Military Alliances and Public Support for War

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Abstract: How do military alliances affect public support for war? We offer the first experimental evidence on this fundamental question. Our experiments revealed that alliance commitments greatly increase the American public’s willingness to intervene abroad. The effects were largest when the stakes of intervention were low, the costs of intervention were high, and the country in need of aid was a non-democracy. Thus, alliances create public support for getting entangled in conflicts the country might otherwise avoid. We further found that alliances shape public opinion through two main mechanisms: alliances increase public fears about the reputational costs of nonintervention, and heighten the perceived moral obligation to intervene by raising concerns about fairness and loyalty. These findings shed new light on debates about the effects of alliances in international politics.
1. Introduction

Do military alliances matter and, if so, when and why? These questions have long been debated in both academic and policy circles. Skeptics of international agreements argue that, under anarchy, military alliances are merely “scraps of paper” that countries can disregard when it suits them. Indeed, studies show that countries honor their formal alliance commitments only 50–75% of the time.¹ According to the skeptics, alliances place minimal constraints on state behavior, including decisions to use military force.

Others take for granted the idea that alliances are consequential. For centuries, American statesmen have warned that decisions to enter alliances should not be taken lightly. Thomas Jefferson railed against “entangling” alliances and George Washington warned against “permanent” ones. As historian David Fromkin wrote in an essay criticizing U.S. alliances during the Cold War, “any advance commitment to take future action—especially the most extreme type of national action, going to war—should be contracted only with the utmost reluctance and only where there is an overwhelming necessity for doing so.”² According to this view, alliances shape behavior because breaking them has consequences.

Despite the immense importance of knowing whether and when alliances matter, isolating the effect of alliances is remarkably difficult with historical data. Many factors influence decisions about war, making it hard to tell whether intervention in any given conflict was due to an alliance, or whether other factors would have produced the same outcome absent an alliance. Moreover, testing whether allies have consistently aided their partners does not, by itself, reveal whether alliances are consequential. To assess whether alliances change the

likelihood of intervention on behalf of an ally, we must compare decisions about war when alliances exist to otherwise equivalent situations in which alliances are not in place.

It is challenging to assess this counterfactual using observational data. Countries do not choose their allies randomly, and situations are rarely alike in all respects except the presence of an alliance. In addition, alliance obligations are invoked only rarely, giving observers few data points from which to draw conclusions. Finally, strategic selection hampers our ability to assess how alliances shape behavior, because reliable alliances will rarely be tested, whereas unreliable alliances will be tried disproportionately.\(^3\)

In this paper we take a new approach by using experiments to investigate how alliances affect public opinion in the United States. Many scholars have argued that public opinion affects leaders’ decisions about foreign policy, particularly about whether to use military force. Gartzke and Gleditsch (2004, 782), for example, claim that domestic audiences are “pivotal in the choice to intervene” on behalf of an ally. By studying how and why alliances affect the preferences of the American public, we can therefore learn much about the impact of alliances. Moreover, by embedding experiments in surveys, we gain new data about the effects of alliances on public opinion while addressing challenges posed by observational/historical approaches.

Participants in our surveys read a vignette in which one country attacked another and attempted to seize some of its territory. We randomized whether the U.S. had signed a formal defense pact or had not made any pledge to defend the invaded country. We also varied four contextual features: the costs of intervention, the stakes for the U.S., the political regime of the invaded country, and the geographic region in which the country was located. After providing

\(^3\) Smith 1996; Gartner and Siverson 1996; see also Schultz 2001.
additional details about the situation, we measured whether—and why—respondents would support or oppose using the U.S. military to defend the country that had been attacked.

Our experiments shed light on three fundamental questions. First, to what extent do military alliances change public preferences about the use of force? Across a wide range of conditions, participants in our experiments were on average 33 percentage points more supportive of intervention to help an ally than to help an otherwise equivalent country to whom the U.S. had not made such a pledge.

Second, under what conditions do alliances have the most potent effects on public opinion? In our experiments, alliances proved most consequential when the underlying circumstances made military intervention least appealing. When the stakes for the U.S. were high, the costs of military intervention were low, and the victim was a democracy, public support for intervention was strong regardless of whether an alliance existed. In contrast, when contextual factors such as low stakes, high costs, and an autocratic victim mitigated against military involvement, alliances exerted powerful effects, turning public skepticism about intervention into majority support for war. These findings suggest that alliances have the potential to entangle democracies in military conflicts they might otherwise avoid.

Third, through what mechanisms do alliances exert their influence on public sentiment? We investigated three mechanisms that could drive the effect of alliances on support for military intervention: concerns about being perceived as a faithful alliance partner, fears of reputation spillover into nonmilitary arenas, and concerns about the morality of spurning an ally. We found that the effect of alliances was due primarily to fears of developing a reputation as an unreliable ally and feelings of moral obligation. Our findings shed new light on debates about the effect of alliances in international politics.
2. When and why do alliances matter?

Do alliance agreements constrain decisions to use military force? If so, through what mechanisms do alliances work, and can alliances entangle countries in conflicts in which they have little national interest? These questions are of considerable importance not only to scholars, but also to policymakers. Johnson (2016, 457) found that more than one-third of wars between 1816 and 2007 invoked alliance obligations, suggesting that “alliances have been relevant to a significant number of wars in history.”

We take a fresh theoretical and empirical approach by focusing on whether alliances affect public support for military intervention on behalf of a country that has been attacked. Many scholars have argued that public opinion is crucial to decisions about the use of military force. Leaders of democracies, in particular, rarely go to war without public backing (Reiter and Stam 2002). Research has shown that leaders anticipate costs not only for using force when the public opposes it, but also for failing to fight wars that the public supports (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2018). It follows that leaders pay attention to public opinion when deciding whether to intervene on behalf of an ally (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2004; Chiba, Johnson, and Leeds 2015).

Given the importance of public opinion, we investigate whether alliances shape public support for fighting on behalf of other countries. Below, we explore three plausible and

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4 Like most existing literature, we study formal agreements that are signed, and when necessary, ratified, by all parties (e.g. Singer and Small 1966, Snyder 1997, Leeds 2003a, Choi 2012).
potentially complementary mechanisms through which alliances could affect public sentiment. First, citizens might worry that reneging on an alliance would undermine their country’s reputation as a reliable ally. Second, voters might think that breaking an alliance could taint their country’s reputation for reliability on nonmilitary issues. Third, alliances could change the public’s moral calculus, a possibility that has received little attention in the existing literature. After discussing these mechanisms, we consider the circumstances under which alliances might have the most potent effects on public support for war.

Reputation for Military Reliability

First, alliance commitments could affect public support for war by raising concerns about the country’s reputation as a reliable military partner. A country’s past behavior provides clues about whether it would fulfill its alliance obligations in the future. When a country fails to fulfill the terms of an alliance, it could develop a reputation for being an unreliable ally. A reputation

Future research could explore additional mechanisms, for example whether voters believe that alliances with potential targets make it more likely that intervention will succeed, perhaps because of the benefits of peacetime military coordination (Johnson, Leeds, and Wu 2015).

This article examines how alliances affect public support for war. A different research question, requiring a different experimental design, is how alliances affect public perceptions of the leaders making decisions about military intervention. Future research could explore, for example, whether alliances influence perceptions of leader competence (e.g. Levendusky and Horowitz 2012, Gelpi and Grieco 2015, Levy et al. 2015).

for reneging, in turn, could have various negative effects. For one, a bad reputation could undermine a country’s ability to attract military cooperation down the road, because states only form alliances when “they believe there is a reasonable probability of successful cooperation” (Crescenzi et al. 2012, 263). When a country develops a reputation for unreliability, other countries might demand costly terms, or refuse to form an alliance at all. In addition, if potential aggressors perceive that the U.S. will not stand by its commitments, they could be more likely to target other U.S. allies militarily, weakening U.S. security. Thus, alliances could increase public support for military intervention by raising the specter of reputational damage (Johnson 2016).

Despite the appeal of this logic, there is scholarly debate about whether breaking alliances actually has reputational consequences. Citizens might not think that breaking an alliance would carry serious reputational costs. As Morrow (2000, 71–72) notes, “every decision to intervene is unique, and the interests and values that drive decisions to intervene vary from case to case.” Other scholars have shown that cognitive biases could distort how people translate past actions into reputation (Mercer 1996). Observers might view any particular act of betrayal as sui generis, rather than evidence of a general proclivity to break promises and abandon allies.

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8 On the terms of alliances, see Snyder 1997; Mattes 2012a; Johnson 2015.

9 Similarly, Press 2005 argues that power and interests, not past behavior, shape foreign leaders’ beliefs about threat credibility. See also Snyder and Diesing 1978 on how leaders often misinterpret historical information during crises and Reiter 1996 on how countries use history in their decisions to form alliances in the first place.
If voters think that countries can escape reputational damage simply by arguing that “this time is different” then the mere existence of an alliance might not affect domestic calculations.\textsuperscript{10}

Moreover, even if voters believe that breaking an alliance could cause reputational damage, it remains to be seen whether they take reputational costs into account when making decisions about military intervention. If voters do not place much weight on the country’s reputation for military reliability when calculating the costs and benefits of war, concerns about reputation would not lead to greater rates of intervention on behalf of allies. Our experiments evaluate both parts of this causal chain: whether citizens believe that breaking an alliance will hurt America’s reputation as a reliable ally, and whether those reputational concerns encourage the public to support military intervention.

\textit{Reputation for Nonmilitary Reliability}

The public could also worry that forsaking an ally could tarnish the country’s reputation in other domains, a phenomenon known as “reputation spillover” (Cole and Kehoe 1998; Guzman 2008, 103). Jervis (1989), for example, argues that countries can form a “signaling reputation,” or a general reputation for keeping their word. This could be valuable not only in future alliance negotiations, but also in recruiting foreign partners for cooperation in nonmilitary contexts such as trade, finance, immigration, and the environment. If observers draw broad conclusions about a country’s reliability from its treatment of allies, neglecting an alliance could hurt the country’s ability to find willing partners for cooperation in other areas. If voters

\textsuperscript{10} Another possibility has to do with the design of specific alliances: some alliances do not spell out what actions a state is obligated to take, allowing states to argue that they are fulfilling the letter if not the spirit of an agreement (Beckley 2015).
anticipate this reaction on the part of foreign countries, and incorporate concerns about reputation spillover into their decisions about military force, reputation spillover could be a mechanism through which alliances influence public support for war.

However, there are two reasons that this mechanism may not explain the effect of alliances on public support for war. First, citizens might be skeptical that reneging on a military agreement would hurt the country’s reputation in other areas. Downs and Jones (2002), for example, argue that countries form different reputations in different issue domains, and that the reputational consequences of breaking a given international agreement are usually limited to similar agreements. As Goldsmith and Posner (2005) put it, “it is not clear how much the violation of one treaty says about a state’s propensity to violate other treaties” (102; see also Posner and Sykes 2013: 33). If the public thinks this way, citizens may not worry about reputational spillovers from alliances to other areas of international cooperation.

Second, even if voters anticipate reputational spillover, they may not weigh this factor heavily when pondering military intervention. Other considerations—such as direct U.S. interests in the conflict—could loom larger. In order for reputational spillover to be a mechanism through which alliances affect public support for war, voters must not only believe that breaking an alliance has consequences for other areas of foreign policy, but must also take those other consequences into account when deciding whether to support war.

*Moral Obligation*

A third potential mechanism involves morality: perhaps citizens think it would be morally wrong to break a promise, even in the absence of reputational consequences. This idea is
curiously absent from the existing literature on alliances, but a growing body of scholarship has argued that moral considerations affect how the public thinks about foreign policy more generally (Herrmann and Shannon 2001, Kertzer et al. 2014). Moral beliefs appear to shape individual preferences about using military force (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, Liberman 2006, Stein 2012, Kreps and Maxey 2017), and individuals often cite morality when explaining their own views on military intervention (Hermann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Reifler et al. 2014). Moral concerns also affect how countries fight wars, including decisions about using biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons (Price 1995, Price and Tannenwald 1996, Tannenwald 1999) or engaging in torture (Nincic and Ramos 2011). In addition, moral considerations can affect perceptions of the U.S. national interest (Kertzer et al 2014). This research suggests a potentially important causal mechanism: alliances could alter preferences about war by triggering a sense of moral obligation to help another country.

How, specifically, could alliances activate moral concerns? The most recent scholarship on the psychology of moral thinking argues that there is not one single dimension of morality—such as justice—but rather that conceptions of morality are based on a finite number of “moral foundations” (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Graham et al. 2013). These foundations are thought to stem from evolutionary challenges and are present in moral orders around the world.

Moral foundations theory identifies five distinct foundations: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, with some scholars adding a sixth foundation of liberty/oppression. The first two foundations, care and

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11 For an exception see Snyder 1997, pp. 8.

12 See also Dolan 2013 on conflicting norms.

13 Though, different cultures may emphasize different moral pillars (Graham et al 2013).
fairness, are consistent with longstanding Western approaches to theorizing about morality, which have to do with “how individuals ought to relate to, protect, and respect other individuals” (Graham et al 2013, 59). The care/harm foundation holds that people should help rather than harm others, and the fairness/cheating foundation emphasizes the importance of equal treatment and reciprocity.

Beyond care and fairness, moral foundations theory highlights several moral principles that focus on membership in social groups and deference to religious and institutional authorities: loyalty/betrayal (associated with virtues such as loyalty and patriotism), authority/subversion (associated with obedience and deference), and sanctity/degradation (related to qualities such as chastity, piety, and cleanliness). Finally, some have argued that there is a sixth moral foundation, liberty/oppression, which emphasizes freedom from domination and coercion (Haidt 2012).

First, alliances could raise concerns about fairness. Alliances are typically reciprocal, in that countries promise to defend each other in the event of attack. Countries profit from having allies, for example because alliances deter foreign aggression. Failing to defend an ally could be viewed as cheating: reaping the benefits of an alliance but refusing to pay the costs.

Second, alliances could prompt questions of loyalty. The loyalty/betrayal foundation is based on attachments to groups such as family, church, or country. As Haidt and Graham (2007, 105) put it, “Because people value their ingroups, they also value those who sacrifice for the ingroup, and they despise those who betray or fail to come to the aid of the ingroup, particularly in times of conflict.” To the extent that alliances create an “ingroup,” failing to help an ally could be viewed as an immoral betrayal of a fellow group member.
Alliances could also potentially raise issues related to authority and care. The authority moral foundation involves respect for hierarchy and the rule of law. The public could reason that abrogating an alliance violates international law—for example, that it contravenes *pacta sunt servanda*, the international legal principle that agreements must be kept—and is morally wrong for that reason. On the other hand, voters might believe that abrogating an alliance is consistent with international legal principles, or they might ignore international law entirely when weighing the morality of military intervention.

In terms of the care foundation, voters could reason that rebuffing an ally generates greater harm than spurning a non-ally, since “the failure of an alliance likely renders the abandoned partner more vulnerable than it was prior to its formation” (Crescenzi et al. 2012, 260). However, voters might not perceive allies to be more vulnerable, reasoning that the harm stemming from nonintervention would be the same regardless of whether an alliance had been signed. We design empirical tests to examine which of these countervailing logics dominate.

Finally, it is difficult to imagine why alliances would elicit concerns about the remaining two foundations: liberty and sanctity. The liberty foundation is concerned with freedom from domination; voters might reason that they have a moral duty to protect citizens of other countries from unfair domination by an invading army, but it is unclear why those concerns would be greater in the presence of an alliance. It also seems improbable that alliances would trigger concerns about sanctity, which has to do with issues of spiritual and bodily purity. In our
experiments, we test which of the six moral foundations are affected by alliances, as well as which foundations most shape views about the morality of military intervention.\(^\text{14}\)

*Context and the Effects of Alliances*

It is also important to inquire whether alliances have larger effects in some contexts than in others. We focus on three contextual variables that have been found to influence support for military intervention in democracies and explain why they should moderate the effect of alliances on support for war: the stakes of the dispute, the anticipated cost of intervention, and the regime type of the country in need of help.

First, past research shows that the public cares greatly about the *stakes* of a conflict (Larson 1996). While perceptions of the national interest may change over time (Jentleson 1992), the public should be more likely to support military intervention, all else equal, when U.S. interests are on the line. Second, voters pay attention to the human and economic *costs* of military intervention (Mueller 1973, Nincic and Nincic 1995). Scholars have debated when costs are most likely to dampen enthusiasm for war, but they generally agree that the public is more likely to support using military force when it expects low casualties and financial expenditures (Jentleson 1992, Gartner and Segura 1998, Feaver and Gelpi 2004, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009, Flores-Macias and Kreps 2017). A third contextual variable is *regime type*. Previous

\(^{14}\) Research has found that liberals are more likely to emphasize harm and fairness than conservatives, who use all of the moral foundations more equally (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). In the appendix, we assess this possibility among our respondents.
research has shown that democratic publics are more supportive of intervention on behalf of a
democracy than a dictatorship (Herrman, Tetlock, and Visser 1999).\textsuperscript{15}

We hypothesize that these variables should moderate the effect of alliances by
influencing the underlying level of support for military intervention. When the case for war is
already strong—for example, when important U.S. interests are at stake, the costs of intervention
are expected to be low, and the intervention would help a fellow democracy—the public will
tend to support war even in the absence of alliances. In such situations, the marginal effect of
alliances is likely to be small. In contrast, when the public is skeptical about the underlying
merits of a military intervention, there is more opportunity for alliances to tip the balance,
potentially entangling countries in wars they would otherwise prefer to avoid.

This logic puts previous research about alliance reliability in a new light. When the stakes
are high, the costs are low, and the country needing defense is democratic, we hypothesize that
voters in democracies will support intervention, regardless of whether the victim is an ally. In
such circumstances, alliances will be \textit{reliable but inconsequential}. That is, the ally will send aid
reliably, but contextual factors would have caused the same behavior even if no alliance existed,
making the apparent correlation between alliances and intervention spurious. Thus, showing that
alliances are reliable does not prove that they are effective. One must take the additional step of
testing whether, holding context constant, support for war is greater when alliances exist than
when they do not. An experimental approach is ideally suited to assess this counterfactual.

\textsuperscript{15} For similar findings using a sample of U.S. political elites, see Herrmann and Shannon 2001.
3. **Research strategy**

To study how alliances affect public support for military intervention, we fielded large-scale survey experiments. Our experiments, embedded in public opinion polls, presented respondents with a hypothetical situation in which one country invaded another and attempted to seize some of its territory. We randomized information about whether the U.S. had an alliance with the country that had been attacked, as well as information about several contextual factors that could make alliances more or less consequential. After describing the scenario we asked whether the respondent would support a U.S. military intervention to drive out the invader. This design allowed us to estimate the effects of our randomized treatments while avoiding problems of endogeneity, spurious correlation, and collinearity that often hamper observational research.

Our experiments were also designed to shed light on causal mechanisms. We measured how the treatment variables affected perceptions of three mediating variables: how U.S. actions would affect its reputation for upholding alliance agreements; how U.S. behavior would affect its reputation in the nonmilitary realm; and whether the U.S. had a moral duty to intervene. Having measured these perceptions, we could study why alliance commitments shift (or do not shift) public preferences about intervention.

Our main experiment was administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,200 U.S. citizens by YouGov in April 2017. The text of the experiment appears in the appendix. The experiment began by telling respondents, “There’s a lot of talk these days about U.S. relations

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16 For a general discussion of the benefits of experiments for studying international law, see Chilton and Tingley 2014. For an experimental approach to how treaty commitments affect public opinion in other issue areas, see for example Chaudoin 2014 on trade policy preferences and Wallace 2013 on torture.
with other countries in the world. We’d like to get your thoughts about a situation our country could face in the future. The situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. After describing the situation, we will ask your opinion about a policy option.”

We then presented respondents with a scenario in which the leader of a country wanted more power and resources, so he sent his military to attack another country and take part of that country’s territory. We told all respondents that the attacking country was non-democratic, that it did not share many interests with the U.S., and that it did not have a military alliance with the U.S. We also told all respondents that the country that had been attacked shared many interests with the U.S.

To investigate the effects of alliances, we randomized whether the U.S. had formed an alliance with the country that was attacked. One half of the respondents read that the U.S. “does not have a military alliance” with the country that was attacked. The other half were told that “the country that was attacked has a written military alliance with the U.S. The agreement, which was signed and ratified three years ago, says: ‘If one member of the alliance is attacked, the other member will take all necessary actions, including the use of armed force, to defend its ally.’”

Our experiment therefore estimates how American voters would react upon learning that the U.S. had a formal alliance agreement with the country that was attacked.\footnote{We modeled this language on Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, a classic case of a defensive alliance: https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.}

\footnote{Future research, as we discuss later, could investigate how voters react to informal promises of support, as well as vague versus specific alliance agreements (Leeds 2003a; Benson 2012; Beckley 2015; Chiba, Johnson, and Leeds 2015). Future studies could also vary whether leaders
We also randomized four contextual variables: stakes, costs, regime type, and region. To vary the stakes for the U.S., we told half the sample that “If the attacker succeeds in taking part of the other country, this would weaken U.S. military security and hurt the U.S. economy.” The other half of the sample read that a victory by the attacking country would “neither weaken U.S. military security nor hurt the U.S. economy.” We randomized the costs of military intervention by indicating whether the military operation would or would not be “very costly for the United States.” To vary regime type, we randomized whether respondents learned that the country under attack was a “democracy” or “not a democracy.” Finally, we varied the region in which the dispute took place, not only to make the vignette more concrete, but also to make sure that our findings were not specific to any particular region of the world. Respondents were randomly told that the two countries were located in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or South America. We independently randomized alliances and the four contextual variables, resulting in a 2×2×2×2×4 factorial design.

After exposing respondents to this information, we asked whether they favored or opposed sending the U.S. military to stop the invasion. There were five response options, ranging from “Favor strongly” to “Oppose strongly.”19 For the main analyses in this article, we dichotomized the dependent variable: responses were coded as 100 if they favored military intervention strongly or somewhat, and coded 0 otherwise. Coded this way, our dependent attempt to persuade voters to defend the country or stay out of the conflict, to evaluate when and how elite rhetoric strengthens or attenuates the effect of an alliance on public support for war.

19 At the end of the experiment, we administered five attention checks, shown in the appendix. YouGov delivered a nationally representative sample of 1,200 respondents who answered at least four out of five attention checks correctly.
variable measures the percentage of Americans who favored military intervention, and our
treatment effects are percentage-point changes in public support for intervention. Focusing on
percentages not only simplifies the analysis and presentation, but also allows a natural
interpretation that matches how news organizations and political analysts present public opinion
data. Nevertheless, our conclusions would not change if we measured public opinion and
expressed treatment effects on a five-point scale (see appendix).

To analyze the effects of the randomized treatments, we regressed support for war on all
interactions of alliances, costs, stakes, regime, and region, while controlling for demographic and
attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party identification, hawkishness,
internationalism, and nationalism) that might affect support for war. This approach not only
corrected for minor imbalances in treatments and demographic/attitudinal variables, but also
facilitated the analysis of both main and conditional effects. For example, based on the
regression, we estimated the main effect of alliances as the average of the effects in the 2×2×2×4
strata defined by the other randomized treatments. Similarly, we estimated the conditional
effects of alliances by averaging the effects in selected strata of interest. We now present our
findings.

20 On using linear regression to estimate the average marginal component effects and conditional
effects of all randomized treatments in a high-dimensional (“conjoint”) experiment, see
Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014).

21 Our subclassification estimator gave equal weight to each of the 2×2×2×4=32 strata defined by
the other treatments.
4. The Effect of Alliances on Public Support for War

Figure 1 shows the effect of alliances on public support for war, averaging over all the other randomized treatments. The first row shows that 79% of respondents supported war when the victim was a U.S. ally. In contrast, the second row shows that only 46% supported intervention to help an otherwise identical non-ally. Other factors equal, then, having an alliance increased public support for intervention by 33 percentage points, causing a swing from majority opposition to majority support for war. In this figure and all others, the horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals. The interval for the effect of alliances ranged from 28 to 38, so we can be quite certain that alliances altered public opinion about war.

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22 Based on our regression, the percentage of respondents who supported war was 79.44 percent when the U.S. had an alliance, versus 46.25 percent when the U.S. had not, implying an effect of 79.44 – 46.25 = 33.19 percentage points. If, however, we had not run a regression, but instead calculated average support for war with and without alliances (without controlling for demographic/attitudinal variables or combinations of randomized treatments), the estimates would have been nearly identical: 79.57 – 46.49 = 33.08 percentage points.

23 Our conclusions were robust to alternative weighting and coding schemes (see the appendix). When we reestimated Figure 1 using sampling weights, support for war was 77.27 percent with alliances and 46.95 percent without, for an effect of 30.32 percentage points, nearly the same as our unweighted estimates. This corroborates Miratrix et al. (2018, 275), who concluded that it is typically not worth using sample weights for survey experiments administered online by YouGov, because “sample average treatment effect (SATE) estimates did not appear to differ substantially from their weighted counterparts, and they avoided the substantial loss of statistical power that accompanies weighting.” Our findings were also robust to different coding schemes.
As the appendix shows, the same conclusions held for various subsets of the population. Alliances mattered for respondents with high and low levels of political interest, and for those who did and did not engage in costly political activities such as working for campaigns, donating money to candidates or parties, displaying political signs, or attending political meetings. Alliances were also consequential regardless of political affiliation, with large effects for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.²⁴

When we recoded the dependent variable as a 5-point scale (0, 1, 2, 3, 4), average support for war was 3.04 with alliances versus 2.09 without alliances, for an effect of 0.95 and a confidence interval running from 0.84 to 1.06. See the appendix.

²⁴ The effects of alliances among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans were all above 30 percentage points. See appendix for these and other subgroup analyses.
Figure 1: Effect of Alliances on Support for War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alliance</th>
<th>No Alliance</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support for War (%)

Note: The first two rows of Figure 1 display the percentage of respondents who supported war when the U.S. had a formal alliance (79%) and when it did not (46%), averaging over all other treatment conditions. The third row gives the effect of alliances, expressed as the percentage-point change in support for war. Estimates are based on the regression model described in the text.

Figure 2 presents the average effects of the other randomized treatments and compares them to the effect of alliances. Ceteris paribus, intervention was 15 points more popular when the stakes were high—e.g. inaction would weaken the safety and economy of U.S.—than when the stakes were low. Figure 2 also reveals a public preference for defending democracies. In general, the public was 12 points more willing to intervene on behalf of a democratic victim than a nondemocratic one. The anticipated costs of war also mattered: public support was 10 points higher when the expected costs of action were low than when the expected costs were high. The bottom portion of Figure 2 displays the effects of our fifth randomized treatment, geographic

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25 Figure 2 is based on the same regression we used to generate Figure 1.
location. We designated South America as the reference region and plotted geographic effects relative to that baseline. Regional differences were small, and not statistically distinguishable from zero.

**Figure 2: Effects of All Treatments on Support for War**

*Note*: Figure 2 shows the effects of each treatment on the percentage of respondents who supported war, averaging over all other combinations of treatments. Each treatment effect is measured by contrasting the treatment to a baseline: alliance (treatment) versus no alliance (baseline); high stakes (treatment) versus low stakes (baseline); democracy (treatment) versus autocracy (baseline); low costs (treatment) versus high costs (baseline); and Africa, Eastern Europe,
and Asia (treatments) versus South America (baseline). Estimates were obtained from the same regression that was used to generate Figure 1.

In sum, our data strongly confirm the hypothesis that alliance commitments shape public support for war, even after removing any correlation between alliances and the costs of intervention, the economic and strategic interests of the U.S., the political system of the country that was invaded, and the region in which the country was located. Moreover, the impact of alliances was more than twice as large as the effect of any other treatment in our experiment. These findings suggest that citizens attach high importance to honoring military alliances and are willing to send American forces into battle in order to uphold prior commitments.

5. **Does Context Moderate the Effect of Alliances?**

So far, we have estimated the effect of alliances by averaging over contextual variables. In this section we dive deeper by investigating support for war in a variety of contexts, and ask whether alliances were more consequential in some situations than in others.

Figure 3 depicts support for war given different combinations of alliances and three contextual variables: the stakes for the U.S., the expected costs of military intervention, and the regime type of the victim.\(^{26}\) We averaged over the fourth contextual variable, geographic region, which proved relatively unimportant.\(^{27}\) The hollow markers in Figure 3 measure support for war

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\(^{26}\) Figure 3 is based on the same regression that was used to generate Figure 1.

\(^{27}\) The appendix shows that the estimated effects of alliances were similar (between 26 and 35 percentage points) whether the country was located in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or South America.
in scenarios without an alliance, while the solid markers represent support for war in scenarios with an alliance.

In the absence of alliances, contextual variables powerfully and predictably influenced public opinion. The hollow marker in the top left corner of the figure shows that, when the stakes for the U.S. were low, the victim was an autocracy, and the costs of intervention were high, 18% of respondents supported military intervention when there was no alliance. As background conditions changed, support for war grew. For instance, enthusiasm for war was much greater when the stakes were high (bottom half of the figure) than when the stakes were low (top half of the graph), a pattern that held for every combination of regime type and costs. Regime type and cost operated in similar ways, driving support for war not only on average, but also for each combination of the other contextual variables.  

\[28\] The effects were always in the expected direction, though not always statistically significant at the .05 level.
Figure 3: Support for War With and Without Alliances

Note: Figure 3 depicts the percentage of respondents who supported war when the U.S. had a formal alliance (solid dot) and when the U.S. did not (hollow dot), for each combination of three contextual variables: stakes for the U.S. (low versus high); the expected costs of military intervention (high versus low); and the regime type of the victim (autocracy versus democracy). Estimates were obtained from the same regression that was used to generate Figure 1.
When we introduced an alliance, however, contextual variables became far less important as predictors of support for war.\textsuperscript{29} As the solid markers show, support for war became consistently strong. The public was not substantially more willing to defend an ally when the stakes for the U.S. were high than when the stakes for the U.S. were low. Likewise, opinions were not systematically different when the ally was a democracy compared to when it was an autocracy, and costs mattered only when the stakes were low. In general, the introduction of military alliances deprived contextual variables of their explanatory power.

If alliances generate consistently high support for war, overriding otherwise substantial variation by context, then alliances must exert stronger effects in some contexts than in others. Figure 4 presents this finding graphically. Each dot in Figure 4 shows how alliances increased support for intervention under the stated conditions, relative to an otherwise identical situation in which the U.S. had not made an alliance commitment. The first row shows that when the stakes for the U.S. were low, the costs of intervention would be high, and the victim was an autocracy, alliances boosted support for war by 50 points. The bottom row shows the opposite situation: when the stakes were high, the costs of intervention low, and the victim was a democracy, alliances moved opinion by only 15 percentage points. As the figure clearly shows, the effect of military alliances varied greatly by context.

\textsuperscript{29} Put differently, not only do contextual variables such as regime type, costs, and stakes moderate the effect of alliances, but alliances also moderate the effect of contextual variables.
Note: Figure 4 gives the estimated effects of alliances on public support for war for each combination of three contextual variables: stakes for the U.S. (low versus high); the expected costs of military intervention (high versus low); and the regime type of the victim (autocracy versus democracy). Estimates were obtained from the same regression that was used to generate Figure 1.

What general lessons can we draw from these patterns? We hypothesized that the effect of alliances would be greatest when other factors made military intervention less attractive.

Figure 5 tests this hypothesis directly, by plotting the effect of alliances (vertical axis) against support for war in the absence of an alliance (horizontal axis). Each dot in Figure 5 represents one of the eight possible combinations of stakes, costs, and regime type in our experiment. The top left dot, for example, represents the effect of an alliance in situations when willingness to aid
a non-ally would be lowest (low stakes, high costs, autocracy). The steep downward slope confirms that the effect of alliances declines as contextual variables work to increase the baseline popularity of military intervention.

**Figure 5: Effect of Alliances, by Baseline Support for War in the Absence of an Alliance**

![Graph showing the effect of alliances by baseline support for war in the absence of an alliance.](image)

*Note:* Figure 5 shows that the effect of alliances is negatively related to baseline support for war in the absence of an alliance. The figure contains eight dots, one for each of the eight combinations stakes, costs, and regime type. Support for war in the absence of alliances comes from Figure 3. The effect of alliances comes from Figure 4.
In sum, alliances made the biggest difference when the U.S. did not have strong military, economic, and political reasons to intervene. This finding lends support to fears of entanglement, by showing that alliances greatly enhance the popularity of war—in our scenario, generating majority support for intervention—when the situation would otherwise fail to justify U.S. military involvement.
6. Why Do Alliances Affect Support for War?

Next, we investigated three mechanisms through which alliances could drive public support for war: reputation for military reliability, reputation for nonmilitary reliability, and moral obligation. We measured these three potential mediators by asking respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the following three statements: (1) “If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will doubt America’s willingness to honor military alliance agreements in the future.” (2) “If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will doubt America's willingness to honor nonmilitary agreements in areas such as trade or the environment.” (3) “The U.S. has a moral obligation to send its military to defend the country that was attacked.” In each case, we used the answers to construct a scale with five levels: disagree strongly (0), disagree somewhat (25), neither agree nor disagree (50), agree somewhat (75), or agree strongly (100).

We regressed each mediator on all interactions of alliances, costs, stakes, regime, and region, while controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party identification, hawkishness, internationalism, and nationalism) that might affect how respondents thought about reputation or morality. Based on the regressions, we estimated the

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30 We asked respondents to rate their agreement or disagreement with each mediator individually, rather than asking them to choose among the mediators. See appendix for questionnaire. In future studies, researchers could include open-ended questions about why respondents favored or opposed military intervention.
main effect of alliances on each mediator by averaging over the effects in the $2\times2\times2\times4$ strata defined by the other randomized treatments: stakes, costs, regime type, and region.$^{31}$

As the top row of Figure 6 shows, respondents felt that reneging on an alliance would undermine America’s reputation for being a reliable ally by signaling that the U.S. could not be trusted to defend its allies in the future. Voters were 38 points more likely to agree that staying out would hurt America’s reputation for military reliability when the victim was an ally, than when the victim was not an ally.

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$^{31}$ Based on our regressions, the effects alliances on reputation for military reliability, reputation for nonmilitary reliability, and moral obligation were 38.3, 16.6, and 27.0, respectively. If, however, we had not run regressions, but instead calculated the differences in the average values of the mediators with and without alliances, the estimates would have been nearly identical: 38.2, 16.4, and 27.1.
Figure 6: Effects of Alliances on Mediators

Note: Figure 6 shows the average effect of alliances on three mediators: reputation for military reliability, reputation for nonmilitary reliability, and moral obligations. Each mediator was scaled from 0 to 100, and effects are presented as changes on the 100-point scale. Estimates are based on regressions described in the text.

Respondents also felt that abandoning an ally would taint America’s reputation for honoring non-military agreements in areas such as trade or the environment. As the second row of Figure 6 shows, concerns about reputational spillovers were 17 points higher when the U.S. had previously made an alliance commitment than when it had not made such a pledge. Importantly, though, citizens expected more damage to America’s reputation for military reliability than to its reputation for reliability in other domains. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that reneging causes more reputational damage within the immediate issue area than across issue areas.

Finally, alliances imbued respondents with a strong sense of moral obligation. Respondents were 27 points more likely to perceive a moral obligation to intervene when the victim was an ally, than when the victim was not. Overall, Figure 6 confirms that alliances
affected perceptions of all three mediators: reputation for military reliability, reputation for reliability on nonmilitary issues, and moral obligation.

Moving down the causal chain, how did these mediators affect support for war? To find out, we regressed support for war on the three mediators, which we rescaled from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. As before, we controlled for all interactions of the randomized treatments, as well as socio-political attitudes and demographic variables. The regression was designed to isolate how beliefs about reputation for military reliability, reputation for nonmilitary reliability, and moral obligation affected attitudes toward intervention, after adjusting for individual and situational features that could confound the relationship between the mediators and the outcome.
Figure 7: Effects of Mediators on Support for War

Note: Figure 7 shows the effects of each mediator on support for war, controlling for all interactions of randomized treatments and a battery of demographic/attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party identification, hawkishness, internationalism, and nationalism). Each mediator was rescaled from 0 to 1. Thus, Figure 7 shows the consequence of moving each mediator from its minimum to its maximum value, holding other variables constant. Estimates are based on the regression model described in the text.

Figure 7 plots the effects of the mediators on support for war. Reputation for military reliability had the largest effect: other factors equal, willingness to intervene was 49 percentage points higher among people who strongly agreed that inaction would undermine America’s reputation for honoring military alliances (reputation for military reliability = 1) than among people who strongly disagreed that staying out would cause this kind of reputational damage (reputation for military reliability = 0). In contrast, support for war was only 8 percentage points higher (a statistically insignificant estimate) among respondents who anticipated that inaction would cause reputational spillovers than among people who doubted the possibility of reputational spillovers. Finally, independent of any reputational concerns, citizens who perceived
a moral obligation gave 38 points more support for war than citizens who denied any moral obligation.

We combined the information from Figures 6 and 7 to estimate the importance of each causal mechanism.\textsuperscript{32} Recall that alliances increased public support for intervention by 33 points. Approximately 57\% of this effect flowed from concerns about a reputation for being a reliable ally. To see why, note that the expected damage to America’s reputation for military reliability was .38 points higher (on a 0–1 scale) in scenarios with an alliance than in scenarios without an alliance. Moreover, a one-unit change in expected damage to the country’s reputation for military reliability was associated with a 49-point surge in support for intervention. Putting these estimates together, we get $0.38 \times 49 = 19$, representing $19 \div 33 \approx 57\%$ of the total effect of alliances.

Using a similar procedure, we calculated that fears of reputational spillovers mediated only 4\% of the total effect of alliances. This was because, although alliances raised expectations about reputational spillover, fears of spillover had little effect on support for war. Finally, alliances generated a sense of moral duty, which strongly influenced attitudes about intervention. This moral pathway accounted for 31\% of the total treatment effect. We present these estimates

\textsuperscript{32} We calculated the strength of each pathway using the product of coefficients method (Baron and Kenny 1986). The appendix shows that our conclusions remained the same when we instead applied the Imai et al. (2011) potential outcomes framework to non-linear probit models. Note, however, that even in an experimental context, causal mediation analysis relies on untestable assumptions, including that the observed values of the mediators are independent of treatment status and all pretreatment confounders (Imai et al. 2011).
in Figure 8, which suggests that alliances drove public opinion primarily by changing perceptions of moral obligation and America’s reputation as a reliable ally.

**Figure 8: Estimates of Causal Mechanisms**

Note: Figure 8 estimates the importance of each causal mechanism, i.e., how much each mechanism contributed to the total effect of alliances. Estimates were based on the product-of-coefficients method, as discussed in the text. Our conclusions about the contributions of the three mediators remained the same when used probit regression to model support for war and conducted mediation analysis within a potential outcomes framework (see appendix).
7. What Drives Perceptions of Moral Obligation?

We found that alliances affect support for war partly by giving rise to a sense of moral obligation. Why do citizens regard alliance commitments as morally binding? To find out, we fielded a follow-up study to 2,703 U.S. adults, recruited via Lucid in December 2017 and June 2018. We began with text identical to our main YouGov study, and found that our previous findings replicated well. As the appendix shows, the average effect of alliances was 28 percentage points in the follow-up study, compared to 33 points in our main study. Moreover, as in the main study, the effects of alliance varied by context, and alliances exerted their influence by raising concerns about moral obligation and U.S. reputation for being a reliable ally.

The follow-up study concluded with a battery of questions about moral foundations, designed to gauge which specific considerations influenced perceptions of moral obligation. We asked whether failing to intervene would violate principles of fairness, loyalty, authority, care, liberty, and sanctity, the six main constructs in moral foundations theory. We captured beliefs about fairness by asking how much respondents agreed or disagreed that “If the U.S. does not send its military, this would be unfair to the country that was invaded.” Similarly, we studied perceptions of loyalty by measuring reactions to the claim, “If the U.S. does not send its military, this would be disloyal to the country that was invaded.” The appendix provides the text of all six moral foundation items, each coded on a scale from 0 (disagree strongly) to 100 (agree strongly).

We regressed each moral foundation on all interactions of alliances, costs, stakes, regime, and region, while controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party identification, hawkishness, internationalism, and nationalism) that might affect

33 Lucid used quota sampling to ensure that was diverse with respect to gender, age, ethnicity, and geographic region.
perceptions of morality. Based on the regressions, we estimated the main effect of alliances on each moral foundation by averaging over the effects in the 2×2×2×4 strata defined by the other randomized treatments.

Figure 9 shows how alliances affected perceptions of whether nonintervention would violate each moral foundation. As hypothesized, respondents were far more likely to view nonintervention as unfair and disloyal when the victim was an ally than when the victim was not. Alliances also raised concerns about authority; subjects were substantially more likely to think staying out of the conflict would “show disobedience to higher authorities” if the U.S. had previously cemented an alliance agreement. This effect makes sense to the extent that citizens view breaches of treaties as violations of international law.

Figure 9: Effect of Alliances on Moral Foundations

Note: Figure 9 shows the average effect of alliances on each of six moral foundations: fairness, loyalty, authority, care, liberty, and sanctity. Each moral foundation was scaled from 0 to 100, and effects are presented as changes on the 100-point scale. Estimates are based on regressions described in the text.
Alliances also affected perceptions of care. In vignettes with alliances, respondents were 8 points more likely to agree that “If the U.S. does not send its military, the country that was invaded would suffer serious harm.” This effect, though relatively small, is consistent with the hypothesis that allies might suffer disproportionately if abandoned, because they had developed military plans on the assumption that the ally would uphold its side of the agreement.

Surprisingly, alliances also raised concerns about liberty. Subjects were 12 points more likely to believe failing to intervene “would be a threat to the liberty of people in the invaded country” when that country was an ally, though it is not clear why they would have this perception. We leave this as a topic for future research. Finally, as expected, we found no evidence that alliances increased concerns about sanctity/purity, operationalized as the belief that nonintervention would “increase the spread of germs and diseases.”

Next, we studied how the six moral foundations affected overall beliefs about a moral obligation to intervene. Thus, the dependent variable was the respondent’s level of agreement with the statement that the “U.S. has a moral obligation to defend the country that was attacked.” We regressed this sense of moral obligation on all six measures of moral foundations, controlling for attitudinal and demographic variables and all interactions of the randomized treatments.

The estimated effects of each moral foundation appear in Figure 10. Other factors equal, moral obligation was 33 points higher among people who strongly agreed that nonintervention was unfair, than among people who felt the opposite. Similarly, perceptions of moral duty were 25 percentage points higher among those who strongly agreed that staying out would be disloyal, than among people who disagreed with that view. Three other moral foundations—authority, care, and liberty—had smaller but still positive effects on perceptions about the overall morality
of intervention. Finally, in our study, the foundation of sanctity did not drive thinking about the morality of military intervention.

![Figure 10: Effects of Moral Foundations on Moral Obligation](image)

*Figure 10: Effects of Moral Foundations on Moral Obligation*

*Note:* Figure 10 shows the effects of each moral foundation on the overall sense of moral obligation, controlling for all interactions of randomized treatments and a battery of demographic/attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party identification, hawkishness, internationalism, and nationalism). Each moral foundation was rescaled from 0 to 1. Thus, Figure 10 shows the consequence of moving each moral foundation from its minimum to its maximum value, holding other variables constant. Estimates are based on the regression model described in the text.

We combined the estimates from Figures 9 and 10 using the same approach to causal mediation described above. In our study, alliances affected overall beliefs about morality primarily by raising concerns about fairness and loyalty. Together, these two moral obligations mediated nearly 60 percent of the effect of alliances on moral obligation. Three other moral
foundations, authority, care, and liberty, played relatively small mediatory roles, each accounting for 3-5% of the total effect. Finally, concerns about sanctity did not mediate the effect of alliances on moral obligation.  

Figure 11: Estimates of Causal Mechanisms for Moral Obligation

Note: Figure 11 estimates the importance of each causal mechanism, i.e., how much each moral foundation contributed to the total sense of moral obligation. Estimates were based on the product-of-coefficients method. Our conclusions about the contributions of the six moral foundations remained the same when we conducted mediation analysis within a potential outcomes framework (see appendix).

34 The appendix depicts the analyses of moral foundations when splitting the sample by Party ID and ideology. We find that Democrats and Republicans, and liberals and conservatives, are similar in their moral thinking about alliances and military intervention.
In summary, we found that alliances raise concerns about fairness and loyalty, which in turn contribute to the sense of moral obligation that helps make alliances bind. Our findings about fairness and loyalty have both scholarly and practical implications. First, our findings underscore the importance of studying moral inclinations when explaining attitudes about foreign policy (Kertzer et al. 2014, Kreps and Maxey 2017). Fairness and loyalty have received relatively little attention in the literatures on alliances or military intervention, but our experiments indicate that these are important considerations in the public mind.\(^{35}\)

Second, our results suggest both challenges and opportunities for leaders seeking to sway public opinion about supporting an ally. When voters see policies in terms of moral values, they report being much less open to changing their minds than when issues do not involve questions of morality (Mooney and Schuldt 2008). Indeed, people express “moral outrage” at the suggestion that nonmoral considerations such as economic costs could eclipse moral concerns (Tetlock et al. 2000). Leaders wishing to mute public support for intervention would therefore need to explain why refusing to help an ally would be neither unfair nor disloyal. On the other hand, when voters do not already view an issue in moral terms, moral rhetoric can shift public opinion (Feinberg and Willer 2013). In some contexts, therefore, leaders might be able to employ moral rhetoric to shape the public debate.

Our findings also help make sense of contemporary debates about the future of U.S. alliances such as NATO. President Donald Trump claims it is unfair to expect the U.S. to defend

\(^{35}\) Though some, e.g., Brewer 2009, have studied patriotism, loyalty to one’s own country.
NATO allies who are not spending at least 2 percent of annual GDP on their own defense.\textsuperscript{36} If the U.S. public sees NATO allies as shirking their commitments or bilking U.S. taxpayers, they may conclude that the U.S. is not obligated to reciprocate by defending those countries militarily. If Americans accept Trump’s portrayal, this could undermine a key component of the U.S. commitment to NATO: a sense of moral duty grounded in perceptions of fairness and reciprocity.

Loyalty, too, has played a role in debates over NATO. Critics have portrayed President Trump as showing more loyalty to Russia than to NATO allies.\textsuperscript{37} To the extent that the public cares about loyalty to in-group members, such rhetoric could strengthen the public perception that the U.S. has a moral obligation to defend NATO allies.

8. Conclusion

When and why do military alliances matter? We study this question from the perspective of public opinion. Our experiments, fielded in the U.S., presented subjects with a situation in which one country had invaded another. We randomized whether the U.S. had a military alliance with the country under attack, as well as contextual factors including costs, stakes, regime type, and geographic region. Thus, we were able to estimate the effect of alliances on public support for war, while holding constant other factors that could affect decisions about whether to form an alliance and intervene in disputes.

\textsuperscript{36} See, for example, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/07/19/tucker_carlson_are_you_ok_with_your_kids_dying_to_protect_montenegro.html

\textsuperscript{37} https://www.newsweek.com/Donald-Trump-Loyal-Putin-NATO-1018293
We found that having a military alliance profoundly influenced support for war. On average, Americans were 33 percentage points more supportive of defending a U.S. ally than an otherwise identical non-ally. Alliances had powerful effects across the political spectrum, regardless of political party, ideology, and involvement in politics.

We also investigated the conditions under which alliances were most potent. Alliances held the most sway when the context least favored war. When we told respondents that a non-ally had been attacked, and described low stakes, high costs, and a non-democratic victim, few Americans wanted to get involved. When we presented an identical situation involving a U.S. ally, however, the popularity of war soared. Alliances transformed public reticence about military intervention into enthusiasm, demonstrating that citizens do not regard alliances as mere “scraps of paper.”

In addition, we found strong evidence for two causal mechanisms. Alliance commitments shaped public opinion about war by raising concerns about America’s reputation as a reliable ally, and by generating a sense of moral obligation. When we investigated the roots of these moral beliefs, we found that alliances influenced perceptions of obligation by activating two important moral foundations: fairness and loyalty.

Together, these findings about the effects of alliances on public support for war, and the mechanisms through which they shape public sentiment, have important implications for policymakers. Our findings suggest that policymakers weighing the wisdom of an alliance are right to be concerned about entanglement. Alliance commitments greatly increase U.S. public support for military intervention, particularly when the U.S. has little underlying interest in the conflict. Leaders who breach alliances when the stakes seem low, the costs seem high, or the ally has a different political system will face a public primed to think that reneging would be both
unwise and unethical; it would undermine the country’s reputation for military reliability and violate moral obligations grounded in fairness and loyalty.

At the same time, our findings suggest that alliances should have significant deterrent value (Leeds 2003a; Johnson and Leeds 2011). If potential aggressors understand that alliance agreements increase domestic political support for coming to the victim’s aid, alliances could discourage attacks and help maintain peace in the international system. In sum, our findings suggest that alliances can be a potent tool of international politics.

Our results could also help to explain existing empirical findings in the literature on alliances. We found that a strong majority of the public supported intervention on behalf of allies, regardless of the context. This finding could provide microfoundations for the idea that democracies are particularly reliable allies (Leeds 2003b). To the extent that democratic leaders are more sensitive to pressure from domestic audiences, public opinion could be part of the explanation for the credibility of democratic alliances. Future research could evaluate this possibility from both a theoretical and empirical standpoint.

Future research could also explore additional questions about when and how alliances shape public opinion. For example, how might elite rhetoric moderate the effect of alliances on public support for war? On the one hand, studies have shown that leaders who fail to honor

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38 Though beyond the scope of this paper, alliances could also affect how partners behave toward third parties: either emboldening allies to act aggressively (e.g. Benson 2012) or encouraging them to solve disputes peacefully (Fang, Johnson, and Leeds 2014). Further, alliances could make states seem more threatening, creating a security dilemma (Vasquez 1993; Gibler 2000).

39 For other work on the reliability of democratic alliances, see Mattes 2012b, Clare 2013, and DiGiuseppe and Poast 2018.
international commitments can mitigate public disapproval by providing justifications for their behavior (Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). Leaders might try to garner public support for abandoning an ally by misrepresenting the terms of the alliance, claiming that circumstances have changed, or painting the ally’s behavior in an unflattering light. On the other hand, leaders might try to boost public support for defending an ally by highlighting the reputational consequences of breaching an alliance or by painting promise-breaking as unfair and disloyal. Future research could evaluate whether, and when, elite rhetoric could dampen or boost the large effects of alliances found in our experiments.

Given our evidence that alliances increase public support for war, scholars could explore whether leaders can design agreements that allow greater public leeway. Does the agreement contain escape clauses or vague language providing allies with freedom of action (Leeds 2003a; Benson 2012; Beckley 2015; Chiba, Johnson, and Leeds 2015)? How specific and complete are the terms of the agreement? Do formal alliances differ from informal ones (Lipson 1991), or from coalitions that emerge during crises (Wolford 2015)? Do citizens react differently to multilateral alliances than to bilateral agreements? By randomizing not only the existence but also the content of alliance agreements, researchers could assess whether some types of alliances are more consequential than others. This would be of interest to policymakers tasked with crafting alliances that balance two competing goals: deterring foreign attack and avoiding unwanted entanglement.

Scholars could also investigate responses to changing circumstances. In international law the principle that treaties must be kept (pacta sunt servanda) sits uncomfortably with the idea that fundamental changes in circumstances can render treaties invalid (rebus sic stantibus). Are domestic audiences more willing to violate agreements when circumstances have changed
fundamentally since the alliance was formed? For example, does it matter whether the alliance was signed when the ally was more strategically important, had a different type of political regime, or had different policy preferences?\textsuperscript{40} Are citizens less willing to uphold older treaties, or treaties signed by a different leader, even if other circumstances have not shifted appreciably?\textsuperscript{41}

Future research could also explore how the origins and nature of the conflict between the two countries influence public reactions to alliances. In the experiment we conducted, the ally was attacked. Future experiments could examine how alliances affect the likelihood of intervention when the ally instigates the dispute, to find out whether alliances not only entangle but also entrap.\textsuperscript{42}

Finally, scholars could investigate whether alliances have similar effects in other countries. We fielded our study in the U.S., a superpower that is one of the most militarily active democracies in the world. Researchers could replicate our experiments on other samples—including citizens of other countries and foreign policy elites—to explore the effects of alliances in countries that are militarily weaker or that differ from the U.S. in other ways.

Observers often decry world politics as a realm devoid of enforcement. Without a central authority to punish countries that renege on their promises, why should international agreements

\textsuperscript{40} See Leeds and Savun 2007 on how changes in circumstances affect the probability that states will terminate their alliances in violation of their terms.

\textsuperscript{41} Such experiments could complement existing work on leader-specific reputations to assess the extent to which citizens believe that a reputation for reneging would adhere to the leader who broke the agreement, or the country as a whole (Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018). See also Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009 on leadership change and alliance termination.

\textsuperscript{42} On entrapment, see Kim 2011 and Edelstein and Shifrinson 2018.
such as alliances carry any weight when it comes to life-or-death decisions such as sending military forces into battle? Our findings suggest that by engaging concerns about reputation and morality, military alliances have potent effects on public support for military intervention. The power of alliances to sway public opinion should not be taken lightly by leaders deciding whether to form new agreements—nor by foreign powers tempted to test existing ones.
Works Cited


