Polarization, casualty sensitivity, and military operations: evidence from a survey experiment

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Abstract

Does political polarization impact decisions to go to war? This paper explores how differences in casualty sensitivity by political party in the USA may present different incentives to wartime leaders. Using three survey experiments, I assess the relationship between party, ideology, casualty sensitivity and support for war. Results indicate that conservatives are less likely to change their support in response to increases in casualties, while liberals are much more likely to be sensitive to casualties. Further, this result appears to be primarily attributable to ideology, as opposed to partisan preference, generating different incentives regarding war strategy by political party. As polarization increases, these trends are likely to become more pronounced, with significant implications for when and how states fight wars.

Keywords Polarization · U.S. foreign policy · Casualties · Public opinion

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Introduction

What effect does political polarization have on American military operations at war? In January 2007, American president George W Bush announced to the American people that the USA would surge an additional 30,000 forces into the heart of Iraq to combat insurgent forces and counter the civil war that the American invasion had unleashed. The announcement came just as violence appeared to be spiraling out of control, and less than two months after congressional Republicans had suffered significant midterm losses, largely over public dissatisfaction with the war effort and the sharp increase in US military casualties over the previous two years. Yet when Bush, a Republican, announced the new policy, it was greeted with enthusiasm by many members of his own party, despite the administration’s acknowledgement that the strategy was likely to result in significantly more American deaths than the previous year. This raises a puzzle: if casualty sensitivity caused the electoral backlash that ceded control of Congress to the Democrats, why was Bush’s position so popular within his own party?

The answer, I find, is that conservatives and liberals interpret wartime casualties very differently from each other, and this has significant impacts on American support for war. Because conservatives display lower levels of casualty sensitivity, Republican politicians are incentivized to pursue battlefield victories even when they come with significantly higher casualties. By contrast, because liberals are more likely to reduce their support for conflict as casualty levels increase, Democrats in power are far more risk averse and willing to pursue negotiation as a strategy. Further, as the American electorate becomes increasingly polarized, these incentives become more pronounced, and military strategy may vary widely from administration to administration.

I explore this potential using three survey experiments that evaluate American attitudes toward humanitarian intervention while varying the number of casualties an operation is expected to incur. The first survey tests casualty sensitivity in a low-level humanitarian intervention, while the second and third experiments expand the scenario to include the potential for long-term stability operations and, as a consequence, much higher casualty levels.

The results suggest that respondents who identify as conservative exhibit very little sensitivity to casualties, while liberal-leaning respondents are significantly more likely to change their opinion about the wisdom of an operation if it results in large numbers of casualties. This appears to be a product of ideology rather than partisanship, as having a co-partisan in the White House appears to influence preferences only in the most extreme of circumstances. Even still, these results suggest that ideological differences may significantly influence a leader’s incentives during wartime. Republican presidents may have stronger incentives to pursue physical battlefield gains, while Democrats have incentives to reduce the number of friendly casualties. These differences are only likely to increase as the number of independent voters continues to decline and Americans increasingly identify with a political party.

This has important implications for military strategy and foreign policy more broadly. In particular, we expect to see three things happen as polarization increases.
First, Republicans and conservatives will likely be held increasingly less accountable for conduct during war as their co-partisans express less concern over dead and wounded, while pursue strategies that reduce the human cost of war. Second, shifts between parties may result in increasingly dramatic swings in military strategy and foreign policy, further eroding allied confidence in the credibility of U.S. commitments and creating opportunities that enemies may exploit. And finally, we will likely see significantly differences between the parties in the lessons learned from war and conflict, as their constituents care about different costs.

Casualties and public support for war

Public attitudes shape and influence the making of foreign policy in the USA in two distinct ways. First, elections serve as a direct referendum on a president’s policies, both domestic and foreign (Foyle 2004; Holsti 1996). Voters assess whether a leader has been good for the country on salient issues (Fiorina 1981; Aldrich et al. 1989) and determine whether that leader should remain in power. While the best predictor of broad voting patterns remains economic performance and other so-called fundamentals, during times of war the public will also respond to wartime performance, judgement, and strategic outcomes (Carson et al. 2001; Gartner and Segura 2005; Karol and Miguel 2007; Voeten and Brewer 2006; Gartner and Segura 1998). Indeed, Gelpi et al. (2009) find that 2004 votes shares for Bush and Kerry were strongly correlated with judgements about whether the decision to go to war in Iraq was the “right” one. These electoral consequences have a constraining effect; we observe that democratic leaders will alter foreign policy—and even military operations on the battlefield—in the lead up to elections in order to gain more public support (Marinov et al. 2015; Payne 2020; Lee 2015).

Second, the public exercises control over the executive through Congress. Rather than waiting every four years—a long cycle in which to register discontent—Congressional elections happen every two years and generally provide a more direct feedback mechanism for public preference. Though Congress has increasingly abdicated its role in oversight over the last several decades (Goldgeier and Saunders 2018), they retain significant powers, both informal and formal, to constrain and control foreign policy and wartime conduct. Congress’s oversight powers, including the War Powers Act, along with the power of the purse and treaty ratification create significant potential costs to presidents who may want to pursue unpopular foreign policy. Informally, Congress can also extract what we might call “political capital” from the president—requiring a president to sacrifice other legislative priorities in exchange for support and votes on foreign policy initiatives. This can constrain the president in a number of ways, including but not limited to treaty negotiation and ratification (Homan 2015) and decisions about the use of force (Howell and Pevehouse 2005).

As the public polarizes, however, voting behavior is changing, with significant implications for foreign policy. Public attitudes about candidates are becoming increasingly fixed, and even major security crises no longer result in bipartisan
support (Myrick 2021). Political polarization is also having a significant effect on the way that Congress interacts with the president on matters of foreign policy. Far fewer legislators vote against their own party’s position across the board (McCarty et al. 2006; Klein 2020), and foreign policy issues that were previously sources of bipartisan consensus have become polarized (Meernik 1993; DeLaet and Scott 2006; Lee 2019).

Understanding the sources of public support for war, therefore, remains a critical focus of study, and one that is changing today. Traditionally, casualties in war have provided an important source of information to voters about the costs of war. While they are by no means the only factor that is important—other studies have shown that taxes (Kreps 2018), ideology (Gries 2014), demographics, and estimations of victory and success (Eichenberg 2006; Gelpi et al. 2005) are also good predictors of support for war—casualties remain an important factor both in the scholarly literature, in popular conception, and as a strong belief amongst elites. It is therefore important to understand how polarization may influence casualty sensitivity amongst the public—and by extension support for war and foreign policy more broadly.

In general, there are four distinct ways in which casualties may influence public opinion: direct costs, indirect costs, information about presidential competence, and information about the likelihood of success in war. Direct costs assume that individuals weigh the likelihood of being drafted or otherwise personally sacrificing for war against either the cumulative or individual benefit that such a war would provide. Crystalized by Larson’s (1996) study with RAND, this series of theories portrays a “rational public” that weighs the costs of an operation against the potential benefits of military action. On the one hand, public opinion about casualties may decline because the public is literally bearing the costs of war—young men are concerned about being drafted, families are concerned that they will lose loved ones, etc. It is also the logic behind contemporary calls some by high-profile individuals for the return of a draft as a way to return public awareness to foreign policy and war (Rogin 2012; DiGregorio 2018). The empirical results of the direct cost thesis are somewhat mixed: while Americans are overwhelmingly against the return of the draft, Blankshain et al. (2021) find that this is not driven by the prospect of individual loss. Yet, Americans are indeed more likely to alter their opinion about war when actually do bear the consequences of conflict: military families who have experienced war losses are more sensitive to wounded casualties (Fazal 2021), public support declines when the war must be funded with a tax increase (Kreps 2018), and Americans with personal knowledge of an Afghanistan or Iraq war casualty were more likely than their co-partisans to express disapproval of President George W Bush (Gartner 2008a, b).

On the other hand, the public also weighs the indirect cost of the war to their communities. Mass casualty events that concentrate deaths locally—such as when a national guard unit is involved in a helicopter crash—result in significantly lower levels of support for incumbent representatives and Senators (Carson et al. 2001; Kriner and Shen 2021; Karol and Miguel 2007; Gartner et al. 2004; Gartner and Segura 2008). Public attitudes are responsive to peer cues from social situations in addition to cues from elites in Washington, DC (Kertzer and Zeitoff 2017); local
coverage of casualties therefore plays a major role in both communicating information about the war and highlighting its salience to the electorate (Gartner 2004; Gartner and Segura 2000). Indirect costs may also be societal: mobilizing reserve components takes valued community members out of the private sector and into government service, and mass mobilization takes men and women out of society and leads to declining marriage rates and fertility. And while direct costs are largely experiential and difficult to “spin”, indirect costs to communities and the nation can be influenced by media coverage and elite cues that interpret the cost of casualties differently (Baum and Groeling 2009; Berinsky 2009).

Overall, Gartner (2008a) articulates the cost theses clearly: ‘As rational consumers, individuals weigh a war’s anticipated costs and benefits (Gartner and Segura 2005; Gelpi et al. 2005). Casualties are the most salient, visible, and systematic measure of a war’s cost (Gartner and Segura 2000)... If individuals’ utility for estimated costs exceeds their estimated value of the benefits, they oppose the conflict.’ Casualties, therefore, either cumulative (Mueller 1973; Milstein and Mitchell 1968; Milstein 1974) or marginal (Gartner and Segura 1998) increase public perceptions of cost, and thus decrease levels of support.

Casualties also provide information about a president’s competence as a war manager. Public support for a war in many cases depends upon presidential performance and perceived competence during war (Gartner 1997; Murray 2001). Even if the public ultimately believes the cause is worthwhile, or that the state will ultimately succeed, they may be less likely to support a war that they believe is mismanaged—or at the very least seek to replace the leader responsible for managing the war. Because casualties are one of the single biggest indicators of how well a war is progressing (second only perhaps to territorial occupation in conventional conflicts), they provide information to voters and constituents about how well (or badly) a president is managing the war (Lee 2015). Presidents may therefore find themselves worried about rising casualty levels not because of the cost they inflict on the population or the political fodder they provide elites, but because they indicate to the public that the commander-in-chief is unnecessarily increasing costs.

Finally, casualties may be an indicator of success in war. Gelpi et al. (2009) argue that it is prospective judgements about the likelihood of winning a conflict that influence public opinion, rather than retrospective understanding of costs. Yet success is difficult to measure, particularly for conflicts whose objectives center around regime type, governance, and stability—as opposed to traditional conventional conflicts where success is measured by occupied territory. Casualties, therefore, may also provide an objective measure of battlefield progress and success during war and asymmetric conflict.

Using a non-rationalist framework, increases in casualties over time may lead some to in fact become more risk accepting as they seek to regain losses (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Petersen and Lawson 1989). Alternatively, if Americans have identified a threshold level of acceptable casualties (as opposed to attempting to optimize on each dimension of cost and/or competence), then casualty sensitivity may look more like a binary state than a continuous phenomenon (Simon 1956; Bendor et al. 2011). Partisan identity also impacts how voters interpret casualties: Berinsky (2009) finds that the public is not casualty sensitive, but rather simply
reflects the attitudes and narratives shared by their co-partisan elites. Elites, he argues, give the public a way to interpret casualties, without which the public would not exhibit sensitivity to increasing numbers of dead and wounded. Casualties are, in effect, contextualized by elites through partisan lenses. Therefore, increases in casualties provide a source of potential political discord, where opposition elites leverage increases in casualties to attack an incumbent administration’s wartime policies.

**Party politics and the cost of war**

If political polarization is affecting the way that Americans vote, organize, and cooperate in government, then domestic political polarization may also have significant impacts on the way that Americans experience and interpret casualties during war. What’s more, increasing levels of political polarization may create significantly different incentives for leaders either considering or actively engaged in using force abroad.

Political polarization is defined here in two distinct yet mutually reinforcing ways. First, it refers to the sorting of Americans into increasingly ideologically homogenous political parties. Since the 1970s, Americans have largely seen their ideologies align increasingly with a single political party, resulting in political sorting that reduces ideological division within a party. As a result, ideological conservatives are increasingly synonymous with Republicans, while ideological liberals are synonymous with Democrats. What’s more, because of this sorting pattern the ideological mean of each political party has moved farther away from center, even as many Americans still see themselves as having moderate political views. As a result, there are fewer cross-cutting cleavages in American politics today that incentivize bipartisan cooperation. Second, it refers to decreasing incentives for bipartisanship and elite consensus on issue areas as a result of affective polarization. This kind of division, which increases feelings of animosity for members of the opposite party regardless of policy preferences, reduces the electoral benefits of elite cooperation while increasing incentives for elites in the minority to opposed the majority’s policy position at all costs. Overall, political polarization results in fewer areas of issue overlap between political parties, and fewer incentives to cooperate even in the areas where elites agree.

Most studies, however, have not done sufficient theorizing about how differences in ideology and political party may impact the way that Americans respond to casualties during war. In a survey conducted from 1998–1999, Gelpi and Feaver (2005) find no differences in casualty tolerance by political ideology. However, in a series of surveys conducted during the Iraq War, Boettcher and Cobb (2006) report that Republicans expressed much lower levels of casualty sensitivity than Democrats. Rather than explore innate differences in casualty sensitivity by party or ideology, most work on elite cues argues that public responses to casualties are inherently malleable and driven by co-partisan elite narratives (Berinsky 2009).

And yet, there are reasons to believe that both political ideology and partisan affiliation may significantly affect how Americans respond to casualties independent of elite cues. For one, conservative and liberals have very different ways of
thinking about foreign policy more broadly. Conservatives see threats differently than liberals, they tend to be more skeptical of multilateral engagement, and they are more likely to favor investing in military dominance as opposed to other “soft power” initiatives. Gries (2014) finds that conservatives also tend to score higher on measures of patriotism and nationalism than self-identified liberals, resulting in less positive feelings toward other countries, and more positive feelings about the USA itself. This is significant because it may affect two of the ways in which casualties influence public opinion during wartime: First, conservatives may be much more likely to believe that the cause of a conflict is worthwhile, and therefore be less sensitive two casualties in service of that cause. Second, conservatives with high levels of nationalism also may have more faith in the country’s ability to win the war and have high expectations of success—thereby resulting in lower levels of casualty sensitivity.

Conservatives and liberals also display different levels of deference to leaders’ judgement—another factor that might result in differences in casualty sensitivity. Indeed, conservatives are more likely to reward loyalty and less likely to question authority figures (Gries 2014). As a result, they may be slower to update their beliefs about the importance of the war, or require far more casualties to reconsider their opinions about the wisdom of a conflict. In essence, conservatives’ opinions about the president as a war manager, regardless of party, may be relatively more fixed than liberals due to the prevalence of traits like loyalty and respect for leaders. Because of this, conservatives may be significantly less sensitive to casualties as they update beliefs about a leader’s competence more slowly than their liberal counterparts.

Conservatives also have different ideas than liberals about the use of force more specifically. In particular, they are more likely than liberals to view the use of force as a useful and effective tool of foreign policy. When asked in public opinion polls about the potential for using force to accomplish foreign policy objectives, conservative respondents are more likely to approve of the military operation, and more likely to believe that it will be successful (Lee and Chu 2019). These divides have implications for the ways that conservatives may differ from liberals in how they interpret news about casualties. If casualties are for some considered to be an objective measure of progress in the war, we would expect increases in casualties to signal a failing war strategy and increase support for replacing both the civilian and military leaders responsible for the war. However, if conservatives instead retain faith in leadership, despite bad news about military operations, then we expect lower levels of casualty sensitivity.

This creates a testable hypothesis:

**H1** Ideological conservatives will express lower levels of casualty sensitivity than liberals.

Beyond ideology, however, there are also partisan differences in the civil-military relationship writ large that may result in differences in casualty sensitivity between parties—indeed independent of elite cuing effects. Republicans in general score higher on
levels of trust and confidence in the military (Burbach 2019; Leibert and Golby 2017). There has been a significant amount of research attempting to explain why this is the case—some may have to do with opinions about the use of force described above, while other focus on the composition of the military—and in particular, the policy preferences of military elites, who tend to be disproportionately white, male, and from the South (Desch 2001). This conservative confidence, further, does not appear to be responsive to new information about job performance, ethics scandals, or other crises in leadership that would usually decrease public support for public institutions (Robinson 2018). Indeed, Robinson (2019) finds that responses to negative information about military performance actually increases conservative support for the institution—a response that more closely mirrors how Americans react to news about institutions they consider to share their partisan beliefs. By contrast, liberals respond to new information (both positive and negative) in ways that mirror a constituency that sees the military as nonpartisan.

Attitudes about civilian control also break down along partisan lines—depending on which party holds the White House. Krebs et al. (2021) find that Democrats who disapproved of Trump were significantly more likely to believe that the military’s advice on a proposed military mission be followed regardless of civilian oversight. Yet, in a 2013 survey, Mattis and Schake (2015) found that during Obama’s time in office it was Republicans who adopted a more deferential attitude toward military advice. Whether Americans believe that the president should have the ultimately authority over wartime decisions, then, may depend on whether their party holds the White House (Krebs and Ralston 2020; Burbach 2019).

Having a co-partisan in the White House may therefore mitigate the effects of ideology on public attitudes because it increases trust in the executive. Democrats in particular may mirror the levels of trust in the president that we usually see amongst conservatives and Republicans, making them slower to update, more likely to be forgiving, and less likely to express sensitivity to casualties. As a result, we might expect that casualty sensitivity amongst both parties should be weakest when there is a co-partisan in the White House.

This produces a second testable hypothesis:

**H2** The strength of casualty sensitivity will be conditioned by which party holds the presidency.

It is important to note that the phenomenon being investigated by H2 is theoretically distinct from the role that elite cues can play in shaping public attitudes. Having a co-partisan in the White House may mitigate the effects of ideology simply because the factors that contribute to ideological differences (trust in leadership, willingness to update, belief in the efficacy of force, etc.) are conditioned based on whether an individual has confidence in the capabilities of their fellow partisan to successfully prosecute a mission—dependent of outside information. By contrast, elite cues rely on the ability of elites to persuade the public of their competence and signal support or disapproval for the rest of the party to follow. The former
investigates a baseline level of partisanship, while the latter explores the ability of co-partisans to actively shape opinion.

**Research design**

This study seeks to test whether and under what conditions conservatives and liberals express different levels of casualty sensitivity. In particular it asks two related, but theoretically distinct, questions: (1) Are conservatives less likely than liberals to decrease support for a conflict in response to additional casualties; and (2) Does casualty sensitivity vary according the political party in the White House? To do this, I use three survey experiments, administered 10 and 22 months apart, respectively. Survey experiments are an ideal way to control for the wide variety of factors that oftentimes influence public attitudes, including feelings about specific countries or leaders, racial/religious biases, and/or misinformation about real-world events. By holding every other factor constant except for the number of expected casualties from the operation, we are able to remove other confounding factors from the situation, and get a clearer view of exactly what impact changes in casualties—and only casualties—has on public support.

Each respondent read a short vignette about a hypothetical humanitarian intervention in countries where the USA is not currently engaged. This survey required the use of a hypothetical scenario, unrelated to current conflicts, precisely because the variables of interest—ideology and Party ID—lead respondents to be particularly susceptible to elite cues about potential real-world conflicts. As a result, had the experiment used a known conflict, it would have imported already existing biases, influenced by partisan cues from both civilian and military leaders. Hypothetical scenarios that deal with “neutral” countries or hypothetical states are therefore an ideal way to isolate and measure one variable’s independent effect on public attitudes.

Even still, public support for casualties can vary significantly based on how they are framed. In particular, elite cues from a variety of groups can play an overwhelming role in shaping how the public thinks about the wisdom of a military option (Berinsky 2009; Gelpi et al. 2009). These surveys therefore omit explicit references to elite support or disapproval, as the literature is clear on the ability of elites to alter public preferences through political communication. Rather, because we are interested in more baseline levels of support across ideology and co-partisanship—levels that on their own can shape elite incentives—we use a much softer measure of co-partisanship: real-world presence of a Republican or Democrat in the White House.

Each survey randomly varied the number of casualties expected from the intervention, and asked respondents about their support for the operation, and whether they believe the operation will succeed. Humanitarian missions were selected because while Jentleson (1992) finds that humanitarian missions are seen by the public to be among the most legitimate kinds of operations the U.S. conducts, they are still fundamentally wars of choice. As a result, respondents have the
option to choose whether they want to commit U.S. forces without concern than inaction would harm the vital security interests of the USA in some way.

It is important to note here that there are significant differences between retrospective events and prospective support—Americans are less sensitive to casualties in the abstract than reported figures and events that occur in real time. Americans are also notoriously bad at contextualizing casualties, and estimations about how many casualties are “acceptable” versus “unacceptable” vary dramatically—especially without context provided by elites. The choice to use prospective casualties rather than retrospective in the survey, therefore, means that the overall degree of support for an operation could be significantly different between pre- and post-operational estimates. However, this more closely mirrors the kind of incentives that presidents may face in the lead up to an intervention or when contemplating a change in military strategy. When trying to understand the impact of public opinion on shaping decision-making ex ante, prospective estimates are particularly useful.

From an estimation perspective, prospective hypotheticals also make it less likely that we will observe casualty sensitivity more generally, and the hypothetical, prospective survey experiments therefore represent a minimum level of casualty sensitivity. Most importantly for this study, there is no theoretical reason why conservatives should express more or less sensitivity to retrospective casualty figures than liberals; we therefore expect that any difference in casualty sensitivity based on ideology or partisanship should hold.

Support for military operations is reported on three different scales. The first is a traditional seven-point Likert scale, which measures degree of support for an operation ranging from “support a great deal” to “oppose a great deal”, with the middle option being “neither support or oppose”. This provides significant visibility into how casualties affect how strongly an individual feels about a particular military operation; while a respondent may still believe that the operation is the right thing to do, the level of certainty may change as casualties rise. Therefore, the seven-point Likert scale used in Survey Experiment 1 is the most sensitive measure of support in the survey. Survey experiments 2 & 3 use a five-point Likert scale, which still measures degree of support but is slightly less sensitive. Finally, in order to show a more straightforward measure of support, I collapse each Likert scale into a two-point basic “support/do not support” measure. This allows us to compare changes in support for humanitarian operations in a way that can be communicated in a more conventional format: percent support for military operations.

**Survey 1**

The first survey experiment presents a hypothetical civil war where the government has begun massacring its citizens, administered in 2018 to a nationally-representative sample of 3,300 respondents. They were told that the U.S. is considering intervening to protect the civilians, which would save approximately 20,000 lives, but that it would also be at the cost of either none or about a dozen U.S. casualties. They were then shown a picture of both a child from a war-torn area, and a photo of a destroyed religious
building. This scenario was meant to mimic a situation such as Somalia, where U.S. forces would be solely responsible for delivering aid, rather than engaged in combat. Respondents were then asked to select on a seven-point scale the degree to which they supported the operation, and whether they believed the operation would be a success.

This scenario is a difficult test to pick up measures of casualty sensitivity because of the low levels of casualties predicted. While these casualty levels are the most realistic for an operation of this nature, varying the number of casualties from 0 to a dozen creates a tough test of casualty sensitivity to begin with; thus, any decrease in support for a military operation based on the introduction of 12 casualties suggests high levels of sensitivity to casualties writ large. Similarly, it would perhaps be unsurprising to observe relatively small (or even no) changes in support based upon the introduction of a dozen casualties. This test therefore favors a null hypothesis: that there will be relatively little difference between liberals and conservatives in support for military operations based upon an increase in casualties, and that any sensitivity will be small in degree.

**Survey 2**

In the second survey, respondents were asked about another humanitarian intervention that would require more sustained U.S. action. 743 respondents on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform were presented in 2019 with a hypothetical civil war where the U.S. was contemplating military action. However, the mission was not to simply deliver food aid, but also to stabilize the country. They were told that the mission could cost up to 30, 300, or 3000 soldiers killed in action, but that if successful, it would save approximately 50,000 lives. They were then asked to select on a five-point scale the degree to which they believed the operation would be successful, and how strongly they supported sending troops.

This additional survey experiment then represents a more clear-cut test of casualty sensitivity during what may be perceived as a major military operation. In contrast to the relatively low-cost humanitarian operation, where respondents may see little difference between zero and a dozen casualties in terms of likelihood of success or commitment, casualties in this scenario much more clearly indicate the scale of the proposed military operation. By varying the number of expected casualties by orders of magnitude, we are therefore able to test exactly how pronounced differences in sensitivity to casualties may be between partisans. And by varying the number of expected casualties along three difference levels, rather than just two, we are able to explore whether differences in casualty sensitivity have a floor or a ceiling. The second and third surveys therefore represent an “easy” test of casualty sensitivity, and we should expect to see a much larger difference in support by both ideological camps given the magnitude of the difference. This is important because casualty sensitivity, and co-partisan effects, may differ depending on the expected size and commitment associated with a military operation; these surveys account for this possibility.
Survey 3

Both surveys 1 and 2 were fielded during the presidency of Republican Donald Trump. Therefore, to test the second hypothesis—that casualty sensitivity changes according to the party in power in the White House—a third survey experiment was fielded in late January 2021 immediately after the inauguration of Democratic President Joe Biden. 1,655 respondents were given exactly the same prompt from Survey 2 using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform. This approach was chosen for two reasons. First, by keeping the question wording exactly the same, there is minimal risk that any difference in results can be attributable to changes in scenario, priming, or respondent interpretation of the vignette provided. Second, more traditional primes of elite cues were not introduced because the hypothesis in question is seeking to understand the effect of partisan leadership independent of explicit cues. Elite cue primes, where the vignette explicitly mentions Republican or Democrat support, are blunt measures that are well-established in the literature as effect tools. This study, however, is seeking to understand the effect of co-partisanship on casualty sensitivity outside of this more traditional mechanism. As a result, the co-partisan prime is much more subtle, coming only in the form of timing—who is president during the time of the vignette.

Results

The results show support for both ideological and partisan differences in casualty sensitivity. Respondents who identify as Republican and conservative display much less sensitivity to casualties than respondents who identify as Democrat and liberal. However, casualty sensitivity overall does not appear to be significantly moderated by which party controls the White House, except in major military operations.
Yet differences remain between ideological components, with conservatives on the whole expressing lower levels of sensitivity to casualties than liberals.

Consistent with Jentleson (1992), we observe high levels of support for the proposed humanitarian mission in all three of the surveys. Support for the hypothetical intervention stays above 50% in almost all cases, and regularly reaches levels where over two-thirds of Americans support intervention, regardless of party or ideology. Yet differences in the degree to which casualties matter does, in fact, vary by ideology and the party of the president.

In the first scenario, conservatives express no difference in support for the operation when the number of expected casualties increases from zero to a dozen. By contrast, liberals decrease their support for the operation by almost 7%. Figure 1 shows the overall differences in support for the operation using a rough two-point “agree/disagree” scale. While liberals express much higher levels of overall support for the proposed intervention, they are also much more sensitive to even relatively low expected costs—support decreases by 7 points when the respondent is informed that the operation will likely result in about a dozen casualties. By contrast, while conservatives express lower levels of overall support for the operation, they appear impervious to expected costs; support does not decline in any meaningful way when the number of expected casualties increases.

Table 1 shows a basic t test by party identification. Regardless of how one measures support, self-identified liberals are clearly more responsive to the increase in expected casualties. This is significant in part due to the relatively low level of expected casualties in the first place; that respondents identifying as ideologically liberal decrease support by such a large percentage with so few additional casualties, while appear to remain unmoved, suggests that these effects may be felt even with relatively small operations and decisions about the use of force.

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This effect also appears to be similar by both party and ideology. Figure 2 illustrates the results from the two-point scale (support/do not support) by both Republican/conservative and Democrat/liberal identification. While the margin of error is larger for respondents who identify as liberal, the coefficients are remarkably similar. This is generally unsurprising, given that the two are highly correlated and that polarization is increasingly synching ideological preferences with part affiliation. As a result, we observe both ideological differences as well as partisan differences in sensitivity to casualties.

### Table 1

| Party Identification | Difference in support amongst | Change in support with additional casualties |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
|                       | 7-Point scale | 2-Point scale|
| Conservatives         | −0.16           | −0.02          |
| Liberals              | −0.28***        | −0.07**         |

*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01. This table presents the difference in average support for intervention between different experimental treatment groups, using three different coding schemes of the dependent variable.
Fig. 2 Republican/conservative versus democrat/liberal sensitivity to casualties

Fig. 3 Differences in casualty sensitivity amongst conservative versus liberal respondents (surveys 2 & 3)
Results from the second and third survey experiments are more nuanced, but tell a similar story. Figure 3 shows differences in support for military intervention where troops may need to stay and stabilize the country—a traditional counterinsurgency mission that could be seen as similar to the Iraq War. It reports the combined results from the two identical survey experiments on a rough two-point scale, conducted 18 months apart. In this scenario, where the number of casualties was increased by an order of magnitude with each step, conservatives express both higher levels of overall support and more casualty sensitivity. However, high levels of variation in support amongst conservatives lead to low levels of statistical significance. In particular, similar to our observations from Experiment 1, smaller changes in expected casualties as associated with insignificant changes in conservative support.

Overall, while the drop in support for the proposed operation is the similar between ideological preferences in the low-level scenario (7.8%), only the difference amongst liberals is statistically significant. These results are mirrored by party.

While the relatively small N may play a role in under-estimating the significance of the results, another potential explanation is heterogeneity of policy preferences amongst those who identify as conservative. Indeed, for many Americans (especially Black Americans), self-reported ideology does not effectively capture policy and voting preferences, and is instead more reflective of how a respondent sees themselves compared to others in their social environment or even just understand the traditional right-left spectrum (Jefferson 2020). This is reflected in our survey results as well; while amongst liberals there is significant overlap between party identification and ideology, just 65% of those who identify themselves as conservative in ideology claim to be Republican—with no significant graduation between those who are weakly conservative versus strongly conservative. Using this, it is possible that Black Americans identify themselves as being ideologically conservative, but have voting behavior (and responses to external stimuli like casualties) that mirrors Democrats. Therefore, investigating Republican (rather than conservative) attitudes may provide additional insight into elite incentives, particularly as party ID becomes even more important for voting preferences.

### Table 2

| Difference in support amongst... | Change in support with additional casualties |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|                                 | 30–300 300–3000                                   |
|                                 | 2-pt scale 5-pt scale 2-pt scale 5-pt scale       |
| Republicans                     | −0.03 −0.12 −0.13** −0.36** |
| (N=323) (N=377) (N=333) (N=395)
| Democrats                       | −0.06* −0.21** −0.13*** −0.31**** |
| (N=666) (N=779) (N=659) (N=765)

*p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01. This table presents the difference in average support for intervention between different experimental treatment groups. N levels appear different because the “neither support nor opposed” answer is dropped in the 2-pt scale.
Table 3 Average treatment effects: republicans and democrats express different levels of sensitivity to increases in expected casualties

| Difference in support amongst... | Change in support with additional casualties | 0–12 Casualties | 30–300 Casualties | 300–3000 Casualties |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
|                                 | Co-partisan Non-party Co-partisan Non-party Co-partisan Non-party |
| Republicans                     | −0.14 (N=890)                              | −0.36* (N=180) | −0.15 (N=181)   | −0.26* (N=395)   |
| Democrats                       | −0.24*** (N=1219)                          | −0.31*** (N=667) | −0.18* (N=779)  | −0.71*** (N=222) |

*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01. This table presents the difference in average support for intervention between different experimental treatment groups using a 5-point scale. The 7 pt scale from Survey #1 was condensed to 5-pts by collapsing the “agree and strongly agree” categories.

Table 2 finds support for this potential discrepancy by investigating the impact of party ID on casualty sensitivity. It demonstrates that while respondents who identified themselves as Democrats appear to be sensitive to casualties at both low and high levels, Republicans only express levels of aversion at the upper bound. Both the magnitude and the significance of Democrats’ response to the change in casualties is stronger than the Republican response at the lower levels. However, once the figure changes up to 3,000 expected casualties, Republicans express essentially the same levels of sensitivity as Democrats.

These results provide the strongest evidence across Surveys 2 & 3 that there are differences between party and ideology on how Americans view casualty sensitivity. As in Survey 1, we observe significantly smaller coefficients in sensitivity amongst Republicans during low-intensity conflict, suggesting that at least some of the results in Fig. 3 are being driven by people who would identify as conservative Democrats or conservative independent voters, rather than rank-and-file conservative Republicans.1

Party versus ideology: president effects?

We now turn to the results by the political party in the White House. Using all three surveys, Table 3 suggests that both Republicans and Democrats express slightly different levels of casualty sensitivity depending on whether the president is a co-partisan, but retain their differences in overall levels of casualty sensitivity. In particular, it appears that during major military operations, respondents were especially likely to express sensitivity to casualties if the president was of a different party (Columns 5–6), while minor military operations were met with less sensitivity to casualties,

1 The astute observer would note that the differences between ideology and party are themselves difference between Survey 1 and Surveys 2 & 3. This is potentially attributable to the difference in platform: MTurk generally attracts more Democrats, and may therefore have an unrepresentative sample that introduces more heterogeneity amongst conservatives.
particularly amongst Republicans (Columns 1–4). In general, however, Democrats appear to remain across-the-board more sensitive to casualties that their Republican counterparts; if these effects are mitigated by a co-partisan in the White House, it is largely with Republicans contemplating major military operations.

Column 4, however, presents an interesting outlier when compared to other results from Democrats: it appears that in Survey 2, Democrats did not express significant levels of casualty sensitivity when presented with a low-intensity military intervention scenario under Republican President Donald Trump. This could be the result of two different factors. First, it could simply be an outlier result. This interpretation is supported by the relatively high level of sensitivity expressed in Survey 1: a similar low-intensity operation, also under Trump, administered to a higher quality and larger sample size. Survey 2 had the lowest number of respondents of each of the surveys, and so it is entirely possible that the null result is an anomaly.

The discrepancy might also be explained, however, by the events that took place between the administration of Survey 2 and 3: the COVID-19 pandemic. It is plausible that the emergence of the pandemic as a security threat made all Americans especially sensitive to casualties and the potential severity of military operations overseas; with a domestic crisis at home, Americans’ sensitivity to the potential cost of military intervention abroad may have been particularly heightened. This would explain the relatively strong result found for Democrats in Column 3 (co-partisan president, administered in 2021) when compared to Column 4 (non-party president, administered in 2019). In this scenario, it would appear that Democrats are more similar to Republicans in their levels of casualty sensitivity. This is a less likely explanation, however; it is inconsistent with both the results of Surveys 1 and 3, both of which were larger and more representative.

Overall, the results indicate that conservatives likely respond differently to increases in casualties than liberals—particularly in low-intensity operations. In particular, they are less likely to change their support for military operations even as the expected number of dead and wounded increase significantly. In some cases, they do not change their support at all. This is consistent with our ex ante expectations: conservatives view military force as an effective instrument of power, are less likely to question authority, and are less likely to change their attitudes about the military in response to policy failure. As a result, we observe that they are significantly less casualty-sensitive than their more liberal counterparts.

Table 3 also suggests that this is primarily driven by ideology rather than pure partisanship. Contrary to theories that predict an increased confidence in a co-partisan president (and thus a higher tolerance for casualties), the lack of discernable difference between respondents’ preferences from one president to the next indicates that the operating mechanism is more ideological and enduring rather than elite-driven. The exception to this is in potentially major military operations resulting in casualties in the thousands; Americans in this scenario both express some levels of casualty sensitivity (though Democrats appear to again be more sensitive) and are more tolerant when a co-partisan occupies the White House.
The effects of polarization

The results presented above show that the degree to which a person expresses sensitivity to military casualties is likely conditioned upon their political ideology. Traditionally, these differences would not make a significant difference in military strategy, because a president would still have to appeal to enough moderates in the electorate for political support and reelection. Even if the leader was not concerned about reelection, he or she would still require support amongst moderates in Congress in order to pass and enact a legislative agenda.

However, as the USA has become increasingly polarized, presidents and elected leaders have far fewer incentives to appeal to the “median voter”—whether amongst the general public or in the legislature. Over the last 50 years, the two parties have moved farther apart in policy preferences, and become increasingly homogenous within the party. This decrease in ideological overlap creates more incentives for presidents to rely on support from within their own party rather than negotiating with the other side. In terms of wartime strategy, this means that Republican presidents are likely to pay less attention to casualties while prosecuting a war, while Democratic presidents are likely to pay significantly more attention to casualties than before.

Should these results be generalizable, we can imagine three primary effects. First, Republicans will likely be held increasingly less accountable by fellow conservatives for beginning costly wars and pursuing military strategies that result in significant numbers of dead and wounded soldiers. As Republican leaders depend more on their co-partisans for support, and require less support from more dovish Democrats, they are less likely to face incentives to limit casualties. In some cases, this may free them to pursue successful military strategy without fear of electoral backlash—as George W. Bush did in 2007 with the Iraq Surge. But in other cases, it may encourage Republican presidents to pursue victory at any cost, even when the public writ large does not support the war. In foreign policy, the executive branch is already largely independent from oversight, and its growth in size and scope combined with Congress’s willingness to cede authority over foreign policy initiatives, has led to very few ways in which the president is held responsible for foreign policy failures. As polarization continues to increase, and Republicans become increasingly less sensitive, this will likely further erode accountability.

By contrast, Democrats are likely to suffer significant electoral consequences for strategies that require large numbers of casualties, even potentially to the point of crippling support for military action at all. As Democrats become increasingly dependent upon the more liberal wing of their party for support and election, they are likely to be forced to pay particular attention to the potential human costs of military action. In some cases, this may lead them to be particularly prudent with the use of force—Reiter and Stam (2002) show that democracies are more likely to be selective in their conflicts and therefore more likely to win. But in the extreme, it could make Democratic presidents hesitant to pursue military strategies that would
result in battlefield victories if they come with high costs, especially in already low-intensity conflicts that are less likely to trigger intra-party rally effects.

Perhaps most realistically, Democrats will face stronger incentives to prosecute conflict in a way that minimizes human interaction—resulting in a reliance on technologically-driven conflict management tools that utilizes drone strikes, artificial intelligence, and missile strikes to accomplish foreign policy objectives that might otherwise have been performed more effectively with Americans at the helm. This, counter-intuitively, also leads to a decline in accountability as the administration attempts to hide the costs of war from its constituents.

Second, these differences in military strategy and preferences also present problems for continuity across administrations. While it is unusual to see a party change power in the midst of a conflict, it is not without precedent. Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson was replaced by Republican Richard Nixon in 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War, and Republican George W Bush was replace by Democrat Barack Obama in 2008 just after the Iraq Surge; Obama was then replaced by Republican Donald Trump who assumed responsibility for the War in Afghanistan. While each administration undoubtedly brings different priorities, dramatic changes in military operations from administration to administration can have deleterious effects on troop morale, strategic planning, and wartime alliances.

In particular, the results above suggest that Republicans may be increasingly incentivized to pursue risky battlefield strategies in an effort to win even at the expense of casualties, while Democrats may face some incentives to reduce casualties even at the cost of victory. This can lead to significant changes in military operations, and if done regularly may undermine strategic planning more broadly as military objectives and what options are deemed politically acceptable change. It may also have an effect on troop morale, as troops previously committed to a strategy or cause feel as though they are being used as political pawns. One can imagine this effect working in either direction: As Democrats change military strategy to be more risk averse (or withdraw altogether), soldiers in the field may come away from the fight with the sense that their sacrifice and service was negated for political expediency. By contrast, should a Republican suddenly escalate operations in an unpopular war without a clear victory in sight, those fighting the battles may lose a sense of purpose and belief in victory.

Finally, increasing polarization will likely lead to each party taking very different “lessons learned” from military operations and campaign strategy. Echoing the work of Schultz (2017), polarization can result in the two parties seeing military outcomes through partisan lenses, rather than applying an objective framework to evaluate success and failure. If one party has political incentives to ignore casualties, while the other has incentives to pay particularly close attention to increases in the human cost of war, this will lead to different interpretations about the success or failure of military strategy in war.
Conclusions and directions for future research

This paper has explored the degree to which casualty sensitivity differs by political party and ideology, and its implications for military operations in an era of polarization. Ultimately, the evidence reveals that conservatives are generally less likely to change their support for military interventions in response to increases in expected casualties. This effect is especially pronounced for lower-intensity military operations when expected casualties are in the tens and hundred, rather than thousands. By contrast, Americans who identify as liberal appear significantly more likely to decrease their support for military intervention as the number of expected casualties rise. While this may be situation-dependent, liberals in general appear much more responsive to information about casualty levels.

What’s more, these differences appear to be the result of ideology, as opposed to partisanship. Indeed, whether Americans share a party with the president appears to primarily impact casualty sensitivity during major military operations, as opposed to smaller, lower-intensity conflicts. Even still, conservatives (and those who identify as Republicans) appear to be less casualty sensitivity on the whole when compared to liberals and self-identified Democrats. This indicates that sensitivity to casualties is, at least to a degree, a factor of ideological preferences as opposed to simply a reflection of confidence in co-partisan elites. Further research may choose to use a stronger test of partisanship by explicitly identifying the administration making decisions about military operations; this use of stronger cues may yield additional insights about the degree to which partisanship can override (or undermine) ideological preferences.

These results have implications as the U.S. domestic public becomes increasingly polarized. It may result in decreases in leader accountability, wild swings in military operations between administrations, and an inability to learn appropriate lessons from military successes and failure. Here, historical work may prove to be a valuable method to understand how different domestic incentives have shaped leaders’ decisions about escalation and intervention. Further analysis is certainly required to distill the ways in which polarization may exacerbate differences in casualty sensitivity, interact with elite cues, and alter leaders’ incentives to manage military operations in a non-partisan manner.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

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