How and why does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies?

Michael Tomz
Department of Political Science
Stanford University
tomz@stanford.edu

Jessica Weeks
Department of Political Science
University of Wisconsin-Madison
jweeks@wisc.edu

Keren Yarhi-Milo
Department of Politics
Princeton University
kyarhi@princeton.edu

Draft: February 2017
Comments welcome

Abstract: How does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies? For years, the conventional wisdom held that public opinion exerted little influence on foreign affairs. More recently, scholars have argued that the public mood shapes foreign policy decisions. Disagreement remains, however, about what mechanisms could link public opinion to policy outcomes. In this paper we compare two mechanisms: sanctioning and selection. The sanctioning mechanism says that citizens exert influence by threatening to punish leaders for foreign policy missteps. If the threat of punishment is severe enough, it could deter incumbent politicians from choosing foreign policies that the public dislikes. The selection mechanism, in contrast, says that citizens exert influence by striving to elect good types. They try to vote for leaders who have appealing foreign policy platforms, and once in office, those leaders generally remain true to their platforms. Both mechanisms are plausible, but they are difficult to study empirically due to problems of selection, reverse causation, and omitted variable bias. We overcame these challenges by administering two unique surveys in Israel: one involving the mass public, and one involving current and former members of the Israeli legislature. We find that public opinion influences policy through both channels, but the selection mechanism is significantly more powerful. These findings provide a new foundation for future research about the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy in democracies.
I. Introduction

How does public opinion affect foreign policy in democracies? For decades, observers were largely in agreement that public opinion does not play a major role in foreign policy decision-making. Much of this research noted that learning about the details of foreign affairs is taxing to the average voter, and that the public has larger concerns than foreign affairs. The conventional wisdom was that the public was disinterested in foreign policy and knew little about foreign relations, meaning that mass opinion could at best have a negligible effect on policy output.\(^1\) Many examples of low public knowledge lend credibility to this view: one study, for example, found that 60 percent of the American public had at least one major misperception about the Iraq War (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003). In fact, even experts with far more information and experience disagree over who is to blame for specific decisions and policy outcomes.

In recent years, however, the tide has turned, with many observers arguing that public opinion shapes and constrains foreign policy. Researchers have found that the public is generally well informed about, and interested in, international affairs, that foreign policy affects vote choice, and that public opinion affects policy output.\(^2\) As a consequence, leaders who are accountable to a voting public appear to behave quite differently in a range of policy areas, including conflict initiation, general international cooperation, trade, and alliance politics.\(^3\)

Disagreement remains, however, about how exactly public opinion could affect foreign policy decisions. For the most part, scholars have not differentiated between possible reasons that the opinions of ordinary citizens could matter. Most past studies have focused on a sanctioning mechanism in which leaders are swayed by the public mood out of fear of the political repercussions. While this view seems to have merit, we highlight a second, often-overlooked mechanism linking public opinion and foreign policy: selection. From this perspective, citizens tend to vote for parties that have appealing foreign policy platforms, and politicians tend to adhere to those platforms after taking office.

Clarifying these relationships is important for many reasons, such as explaining and predicting foreign policy in democracies, and assessing how and to what extent foreign policy reflects the will of the people. However, establishing a causal relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, much less disentangling different mechanisms, is difficult due to empirical challenges involving reverse causation, omitted variable bias, and selection bias.

Moreover, little research has systematically studied one of the most important sets of actors in the policymaking equation: the elites who ultimately make policy decisions. As we explain in detail later, understanding the perceptions of decision-makers is central to assessing both the sanctioning and selection mechanisms. Seizing on a unique

---

opportunity to study decision-makers in Israel, we were able to recruit 87 current and former policymakers and query them about their own foreign policy positions and their beliefs about the consequences of making foreign policy decisions that conflicted with public preferences. As part of our elite survey, we also carried out an experiment in which we randomized information about public support for a potential military strike, and measured whether this affected policymakers’ own support for military action.

Testing these mechanisms also required us to carry out a study on the Israeli public. While most existing research on public opinion has focused on observational data, we overcame threats to inference by presenting survey respondents with an experiment in which we presented subjects with two hypothetical parties. We randomized seven attributes of each hypothetical party: foreign policy platform, economic policy platform, religious policy platform, party size, and the military experience, political experience, and gender of the party’s leader. We then asked subjects to say which of the two parties they preferred. We repeated the process three additional times for each respondent, allowing us to collect large amounts of data about how the attributes of parties and their leaders affect public support.

Bringing together these different sources of data, we found strong support for the selection mechanism. Israeli citizens were much more likely to support a party that shared their own foreign policy views. The effect of foreign policy matched that of religious policy, and was slightly greater than the effect of economic policy. Other factors mattered much less: party size and the party leader’s military and political experience had modest effects, while the party leader’s gender did not affect the party’s popularity. We also found strong evidence that once in office, members of the Israeli Knesset expressed foreign policy preferences that closely tracked their own parties’ views on using military force.

We also uncovered support for the deterrence mechanism, though the evidence was somewhat less definitive. Our experiment indicated that when Israeli policymakers were told that the public strongly supported a military strike, compared to strongly opposing a military strike, this increased elites’ own support for a military strike by about 15 percentage points. While substantively rather large, this effect was not significant at conventional levels due to the small sample size. We also found that a majority of Knesset members believed that the government would face significant consequences if it failed to heed public opinion.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. We first disentangle two ways in which public opinion could affect foreign policy: sanctioning and selection. For each mechanism, we outline the key assumptions, assess the state of empirical knowledge about the mechanism, and discuss challenges to studying it. We then present our data collection efforts, followed by a discussion of our key results. A final section concludes.

II. How Public Opinion Could Affect Foreign Policy: Two Mechanisms

Sanctioning

The idea that the public can punish leaders for their foreign policy choices, thus deterring them from making unpopular decisions in the first place, has been the focus of
much recent scholarly research. In this view, leaders make decisions anticipating that the public will reward or punish them for foreign policy decisions. Reward and punishment could appear in many forms: in the ballot box, via campaign contributions, or through approval ratings that affect the leader’s ability to further other policy agendas.

Many scholars have argued in favor of this general model of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. Some of the most influential recent theories in international security are in fact premised on the sanctioning mechanism. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and colleagues’ “selectorate theory” (1999, 2003), for example, argues that democratic leaders’ reelection prospects affect their decisions about foreign policy. Selectorate theory builds on the assumption that leaders need the support of a winning coalition in order to stay in power. In a democracy, the winning coalition is the subset of voters needed for the leader to win an election—a large portion of the country’s citizens. According to this theory, the process unfolds as follows: leaders make decisions about war or other foreign policies, the public observes the outcome, and then the public decides whether or not to retain the leader in office. In other words, public opinion matters via sanctioning: democratic leaders are deterred from making unpopular decisions because of the threat that voters will unseat them.

Reiter and Stam (2002) also focus on military conflict, arguing that “democracies win the wars they start because the fear of the domestic political consequences of fighting a losing war pushes elected officials to start only winnable wars” (144). They write that leaders worry both about current public opinion and electoral punishment down the road (after the outcome of the foreign policy decision is clear); either way, in their view leaders care about public opinion when making their decisions because they are concerned about the public reaction. Consistent with this claim, Weeks (2014) shows that leaders of democracies (along with some kinds of autocracies) face a heightened risk of removal from office when they lose wars. Croco (2015) demonstrates that the public’s incentive to punish a leader for a poor war outcome is strongest when the leader has political ties to the war’s origins, which in turn affects leaders’ decisions about how to prosecute wars and when to make peace. Baum and Potter (2015) similarly argue that the public aims to remove leaders who perform poorly on foreign policy, and to keep in

---

4 Fiorina (1981) and Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) argue that U.S. voters make retrospective judgments about a leader’s foreign policy decisions, which affects their support for the leader going forward. Using an original survey, for example, Hurwitz and Peffley found that U.S. citizens who thought highly of the president’s performance on foreign policy also gave those leaders higher overall approval ratings. Note that this study cannot rule out the possibility that the relationship between foreign policy and vote choice/approval is endogenous, i.e. that Presidential approval leads individuals to evaluate foreign policy performance more generously. For other work in this time period on domestic accountability for foreign policy, see e.g. Russett 1990, Bartels 1991 and Risse-Kappen 1991.

5 Bueno de Mesquita et al. do not test their assumption of ex post accountability directly, however.
office those who perform well, but that this is easiest when the country faces robust opposition parties and a free press.  

Finally, anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that leaders are deterred by elections. In March 2012, for example, media microphones accidentally captured U.S. President Barack Obama telling then-Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev that he would have more “flexibility” to make foreign policy decisions once he had weathered the upcoming election. The exchange was as follows:

\[\text{Obama:}\text{ On all these issues, but particularly missile defense, this, this can be solved but it’s important for [Vladimir Putin] to give me space.}\]

\[\text{Medvedev: Yeah, I understand. I understand your message about space. Space for you...}\]

\[\text{Obama: This is my last election. After my election I have more flexibility.}\]

In one possible reading of this exchange, Obama believed that he—and perhaps allies in Congress—would be punished at the ballot box in the November elections for making an unpopular deal with Russia.

Despite the appeal of the sanctioning logic, however, the theory relies on several assumptions that are difficult to meet in practice. In many versions of the sanctioning/deterrence argument, the public needs not only to know who is responsible for a specific foreign policy decision, but also decide whether the decision was appropriate given the circumstances. This kind of information is very difficult for ordinary citizens to gather. Consider, for example, recent debates over who is responsible for the rise of the Islamic State. Was it George W. Bush, who presided over the invasion of Iraq in 2003, or was it Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, who inherited that war when they took office in 2009? More generally, much empirical evidence suggests that citizens are not very well-informed about foreign policy decisions unless they involve a serious and costly failure.  

Another potential limitation of the sanctioning mechanism is that the public can punish or reward the leader for a past action only in relatively limited circumstances. To the extent that scholars have argued that elections deter leaders, it is important to remember that many countries limit elected officials to two terms in office, meaning that sanctioning via elections primarily works when at least one of the candidates is already in office and has not reached his or her term limit. In some countries, representatives are permitted only a single term, meaning that there is never a direct referendum on the leader’s past performance (in foreign policy or other areas). Finally, there are many

---

7 http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/26/the-dirty-little-secret-about-second-term-presidents/
electoral races in which none of the candidates are incumbents or were responsible for significant foreign policy decisions. For all of these reasons, electoral sanctioning is only possible some of the time, and, as Fearon (1999) points out, the public might find it more efficient to think of elections as a way to select good leaders than as a way to punish bad ones.  

Logic aside, sanctioning theory needs much more research to validate its core predictions. First, there is currently mixed evidence about whether leaders at the end of their term-limited time in office behave differently than leaders who are up for re-election and therefore might be sanctioned by the public. Different scholars have also reached conflicting conclusions about whether foreign policy decisions affect leaders’ reelection prospects. Some studies find that leaders of democracies are neither punished nor rewarded for their country’s performance in a war (e.g. Chiozza and Goemans 2011 and Debs and Goemans 2010). Others find that culpable, democratic leaders are nearly three times as likely to be removed from office if they lose a war compared to remaining at peace, and about half as likely to lose office when they win a war compared to peacetime (Croco and Weeks 2016). All of these studies are however hampered by selection bias: leaders who anticipate punishment are likely to avoid the very situations in which punishment would be observed (Schultz 2001).

Second, some of the same evidence that is invoked to support sanctioning theory can be interpreted quite differently. For example, in the above-mentioned exchange between presidents Obama and Medvedev, Obama might have thought he would have more flexibility after the elections not because he would then be free from sanctioning, but because he feared that cooperation with Russia would lead the public to doubt the foreign policy stances on which he had campaigned, leading them to choose a new leader who better represented their interests. In practice, it is often difficult to discern whether the public is using its vote to punish a leader, as opposed to using information about past actions to make informed decisions about a leader’s future preferences and ability.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, existing empirical studies of the sanctioning mechanism have focused either on observable outcomes like conflict initiation, or the reaction of the public. No studies, to our knowledge, have systematically examined whether policymakers believe that they will be punished if they do not heed the public’s wishes. This information, however, is crucial if we seek to uncover whether the sanctioning model affects leaders’ calculations. One of the advantages of our research design is that it allows us to test directly the extent to which leaders’ beliefs about domestic political consequences affect their decisions about the use of force.

---

9 One could construct a more elaborate argument in which the public punishes the party if the leader is term-limited, though to our knowledge this is not common in the literature about sanctioning for foreign policy.

10 See for example Gaubatz 1991, Reiter and Tillman 2002, Williams 2013, Zeigler, Peerskalla, and Mazumder 2013, Haynes 2012, Conconi, Sahuget and Zanardi 2014, and Potter 2016. The most recent study on the topic, Carter and Norstrom n.d., finds that a) butting up against a term limit does not increase conflict initiation overall; b) butting up against a term limit makes conflict initiation less likely for doves; but c) butting up against a term limit has no effect on conflict initiation by hawks. In conclusion, on average, leaders do not change their behavior when they are no longer facing an election.
Selection

Surprisingly few authors have focused on an alternative pathway through which public opinion could affect foreign policy: by selecting leaders who share the public’s preferences, and who will adhere to those values once in office. In this view, voters select representatives who seem competent and whose foreign policy views match their own. For example, hawkish citizens would tend to favor hawkish candidates or parties, dovish citizens would be inclined to support more dovish candidates, and voters would tend to prefer candidates who appear competent in international affairs. According to this mechanism, the winners of elections then tend to stick relatively closely to their values once in office; the strongest version of the selection mechanism is that leaders stand by their principles regardless of a specific policy’s popularity at the time. Either way, according to the selection mechanism, the public influences foreign policy decisions at least in part by choosing the individuals who will formulate and enact decisions about the country’s external affairs.

The idea that selection plays an important role in elections is plausible for many reasons. Focusing on elections in general (though not the specific role of foreign policy in elections), Fearon (1999) shows that it is usually in voters’ interest to use elections with an eye to choosing candidates with high ability and like-minded preferences, especially when it is difficult to observe a policymaker’s past decisions. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, voters are often confronted with candidates who have not held a particular office before, or who are at the end of a term limit, meaning that they could not use their vote to sanction candidates for past policy decisions even if they wanted to.

Many observations appear to support the idea that citizens’ votes are affected by candidates’ expected future performance on foreign policy. Election campaigns often emphasize candidates’ ability and stances on foreign policy; for example, in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, a central issue has been whether the candidates have the right “temperament” to guide the U.S. through foreign affairs and have the judgment required to make decisions about using nuclear weapons. More generally, elections often revolve around personal traits such as honesty, competence, and values, with voters often saying that they prefer leaders who are consistent in their policy views, rather than leaders who shift with the tide of public opinion. Even when campaigns mention candidates’ past behavior, it is usually presented as evidence of character or preferences, not as a reason for punishment. Finally, Heffington (2016) shows that leaders’ pre-election promises are correlated with their behavior in office, lending further credence to the selection mechanism.

Despite the intuitive nature of the selection argument, little scholarship about the determinants of foreign policy has investigated the selection mechanism systematically. Many scholars have shown evidence that foreign policy matters in elections, but those

---

11 For exceptions, see Fearon 1999 and Gadarian 2010.
12 Gadarian finds that in the U.S. context, the link between the citizens’ foreign policy stances and their evaluations of candidates depends on the candidate’s political party.
studies do not show whether this is due to sanctioning, selection, or both. When scholars do focus on how candidates’ traits affect foreign policy, they tend to separate those traits from the public’s decision to choose a specific leader in the first place (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015). Moreover, some past studies face challenges establishing whether the leader’s preferences affect voter support, or whether voters’ support for a candidate leads them to have more favorable impressions of the candidate. Finally, surprisingly little research has investigated whether leaders’ pre-election promises match their preferences once in office. We attempt to remedy these problems in our research design.

To summarize, we have outlined two distinct mechanisms through which public opinion could affect foreign policy: sanctioning and selection. While both of these mechanisms are plausible, existing research on these mechanisms suffer from various shortcomings.

Studies about the deterrence mechanism, for example, often focus on outcomes (such as the decision to initiate or terminate a war) that could be equally explained by other mechanisms (such as leaders’ pacific norms). Other research on the sanctioning mechanism has examined whether foreign policy issues such as war outcomes affect leaders’ tenure in office, but this research could suffer from selection; according to sanctioning theory, leaders make strategic decisions in light of the possibility of punishment or reward. Finally, none of the existing studies examine sanctioning through the eyes of policymakers: do they believe that they will be punished for going against public opinion? Ultimately, it is the beliefs of policymakers that drive the sanctioning mechanism.

Even more remains to be learned about the selection mechanism. Several studies have shown a correlation between foreign policy and vote choice, but much of that research suffers from two major challenges to inference. The first challenge is showing that opinions about foreign policy cause voters to support specific candidates, rather than that support for a candidate causes a citizen to approve that person’s foreign policy platform. The second is that in the real world, candidates choose their foreign policy platforms strategically. If foreign policy is important to voters, parties might converge in their foreign policy views, forcing voters to break the tie by selecting parties on other criteria. Thus, if foreign policy is important to voters, the historical correlation we observe between foreign policy and vote choice might underestimate the true importance of foreign policy to voters. This is one of the reasons that it is useful to run experiments, in which we can make the parties take combinations of positions that they might not take if they were thinking strategically.

It is also important to note that the deterrence and selection mechanisms are in no way incompatible. It is likely that voters consider elections to be opportunities to both sanction and select leaders, and that leaders make foreign policy with a mix of sanctioning and selection in mind. As we describe later, future work will examine the conditions under which the different mechanisms are most likely to operate.

---

III. Data

To overcome the challenges we identified in studying the deterrence and selection mechanisms, we capitalized on a unique opportunity to field two sets of survey experiments in Israel, an important democracy. The first was administered on members of the Israeli legislature (the Knesset), and a second, related experiment, was fielded on members of the Israeli public.

The focus on the Israeli Knesset provides several advantages. First, Israel is an established and important democracy where decisions about the use of force—our focus in this paper—are common. The decision-makers in our sample thus have experience wrestling with issues similar to those we ask about in our survey. Second, the structure of Israel’s parliamentary system is one in which the vast majority of the members of the executive branch are also elected members of the Knesset. Thus, a segment of those currently serving as members of the Israeli Knesset are also directly involved in decisions about the use of force. In this sense, studying members of the Knesset is different than studying members of many other legislative bodies, such as the U.S. Congress. Furthermore, the short election cycles characterizing Israeli politics often lead to a situation where former members of the executive branch (that is Ministers and Prime Ministers) become members of the opposition in the Knesset. Moreover, the vast majority of Israel’s current members of the executive branch were at some point in their political career members of the opposition in the Knesset. Taken together, by surveying current and former members of the Knesset, we are essentially accessing the beliefs of current, former, and potentially future members of the Executive branch. Finally, looking at the role of public opinion and the use of force in the context of a medium-power parliamentary democracy allows us to escape the often U.S.-centric literature on public opinion, and thus contribute to a growing scholarly work that explores those public-elites dynamics outside the context of the U.S. electorate.

To survey current and past members of the Knesset, we built a database of all 411 individuals who had served in the Knesset between June 1996 and March 2015. Of these, 381 were still alive when our study began. We were able to locate email contact information for 288 of these living current and former Knesset members (MKs), and invited them all to participate in a survey. We followed up via email several times, and made telephone calls to subjects and their assistants. Research assistants also traveled to the Knesset four separate times to invite current members to participate. Our fielding period was July 10, 2015 to October 20, 2015. We received completed surveys from 87 current and former Knesset members; this represents 23 percent of living MKs and 30 percent of living MKs for whom we were able to obtain contact information. We gave respondents the option of filling out the survey online, or in hard copy. Most of our respondents chose to fill out the online version of the survey. The surveys were administered in Hebrew, though we describe the questions in English here.

We also fielded a separate study of the Israeli mass public. This internet-based survey was administered by iPanel, a respected Israeli survey firm, in March 2016. iPanel recruited 1260 members of the Israeli Jewish population in March 2016, and included
benchmarks for gender, age, education, and area of residence. Details on both of our questionnaires are provided below.

IV. Testing the Selection Mechanism

In a party-based democracy, selection theory involves four requirements. First, parties must have clear foreign policy platforms. Second, citizens must be aware of those policy platforms. Third, citizens must show an electoral preference for parties that closely match their own views about foreign policy. Finally, once in office, leaders must remain true to their party’s foreign policy platform, either because of their own convictions or because of party discipline. We now test each of the four requirements.

Do parties have clear policy platforms?

We used data from the Election Compass to measure the policy platforms of the major parties in Israel. The Compass was first developed by researchers at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam to describe the positions of parties in the 2006 Dutch parliamentary election. Since that time, the project has expanded to more than 40 countries, including Israel, where the Compass is a collaborative effort between the Dutch team and researchers at the Israel Democracy Institute.

To infer where parties stand on foreign and domestic issues, Compass researchers examined “official documents, speeches, legislative activity, and statements in the mass media.” Multiple coders reviewed the data, calibrated issue positions, and checked for accuracy. Before finalizing the codings, the Compass team solicited feedback from panels of journalists and from the parties themselves. The Compass is, therefore, a good gauge of party positions and has been used in recent research (e.g., Arian et al. 2011, Grossman, Manekin and Miodownik 2015).

We used Compass data to summarize the foreign policy platforms of Israeli parties on the eve of the 2015 election. Our analysis focused on nine policy issues related the Palestinian conflict and Israeli-Arab relations. For each of the nine policy statements listed below, the Compass indicated whether a party disagreed completely, tended to disagree, was neutral, tended to agree, or agreed completely. We scored each item on a five-point integer scale from most dovish (-2) to most hawkish (2), and then averaged over the nine items to get an overall measure of hawkishness for each party.

Policy Statements in the Compass Database

- Under no circumstances should settlements be evacuated from Judea and Samaria.
- As part of a permanent peace settlement, Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem should be given to the Palestinians.

14 For other recent studies using iPanel, see for example Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan and Courtemanche, 2015; Grossman, Manekin, and Miodownik 2015; and Renshon, Yarhi-Milo, and Kertzer 2016.
• As part of a peace treaty, the establishment of a Palestinian state should be accepted.
• As part of a peace treaty with appropriate security arrangements, the Golan Heights should be returned to Syria.
• A peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is necessary for the long term security of Israel.
• Israel should do all that is necessary for its national security, even if it causes casualties among Palestinian civilians in neighboring territories.
• To combat terrorism, discrimination against non-Jews is justified.
• If diplomatic efforts fail, Israel should attack Iran’s nuclear facilities.
• To prevent rocket fire from Gaza, the military should occupy key sections of the Gaza strip and hold them over time.

Figure 1 displays the hawkishness scores of the eleven major parties in the Compass database. The scores range from -2 for Meretz, which expressed strongly dovish positions on all nine issues, to HaBayit HaYehudi (Israel is our Home), which was moderately hawkish on Iran and strongly hawkish on the remaining issues. The remaining parties distribute themselves fairly evenly between these extremes, giving Israeli voters a rich menu of options on matters of foreign policy.

**Figure 1: Hawkishness of Party Platforms**

```
Meretz
Joint List
Zionist Union
Yesh Atid
United Torah
Kulanu
Yachad
Shas
Likud
Yisrael Beiteinu
HaBayit HaYehudi

Hawkishness
```

-2 -1 0 1 2
Are citizens aware of the foreign policy platforms?

Next, we designed a survey to measure whether ordinary Israeli citizens recognize these fundamental differences in the foreign policy platforms of the major parties. As noted earlier, the survey was administered by iPanel to a representative sample of the Israeli Jewish population.

The survey asked respondents to place several major parties on a scale from 1 (dovish) to 7 (hawkish) with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict. All participants rated the two largest parties, Likud and the Zionist Union, which held 30 and 24 seats, respectively, at the time of the survey. In addition, each person was randomly assigned to score one party with a dovish platform (either Meretz or the Joint List), one party with a centrist platform (either Yesh Atid or Kulanu), and one party with a hawkish platform (either Yisrael Beiteinu or HaBayit HaYehudi). Finally, we asked the respondent to place their own preferred party, if it had not already come up by chance. This extra step produced data about three additional parties: Shas, United Torah Judaism, and Yacha. We omit these parties from the main analysis, because they were scored only by a small number of party adherents, rather than the population at large.

Figure 2 displays how respondents perceived the eight main parties in the study. The histogram in the top left corner shows that nearly 57% of respondents viewed Meretz as a 1 on the hawkishness scale. An additional 31% regarded the party as a 2, and 6% placed the party at 3. Thus, fully 94% of respondents recognized Meretz as dovish, while also disagreeing about the party’s precise placement on the left side of the scale. The remaining histograms convey similar mixtures of consensus and diversity: each shows strong clustering around the mean (represented by the dashed line), while also revealing real differences in opinion about exactly where the parties stand.
Although Israeli citizens disagree somewhat about the placement of parties, their perceptions appear to be remarkably accurate, on average. Figure 3 plots the average public perception of each party against the content of its platform, as scored by the Election Compass. The axes are on different scales, with perceptions measured from 1 to 7 and platforms scored by averaging 9 policies that were each coded from on a five-point spectrum. Nevertheless, the linear fit between platforms and perceptions is nearly perfect. Indeed, the regression line in Figure 3 explains 98% of the variance, implying that nearly all the variation in public perception can be explained by referencing party platforms. This is, we believe, a striking example the “wisdom of the crowds,” the idea that large groups of citizens are often right on average, even though the beliefs of many individual members may differ from the truth. The wisdom of the crowds is a powerful force that contributes to accurate selection—and effective representation—in democracies.
Do citizens vote on the basis of foreign policy?

To this point, we have shown that political parties in Israel have clear, measurable foreign policy platforms, and that voters have reasonably accurate perceptions about where the parties stand. To what extent do citizens choose parties on the basis of foreign policy, and how does the weight of foreign policy compare to the weight of other electoral considerations?

We approached these questions by designing a conjoint experiment, which we embedded in the same public opinion survey that also asked about Israeli parties. The experiment began by measuring each person’s individual preferences on foreign, economic, and religious policy. “On matters of foreign affairs and security,” we asked, “do you support a dovish (left) or a hawkish (right) approach?” The four response options were definitely dovish, more dovish than hawkish, more hawkish than dovish, or definitely hawkish. Following the Israeli National Election Study, we quantified preferences about economic policy by asking: “About the structure of economic life in the country, do you support a capitalist or a socialist approach?” The available answers were definitely capitalist, more capitalist than socialist, more socialist than capitalist, or definitely socialist. Finally, to capture views about religious policy, we inquired: “To what extent should the government require Jewish religious traditions in public life?” The options were never, sometimes, often, or always.
After measuring each respondent’s preferences about policy, we asked them to evaluate pairs of political parties. Our preface explained, “On the following screens we will describe a number of political parties. The parties are hypothetical; they are not actual parties in Israel today. The vast majority of candidates in each party are Jewish, and each party is expected to pass the electoral threshold and enter the Knesset. Please read the descriptions carefully, and then tell us which party you would prefer.”

We then described two parties, A and B, which varied randomly on seven dimensions: foreign, economic, and religious policy; the size of the political party, and the military experience, political experience and gender of the party leader. We portrayed policies along the same spectra we had used earlier. Thus, each party’s foreign policy was randomly assigned to be definitely dovish, more dovish than hawkish, more hawkish than dovish, or definitely hawkish. Likewise, economic policies ranged from socialist to capitalist, and religious policies ranged from never requiring to always requiring Jewish religious traditions in public life.

We also described the military experience of each party leader, by randomizing whether the leader had served no more than the mandatory minimum, had risen to the rank of junior officer, or had attained the rank of senior officer. For political experience, we randomly drew an integer between 0 and 30 to capture the number of years the party leader had been in national politics. Finally, we indicated whether the party leader was male or female, and we mentioned whether the party was (or was not) one of the three largest parties in the political system. For robustness we randomized the order in which respondents saw this diverse set of considerations. Figure 4 displays an example of what respondents saw.
We intentionally randomized each of the seven dimensions independently, to produce an extremely diverse set of combinations, including combinations of policy and leadership that are not common in current Israeli politics. This approach not only avoids multicollinearity, but also allows us to estimate the consequences of taking the full range of policy positions, including ones that might be electorally disadvantageous.

We concluded the scenario by asking: “If you had to choose, which party would you vote for?” We repeated the exercise with three additional pairs of parties: C versus D, E versus F, and G versus H. Thus, each participant reviewed eight party profiles, giving us a large number of judgments about an extremely rich political space.

In the analysis below, we simplify the exposition by presenting the effect of each attribute, averaging over all the other dimensions of the experiment. To quantify the effect of gender, for example, we would measure how much better (or worse) parties with male leaders fared in our experiment, averaging over all other characteristics the party might have, and over all characteristics the opposing party might have. In the literature on conjoint experiments, this effect is called the “average marginal component effect” (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).

Figure 5 summarizes the average effect of the four nonpolicy attributes in our experiment. These effects are not only interesting in their own right, but also stand as useful benchmarks for comparing the importance of policy positions. The top portion of the figure shows that, other factors equal, respondents preferred leaders with extensive military experience. In our experiment, all party leaders had completed compulsory service, but some exceeded the minimum and attained an officer’s rank. Overall, parties led by former senior officers performed 4 points better (and parties led by former junior officers performed 2 points better) than parties whose leaders left the military after their satisfying their mandatory service.
The middle portion of Figure 5 quantifies the effects of political experience. Our evidence shows that Israelis strongly prefer seasoned politicians over newcomers. Parties guided by leaders who have been in national politics for 6-10 years performed 6 points better than otherwise comparable parties with less experienced leadership. Interestingly, experience exhibits diminishing marginal returns: voters do not perceive leaders with more than 10 years of experience as significantly more attractive than leaders who have served in national politics for 6-10 years.

The bottom portion of Figure 5 presents the average effect of gender and party size. Perhaps contrary to expectations, Israeli voters did not show any preference for male leaders over female ones. We also tested for gender preferences among male versus female respondents (not shown), but neither group assigned any importance to the gender of the leader, after other factors were taken into account. Finally, Figure 5 shows that, ceteris paribus, voters threw 2% more support behind large parties, than behind other otherwise comparable parties that did not rank among the top three. This could be taken as evidence that at least some Israelis engage in strategic voting: supporting large parties that might stand a better chance for forming governments and leading coalitions.

Having established the importance of nonpolicy attributes, we now consider how the foreign, economic, and religious positions of parties affect support at the polls. The left side of Figure 6 shows the effects of foreign policy. As shorthand, we represent each policy position with a number: 1=definitely dovish, 2=more dovish than hawkish, 3=more hawkish than dovish, and 4=definitely hawkish. In our sample, 9% of voters placed themselves at 1; 27% were at 2; 38% were at 3; and 26% were at 4 on the foreign policy scale. Our conjoint experiment estimates how these four groups of voters responded to parties that agreed or disagreed with their own opinions.
The left side of Figure 6 shows that voters awarded substantially less support to parties with distant foreign policy views, than to parties who concur with them about foreign policy. For instance, dovish voters (voters at 1) gave 32 points less support to hawkish parties (parties at 4) than to parties who shared their dovish ideal point. Likewise, hawkish voters (people at 4) awarded 37 points less support to dovish parties (parties at 1) than to parties who sympathized with their own hawkish preferences.

These effects were not unique to extreme voters; moderate voters penalized deviations, as well. Moderate doves (voters at 2) were 21 points less supportive of parties at 4, than of parties at 2. Similarly, moderate hawks (voters at 3) were 24 points less supportive of parties at 1 than of parties at 3.

The figure also shows an interesting asymmetry in reactions: voters in our experiments were much more tolerant of parties on their own side of the issue, than of voters on the opposite side of the issue. This is most evident among strong doves (voters at 1), who were comfortable with moderately dovish parties (parties at 2) but strongly penalized hawkish parties of any kind. Other voters exhibited similar patterns: they imposed small penalties when deviations were confined to their own side of the issue, but docked parties severely for locating on the opposite side of the dove-hawk space.

The second and third columns of Figure 6 present analogous estimates for economic and religious policy. Our data suggest that, in Israeli elections, foreign policy is at least as important as religious policy, and is even more important than economic policy. Taken together, these findings provide extremely strong support for the selection model. In Israel, parties take clear positions on foreign policy; citizens accurately recognize those positions; and citizens vote to a large degree on the basis of foreign policy. Only one component is missing: once elected to office, do members of the Knesset express foreign policy positions that accord with the platforms or reputations of
their parties? To find out, we now turn to a second survey, of members of the Israeli Knesset.

*Do members of the legislature remain true to type?*

We now turn to the Knesset survey to ensure that MKs’ own views about foreign policy reflect the parties with whom they identify. To learn about MKs’ party affiliations, we asked respondents which political party is closest to their views. In 13 cases, our respondents skipped the question or said that no party fully represented their views. In those cases, we looked up their last known party, which we defined as the party they officially represented the last time they served in the Knesset. Responses spanned the political spectrum, with one for Meretz, one for Yisrael Beiteinu, two for each of Center, Labor, Likud, and Shinui, and three for Kadima. In the graphs below, we present the results two ways: by their current party as measured through the survey (omitting the 13 who did not express a current preference), and by their last known party (using the current party whenever possible, and using their last official party when they did not name a party during the survey). We then grouped MKs’ political parties into the same five categories (far left to far right) as in the public survey described above.

We also asked MKs to rate themselves on a seven-point “hawk/dove” scale in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict. For ease of interpretation, we rescaled the variable to go from 0 (extremely dovish) to 100 (extremely hawkish). Figure 7 summarizes our findings. The top panel shows MKs’ average hawkishness by party for respondents who reported their party affiliation. The bottom panel shows the results when we imputed party affiliation for the 13 respondents who did not express a party preference. Both panels indicate a strong correspondence between the MK’s hawkishness and the hawkishness of the party that comes closest to their view: MKs associated with far-left parties were by far the most dovish, and MKs who felt closest to hawkish parties also tended to report that they held hawkish preferences.

---

15 We asked about party affiliation this way, since a) parties may have changed their foreign policy positions over time, and b) former Knesset members’ party affinity may have changed since they last held office.
Figure 7: Average Hawkishness of Knesset Members, by Party

![Graph showing average hawkishness of Knesset members by party.]

Member's Hawkishness
We carried out similar analyzes for militarism (represented by an index of three questions that measure MK’s views about the efficacy of military force) and MKs’ views about whether to carry out a military strike in Lebanon in a hypothetical scenario. The results are shown below, in Figures 8 and 9. As with hawkishness, MKs’ party affiliation corresponded closely with their party’s ranking on a left-right scale.

**Figure 8: Average Militarism of Knesset Members, by Party**
In sum, our results show strong support for the selection argument. On average, the Israeli public is able to correctly identify how hawkish political parties are relative to each other. We further found strong evidence that voters were influenced in their choice of candidate by the foreign policy platform that we attributed to hypothetical candidates, both in absolute terms and relative to the candidates’ other political and demographic characteristics. We then followed the causal chain by moving to the Knesset survey. We found that MKs’ opinions about the use of military force (measured several different ways) were closely tied to their party affiliations. Together these pieces of information suggest that voters are able to distinguish the parties’ foreign policy platforms, are influenced by foreign policy in their choice of candidate, and that decision-makers’ preferences once in office adhere closely to their parties’ own views.
V. Testing the Sanctioning Mechanism

Having found strong support for the selection mechanism, we now turn to the sanctioning mechanism. Here, we rely primarily on the data collected from Knesset members, since it is their own beliefs about public opinion that drive this mechanism.

To evaluate the sanctioning hypothesis, a key part of this survey was an experiment designed to test the effect of public opinion on MKs’ support for a hypothetical military strike. We presented all MKs with the same scenario:

“We would like your opinion about the following hypothetical scenario.

Ten armed terrorists emerged from an underground tunnel in northern Israel, close to the border with Lebanon. The terrorists were planning to attack a Jewish town, take civilian hostages, and bring them back to Lebanon. The IDF caught some of the terrorists, but others escaped back into Lebanon. Several IDF soldiers were wounded during the operation.

The cabinet discussed whether Israel should send special forces and planes to attack the terrorist bases in Lebanon.

The security establishment is divided over whether Israel should carry out this military operation. Supporters say the operation would punish the terrorists, reduce the threat from the tunnels, and deter future attacks. Opponents say the operation would lead to IDF casualties, would cause terrorists to retaliate against Israeli cities, and would escalate into a large-scale military conflict.”

We then randomized information about public support for a military operation. Half of the MKs were told that public opinion was strongly in favor of military action, while the other half were told that the public firmly opposed the idea:

“The public strongly [supports/opposes] taking military action against the terrorists. The media has covered the situation extensively, and polls show that more than 75% of voters think Israel [should/should not] attack the terrorist bases. Citizens have started demonstrating [for/against] the military action and sending letters to their representatives.”

Having manipulated decision-makers’ perception of public support for military action, we then measured MKs’ own support for a military conflict. We asked all respondents: “In this situation, would you favor or oppose sending special forces and planes to attack the terrorist bases?” We gave our subjects four answer options: favor strongly, favor somewhat, oppose somewhat, and oppose strongly.

To analyze the data in an intuitive way, we distinguished between MKs who supported a strike and those whose who did not. We found that support for a military strike was nearly 16 percentage points higher when a majority of citizens favored a strike, than when most citizens opposed a strike. Due to the small sample size, the 16-point
difference—which is substantively rather large—is distinguishable from zero at the .135 level in a two-sided test. In order to detect an effect of this size, we would need a sample of 290 MKs—more than the number of living MKs for whom we found contact information. Alternatively, we would need a massive treatment effect of 28 percentage points to find a conventionally significant effect given our sample size of 87.

Note that we randomized information about the support of the public as a whole, not the MK’s own political party. We did this in part because it was not always plausible to tell MKs that 75 percent/25 percent their own party’s voters were for/against military action. However, it is likely that if MKs care about public opinion, what they care about most is the views of their own party’s supporters. To measure MKs’ inferences about support from their own party, we asked MKs what percentage of their party’s voters probably support/oppose military action against terrorists. We found that when MKs were told that most of the general public strongly supported military action, this led to a 23 percentage-point increase in their belief that their own party’s supporters were in favor of a strike. We next carried out a simple mediation analysis. We found that nearly all of the effect of our “public support” treatment was mediated by MKs’ beliefs about how their own party’s voters felt.

Next, we explore MKs’ perceptions of the consequences of failing to heed public opinion. We told our respondents,

“We would now like you to think about Israel’s use of military force more generally. Please consider the following hypothetical situations.

Suppose an Israeli government was considering whether to go to war against a foreign adversary. If the public strongly opposed the war, but the government nonetheless decided to go war, please rate the likelihood that each of the following events would happen in the short term.”

We asked respondents whether they thought the government would lose support in the polls; whether the government would find it difficult to get support for other foreign and domestic policies; whether the government would fall; and, if elections were held in the short term, whether the governing parties would lose seats. For each question, MKs were asked whether it was extremely likely, very likely, somewhat likely, or not likely at all that the event would happen.

We then asked the MKs what they thought would happen if the government did not wage a war that would be popular. We told respondents,

“Again, suppose an Israeli government was considering whether to go to war against a foreign adversary. If the public strongly favored the war, but the government nonetheless decided not to go to war, please rate the likelihood that each of the following events would happen.”

We then asked about the same four potential consequences, with the same answer options. Table 1 shows the percent of MKs who chose each answer option.
Table 1: Knesset Members’ Perceptions of the Likelihood of Sanctioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not likely</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>Extremely likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>If the government waged an unpopular war</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government would lose support in the polls</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government would find it hard to get support for other domestic and foreign policies</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government would fall</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ruling party would lose seats</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If the government avoided a popular war</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government would lose support in the polls</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government would find it hard to get support for other domestic and foreign policies</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government would fall</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ruling party would lose seats</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: the table reports the percent of MKs in our sample selecting each option.

The table reveals that Israeli decision-makers anticipated adverse consequences both for waging an unpopular war, and avoiding a popular war. When it came to fighting an unpopular war, 61 percent of MKs said at least one of the four adverse outcomes was very or extremely likely, 42 percent thought at least two were very or extremely likely, 27 percent thought at least three were very or extremely likely, and 7 percent thought all 4 were very or extremely likely.

Knesset members also anticipated sanctioning if the government stayed out of a popular war. In this case, 53 percent of MKs said at least one of the four adverse outcomes was very or extremely likely, 40 percent thought at least two were very or extremely likely, 20 percent thought at least three were very or extremely likely and 1 percent thought all 4 were very or extremely likely. However, comparing both halves of the table, MKs appear to have generally thought that waging an unpopular war would be worse than avoiding a popular war. Compare, for example, the “not likely” percentages in the top half of the table with the “not likely” percentages in the bottom half of the table. A higher proportion of MKs felt that negative consequences were “not likely” if the government decided to abstain from a war that the public supported.
VI. Conclusion

In this paper, we found strong evidence that politics does not “stop at the water’s edge.” Rather, public opinion affects policy through two complementary mechanisms: sanctioning and selection. First, leaders fear that citizens will sanction them if they fail to heed public opinion. The politicians in our study were more supportive of policies that were backed by a majority of voters, and most of them expected serious consequences for failing to heed public opinion. Second, citizens select parties on the basis of their foreign policy platforms. In our experiments, the effect of foreign policy was at least as large as the effect of religious and economic policies, and outweighed other considerations such as the size of the party and its leader’s military experience, political experience, and gender. We further found that, after entering office, leaders remained true to the foreign policy positions of their parties. In sum, our data provide support for both sanctioning and selection.

Future research should explore how our findings might generalize to other countries and time periods. On the one hand, the public may have more influence over foreign policy in Israel than in other countries. After all, Israel has fought many wars since the 1940s, and it continues to face security challenges from neighbors and terrorist organizations. Israeli citizens might, therefore, be especially attentive to foreign policy, and weigh foreign policy more heavily than citizens in more secure countries. On the other hand, public opinion could have less influence on foreign policy in Israel than elsewhere. Many Knesset members have strong and independent opinions about foreign policy, stemming not only from their political experience but also from years of mandatory military service. Moreover, the shifting party landscape in Israel might make it difficult for voters to understand where parties stand about foreign policy. Finally, foreign policy might be more important to voters in countries where other issues, including religion, are less salient than in Israel. To address these questions, scholars could run comparable surveys in other countries.

Future research could also investigate how sanctioning and selection vary within a single country. For instance, sanctioning could be more powerful when leaders are eligible for re-election and face serious political competition. Selection processes should vary, as well, depending on cross-cutting issues and the strength of party identification. Finally, both mechanisms should depend on public attention to foreign policy, which could ebb and flow in response to objective circumstances and the rhetoric of political elites. These are rich areas for future research.
Works cited:


Debs, Alexandre, and H.E. Goemans. “Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War.” American Political Science Review 104, no. 3 (August 2010): 430–45.


