

# A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy



**Joshua D. Kertzer** Harvard University  
**Thomas Zeitzoff** American University

**Abstract:** *If public opinion about foreign policy is such an elite-driven process, why does the public often disagree with what elites have to say? We argue here that elite cue-taking models in International Relations are both overly pessimistic and unnecessarily restrictive. Members of the public may lack information about the world around them, but they do not lack principles, and information need not only cascade from the top down. We present the results from five survey experiments where we show that cues from social peers are at least as strong as those from political elites. Our theory and results build on a growing number of findings that individuals are embedded in a social context that combines with their general orientations toward foreign policy in shaping responses toward the world around them. Thus, we suggest the public is perhaps better equipped for espousing judgments in foreign affairs than many of our top-down models claim.*

**Replication Materials:** The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/QSXDUN>.

In July 2014, another wave of violence erupted in the Middle East, as Israel responded to a barrage of rockets from Gaza by launching air strikes and, eventually, a ground incursion intent on degrading Hamas's military capabilities and destroying a web of underground tunnels being used to launch covert attacks. In Washington, both Democrats and Republicans firmly sided with Israel: The Senate passed a unanimous resolution blaming Hamas for the conflict, and both prominent Democrats and Republicans gave staunch defenses of Israel's right to defend itself. In an interview on ABC on July 20, Secretary of State John Kerry summed up the White House's position—and with it, the Republicans' position as well—that “when three young Israeli kids are taken and murdered and Hamas applauds it . . . and then starts rocketing Israel when they're looking for the people who did it, you know, that's out of balance by any standard” (ABC News 2014).

Although both Democrats and Republicans in Washington were united in their support of Israel, a

series of polls found that Democrats and Republicans in the public were divided. In a Pew poll conducted July 24–27, 60% of Republicans blamed Hamas for the violence, whereas Democrats were split, with 29% blaming Hamas, and 26% blaming Israel. A Gallup poll conducted July 22–23 detected a similar pattern: 65% of Republicans thought Israel's actions were justified, but Democrats were divided, as 31% backed the Israeli response, and 47% called it unjustified. This pattern—where political elites are united but the public is divided—is particularly interesting for political scientists because it violates the assumptions of a commonly held theory about public opinion, in which the public knows relatively little about foreign affairs and thus structures its beliefs by taking cues from trusted, partisan elites—a top-down process in which members of the public adeptly swallow whatever their preferred elite cue-givers feed them. Yet if the mass public knows so little and can only regurgitate carefully pureed talking points, why does it often disagree with what elites have to say? We argue here that partisan elite

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Joshua D. Kertzer is Assistant Professor of Government, Harvard University, 1737 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02138 (jkertzer@gov.harvard.edu). Thomas Zeitzoff is Assistant Professor, School of Public Affairs, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016 (zeitzo@american.edu).

Previous versions of this article benefited from presentations at George Washington University and the 2014 APSA and Peace Science annual meetings, and helpful feedback from Allison Anoll, Matt Baum, Adam Berinsky, Josh Gubler, Drew Herrick, Tali Mendelberg, Lauren Prather, Brian Rathbun, Jonathan Renshon, Elizabeth Saunders, Rachel Stein, and Mike Tomz. Thanks to Kyle Dropp for his assistance with fielding Experiments 1–2. Kertzer acknowledges the support of the Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance.

*American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 61, No. 3, July 2017, Pp. 543–558

cue-taking models are both overly pessimistic and unnecessarily restrictive: members of the public may often lack information, but they do not lack principles, and information need not cascade from the top down. We present the results from five survey experiments where we explore the limits of elite partisan cues in foreign affairs. Across all five experiments, fielded in three studies across two years, we show that cues from social peers are as least as strong as those from political elites, and in some cases, stronger. Additionally, even in the absence of cues, individuals have general predispositions toward foreign policy they can rely on when forming attitudes toward specific policy issues. Together, these findings suggest that the role of elite cues should be understood in a broader context about the information environment in which citizens are embedded, and the role of political orientations beyond partisanship. We make this argument in three parts. First, we review the literature on public opinion about foreign affairs, showing how scholars in the past half century have oscillated from pessimism to optimism and back again. Second, we point to a number of both theoretical and empirical reasons that should encourage us to relax some of the assumptions undergirding top-down models of public opinion. We then present our barrage of experimental results, and conclude by discussing some of the implications of our findings.

### Three Images of the Public in Foreign Affairs

The public opinion about foreign policy literature is rich and multifarious, but like Caesar onto Gaul, we can crudely divide it into three parts.

In the aftermath of the Second World War arose what came to be known as the “Almond-Lippmann consensus” (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955): a pessimistic view that held that public opinion on foreign policy issues was ill-informed and ill-structured (Holsti 2004). Kennan (1951, 59) compared democratic publics to “one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin,” and Almond (1950, 232) suggested that the American public’s reaction to international events “has no depth and no structure.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the advocates of this cynical view tended to be foreign policy realists, eager to insulate the intricacies of foreign policymaking from what they saw as an unsophisticated and emotional public (Morgenthau 1948).

In reaction to the postwar cynics (and more methodologically sophisticated counterparts, like Converse 1964) have come a series of optimistic rejoinders showing that foreign policy attitudes indeed have structure (Holsti

1992; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987), and that the public reacts predictably and prudently to world events (Jentleson 1992; Kertzer 2013; Page and Shapiro 1992), most notably casualties (Gartner 2008; Mueller 1971). The public has principles when it comes to foreign policy: it likes victory (Eichenberg 2005) and success (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009), dislikes inconsistency (Tomz 2007), likes multilateralism (Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2010), and has stable and well-structured foreign policy orientations (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Holsti 1979; Rathbun 2007; Wittkopf 1990) rooted in core values (Goren et al. 2016; Rathbun et al. 2016) and encoded into our genes (Hatemi and McDermott 2016). Although these approaches are remarkably varied, what they share is a sense that public opinion about foreign policy is characterized by order rather than chaos, and that the sources of this order can be derived from within the public itself.

In response to these optimists is a third school that also finds predictability in public opinion about foreign affairs, but credits it not to members of the public, but to the elites they listen to. Responding in particular to event-driven theories of public opinion, this latter camp points out that the mass public is “rationally ignorant” about politics in general, but especially foreign policy issues, which are, by definition, *foreign*, and relatively far removed from most people’s daily lives (Rosenau 1965), resulting in an important information asymmetry between elites and the public they govern (Baum and Groeling 2010; Colaresi 2007). In the heat of the crisis in Ukraine in early March 2014, for example, only one in six Americans could correctly locate Ukraine on a map (Dropp, Kertzer, and Zeitzoff 2014). To “learn what they need to know” (Lupia and McCubbins 2000) and form political judgments, members of the public thus turn to trusted cue-givers, typically prominent members of their preferred political party.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the balance of public opinion on foreign policy issues is largely driven in a top-down fashion by the balance of elite opinion (Berinsky 2007, 2009; Brody 1991; Zaller 1992). Actual events matter on the ground less than what prominent Democrats

<sup>1</sup>Cue-taking models of public opinion about foreign policy do not limit themselves exclusively to party leaders as cue-givers: Golby, Feaver, and Dropp (2017) look at the cue-giving effects of military generals; Hayes and Guardino (2011) and Murray (2014) at those of foreign leaders; Thompson (2006), Chapman (2011), and Grieco et al. (2011) at the endorsement effects of international institutions; and Pease and Brewer (2008) at that of Oprah Winfrey. However, as we discuss below, all of these cue-givers are sufficiently socially distant from individual members of the public that we can think of a top-down logic as operating, even if the question of how the public weighs competing cues from multiple cue-givers remains an unanswered question. For an integration of the first two images, see Huff and Schub (forthcoming).

and Republicans have to say about them, and when these elites are divided—and the media environment reports these divisions (Baum and Groeling 2009; Groeling and Baum 2008)—the public will follow suit.

Thus, although the elite cue-taking school sees public opinion about the use of force as less stochastic than the early postwar cynics did, their top-down take on the nature of public opinion is perhaps no less pessimistic. Although proponents of these models take pains to point out that members of the public “are not lemmings” (Berinsky 2007, 975) and that relying on heuristic reasoning is neither irrational nor inconsistent with fulfilling the requirements of democratic citizenship (Lupia and McCubbins 1998), the normative implications of these models are nonetheless somewhat saturnine compared to their relatively Jovian predecessors. If public opinion is driven from the top down, the public’s ability to constrain its leaders in the manner anticipated by audience cost theory, for example (Fearon 1994; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012), is limited, as members of the public are simply likely to swallow whatever their elite cue-givers feed them. As Saunders (2015) argues, if public opinion about foreign policy is truly as top-down as elite cue-taking theories suggest, many domestic political accounts of international relations have gotten the democratic audience wrong, and International Relations (IR) scholars should question whether the public belongs in our models of domestic politics at all.

### Going Beyond a Top-Down Model

By reminding us that the nature of the information environment matters in the study of public opinion, elite cue-taking models perform an invaluable service. And yet, there are three reasons why we may wish to postpone throwing out the public with the bathwater.

First, elite cue-taking models are explicitly about a particular top-down causal mechanism, rather than a simple correlation, yet many of the tests of top-down models of public opinion in foreign policy rely on observational data where questions of directionality are difficult to disentangle: it could be the case that a correlation between party leaders’ statements and mass opinion is not due to the public taking cues from party leaders, but from strategic politicians responding to the wishes of their base; it could also be the case that both elites and attentive members of the public rely on the same heuristics or anchor on the same values or orientations when processing information about the world, and thus reach similar opinions simultaneously. If deep-seated values shape foreign policy preferences, for example (Kertzer et al. 2014; Rathbun et al. 2016), and Democrats and Republicans

differ on which values are important to them, elites and the masses can polarize in tandem along partisan lines even without the former cueing the latter.

Experiments are better suited to showing cue-taking in action, but evidence here is mixed, such that even elite cue proponents characterize the existing literature as fragmented with “contradictory results” (Guisinger and Saunders 2017, 2). Gelpi (2010) finds that events on the ground consistently outperform elite cues in an experiment gauging support for the Iraq War, whereas Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) find that elite party cues are surprisingly impotent in audience cost experiments (but see Kertzer and Brutger 2016). Berinsky (2009, 118–23) finds partial support for an elite cue model in an experiment regarding a hypothetical intervention in South Korea, but notes that the hyperpolarized environment of the Iraq War—in which participants have already been pretreated with elite cues about the wisdom or folly of military interventions before they participate in the experiment—makes for a harder test of the theory.

Second, the political behavior literature now has a more nuanced view of elite cues than many IR scholars might realize, calling into question whether ordinary citizens are as easily bullied by the bully pulpit as a top-down model of public opinion predicts (Edwards 2003). Enns (2014) finds that elites largely took cues about mass incarceration from an increasingly punitive mass public, rather than the other way around; Saeki (2013) finds that legislators are more likely to undergo ideological shifts in response to their voters than voters are in response to their legislators; Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries (2007) find that support for European integration is characterized by both top-down and bottom-up cue-giving; and Messing and Westwood (2014) find that social endorsements outweigh partisan sources in selective exposure. Similarly, Bullock (2011) demonstrates that when partisan respondents in experiments are presented with policy information in addition to party cues, the effect of the former is as least as strong as the latter, showing that even strong partisans do not necessarily automatically accept what their party leaders say; Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014) also find that strong partisans are actually more, rather than less, likely to make use of policy information when espousing judgments. Most relevant, both Druckman and Nelson (2003) and Klar (2014) find that citizens’ conversations with one another can eliminate the effects of elite rhetoric. Opinion on foreign policy issues may abide by fundamentally different dynamics than opinion on domestic ones, of course (though see Rathbun 2007), but these findings raise the possibility that the effects of elite partisan cues may be contextually contingent.

Third, the empirical record is filled with anomalies that purely top-down models of public opinion about foreign policy have difficulty accounting for. If the public is simply taking cues from elites, there should not be a “foreign policy disconnect” between the wishes of the former and the preferences of the latter (Page and Bouton 2007). Yet although there was relative elite consensus in the lead-up to the Iraq War—and, in a content analysis of network news coverage in the eight months preceding the war, Hayes and Guardino (2010, 61) find that “the voices of anti-war groups and opposition Democrats were barely audible”—there was sizable domestic opposition to the war in a manner that strictly top-down theories of public opinion have trouble explaining (Hayes and Guardino 2011), just as they have trouble explaining why public support for torture rose when elite opposition increased (Mayer and Armor 2012). Additional evidence comes from outside the United States as well: Kreps (2010) finds that against elite-driven theories of public opinion, the war in Afghanistan was extremely unpopular in most of the countries that contributed troops to the mission, despite the backing of foreign elites.

We suggest that some of these puzzles are perhaps less puzzling if we recognize that citizens do not simply take cues from distant elites, but also bring their own predispositions to the table and can take cues from one another as well. Despite the tendency of treating public opinion as the additive aggregation of individually and independently administered responses to survey questions, public opinion has a *public* quality (Sanders 1999) stemming from the group context in which individuals operate. In that sense, scholars of public opinion should not just be looking at microfoundations, but also at *mesofoundations*: the social context and network in which citizens are embedded. Outside the study of political behavior, constructivist IR scholars have been making similar arguments, pointing to the importance of the mass public “common sense” as an obstacle to elite hegemony (e.g., Hopf 2013). In an innovative study of the 1971 Bangladesh War, for example, Hayes (2012) shows that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s attempts to cue the public to think of India as a threat ultimately failed because the public saw India as a fellow democracy, and thus as inherently nonthreatening. Public opinion proved to be uncueable. Many of our theories of norms in IR similarly advance “bottom-up” models where societal groups are leading political elites, rather than the other way around (e.g., Checkel 1997; Fanis 2011).

There are at least three reasons why scholars of public opinion in foreign affairs should think seriously about mesofoundations and group context. First, groups and social networks are an important source of information

(Mutz 1998). Although the prevailing information-based models in American public opinion about foreign policy are purely elite-driven, information travels laterally as well as top-down, and perceptions of the attitudes of our peers affect both what we think and how certainly we think it (Clarkson et al. 2013; Visser and Mirable 2004). If the power of heuristic processing is a function of not only receiving information but also choosing whether to accept it (Zaller 1992), information from proximate peers is likely to amplify or dampen the resonance of messages from distant elites, particularly given that Americans’ trust in government is consistently lower than their trust in one another (Keele 2007). Second, groups and social networks are important sources of social influence (Milgram 1974; Sinclair 2012). Even when groups do not explicitly coerce, the mere presence of a majority induces pressures toward conformity (Asch 1951; Stein 2013), particularly given the importance of group membership in defining who people are and how they behave (Brewer and Brown 1998).

Third, and relatedly, a rich body of research throughout the social sciences has documented that people behave differently in groups than they do as individuals (Hackman and Katz 2010); late 19th- and early 20th-century scholars preoccupied with the “folly of the crowd” saw groups as more emotional and impulsive than the individuals who compose them (e.g., Le Bon 1896), whereas an opposite body of literature suggests that individual-level errors and irrationalities cancel each other out in groups (Druckman 2004), and a large literature on group polarization (Friedkin 1999; Myers and Lamm 1976) documents the extent to which groups adopt more extreme positions after deliberating than the median stance among group members before deliberation takes place. Yet political scientists have yet to appreciate how these meso-level effects might play a role in public opinion about foreign affairs.<sup>2</sup>

There are multiple pathways through which group cues could influence individuals. First, groups can influence political behavior by explicitly or implicitly pushing social conformity. Second, groups can convey credible new information to group members about how other individuals view specific policies; they thus let group members get a second opinion (Mendelberg 2002). Disentangling these effects observationally is very difficult, so we turn to a series of five survey experiments

<sup>2</sup>Among the few exceptions we are aware of: Radziszewski (2013), who uses observational data to examine the effects of discussion networks on Polish support for the Iraq War, and Todorov and Mandisodza (2004), who explore how second-order beliefs about American public opinion shape first-order foreign policy preferences.



to isolate the informational effect of group cues on support for war and peace in the absence of the social pressure of conformity. In the fourth and fifth experiments, we further test whether it is the information present in the social cues or the similarity of the cue giver that drives the effects of social cues. In doing so, we follow Mendelberg's (2005) exhortation to bring "the group back into political psychology."

To explore these mesofoundations of public opinion about foreign affairs, we designed five survey experiments, fielded in three different studies. The first two experiments were embedded in a survey fielded by Survey Sampling International (SSI) on a national sample of 1,035 registered voters in the summer of 2014.<sup>3</sup> The third experiment was administered to 1,446 American adults on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in the autumn of 2014. The fourth and fifth experiments were embedded in a survey administered to 1,997 American adults on MTurk in the autumn of 2016. We describe each in turn.

## Experiments 1–2

### Method

At the beginning of the first study, participants completed a short questionnaire measuring their militant assertiveness and internationalism—two key foreign policy orientations from the foreign policy public opinion literature (e.g., Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999), as well as a standard battery of demographic and partisan characteristics. After subjects completed the opening questionnaire, they were presented with two foreign policy experiments presented in random order. In each experiment, we presented participants with a fictional newspaper article—presented as real—in which policy makers in Washington were debating a salient national security issue: a military pivot to Asia in response to increased threats from a rising China (*China*), and the deployment of special forces units to combat terrorists in the Middle East (*Terrorism*). Examples of the stimulus materials are shown in Appendix §1 in the online supporting information (SI).

In each article, we manipulated two different factors. First, each article included a quote from a member of Congress endorsing the policy proposal. For each participant, we randomly assigned whether the

endorsement in the article came from a Democrat (*Democratic Endorsement*) or a Republican (*Republican Endorsement*). Since the persuasion literature emphasizes the importance of source credibility (Druckman 2001; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Pornpitakpan 2004), in both cases the speaker is described as a veteran member of Congress with established foreign policy expertise. Second, we manipulated the emotionality of the argument put forth by the member of Congress for the use of force, such that the *Hot Cognition* treatment argument was based on "gut" feelings, whereas the *Cold Cognition* was based on "cool, cold logic."<sup>4</sup>

After reading each article, participants were assigned into one of three groups: a *Control* group, a *Group Endorse* condition, and a *Group Oppose* condition (see Appendix §1 in the SI for examples). In both the *Group Endorse* and *Group Oppose* conditions, participants were presented with a set of results putatively illustrating the preferences of previous survey respondents and were told that "the graph below shows the responses of people who have previously taken the survey." Those in the *Group Endorse* condition were told that "those who answered the earlier questions on the survey *like you strongly supported*" the policy proposal, and they were shown a bar graph where 74% of respondents were in favor of the policy, whereas those in the *Group Oppose* condition were told that "those who answered the earlier questions on the survey *like you strongly opposed*" the policy proposal, and they were shown a bar graph where 74% of respondents were opposed to the policy.

The nature of our social cue treatment builds upon a growing body of research that finds peer networks influence political behavior (Sinclair 2012). Following Mann and Sinclair (2013), we manipulate social cues using the language "like you" rather than selecting a predefined reference group. In this way, the treatment lets participants define their own reference group, rather than assuming participants identify with other members of groups defined by particular descriptive characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

Following the treatments, participants then answered questions related to their support for using force in each scenario.<sup>6</sup> Participants then proceeded to the next

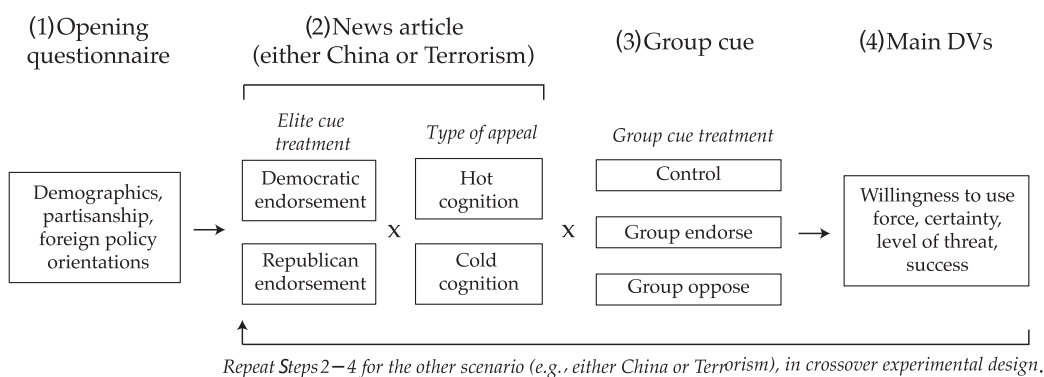
<sup>4</sup>See Appendix §1 in the SI for a broader discussion.

<sup>5</sup>Unlike Mann and Sinclair (2013), the "like you" treatment here is in reference to how the other participants answered previous questions on the survey—the demographic questions and foreign policy orientation questions. Thus, the "like you" here deliberately refers both to people of similar demographic characteristics and to people with similar foreign policy attitudes. See Experiments 4–5 for a modified version of the social cue treatment.

<sup>6</sup>We also measured the certainty of their opinions, the perceived likelihood of success of using force, and how much of a threat they

<sup>3</sup>SSI panels employ an opt-in recruitment method, after which panel participants are randomly selected for survey invitations, using population targets rather than quotas to produce a nationally diverse sample of registered voters. For other recent political science research employing SSI samples, see Kertzer and Brutger (2016).

**FIGURE 1 Experiments 1–2 Design**



**TABLE 1 Treatment Effects on Use of Force (OLS)**

	Dependent Variable: Support for Armed Force					
	China (1)	Terrorism (2)	China (3)	Terrorism (4)	China (5)	Terrorism (6)
Emotional Appeal	0.018 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.018)	0.010 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.016)	0.013 (0.015)	-0.003 (0.016)
Democrat Endorse	-0.001 (0.017)	-0.035 (0.018)	-0.006 (0.015)	-0.029 (0.016)	-0.006 (0.015)	-0.029 (0.016)
Group Endorse	0.068*** (0.020)	0.067*** (0.022)	0.071*** (0.018)	0.056*** (0.019)	0.070*** (0.018)	0.054*** (0.019)
Group Oppose	-0.055*** (0.020)	-0.061*** (0.022)	-0.065*** (0.018)	-0.060*** (0.019)	-0.066*** (0.018)	-0.064*** (0.019)
Party ID			0.008** (0.004)	0.013*** (0.004)	0.009** (0.004)	0.012*** (0.004)
Militant Assertiveness			0.517*** (0.039)	0.551*** (0.042)	0.525*** (0.040)	0.564*** (0.042)
Internationalism			0.142*** (0.043)	0.239*** (0.045)	0.137*** (0.044)	0.222*** (0.046)
Controls					✓	✓
N	1,035	1,021	1,034	1,020	1,031	1,017
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.036	0.032	0.222	0.246	0.227	0.261

Note: All regressions are OLS and control for the randomly assigned order of the experiments (China or Terrorism). Controls include *Male, Age, Education, Income, and White*. \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01.

experiment (either *Terrorism* or *China*), depending on which experiment they were randomly assigned to receive first. Thus, Experiments 1–2 feature a modified crossover design. Participants who first received the *China* experiment and the *Emotional Appeal, Democratic Endorsement, and Group Endorse* conditions, for example, then received the *Terrorism* experiment and the *Logical Appeal, Republican Endorsement, and Group Oppose* treatments.<sup>7</sup> We

thought that the target of the policy shift (terrorism or China’s military) posed to U.S. interests.

<sup>7</sup>In all of the results presented here, we control for order effects.

summarize the study design in Figure 1 and present summary statistics, sample characteristics, and randomization checks in Appendix §2.1 in the SI.

### Results

Do group-level cues influence foreign policy choices, and how do they compare to elite-level endorsements? In Table 1, we explore the effects of our treatments on support for the use of force. Across both experiments, we find that the group treatments strongly influence participants’ choices: Participants in the *Group Endorse*

TABLE 2 Is There a Moderating Effect of Party ID on Support for the Use of Force? (OLS)

	Dependent Variable: Support for Armed Force					
	China (1)	Terrorism (2)	China (3)	Terrorism (4)	China (5)	Terrorism (6)
Emotional Appeal	0.015 (0.016)	-0.006 (0.017)	0.010 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.016)	0.013 (0.015)	-0.003 (0.016)
Party ID	0.029*** (0.005)	0.031*** (0.006)	0.010** (0.005)	0.020*** (0.005)	0.011** (0.005)	0.018*** (0.005)
Democrat Endorse	0.039 (0.033)	-0.013 (0.035)	0.010 (0.030)	0.022 (0.032)	0.008 (0.030)	0.018 (0.032)
Party ID × Dem. Endorse	-0.010 (0.007)	-0.006 (0.008)	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.013 (0.007)	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.012 (0.007)
Group Endorse	0.067*** (0.020)	0.069*** (0.021)	0.071*** (0.018)	0.056*** (0.019)	0.070*** (0.018)	0.054*** (0.019)
Group Oppose	-0.053*** (0.020)	-0.063*** (0.021)	-0.065*** (0.018)	-0.060*** (0.019)	-0.066*** (0.018)	-0.064*** (0.019)
Militant Assertiveness			0.516*** (0.039)	0.556*** (0.042)	0.524*** (0.040)	0.569*** (0.042)
Internationalism			0.142*** (0.043)	0.241*** (0.045)	0.137*** (0.044)	0.224*** (0.046)
Controls					✓	✓
N	1,034	1,020	1,034	1,020	1,031	1,017
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.074	0.078	0.222	0.248	0.226	0.262

Note: All regressions are OLS and control for the randomly assigned order of the experiments (China or Terrorism first). Controls include *Male, Age, Education, Income, and White*. \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01.

condition are significantly more likely to favor using force than those in the *Control* condition, whereas subjects in the *Group Oppose* condition are significantly less likely to support using force than those in the *Control* condition. In comparison, our other treatments have relatively weak and nonsignificant effects: The effect of a Democratic endorsement (*Democrat Endorsement*) reduces support for intervention, but only for the *Terrorism* experiment, and its negative direction is noteworthy given that the literature on “party brand” and “against type” effects would predict that military missions would be more popular when endorsed by a Democrat than by a Republican (e.g., Schultz 2005; Trager and Vavreck 2011). Additionally, the magnitude of the elite cue is smaller and less significant than either of the group cues. Thus, we find strong support for our claim that group cues are important factors in shaping foreign policy attitudes.

Participant-level characteristics matter too. In general, Republicans are significantly more likely to favor intervention than Democrats across both experiments, but the substantive effect of partisanship is dwarfed by that of our two foreign policy orientations: Hawks, high in militant assertiveness, are far more likely to favor both pivoting to Asia and using special forces units to engage

in counterterrorism operations, as are internationalists who generally favor the United States’ playing an active role abroad. In this sense, this first set of results reminds us that rather than just looking at the elite partisan cues floating above citizens’ heads, we should also be looking at the core dispositions sitting inside them, as well as the presence or absence of social cues from individuals’ peers. Substantively, our results point to the underexplored effects of social cues on support for the use of force. Rather than cues only flowing from the top down and swaying malleable voters about foreign policy, we show that (a) voters’ support for the use of force is consistent with their preexisting orientations, and (b) voters are likely to take cues from those who they feel share their own values and points of view.

Ultimately, though, elite cue theory predicts not just that people on average will respond to statements differently based on the political party of the cue-giver, but also that the effect of the cue depends on the partisanship of the recipient: Participants who identify as Republicans should respond to a Republican cue-giver differently than participants who identify as Democrats. Yet when we search for evidence of these heterogeneous treatment effects in Table 2, we come away empty-handed. Our

results thus reconfirm our findings from Table 1 about the importance of group-level cues in shaping public support.

**Were Our Elite Cues Overwhelmed by Group Cues?** An alternative explanation for the absence of evidence in favor of elite cues in Experiments 1–2 could be that the group-level treatments are relatively strong, whereas the elite cue treatments are relatively weak. We thus conducted two additional tests: first, testing for elite cue-taking only looking at the treatment effects among those participants who correctly answered the manipulation check for the elite cue treatment (i.e., those who correctly identified the endorser in the scenario as a Democrat or Republican), and second, testing for elite cue-taking by subsetting the data and restricting our analysis solely to those participants who were in the group *Control* condition and thus did not receive any group cues.

In Table 6 in Appendix §2.1 in the SI, when we restrict the results to those who correctly pass the manipulation check, our core findings remain unchanged: Social cues (*Group Endorse* and *Group Oppose*) and foreign policy orientations (*Militant Assertiveness* and *Internationalism*) influence voters, but elite cues do not. In Table 5 in Appendix §2.1, we explore whether perhaps the meso-level treatments are “swamping” the effects of elite endorsements, restricting our analysis to the group *Control* condition (i.e., those who received no group cues in either the *Terrorism* or *China* experiments). We find inconsistent results for the effect of the *Democratic Endorsement* condition—which now reduces support for a pivot to Asia, rather than terrorism, although the effect remains statistically and substantively weak, and the *Partisanship* × *Elite Cue* interaction remains nonsignificant.

Alternately, another possible explanation for the lack of results for our elite cues is that partisanship moderates the effect of both elite and group-level cues, whereupon our relatively simple models above fail to capture the complex interplay between partisanship and elite and group-level cues. We explore this question in Table 7 and Figure 6 in Appendix §2.1 in the SI, which look at a richer set of two- and three-way interactions between social cues, partisanship, and elite cues. The analysis confirms our core results from Table 1. Elite cues and partisanship have weak and inconsistent results, and they do not appear to moderate the much stronger and robust effect of social cues on support for force. Finally, in supplementary analyses in Appendix §2.1.1, we explore the effects of elite and social cues on certainty, threat perception, and perceived success, finding that group endorsements systematically outweigh elite ones.

## Experiment 3

One potential explanation of the findings of the previous study was that the social cue treatments were simply stronger than the partisan elite cues: The elite cue-giver was a single individual, whereas the social cue was a group. In this sense, the failure of an endorsement by a veteran Democratic or Republican lawmaker to move respondents is notable, but there are other ways of operationalizing elite partisan cues as well. We thus conducted a third experiment on 1,446 American adults recruited in September 2014 from Amazon Mechanical Turk.

### Method

The experiment mirrored its predecessor with two principal changes, based off of the rising China experiment from the previous study. First, given the weak and inconsistent effects of the emotional appeal in Experiments 1–2, we held the type of message constant in Experiment 3 and only used the cold cognition message. Second, rather than manipulating elite partisan cues by manipulating which party endorsed an aggressive foreign policy toward China, we manipulated the position of both parties. A quarter of the participants were told that Democrats in Congress supported an aggressive foreign policy toward China, whereas Republicans in Congress opposed it; another quarter were told that Republicans in Congress supported an aggressive foreign policy, whereas Democrats in Congress opposed it; and a final quarter were told that both Democrats and Republicans in Congress supported the aggressive foreign policy. In this sense, the first two conditions depict a polarized partisan environment, whereas the third displays elite consensus, which if elite cue theory is correct, should display a “mainstreaming” effect (Zaller 1992). Finally, a quarter of participants were in a control group and were not given any information about elite endorsements in order to provide a baseline with which to compare the effects of the other elite cues.<sup>8</sup> Thus, as illustrated in Figure 2, the study design yields a 4 (*Elite Cues*) × 3 (*Social Cues*) fully-crossed factorial experiment.

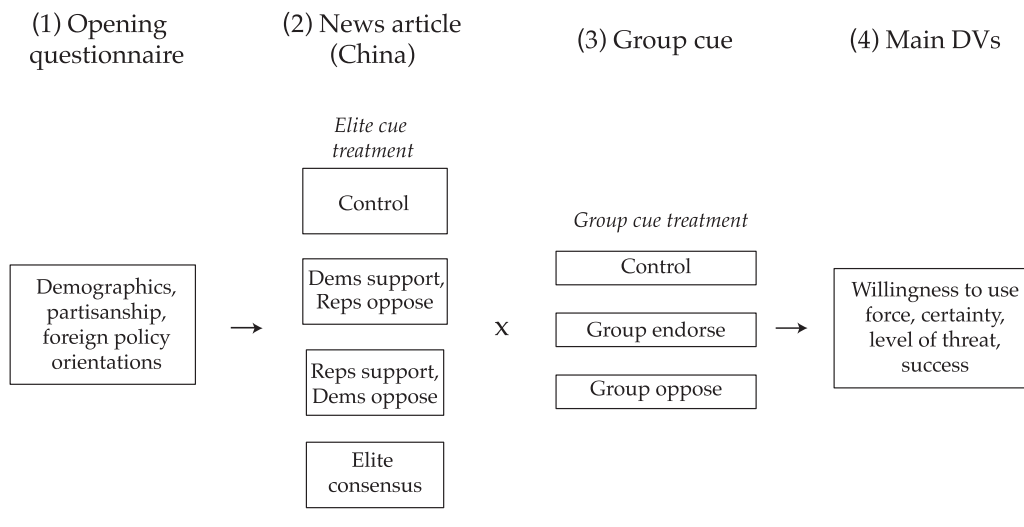
### Results

In Table 3, we present treatment effects from Experiment 3, which reinforce the findings from Experiments 1–2 that social cues strongly influence support for the use of force. The *Group Endorse* treatment significantly increases

<sup>8</sup>The exact wording of the elite cues for Experiment 3 are presented in Appendix §1 in the SI.



**FIGURE 2 Experiment 3 Design**



**TABLE 3 Experiment 3 Treatment Effects**

	Support for Armed Force in China		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dem. Support	-0.031 (0.020)	-0.031 (0.016)	-0.029 (0.016)
Repub. Support	-0.030 (0.020)	-0.044*** (0.016)	-0.043*** (0.017)
Elite Consensus	0.035 (0.020)	0.032 (0.016)	0.031 (0.016)
Group Endorse	0.050*** (0.017)	0.042*** (0.014)	0.043*** (0.014)
Group Oppose	-0.077*** (0.017)	-0.064*** (0.014)	-0.064*** (0.014)
Militant Assertiveness		0.665*** (0.028)	0.668*** (0.029)
Internationalism		0.226*** (0.033)	0.222*** (0.033)
Party ID		0.063*** (0.024)	0.065*** (0.024)
Controls			✓
N	1,446	1,446	1,444
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.042	0.362	0.362

Note: All regressions are OLS, and controls include *Male*, *Age*, and *Education*. \*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01.

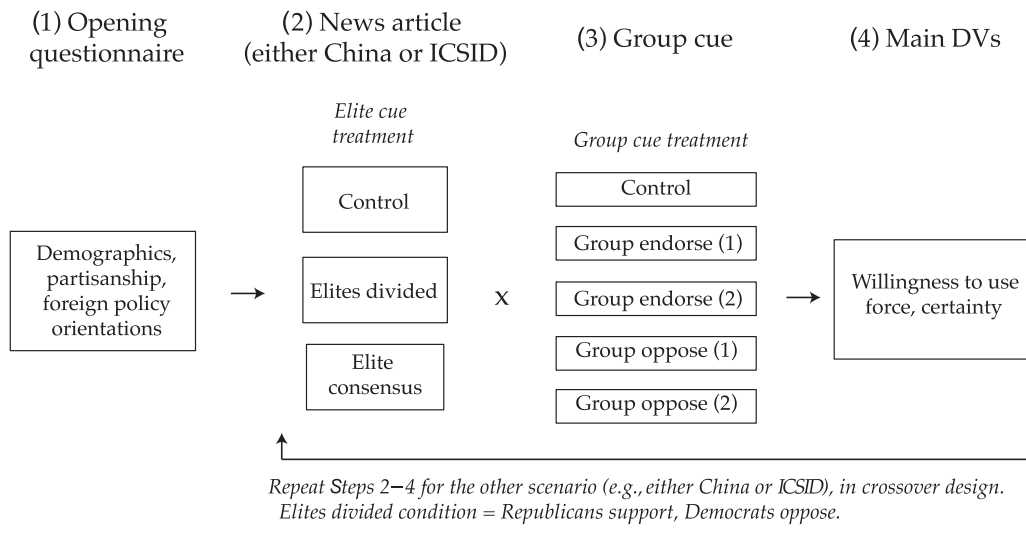
support for using force, and the *Group Oppose* treatment significantly reduces support. Thus, even in the presence of elite cues, social cues exert a strong and significant effect on foreign policy attitudes. Partisanship (*Party ID*) also strongly shapes attitudes toward interventions, with Republicans more in favor of shifting military resources

toward China. Finally, as in the previous study, we note the substantively large and statistically significant effects of individuals' foreign policy orientations (*Militant Assertiveness* and *Internationalism*), which dwarf that of elite cues. These results reinforce that ordinary citizens have stable foreign policy predispositions that strongly shape their attitudes independent of the cues they receive from elites or other members of the public. In Appendix §2.2 in the SI, we present a variety of robustness checks, showing that our results do not differ when we subset among participants who passed the manipulation check, that the effects of our cues are not conditional on respondents' partisanship, and so on.

### Experiments 4–5

Experiments 1–3 show individuals are more likely to take cues about foreign policy from each other than from political elites. Yet foreign policy is about more than just security; it is thus worth testing whether we find similar patterns on economic issues. Additionally, Experiments 1–3 borrow from Mann and Sinclair (2013) in utilizing social cues from individuals who answered previous survey questions *like* the respondent. Although this avoids the problem of selecting a predefined reference group for participants, it raises a number of questions, including about the mechanisms driving the group cue: do social cues need to be from individuals “like” the respondent in order to shape foreign policy views, or does simply knowing the views of other respondents more generally have the same effect? Is the power of social cues about the pull of homophily, or the appeal of getting a second

**FIGURE 3 Experiments 4–5 Design**



**TABLE 4 Experiments 4–5 Results**

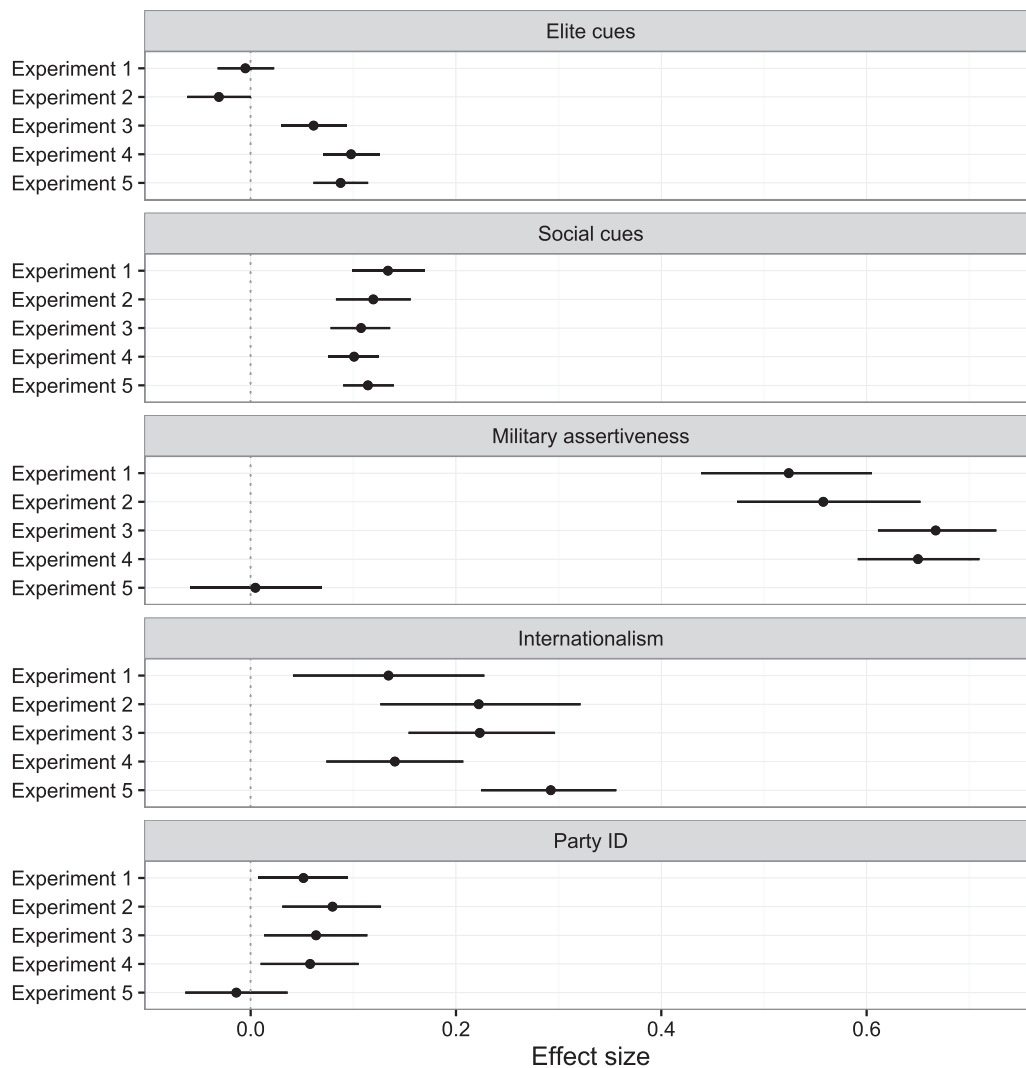
	(1)	China (2)	(3)	(4)	ICSID (5)	(6)
Elite Divided	-0.030 (0.016)	-0.026** (0.013)	-0.026 (0.013)	-0.043*** (0.014)	-0.043*** (0.014)	-0.042*** (0.014)
Elite Consensus	0.064*** (0.016)	0.072*** (0.013)	0.072*** (0.013)	0.047*** (0.014)	0.046*** (0.014)	0.046*** (0.014)
Group Endorse	0.017 (0.018)	0.008 (0.015)	0.008 (0.015)	0.043*** (0.016)	0.043*** (0.015)	0.043*** (0.015)
Group Oppose	-0.091*** (0.018)	-0.094*** (0.015)	-0.094*** (0.015)	-0.069*** (0.016)	-0.073*** (0.015)	-0.073*** (0.015)
Militant Assertiveness		0.655*** (0.028)	0.651*** (0.028)		0.0003 (0.029)	0.004 (0.029)
Internationalism		0.142*** (0.030)	0.141*** (0.031)		0.286*** (0.031)	0.290*** (0.031)
Party ID		0.065*** (0.023)	0.060** (0.023)		-0.016 (0.024)	-0.016 (0.024)
Controls			✓			✓
N	1,997	1,997	1,994	1,997	1,997	1,994
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.046	0.305	0.306	0.058	0.104	0.103

Note: All regressions are OLS and control for the randomly assigned order of the experiments (China or ICSID first). Controls include *Male, Age, and Education*. \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01.

opinion? We thus fielded two additional experiments, on 1,997 American adults recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk, in September 2016. Experiments 4–5 mirrored their predecessors, with three notable differences. First, one of the experiments is about an international political economy (IPE) issue: whether U.S. citizens and corporations should continue to be subject to investor–state dispute settlement from the International Centre for Settlement

of Investment Disputes (ICSID). Second, to disentangle the effects of the social treatments, in addition to the “like you” treatments from Experiments 1–3, we also include a revised version of the group endorse and group oppose treatments that omit the “like you” language, simply reporting the views of generic survey participants. We can thus compare the effect of each type of social cue to one another to gain further leverage on the mechanism

**FIGURE 4 Aggregating Results across All Five Experiments**



*Note:* Results are coefficient estimates from regression models, with 95% confidence intervals calculated using  $B=1,500$  bootstraps; in addition to the treatments and orientations, the models also include demographic controls. To facilitate comparability across studies, the plot presents the largest contrasts for each treatment. The results show that social cues consistently exert a significant effect (averaging +11.5%), whereas the effect of elite cues is inconsistent (averaging +4.2%), and foreign policy orientations generally outweigh party identification.

responsible for the group cue effects. Finally, since the two elite divided treatments in Experiment 3 did not significantly differ from one another, we save statistical power by retaining only one of them, a treatment in which Republicans support a policy and Democrats oppose. Each experiment is thus a 3 (*Elite Cues*) × 5 (*Social Cues*) fully-crossed factorial, illustrated in Figure 3.

We begin by simply comparing the “like you” group cues with their generic counterparts: As we show in Appendix §2.3.1 in the SI, there are no significant differences between the “like you” coefficients and the generic coefficients, a set of Davidson-MacKinnon J tests fails

to find evidence that models differentiating each type of group cue significantly differs from models that pool them together, and a set of Wilcoxon rank-sum tests fails to find evidence that the distribution of the dependent variable differs across each type of group cue, further confirmed by visual inspection of the density distributions. Since it appears that the social cues are not being driven by the “like you” language, for simplicity we pool each type of group cue together for our subsequent analysis, presented in Table 4.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>See Appendix §2.3.1 in the SI for results disaggregated by type of social cue treatment.

The substantive effects of the social cues and elite treatments presented in Table 4 provide several important findings. First, compared to the previous experiments, we find stronger evidence in favor of elite cues—particularly *Elite Consensus*, which bolsters support in both the China and ICSID experiments. One reason may be because the study was fielded during the penultimate month of a highly charged presidential election campaign; supplementary analyses in Appendix §2.3.2 show that our respondents displayed significantly higher baseline levels of partisan polarization here than in the previous experiment. Second, despite the timing of the survey, as before, our largest effects belong to social cues, with the *Group Oppose* treatment strongly decreasing support in both the China and ICSID experiments; the *Group Endorse* treatment also significantly raises support, but only in the ICSID experiment. Third, similar to the previous experiments, foreign policy orientations play statistically and substantively significant roles, although sensibly, military assertiveness is a significant predictor of attitudes toward deploying naval forces in East Asia, but not on investor–state dispute mechanisms. In sum, our findings in Experiments 4–5 suggest that the effects of social cues are not domain specific. Social cues matter for shaping the public’s attitudes not only toward security policy (China), but also in IPE (ICSID), and their effects do not seem to depend on them originating from individuals who specifically share the same views as the respondent. Finally, supplementary analyses in Appendix §2.3.2 offer further evidence in favor of our theoretical mechanisms, showing that respondents who have less trust in government are significantly less sensitive to elite cues in the China experiment, whereas Trump supporters are significantly less receptive to elite cues than Clinton supporters are more generally.

## Conclusion

Public opinion is increasingly playing a prominent role in IR scholarship: from theories of crisis bargaining that abandon unitary actor assumptions and explicitly carve out a major role for domestic publics (Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001), to the rise of individual-level experiments exploring microfoundations, of public opinion toward world affairs (Kertzer and McGraw 2012; Renshon 2015; Tomz 2007; Wallace 2013). This prominence is all the more striking given that it was only 28 years ago that political scientists were still asking whether leaders “waltz before a blind audience” on foreign affairs (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989), and thus whether IR scholars might be justified in bracketing the public altogether. Yet

if elite cue-taking theories of public opinion are correct, and members of the public passively digest whatever their leaders tell them, can publics constrain those who govern them? If public opinion about foreign affairs is really just driven from the top down, should we even bother looking for microfoundations for foreign policy preferences at all?

We argued here that reports of the public’s passivity are somewhat exaggerated. Employing five original survey experiments (the results of which are summarized in Figure 4), we found that the effect of elite cues was inconsistent, but that social cues exert important effects, as do individuals’ general predispositions toward international affairs. We urge caution in dwelling on the substantively larger effect sizes for foreign policy orientations than cues here, since the orientations are real traits our participants carry around with them, whereas the cues are one-shot treatments artificially manipulated in an experimental context. Nonetheless, the fact that *individuals do carry substantively meaningful orientations toward foreign affairs around in their heads with them* is precisely what elite cue theory overlooks; our findings thus show that rather than simply being shaped from the top down, public opinion is a function both of individuals’ social context and their preexisting attitudes toward the kind of role America should play in the world. Studying public opinion about foreign affairs thus involves both micro- and mesofoundations. Our claim is not that elite cues are irrelevant, but rather that they only tell part of the story. In a sense, then, the results also remind us what public opinion polls (and, by extension, many of the survey experiments in IR) are missing: the *public* quality of public opinion (Sanders 1999). Survey experiments in IR, as in political science more generally, treat public opinion as the aggregation of individual surveys administered in isolation. Methodologically, this isolation is crucial, since noninterference between units lets us cleanly estimate causal effects, but it also misses the social, deliberative dynamics that characterize opinion formation in the wild. Experimental research able to bridge this gap in a naturalistic way while also preserving our abilities to make causal inferences will move us considerably forward.

Although we believe our experimental results contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of public opinion about foreign affairs, they are also open to a number of potential critiques suggesting directions for future research. It could be that the effects of our one-sided social cues are stronger in the experiments than in the real world, where individuals are often in heterogeneous social contexts (Klar 2014). We believe this concern is overstated: given the presence of homophily in many social networks, confirmation biases in information processing, and false consensus effects (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook

2001; Nickerson 1999), we do not consider the distribution of support in our treatments to be unrealistic. Nonetheless, future research should examine how mixed or competing social cues shape foreign policy preferences and whether people discount cues from certain members of their social networks, as well as pinpoint the precise mechanisms through which these cues exert their effects.

A related concern could be that experimentally showing that individuals take cues from their social context is different from showing that people take cues from their social networks in the real world. In this regard, though, we should note that experimental methods have a clear advantage compared to observational studies when it comes to testing the effects of social cues, since social networks are likely to confound the effect of group cues with homophily. By showing that experimentally assigned group cues exhibit strong effects, we provide strong evidence that social cues play an important role in attitude formation.

We conclude with two broader implications of our findings. First, our results suggest that people are perhaps more resistant to elite manipulation than some of the more pessimistic elite-driven models of public opinion suggest. At the same time, however, if the inconsistent effects of elite cues are normatively desirable, the significant effects of the group endorsement and opposition treatments show that citizens are not entirely immune to social pressures. These social responses are particularly worth studying in the age of new media, where both search engines like Google and social networks like Facebook rely on complex algorithms to show users what they think they want to see, producing alternative information environments whose implications for foreign policy opinion are not yet fully appreciated (Barberá 2015; Zeitzoff, Kelly, and Lotan 2015). Our findings thus suggest that if we are truly concerned about “manufacturing consent,” we should be worried less about the classic top-down Chomskyan model where the media uncritically parrots what elites have to say, and more about manipulation through fellow citizens: Rothschild and Malhotra (2014) show public opinion polls can become self-fulfilling prophecies, and King, Pan, and Roberts (forthcoming) suggest that the Chinese government fabricates half a billion social media posts a year precisely because it understands the power of social cues.

Finally, IR scholars have rightly begun to gather empirical evidence at the microlevel to test the mechanisms that make our theories work (Kertzer 2017). We would argue that our results should encourage IR scholars to think seriously and systematically about mesofoundations as well. It is striking, for example, that one of the central phenomena of interest for public opinion scholars of for-

ign policy—the rally around the flag effect—is inherently a collective phenomenon, but tends to be studied in an atomistic fashion. Future work in public opinion toward foreign policy should therefore explore the broader group contexts in which individuals are embedded.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

The supporting information contains the experimental manipulations, treatment wording, and survey questions, as well as summary statistics and additional robustness checks.