Issue-Image Tradeoffs and the Politics of Foreign Policy:
How Leaders Use Foreign Policy Positions to Shape their Personal Images

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Forthcoming at World Politics

Abstract

This article explains how leaders can use foreign policy issues to shape their personal images. It argues, in particular, that presidents and presidential candidates can use hawkish foreign policies to craft valuable impressions of leadership strength. This dynamic can give leaders incentives to take foreign policy positions that are more hawkish than what voters actually want. The article documents the causal foundations of this argument with a preregistered survey experiment; it presents archival evidence demonstrating that presidential candidates use unpopular foreign policies to convey attractive personal traits; and it uses observational data to show how those tradeoffs have shaped three decades of presidential voting. The article's theory and evidence indicate that democratic responsiveness in foreign policy is not as simple as "doing what voters want." Leaders often need to choose between satisfying voters' policy preferences and crafting personal images that voters find appealing. Aligning foreign policy with voters' preferences is thus easier said than done, and it is not always the best way for leaders to maximize their public standing.

Issue-Image Tradeoffs and the Politics of Foreign Policy

How does foreign policy shape presidential voting? The traditional way to answer this question is to assume that citizens evaluate leaders based on their policy platforms and support presidential candidates whose views resemble their own.[1] This is a simple and intuitive view of how democracy works: leaders maximize public support by making popular policy choices.

This article argues that voters also evaluate presidential candidates on the basis of whether those candidates appear to possess the personal attributes that make for a competent commander-in-chief. It additionally explains how voters draw inferences about leaders' personal attributes based on their policy positions. This means that leaders must sometimes choose between policies that maximize voters' collective preferences and policies that maximize the leader's personal image – a tension that the article calls an *issue-image tradeoff*.

The article focuses on one specific issue-image tradeoff, in which presidential candidates use hawkish foreign policies to craft impressions of leadership strength. It explains why we should expect voters to value having a strong commander-in-chief; how hawkish foreign policies can help presidential candidates create the impression that they are strong leaders; and how this dynamic can encourage presidential candidates to take foreign policy positions that are more hawkish than what voters actually want. The article supports this argument with three forms of evidence.

First, the article examines three decades of American National Election Studies (ANES) data on defense spending. These data show that voters consistently believe that presidential candidates

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[1] Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida 1989; Aldrich, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006; Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020.

who appear likely to raise defense spending will also be stronger leaders, even though most voters do not actually support raising military expenditures. We will see that voters are more likely to back presidential candidates who take more hawkish positions on the defense budget, even when controlling for preference alignment, along with other factors such as partisanship and ideology. The data further demonstrate that this "hawk's advantage" is mediated by perceptions of leadership strength, but not by perceptions of other personal attributes, such as decency or compassion. These findings indicate that the hawk's advantage at the ballot box revolves around the unique association that voters draw between foreign policy hawkishness and leadership strength. Supplementary material shows that these findings hold when analyzing a broader index of hawkishness based on three additional issues where ANES surveys measure voters' preferences along with their perceptions of leaders' foreign policy positions.

Next, the article presents a preregistered survey experiment that documents the causal link between foreign policy hawkishness and perceived leadership strength. This experiment asked respondents to rate hypothetical presidential candidates whose foreign policy positions were randomized from 52 policy stances. These data confirm the expectation that voters reliably associate hawkish foreign policies with leadership strength, even though participants in the experiment showed no consistent preference for hawkish foreign policies on their merits. This pattern holds for every foreign policy issue that appeared in the experiment and for nearly every demographic group who participated in the study. The robustness of these findings shows that the article's argument is not peculiar to specific foreign policies nor to idiosyncratic segments of the electorate. Instead, we see evidence that the article's hypothesized relationship between policy issues and personal images generalizes across the politics of foreign policy writ large.

Finally, the article draws on archival records to show how issue-image tradeoffs shaped the 1960 presidential election, during which John F. Kennedy's foreign policy platform revolved around a proposed military buildup. Even though less than one-quarter of Americans supported raising defense spending in 1960, Kennedy's advisers believed this promise would help to portray their candidate as a strong and vigorous leader, while casting incumbent Vice President Richard Nixon as being weak and complacent. The documents reveal that Kennedy's campaign deliberately used his foreign policy positions to convey appealing personal attributes, and not to satisfy voters' policy preferences. As one adviser put it, "The primary objective for Kennedy in dealing with specific foreign affairs issues is to enhance his image by demonstrating his knowledge and competence."

The article's multiple forms of evidence complement each other to sustain inferences than none could support on its own. The ANES data suggest that issue-image tradeoffs have shaped the politics of foreign policy across at least three decades of presidential voting, but this analysis is limited by the relatively small number of foreign policy issues that the ANES examines and by the inherent challenges of drawing causal inferences from observational surveys. The survey experiment asks respondents to evaluate hypothetical candidates rather than real leaders, but it confirms the causal link between foreign policy hawkishness and perceptions of leadership strength and shows that this relationship generalizes across a broad range of foreign policy issues. The archival evidence examines a single case, but it directly documents how leaders perceive and react to issue-image tradeoffs in a manner that shapes political strategy.

The article's primary implication is that democratic responsiveness in foreign policy is not as simple as "doing what voters want." Leaders often need to choose between satisfying voters' policy preferences and crafting personal images that voters find appealing. Aligning foreign policy

with voters' preferences is thus easier said than done, and it is not always the best way for leaders to maximize their public standing. This tension may help to explain the persistence of apparent "disconnects" between foreign policy and mass public opinion.[2] The article suggests that some of these policies may not be disconnected from mass public opinion at all, but that they instead reflect leaders using foreign policy issues as tools for crafting their personal images. In this respect, the article's theory and evidence imply that the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy is both more extensive, and more problematic, than the conventional wisdom expects.

Issue-Image Tradeoffs

This section develops the article's argument in three steps. First, it explains why we should expect voters to evaluate leaders' capacity to manage foreign policy by judging those leaders' personal attributes, not just by evaluating the substance of their policy positions. Next, it argues that the policy positions that maximize voters' collective preferences are not necessarily the ones that help leaders craft the most appealing personal images. It develops a specific example of these "issue-image tradeoffs" by explaining how hawkish foreign policy positions can help presidential candidates seem like strong leaders. It concludes by describing how this logic departs from existing studies of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.

Issues, Images, and Presidential voting

A large volume of scholarship on "issue voting" suggests that voters evaluate presidential candidates based the degree to which they agree with those candidates' foreign policy positions

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[2] Page and Bouton 2006; Busby and Monten 2012; Walt 2018.

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("preference alignment").[3] There are several reasons to expect that voters will also place substantial weight on judging whether presidential candidates have the kinds of personal attributes that make for a competent commander-in-chief.

First, foreign policy decision-making is frequently dominated by unexpected events. Many presidents' foreign policy legacies were defined by crises they did not anticipate when they ran for office. Examples include Harry Truman's handling of the Korean War, John F. Kennedy's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Jimmy Carter's response to the Iranian hostage crisis, George H. W. Bush's response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Bill Clinton's handling of the Rwandan genocide, George W. Bush's response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, Barack Obama's response to the Arab Spring, and Donald Trump's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. These examples demonstrate that voters have a legitimate interest in understanding how well leaders could handle unanticipated international problems that emerge on their watch, for which no leader could be expected to specify policy responses *ex ante*. This idea is often captured by aphorisms about how presidential candidates must demonstrate that they are ready to take the proverbial "three-a.m. phone call."

Foreign policy also involves strategic interactions that make it difficult for leaders to specify in advance exactly what steps they will take to solve international crises. As Thomas Schelling explained, most conflict situations are essentially bargaining situations, in which each side's optimal behavior depends on the actions of its counterparts.[4] Even the most sophisticated attempts to specify complete contingent plans for handling these bargaining situations require extensive simplifying assumptions. Nor should voters want leaders to specify those plans, because

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[3] For a review of foundational works in this field, see Aldrich, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006.
[4] Schelling 1960.

adversaries could exploit that information.[5] Thus, while presidents and presidential candidates can communicate their general approaches to conducting foreign policy, it is unreasonable to expect leaders to explain exactly how they would respond to specific international crises.

There is substantial evidence that leaders' personal attributes do, in fact, shape foreign policy decision-making. Recent scholarship has documented that individual-level factors such as confidence, expertise, narcissism, rationality, and resolve affect leaders' foreign policy behavior.[6] This scholarship implies that voters should not simply evaluate presidents and presidential candidates based on preference alignment. Voters also have an interest in making sure that these leaders have the right personal qualities to be a competent commander-in-chief.

A final reason to believe that the relationship between foreign policy and presidential voting will depend on leaders' personal images is that voters are naturally inclined to assess politicians' personal attributes. Voters appear to make split-second judgments about political leaders' competence on the basis of cues such as gender, facial structure, vocal pitch, and physical attractiveness.[7] One explanation for this behavior is that, while policy debates are complex things that rarely come up in voters' daily lives, most people have plenty of experience "sizing up" strangers on the basis of limited information.[8] Thus, while citizens pay limited attention to many foreign policy issues,[9] and thus end up holding many foreign policy preferences that are relatively

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[5] Fearon 1995.
[6] Saunders 2011; Kertzer 2016; Rathbun 2019; Yarhi-Milo 2019; Johnson 2020.
[7] Todorov, Mandisoza, Goren, and Hall 2005; Lawson, Lenz, Baker, and Myers 2010; Klofstad, Anderson, and Peters 2012.
[8] Page 1978; Fenno 1978.
[9] Kleinberg and Fordham 2018.

weak and malleable,[10] it appears that voters intuitively form impressions of leaders' competence and that those impressions shape voters' choices at the ballot box.

Using policy positions to convey personal attributes

If voters evaluate leaders' fitness to be commander-in-chief on the basis of their personal attributes, then we should expect leaders to try to convey appealing attributes to the public. This article focuses on how leaders use policy positions as tools for shaping their personal images. As a specific example of this dynamic, it explains why voters are likely to associate hawkish foreign policies with *leadership strength*, defined as a disposition to vigorously promote national interests and to avoid backing down when challenged by adversaries.[11]

Leadership strength is only part of what it takes to be a competent commander-in-chief, but it is important for protecting national security. If a leader has a tendency to back down when threatened, then this could encourage predatory behavior by the leader's adversaries. Citizens also presumably want their leaders to be proactive when it comes to supporting allies, marginalizing adversaries, and negotiating international agreements that work to America's advantage. A substantial volume of research indicates that voters do, in fact, value presidents who seem like

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[10] Guisinger and Saunders 2017.

[11] This definition of leadership strength is related to personality traits such as assertiveness, confidence, grit, and resolve. In principle, we could consider each of these traits to represent separate elements of what it takes to be a competent commander-in-chief. In practice, however, voters will likely perceive these traits to be highly correlated. Political scientists thus commonly include measures of leadership strength in surveys that elicit voters' attitudes toward presidential candidates. See, for example, Kinder, Peters, Abelson, and Fiske 1980; Cohen 2015.

strong leaders and that they associate leadership strength with making competent foreign policy decisions.[12]

This article uses the term, *hawkishness*, to capture two dimensions of foreign policy. The first dimension is a leader's inclination to employ military versus non-military instruments of foreign policy ("military internationalism"). The second dimension is a leader's willingness to make compromises to work in concert with other countries ("cooperative internationalism"). All things being equal, a foreign policy "hawk" is more likely to pursue militarized foreign policies and less likely to compromise with other countries. A foreign policy "dove" is someone who pursues foreign policies that are less militarized and more cooperative.[13]

Militarized foreign policies are useful tools for crafting impressions of leadership strength because they are easy to frame as "standing up" to America's adversaries or remaining vigilant in the face of foreign threats. Prominent examples of such arguments during presidential campaigns include Lyndon Johnson using the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution to dispel charges that he was soft on communism,[14] how Bill Clinton's 1996 campaign manager, Dick Morris, told Clinton that "I want to bomb the [expletive] out of Serbia to look strong,"[15] or how George W. Bush argued that "sticking to his guns" during the Iraq War demonstrated toughness and resolve.[16] Similarly, leaders who demand greater diplomatic concessions from other countries can readily frame that

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[12] Wattenberg 1991, 66-91; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009, 112-120; Berinsky 2009, 193-196; Cohen 2015, 63-106. A related body of research demonstrates that voters value leaders who seem like assertive, transformative figures – attributes that are consistent with the paper's definition of leadership strength. See, for example, Burns 1978; Stoessinger 1979; Hermann et al. 2001.
[13] The paper's use of the terms "hawkish" and "dovish" is thus equivalent to Wittkopf's (1990) terms, "hard-line" and "accommodationist."
[14] Moïse 1996.
[15] Stephanopoulous 1999, 381-382.
[16] Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 52-53.

behavior as vigorously promoting their citizens' interests – a form of rhetoric that was a particular hallmark of Donald Trump.[17] By contrast, leaders who oppose militarized foreign policies risk appearing as though they are "backing down" in the face of aggression and leaders who make compromises with other countries expose themselves to potential criticism for making excessive concessions. Prominent examples of this dynamic include charges that President Jimmy Carter was a weak leader for supporting the Panama Canal Treaties,[18] or that President Gerald Ford was allowing the Soviet Union to gain undue advantages through arms control negotiations and détente.[19] These examples show how the article's argument plausibly applies to Democrats and to Republicans, to incumbent presidents and to presidential challengers, to campaign promises and to actual foreign policies, to decisions made in and out of wartime, and to policies developed in election and in non-election years.

This article does not argue that hawkish foreign policies are the only way that presidents and presidential candidates can signal leadership strength. For instance, President Joe Biden claimed that withdrawing from Afghanistan demonstrated his willingness to make tough decisions.[20] Yet, that same rhetoric is usually available to hawkish leaders, too, as with George W. Bush "sticking to his guns" in Iraq. The difference between these cases from the standpoint of this article's theory is that Biden exposed himself to criticism for backing down in the face of enemy aggression, whereas Bush could more readily portray the invasion and occupation of Iraq as evidence that he was confronting his adversaries head-on. This is the sense in which the article's argument expects

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[17] Carnegie and Carson 2019.
[18] Zaretsky 2011.
[19] Zelizer 2009.
[20] Shear and Sanger 2021.

that hawkish foreign policies will generally be more useful than dovish foreign policies when it comes to cultivating reputations of leadership strength.

If voters preferred hawkish foreign policies on their merits, then the politics of image-making would not shape leaders' behavior. But so long as we believe that leaders' policy choices have any causal impact on how voters perceive their personal images, then we should expect there to be cases in which the policy positions that maximize voters' collective policy preferences are not also the positions that maximize leaders' ability to craft an appealing personal image – a dynamic that this article describes as *issue-image tradeoffs*. This logic shows why leaders who seek to cultivate mass public opinion do not necessarily have incentives to take policy positions that maximize preference alignment.

Departures from existing scholarship

This article is certainly not the first attempt to argue that image-making considerations shape electoral politics. However, most existing studies of this subject argue that voters' perceptions of policy issues are positively correlated with their perceptions of candidate traits. For instance, the literature on "priming" explains how presidential candidates can enhance their personal images by highlighting popular policy positions.[21] The literature on "elite cues" suggests that leaders who are perceived to be competent will have an easier time convincing voters that their policy proposals are good ideas.[22] Both of these dynamics imply that voters who like a leader's policies will be more inclined to say that the leader has attractive personal attributes, and vice versa.[23] By contrast,

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[21] Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004.
[22] Saunders 2022.
[23] Page 1994.

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this article argues that voters' perceptions of issues and images can diverge from one another in a manner that forces voters to choose between policies they prefer and candidates whom they find personally appealing.

Several studies argue that leaders with reputations for hawkishness run less risk of being perceived as weak when they implement dovish policies.[24] There is also evidence that voters use leaders' party affiliations as heuristics for predicting their policy positions as well as their competence for handling policies in broad issue areas.[25] These works provide further indication that voters' perceptions of foreign policy issues are linked to their beliefs about leaders' personal images, but they do not directly explain how leaders can use foreign policy positions as tools to craft appealing personal images.

The work that most closely resembles this article's argument is a 2021 analysis by Andrew Gooch, Alan Gerber, and Gregory Huber. Gooch, Gerber, and Huber present a survey experiment showing that Congressional candidates who take policy positions that break party norms are more likely to be viewed as ineffective legislators. The authors explain that "These results are, to our knowledge, the first to show that citizens alter their views of candidates' non-policy characteristics in response to their policy positions."[26] This article draws on Gooch, Gerber, and Huber's experimental methodology, but its theory differs from theirs in explaining how the link between issues and images can incentivize leaders to depart from voters' policy preferences, whereas Gooch, Gerber, and Huber are mainly interested in explaining adherence to party norms.

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[24] Kreps, Saunders and Schultz 2018; Mattes and Weeks 2019.
[25] Gadarian 2010; Kertzer, Brooks, and Brooks 2020.
[26] Gooch, Gerber, and Huber 2021, 9.

Within the field of international relations, the existing scholarship that is most relevant to this article is the literature on audience costs. These studies argue that leaders appear incompetent when they do not follow through on military threats or other international commitments.[27] Leaders may thus sometimes take military actions simply to avoid hurting their personal reputations, even in cases where voters would not ordinarily support the use of force. This dynamic is consistent with the logic of issue-image tradeoffs. Yet, this article explains how issue-image tradeoffs do not depend on leaders making prior commitments that they subsequently wish to retract. Instead, its argument explains why leaders may deliberately pursue foreign policies that depart from voters' policy preferences for the purpose of bolstering their personal images, and how that behavior can occur in a wide range of foreign policy domains.

Observational Evidence from the American National Election Studies

This section tests the article's argument using three decades of survey data on presidential voting from the American National Election Studies (ANES). It focuses on the politics of defense spending, because that is the foreign policy issue for which the ANES has most consistently collected voters' preferences. Supplementary material shows that this section's findings all hold when analyzing a broader index of leader hawkishness constructed from whatever foreign policy issues the ANES chose to analyze in each election cycle. This article's survey experiment will additionally confirm that the article's hypothesized link between foreign policy issues and personal images holds across a diverse range of topics.

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[27] Nomikos and Sambanis 2019 explain how perceptions of leader (in)competence drive the dynamics of audience costs.

This section's analysis documents three claims. First, we will see that voters reliably associate hawkish positions on defense spending with leadership strength, but not with other personal attributes such as decency or compassion. Second, we will see that voters are more likely to support presidential candidates who seem more hawkish on military spending. Third, we will see that this "hawk's advantage" at the ballot box is mediated by voters associating candidates' positions on military expenditures with leadership strength (and that it is *not* mediated by perceptions of candidates' other personal attributes).

It is always challenging to identify causal mechanisms in observational survey data. However, political scientists generally expect that endogeneity in survey responses causes voters to align their policy preferences with the views of candidates whom they support for other reasons.[28] If anything, voters' tendency to minimize cognitive dissonance should make it harder to show that leaders gain electoral benefits from taking hawkish foreign policy positions that do not reflect voters' policy preferences. As noted in the previous paragraph, this section also presents a series of "placebo tests" showing that the hawk's advantage at the ballot box is uniquely associated with perceptions of leadership strength, but not with perceptions of candidates' other personal attributes. The article's experimental analysis will further document the causal nature of the relationship between foreign policy hawkishness and perceptions of leadership strength.

Data and research design

In every presidential election year since 1980, the ANES has asked voters to state their preferences for military spending on a 7-point scale. These data show that the median voter almost

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[28] Page 1994; Lodge and Taber 2013.

always prefers to keep defense spending constant. (The sole exception is 1980, when the median voter preferred a slight increase in military expenditures.) ANES surveys also ask voters to use the same scale to describe where they think each presidential candidate stands on the defense budget. These data provide a unique resource for evaluating the electoral impact of foreign policy, because they reveal the extent to which voters perceive contrasts between candidates' policy positions, and which of those positions lies closer to voters' policy preferences.

To measure perceived contrasts between candidates' policy positions, the article analyzes a *Defense Spending Differential* index, which represents the difference that an individual voter perceives in two presidential candidates' positions on military expenditures.[29] This variable ranges from zero to six, with an average value of 2.3 and a standard deviation of 1.6. Eighty-five percent of ANES respondents perceived a difference between presidential candidates' positions on defense spending. Supplementary material demonstrates that voters' perceptions of candidates' defense spending positions are generally quite accurate.

ANES surveys ask voters to rate presidential candidates' personal traits using 4-point scales.[30] These data are available from 1980-2008. This section analyzes an index, called *Leadership Strength Differential*, which captures the leadership score for the candidate who seemed more hawkish on defense spending, minus the leadership score for the candidate who seemed more

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[29] Since voters' assessments of two presidential candidates are not independent observations, it is standard practice to treat these assessments as a single observation, though we will see that the paper's results do not rely on shaping the data in this manner.
[30] ANES surveys do not define "leadership strength" in a manner that pertains specifically to a candidate's ability to handle foreign policy issues. As a result, some of the variation in these ratings may capture perceptions of leaders' expected performance outside the foreign policy domain. This variation should, if anything, make it harder to confirm the hypothesis that voters associate hawkish foreign policy positions with leadership strength. The paper's survey experiment will also a measure of leadership strength that is specifically oriented around handling foreign policy issues.

dovish on defense spending. If a voter perceived no difference between candidates' positions on military expenditures, then the "hawk" designation is randomly assigned.

These data reveal that voters generally associate hawkishness on military spending with leadership strength. In cases where voters believed that one candidate would spend more money on defense than the other, the more hawkish candidate received a leadership strength rating that was 0.34 points higher than his opponent, on average ($p<0.001$). To probe this relationship further, we can use ordinary least squares regression to estimate the following model:

$$[Eq.1:] \text{ Leadership Strength Differential}_{i,h,d}$$

$$= \alpha + \gamma_1 \text{Defense Spending Differential}_{i,h,d}$$

$$+ \gamma_2 \text{Preference Alignment}_{i,h,d} + \gamma_3 \text{Partisanship}_{i,h}$$

$$+ \gamma_4 \text{Ideology}_{i,h} + \gamma_5 \text{Hawk is a Republican}_{i,h} + \gamma_6 \text{Hawk is an Incumbent}_{i,h}$$

$$+ \gamma_7 \text{Female}_i + \gamma_8 \text{Black}_i + \gamma_9 \text{Female}_i * \text{Hawk is a Republican}_{i,h} + \gamma_{10} Black_i$$

$$* \text{Hawk is a Republican}_{i,h} + \gamma_{11} \text{Same Position}_i + \beta \text{Year} + \varepsilon_i$$

This model's unit of analysis is an individual ANES respondent, i, assessing presidential candidates h and d, where h is the candidate who seems more hawkish on defense spending and d is the candidate who seems more dovish on defense spending.[31] The model's dependent variable is the difference between the voter's assessments of the hawkish and dovish candidates' leadership strength (*Leadership Strength Differential*). Our primary variable of interest is the degree to which

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[31] As noted above, the hawk and dove designations are randomized in cases where respondent i believed that the two presidential candidates would spend the same amount of money on defense.

the voter believes that h would spend more money than d on defense (*Defense Spending Differential*). The model controls for *Preference Alignment*, which is an index where higher values indicate that voters' preferences for defense spending are more closely aligned with candidate h.[32] Thus, any observed relationship that the model shows between foreign policy hawkishness and perceived leadership strength cannot be attributed to voters' beliefs about whether it is actually a good idea to raise military expenditures.

The model's indices for *Party* and *Ideology* are oriented so that higher values indicate closer alignment with candidate h.[33] Binary variables indicate whether the more hawkish-seeming candidate is a *Republican* and/or an *Incumbent*. The model contains binary variables indicating whether voters are *Female* and/or *Black*, along with interaction terms that capture the fact that both of those demographics tend to oppose Republican presidential candidates. The indicator variable, *Same Position*, takes a value of 1 if the respondent sees no difference in the defense spending positions of the two presidential candidates. This variable absorbs any statistical trends that result from randomly assigning some candidates to be the "hawk" for the purposes of the analysis. Finally, the model includes a vector of indicators (*Year*) to capture political dynamics that are idiosyncratic to individual election cycles.

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[32] Formally, the measure is Preference Alignment$_{i,h,d} = (|d_h - d_i|) - (|d_d - d_i|)$ where d_i is the respondent's preference for defense spending and d_h and d_d represent the respondent's perception of where candidates h and d stand on that issue.
[33] Thus, if candidate h is a Republican, then higher values of the Party index would indicate that the voter associates more strongly with the Republican party; if candidate h is a Democrat, then strong Republican voters would receive *lower* scores on the partisanship index. The ANES measures partisanship and ideology on 7-point scales (strong Republican to strong Democrat; extremely conservative to extremely liberal).
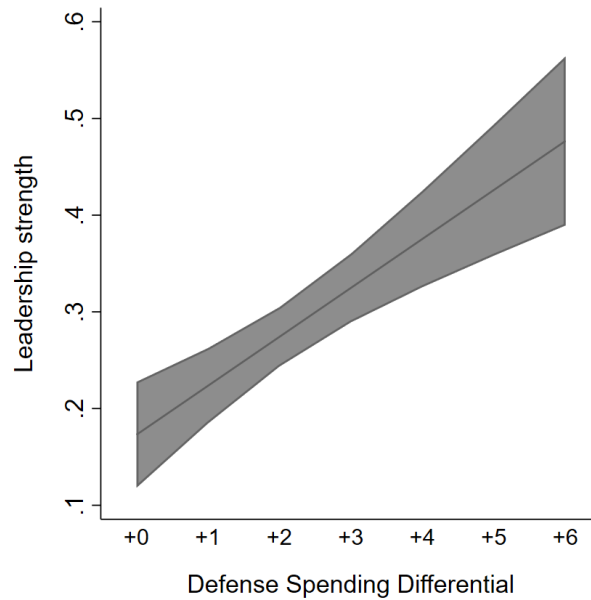
Figure 1. *Defense spending and perceptions of leadership strength*. This figure shows that voters reliably associate hawkishness on defense spending with leadership strength, even when controlling for partisanship, ideology, gender, race, preference alignment, and year fixed effects. Source: ANES, 1980-2008.

The ANES data set records this information for 8,480 respondents. All analyses in this section employ ANES survey weights, adjusted for the fact that each ANES wave contains a different number of respondents, so as to ensure that all waves exert equal impact on statistical results.

Voters associate hawkishness with leadership strength

Figure 1 confirms that voters reliably associate presidential candidates' positions on defense spending with leadership strength, even when controlling for the factors in Equation [1].[34] This

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[34] See Supplementary Table 1 for full results. Supplementary Figure 2 documents similar patterns with data reshaped such that each observation represents one voter assessing one presidential candidate. These data confirm that voters believe that candidates who seem likely to raise defense spending are also stronger leaders – thus, that the pattern in Figure 1 is not simply

pattern is statistically significant at the *p*<0.001 level. Given the model's control variables, we can say that the association between hawkish positions on defense spending and perceptions of leadership strength holds regardless of the degree to which voters are predisposed to support candidates on partisan or ideological grounds, regardless of which pair of presidential candidates we examine – and, crucially, regardless of voters' policy preferences for handling the defense budget.[35]

Placebo test

It is now important to show that hawkish positions on defense spending *uniquely* shape perceptions of leadership strength. If we instead found that voters associate hawkishness with other personal traits – for example, if candidates who seem likely to raise defense spending also come across as being more decent or more compassionate – then we might conclude that Figure 1's results are confounded. This kind of analysis is known as a "placebo test," because it examines whether statistical relationships are absent in cases where a theory predicts they should not exist.

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driven by voters associating *weak* leadership with candidates who appear likely to *cut* military expenditures.

[35] This analysis indicates that a one-standard deviation shift in the Defense Spending Differential is associated with a 0.07-point change in perceptions of the candidates' Leadership Strength. A benchmark for judging the substantive significance of this relationship is that a one-standard deviation shift in partisanship is associated with a 0.51-point change in perceptions of the candidates' Leadership Strength. It would, of course, be surprising to find that candidates' positions on defense spending explain perceptions of their leadership strength anywhere near to the same degree as partisanship. The fact that these coefficients are in the same ballpark indicates that the empirical relationship in Figure 1 captures a meaningful slice of variation in presidential candidates' personal images.
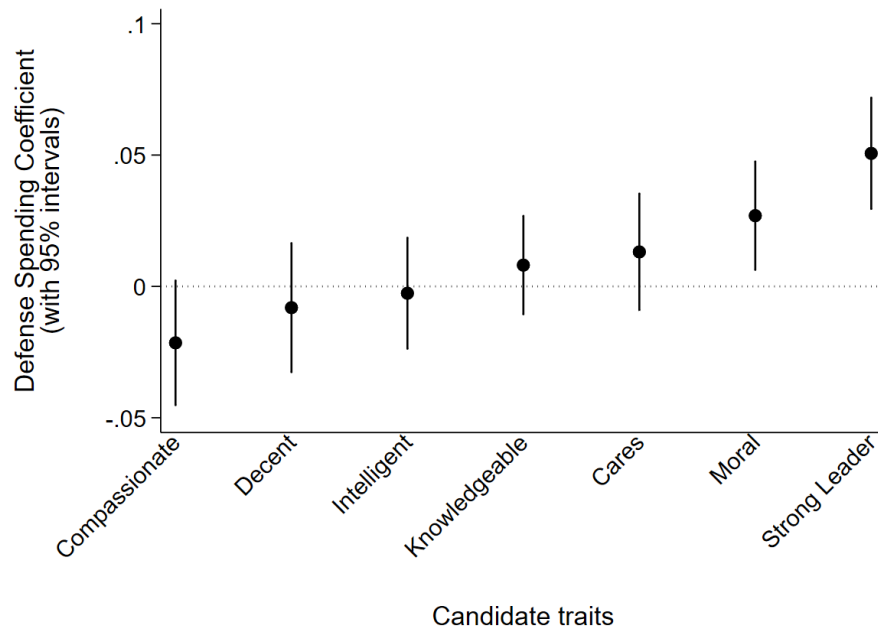
Figure 2. *How candidates' positions on defense spending relate to perceived personal traits*. Each data point represents a separate model examining the association between presidential candidates' positions on defense spending and voters' perceptions of a personal trait. All models control for partisanship, ideology, gender, race, preference alignment, and year fixed effects.

Figure 2 confirms that presidential candidates' positions on defense spending are uniquely associated with perceptions of their leadership strength. Each data point in Figure 2 reflects a *Defense Spending Coefficient*, which is generated by analyzing the extent to which voters associate hawkishness on defense spending with each of the personal traits that the ANES data capture.[36] The right sides of these models are all identical to Equation [1]. Larger Defense Spending

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[36] The analysis excludes perceptions of whether leaders are "inspiring," because scholars generally see this attribute as reflecting the same underlying factor as "strong leadership." These attributes indeed have a higher correlation (r=0.72) than any other pair of traits in the ANES data set. All patterns that the paper describes corresponding to perceptions of leadership strength also hold when analyzing perceptions of inspiring leadership (though they are always less statistically-significant, since the ANES surveys stopped collecting data on perceptions of inspiring leadership after 1996).

Coefficients indicate a stronger positive association between candidates' positions on defense spending and voters' perceptions of those candidates' personal qualities.

Figure 2 shows that the association between defense spending hawkishness and perceived leadership strength is more reliable than the association between defense spending hawkishness and any other candidate trait. Only one other trait in the ANES data – morality – bears a statistically significant relationship to candidates' positions on defense spending. This relationship is driven by voters' perceptions of George W. Bush during the 2004 election,[37] and it is smaller than the association between defense spending and leadership strength ($p<0.05$). This analysis is consistent with the idea that hawkish foreign policies serve a unique function in the politics of image-making, helping presidential candidates to craft impressions of leadership strength.

The "hawk's advantage" at the ballot box

So far, this section has shown that voters associate hawkishness on defense spending with leadership strength. But do those perceptions actually matter at the ballot box?

If this article's argument is correct, then we should find three patterns in the ANES data. First, we should see that voters are more likely to support presidential candidates who take more hawkish positions on defense spending. Second, we should see that this "hawk's advantage" is mediated by perceptions of leadership strength. Third, we should *not* find evidence that the hawk's advantage

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[37] When this year is removed from the data, the association between defense spending and morality falls short of statistical significance ($p=0.14$), but the association between defense spending and leadership strength remains highly robust ($p<0.001$). It is possible that the association between defense spending and morality in that year reflects Bush's most ardent supporters being more likely to receive his campaign's messages about war policies and social conservatism.

is mediated by perceptions of other personal attributes. Confirming these predictions would support the idea that candidates who take more hawkish positions on defense spending enjoy electoral advantages that are uniquely associated with perceptions of leadership strength.

In order to test the claim that presidential candidates who take more hawkish positions on defense spending also tend to win more votes, we can replace the dependent variable in Equation [1] with *Vote Share*, defined as the probability that ANES respondents vote for the candidates they identify as taking more hawkish positions on defense spending.[38] Figure 3 presents results from a logit regression confirming that voters are more likely to support presidential candidates who appear to take more hawkish positions on military expenditures ($p<0.001$).[39] It is again important to note that the model controls for preference alignment, thereby showing that candidates who seem hawkish on defense spending enjoy electoral advantages that are statistically unrelated to what voters think about the merits of raising the defense budget.

Our next question is whether this "hawk's advantage" depends on voter's perceptions of leadership strength. To test this hypothesis, we can employ Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto's method for analyzing the degree to which the relationship between an independent variable (hawkishness) and a dependent variable (vote share) is mediated by a third factor (perceptions of leadership strength).[40] This analysis indicates that 49 percent of the "hawk's advantage" shown in Figure 3 is attributable to the fact that more hawkish candidates also generally seem like stronger leaders, with the entirety of the observed relationship between hawkishness and vote share falling inside the model's 95 percent confidence interval. By contrast, Table 1 shows that no other

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[38] The model is estimated via logit. Following conventional practice, this analysis excludes observations for respondents who did not vote, or who voted for third-party candidates.
[39] Supplementary Table 1 provides full results.
[40] Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto (2010).
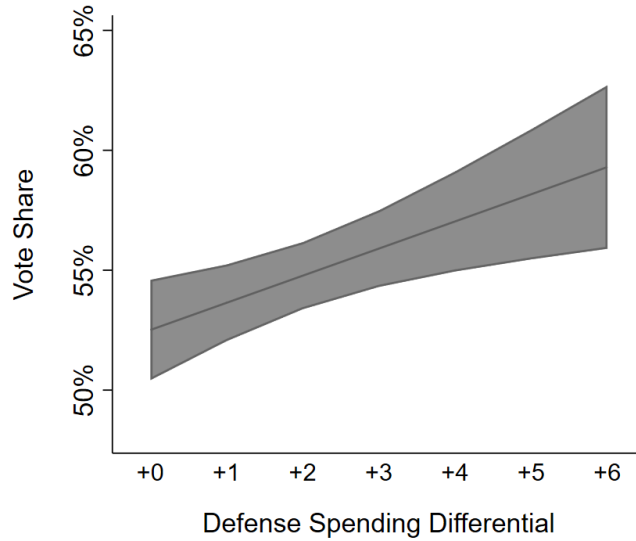
Figure 3. *Defense spending and vote share*. This figure shows that voters are more likely to support candidates who appear willing to spend more money on national defense, even when controlling for preference alignment, partisanship, ideology, gender, race, and year fixed effects. Source: ANES, 1980-2008.

Attribute	Pct. of Total Effect Mediated (95% confidence interval)
Leadership strength	0.49 (0.24, 2.42)
Cares about people like me	0.07 (0.04, 0.15)
Morality	0.04 (0.02, 0.19)
Knowledgeable	0.02 (0.01, 0.07)
Intelligent	-0.05 (-0.13, -0.03)
Compassionate	-0.18 (-0.76, -0.10)
Decency	-0.18 (-2.22, 1.95)

Table 1. *Estimating the degree to which perceptions of personal traits mediate the "hawk's advantage" in ANES data.*

personal trait plausibly explains more than 13 percent of the hawk's advantage. This analysis confirms the expectation that the hawk's advantage at the ballot box is uniquely associated with the way that hawkish policy positions help presidential candidates to seem like strong leaders.

Experimental Evidence

The previous section's analysis shows that the article's argument is consistent with three decades of Americans' political attitudes and voting behavior. Yet, ANES surveys cover a limited number of foreign policy issues, and it is always difficult to identify causal relationships using observational data. To address those gaps in the article's analysis, this section presents a preregistered experiment administered to 1,000 respondents via an online survey.[41]
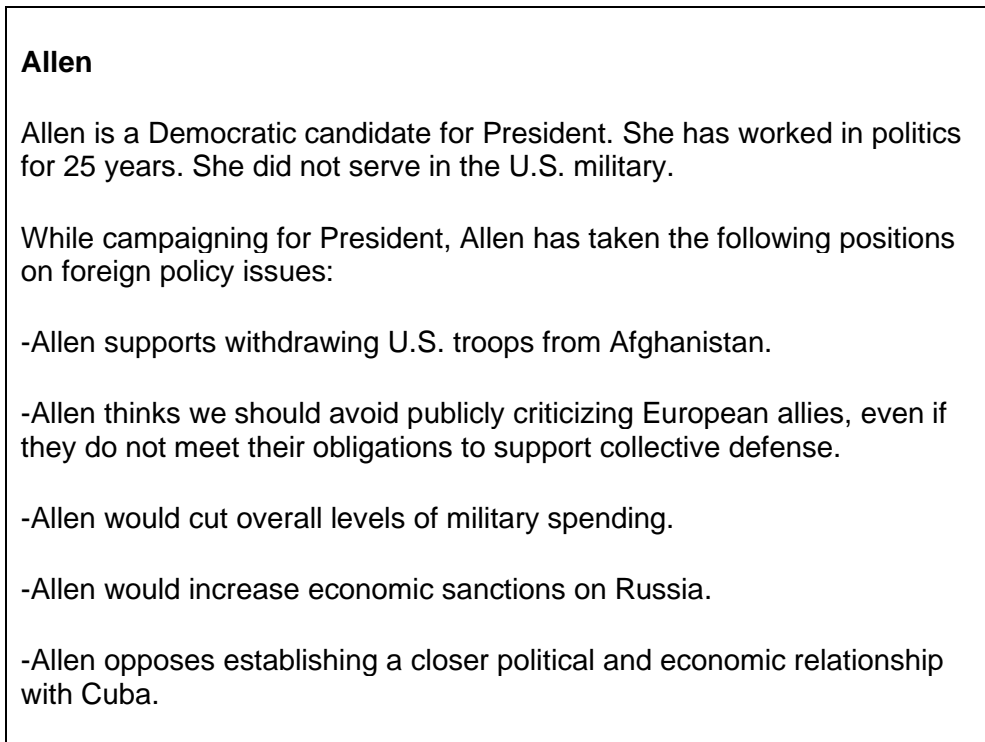
Experimental Design

The experiment asked respondents to rate hypothetical presidential candidates who were described with profiles similar to the one shown in Figure 4.[42] The first paragraph of each profile

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[41] Qualtrics distributed the survey to eligible voters between March 31 and April 7, 2021. Respondents matched national proportions with respect to gender (51% female), race (65% white, 13% Black, 14% Hispanic), age (median respondent between 45-54 years), household income (median $60,000-$69,999), and census region. Respondents were more educated than the U.S. population (50% had a college degree versus 35% of national adults). Forty-five percent of respondents identified as Democrats and 27 percent identified as Republicans, compared to national proportions of 33 and 29 percent, respectively. The results presented in this section employ survey weights based on gender, race, age, education, and partisanship, but all findings hold using unweighted data. The experiment was approved by [redacted] Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (Study #32268) and preregistered prior to data collection at Evidence in Governance and Politics (Study #20210331AA).
[42] Each respondent rated two presidential candidates, one-at-a-time. All findings hold if we examine only the first candidate each respondent rated.

Allen

Allen is a Democratic candidate for President. She has worked in politics for 25 years. She did not serve in the U.S. military.

While campaigning for President, Allen has taken the following positions on foreign policy issues:

-Allen supports withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

-Allen thinks we should avoid publicly criticizing European allies, even if they do not meet their obligations to support collective defense.

-Allen would cut overall levels of military spending.

-Allen would increase economic sanctions on Russia.

-Allen opposes establishing a closer political and economic relationship with Cuba.

Figure 4. *Sample candidate profile*.

presented randomized information on the candidate's party, gender, experience in politics (zero to 30 years), and experience in the military (zero to 30 years).[43]

Each profile then presented five foreign policy positions, selected randomly from 52 possibilities spanning 26 issues. These policy positions were drawn from recent surveys of Americans' foreign policy preferences, covering a broad range of topics that polling organizations consider to be important for understanding Americans' foreign policy attitudes.[44] Figure 4 provides

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[43] These demographic attributes follow the design from Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020.
[44] This review included all surveys in the Roper Center's iPoll database that were fielded from 2017-2020 and tagged with the topics "Defense," "Diplomacy," or "War," supplemented by examining regular surveys from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Gallup, and Pew.

some examples of how these positions spanned military, economic, and diplomatic issues. Supplementary material provides the full list of policy positions that appeared in the experiment.

All policy positions in the experiment met two criteria. First, the issues had to involve contemporary foreign policy. This criterion excluded questions such as, "Do you think the United States did the right thing going to war in Vietnam?" or "Do you support President Trump's decision to assassinate Qassem Suleimani?" Since these questions refer to prior foreign policy decisions, they are not necessarily relevant to predicting a presidential candidate's future behavior. Voters' reactions to these topics would also likely be confounded by other beliefs. For instance, mentioning President Trump's decision to assassinate Qassem Suleimani would presumably elicit reactions based on what respondents thought about President Trump, and not just what they thought about the merits of killing a hostile foreign leader.

The second criterion for including foreign policy issues in the experiment is that one could clearly distinguish between relatively "hawkish" and relatively "dovish" positions.[45] Following the definition of hawkishness provided earlier, this means that candidates' positions on foreign policy issues differed with respect to reliance on military force and/or willingness to pursue unilateral diplomacy. An example of a policy debate that does not reflect those criteria is the question of whether the United States should place a greater priority on protecting human rights. Without saying more about how the candidate plans to protect human rights – for instance, by multilateral sanctions versus military coercion – it is difficult to connect this issue to the article's concept of hawkishness or dovishness. By contrast, when candidates take positions on removing troops from Afghanistan, building a closer political relationship with Cuba, or tightening economic

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[45] Again, see Supplementary material for details.

sanctions on Russia, these stances all have obvious implications for the candidates' hawkishness as this article defined that term.

We can summarize each candidate's *Hawkishness* with an index that represents the number of relatively hawkish positions that appeared in a candidate's profile. The experiment used two questions to measure respondents' perceptions of the extent to which a candidate would be a strong leader. The first question asked respondents how likely the candidate would be to vigorously promote U.S. national interests. The second question asked respondents how likely the candidate would be to back down when challenged by America's adversaries (reverse-coded). These questions employ the exact language that this article's theory section used to define leadership strength. The experiment elicited these ratings on four-point scales, because this is the level of granularity that ANES surveys use to measure candidate traits. The average of these ratings provides a measure of each presidential candidate's perceived *Leadership Strength*.[46]

The experiment measured *Preference Alignment* by having respondents use a 7-point scale to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the candidate's policy positions.[47] Measuring preference alignment with a single scale, rather than asking voters to rate every one of a candidate's policy positions individually, allowed respondents to assign more weight to policy positions they cared about most. Assessments of Preference Alignment and Leadership Strength were only weakly correlated across profiles ($r=0.15$). This pattern is consistent with the idea that voters' assessments of leaders' personal attributes are not a straightforward reflection of the extent to which voters agree with leaders' policy positions on the merits.

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[46] This procedure follows Gooch, Gerber, and Huber's (2021) method of eliciting candidate images by averaging together multiple, related questions. Questions about leadership strength and preference alignment were randomly ordered.

[47] This is the level of granularity that ANES surveys use to measure preference alignment.

Testing causality

Our first empirical question is whether candidates who took more hawkish foreign policy positions were also perceived to be stronger leaders. Since the experiment randomized candidates' Hawkishness, we can examine this relationship using a univariate, ordinary least squares regression.[48] This model shows that adding one additional hawkish policy to a candidate's profile raised perceptions of candidates' Leadership Strength by 0.08 points, on average (*p*<0.001). On average, candidates who took five hawkish policy positions received Leadership Strength ratings that were 0.41 points higher than candidates who took five dovish policy positions. That amounts to more than a half a standard deviation in Leadership Strength ratings (0.67).[49]

Figure 5a shows how the relationship between perceived hawkishness and leadership strength follows a consistent, linear trend. The smoothness of this trend suggests that respondents generally found the combination of policies in these profiles to be plausible. If we instead saw that respondents primarily reacted to profiles that were uniformly hawkish or uniformly dovish, then that would suggest they essentially ignored profiles that included a mix of hawkish and dovish policies.[50] Instead, we see that respondents drew relatively fine-grained distinctions between

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[48] Standard errors clustered by respondent.

[49] The experiment's data show that candidates' leadership ratings were statistically unrelated to gender, government experience, and military experience. Copartisan candidates received leadership ratings that were 0.11 points higher, on average than non-copartisans (*p*<0.01). Respondents' inattention to candidates' prior experience is surprising given prior literature showing that voters value this attribute (e.g., Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020). This null result may reflect the fact that this experiment contained a relatively large number of policy positions, which meant that voters had less need to rely on prior experience as a heuristic for predicting leaders' behavior. This study's dependent variables – perceived leadership strength and preference alignment – also differ from other studies' focus on vote choice.

[50] On the problem of implausible combinations in conjoint survey designs, see de la Cuesta, Egami, and Imai 2022.
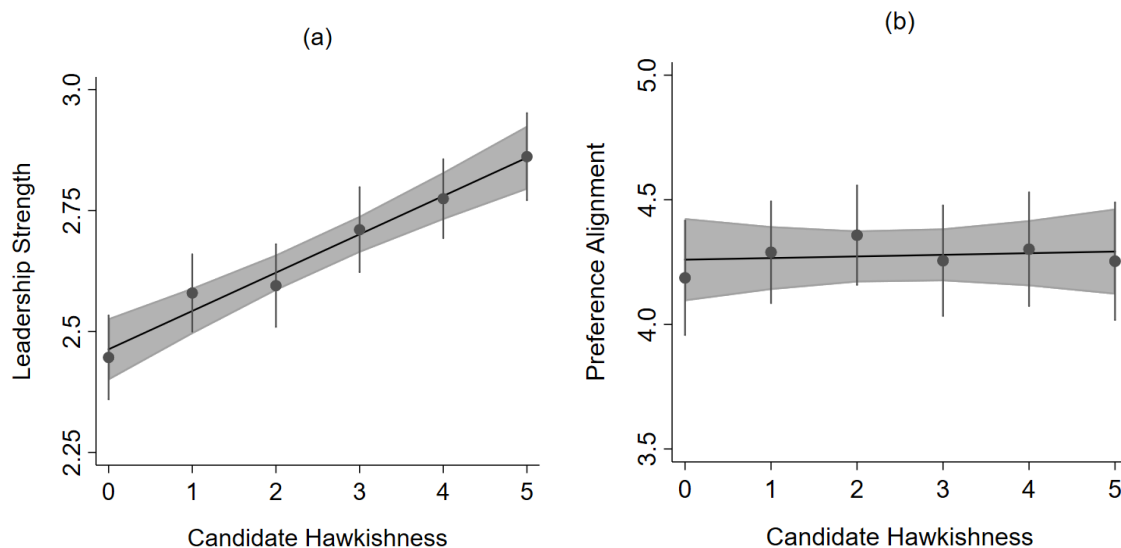
Figure 5. *Experimental results*. Both models are univariate ordinary least squares regressions with standard errors clustered by respondent. The lines report regression results. The dots present point estimates (with 95 percent intervals) from models that fit Leadership Strength and Preference Alignment scores to indicator variables capturing each level of Hawkishness.

candidates' relative hawkishness, and that those distinctions shaped the candidates' personal images in a manner that is consistent with the article's argument.

Taken by themselves, the results in Figure 5a could indicate that voters preferred hawkish foreign policies, and simply assigned higher leadership strength ratings to candidates who offered appealing policy platforms. Yet, Figure 5b shows that voters did not generally approve of hawkish foreign policies on their merits. In a univariate ordinary least squares regression, the relationship between Hawkishness and Preference Alignment is almost perfectly flat ($b=0.01$, $p=0.81$). The fact that variations in candidate hawkishness influenced one of the experiment's dependent variables but not the other supports the article's argument about how voters use foreign policy debates to draw inferences about leaders' personal traits in a manner that is distinct from perceptions of preference alignment.
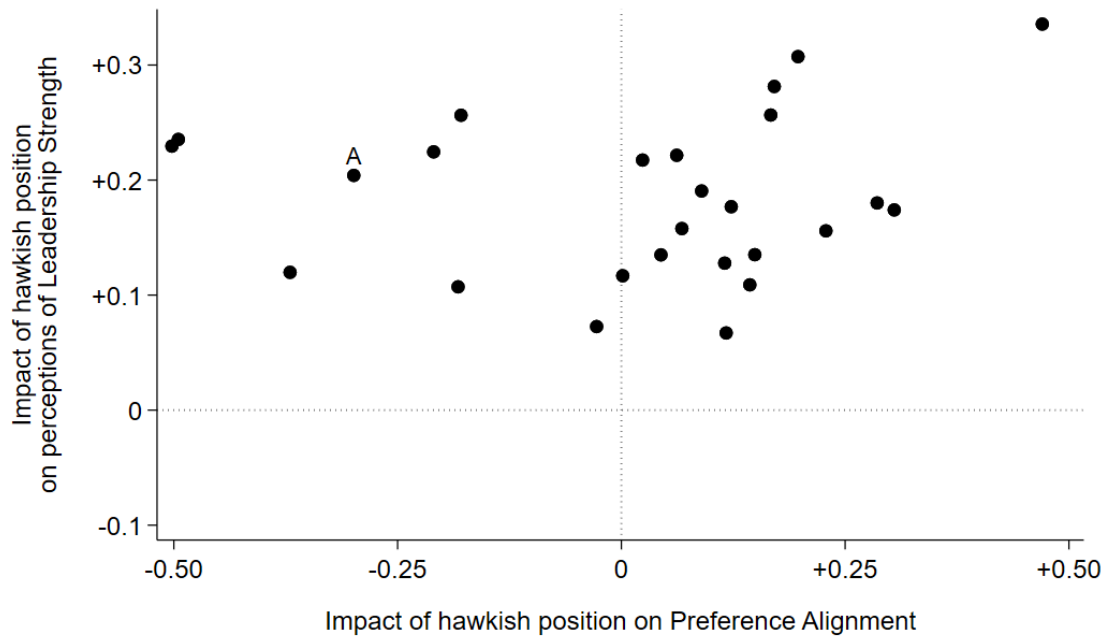
Testing generalizability

The article's analysis of ANES data spanned a narrow range of foreign policy issues. That narrow scope raised questions about how well the article's argument generalizes across foreign policy debates writ large. In order to address those questions, the survey experiment covered 26 foreign policy issues. This breadth of coverage makes it possible to test whether the experiment's overall findings are driven by idiosyncratic policy positions that just so happen to influence respondents in a manner that is consistent with the article's theoretical framework.

To test the generalizability of the article's argument, we can analyze each of the experiment's 26 foreign policy issues individually. For example, one issue that appeared in the experiment concerned withdrawing or maintaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan. A total of 376 candidates took a position on that issue. The data show that candidates who would keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan received Preference Alignment scores that were 0.30 points *lower*, on average, than candidates who favored withdrawal ($p=0.15$).[51] But candidates who wanted to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan also received Leadership Strength scores that were 0.20 points *higher*, on average, than their counterparts ($p<0.05$). These patterns are consistent with the article's logic of issue-image tradeoffs: taking a hawkish foreign policy position boosted perceptions of leadership strength, even though respondents did not actually support the idea on its merits.

Figure 6 shows how similar patterns hold across all 26 foreign policy issues that appeared in the experiment. The horizontal axis captures the degree to which taking hawkish positions affected average scores for Preference Alignment. The vertical axis reflects the degree to which taking the hawkish position on a policy issue changed candidates' average Leadership Strength ratings.

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[51] All findings estimated using univariate ordinary least squares regressions with standard errors clustered by respondent.

Figure 6. *Generalizability across issues*. Each data point reflects treatment effects associated with taking a hawkish position on one of the 26 foreign policy issues that appeared in the experiment. The graph shows that every hawkish position boosted perceptions of candidates' leadership strength, regardless of the extent to which voters supported that policy on its merits. The "A" designation reflects candidates who took a more hawkish position on keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Figure 6 shows that voters associated every one of the hawkish foreign policy positions in the experiment with leadership strength, regardless of what they thought about those positions on their merits. This pattern confirms that the value hawkish foreign policies serve for crafting leaders' personal images does not simply reflect voters' policy preferences,[52] and demonstrates that the association voters draw between hawkishness and leadership strength generalizes across a broad range of foreign policy issues.

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[52] A univariate ordinary least squares regression that compares the size of these treatment effects (*N*=26) finds that the *p*-value for this relationship is 0.65.

This section's findings hold if we limit the analysis to presidential candidates who are Democrats, Republicans, Independents, or who share the respondent's political party (as would be the case in a presidential primary). The section's findings also hold if we limit the analysis to respondents who are men, women, white, Hispanic, Democrat, Republican, Independent, college-educated, or non-college educated, as well as respondents who score at either high or low levels on a battery of questions measuring knowledge of foreign policy.[53] The fact that the article's findings hold across such a diverse range of demographic groups adds credibility to the claim that issue-image tradeoffs are embedded in the politics of foreign policy, and that this dynamic is not driven by an idiosyncratic subset of voters who hold unusual attitudes toward international affairs.

Archival Evidence from John F. Kennedy's 1960 Presidential Campaign

So far, this article has developed a theory of how leaders can use foreign policy issues to craft appealing personal images and shown how that dynamic can give leaders incentives to take foreign policy positions that voters do not support on their merits. The previous two sections documented those incentives with observational and experimental survey data. But the article has not shown that leaders actually perceive and react to issue-image tradeoffs in a manner consistent with the article's theory. To do that, it is necessary to show that leaders deliberately use foreign policy

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[53] The only survey demographic for whom this section's findings do not hold are respondents who identified as Black or African-American. These respondents did not consistently associate hawkish foreign policies with Leadership Strength ($p=0.59$). This likely results from the fact that Black respondents comprised just 13 percent of the sample. An alternative hypothesis is that Black Americans are more skeptical of hawkish foreign policies, and thus less prone to view hawkish leaders as possessing favorable personal attributes. However, candidate hawkishness was statistically unrelated to Black respondents' assessments of Preference Alignment ($p=0.15$). And, even if the paper's argument did not pertain to Black Americans, this would not undermine the conclusion that the logic of issue-image tradeoffs generalizes widely across the politics of foreign policy.

positions as a tool to craft appealing personal images. This section provides such an analysis by examining archival records from John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign.

Background

In his 1961 inaugural address, John F. Kennedy promised to "pay any price, bear any burden… to assure the survival and success of liberty." More than a lofty piece of Cold War rhetoric, this statement reflected a pledge that Kennedy had repeatedly made during his campaign to increase defense spending. This position was not popular on its merits: according to Gallup, just 22 percent of voters thought that the country spent too little on national defense in 1960.[54] Nevertheless, a proposed defense buildup became the central point of contrast that Kennedy drew on foreign policy issues with his opponent, Richard Nixon.[55]

This section uses the Kennedy campaign's archival records to demonstrate two points.[56] First, it shows that Kennedy and his advisers thought the relationship between foreign policy and presidential voting primarily revolved around bolstering Kennedy's personal image rather than appealing to voters' policy preferences. Second, it describes how Kennedy used a hawkish position on military spending to craft the impression that he was a strong leader. This section thus demonstrates how leaders recognize and exploit the kinds of political incentives that the article's previous sections documented using observational and experimental survey data.

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[54] Roper Center, iPoll question USGALLUP.60-625.Q002.
[55] Ellis 2017, 136.
[56] Unless otherwise noted, all documents cited below are drawn from archives at the John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), and all speeches cited below are drawn from the official record of Kennedy's campaign statements (U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce 1961).

The way that image-making considerations dominated Kennedy's strategy is particularly notable given how the contest was so close – Kennedy ultimately won the popular vote by less than 0.2 percentage points – and because foreign policy was unusually salient at the time.[57] These are precisely the conditions under which one might ordinarily expect leaders to avoid taking unpopular foreign policy positions.[58] The fact that Kennedy chose to orient his foreign policy platform around an unpopular defense buildup – which his aides explicitly portrayed as an instrument for personal image-making – thus illustrates how issue-image tradeoffs can shape the politics of foreign policy in a manner that departs from conventional theories of democratic responsiveness.

Prioritizing personal images over policy issues

Heading into the 1960 election, Kennedy's staff believed that their campaign's main weakness lay with foreign policy. Kennedy was knowledgeable about world politics and he had served with distinction in the Navy during World War II, but he had little high-level experience dealing with international affairs. By contrast, Richard Nixon had risen to national prominence by leading anti-Communist investigations in the U.S. Senate, he had confronted Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the nationally televised "kitchen debate," and he had spent eight years as Vice President under Dwight Eisenhower, who remained the country's most trusted voice on global issues.

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[57] Sixty-one percent of voters listed foreign policy issues as the country's most important issue in 1960, a proportion that has not been exceeded in any subsequent presidential election year. Heffington, Park, and Williams 2019.

[58] See Aldrich, Gelpi, Feaver, Reifler, and Sharp 2006 on how political scientists generally believe that theories of issue voting have more explanatory power when foreign policy issues are more salient to the public.

Kennedy's top speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, thus concluded at the start of the campaign that "World affairs will occupy the center of men's minds. Our primary task is to convince the voters of the candidate's and party's ability to make progress in these areas."[59] John Kenneth Galbraith, a Harvard economist who played a key role in shaping Kennedy's campaign strategy, similarly warned that "Nixon's claim to vast experience in a period of trouble and peril is going to be one of our most difficult and perhaps our most difficult issue."[60] Ithiel de Sola Pool, an MIT professor of political science who advised Kennedy on public opinion research, argued that "the foreign affairs issue is the number one question on the minds of voters" and that "this issue is Kennedy's area of greatest weakness."[61]

Kennedy's advisers explicitly rejected the idea of addressing this weakness by appealing to voters' policy preferences, and instead formed their strategy around the objective of bolstering the perception that Kennedy would be a competent commander-in-chief. Public opinion analyst George Belknap summarized the campaign's views of this matter by writing that "A large percent of people express a concern over 'keeping the peace,' but specific foreign affairs issues [are] not of great importance to them." Instead, Belknap wrote, most voters had a tendency to "personalize" foreign policy debates in a way that turned those debates into a referendum on the strength of a presidential candidate's prospective leadership. And, unfortunately for Kennedy, Nixon had a long-standing reputation for being tough on Communism. Belknap thus warned that "Nixon may

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[59] Theodore Sorensen, "Memorandum: Campaign Strategy 1960," JFKL, Sorensen Papers, Box 22.
[60] John K. Galbraith to Kennedy, 29 July 1960, JFKL, John K. Galbraith Papers, Box 529. See also Galbraith, "The Issue of Experience in the 1960 Campaign" (idem, Box 529) and Galbraith, "Memorandum: Campaign Strategy 1960" (idem, Box 530).
[61] Ithiel de Sola Pool, "Simulmatics Report No. 4: Kennedy, Nixon, and Foreign Affairs," 25 August 1960, JFKL, DNC Papers, Box 212, p. 2.

be able to make the claim that 'toughness-softness' is the crucial difference between himself and his Democratic opponent in the public mind."[62]

These ideas recurred throughout the Kennedy campaign's internal debates about the politics of foreign policy. Public opinion analyst Alexander Klein thus boiled down the key question on voters' minds as: "Whom would you want at the White House talking on the phone with Khrushchev?"[63] Speechwriter Richard Goodwin argued that Nixon's strongest lines of attack revolved around raising questions about "whether Kennedy can 'stand up to' or 'sit down with' Khrushchev."[64] Ithiel de Sola Pool encouraged Kennedy to ignore voters' policy preferences and to focus solely on the politics of image-making when designing his foreign policy agenda. "Particular postures on issues," he wrote, "will not directly affect many votes. The primary objective for Kennedy in dealing with specific foreign affairs issues is to enhance his image by demonstrating his knowledge and competence."[65] These statements are all consistent with the idea that the relationship between foreign policy and presidential voting revolves around cultivating favorable personal images, and not just cultivating voters' policy preferences.

Using a hawkish policy position to craft an image of leadership strength

Kennedy determined that the best way to solve his image problem on foreign policy was to use a hawkish position on defense spending to convey leadership strength. Kennedy's staff settled on that strategy as early as May 1959, when Arthur Schlesinger argued that a defense buildup should

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[62] George Belknap, "Public Opinion and the 1960 Elections," 20 June 1960, JFKL, Myer Feldman Papers, Box 4, p. IV-1 to IV-5.
[63] Alexander Klein, "Memo. For Sen. Kennedy," 27 August 1960, JFKL, Robert Kennedy Pre-Administration Political Files, Box 33, p. 2.
[64] Richard Goodwin, speech materials (undated), JFKL, Presidential Campaign Files, Box 996.
[65] Pool, "Kennedy, Nixon, and Foreign Affairs," pp. 3, 28.

be the key foreign policy initiative for Kennedy's broader promise to "get America moving again."[66] Schlesinger and his colleagues designed that slogan to portray their candidate as providing fresh, vigorous leadership.[67] In Schlesinger's view, Kennedy's support for expanding the country's defense program displayed "new initiative in foreign policy" to accompany the campaign's promise to produce a "moral and political revival at home."[68] Walt Rostow, who was Kennedy's top national security adviser, similarly noted that Kennedy's stance on defense spending allowed him to seem as though he would "seize the initiative" in international politics and "move things toward positive American goals," in a manner that closely resembles this article's conception of leadership strength.[69]

In addition to amplifying his own image of leadership strength, Kennedy used his position on defense spending to portray Nixon as being complacent in the face of a rising Soviet menace. Kennedy's top pollster, Louis Harris, summarized this advantage in describing why Kennedy's stance on defense spending was so useful. "Most significant," Harris wrote, "is that it represents Kennedy on the offensive almost totally and Nixon on the defensive. The best that Nixon can register through on is that all is well, that we haven't really lost anything in the world."[70] Kennedy exploited this advantage by claiming that the Eisenhower administration had "move[d] from crisis to crisis" because "we have not been paying the price" that was necessary to ensure U.S. national security, while accusing Eisenhower and Nixon of placing "a balanced budget ahead of a balance

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[66] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Shape of National Politics to Come," 12 May 1959, JFKL, Sorensen Papers, Box 22, pp. 11, 16, 21-22.

[67] The "Shape of National Politics to Come" memo played an important role in establishing Schlesinger's relationship to Kennedy because it helped Kennedy to ground and articulate his liberal ideology. See Aldous 2017, 321.

[68] Schlesinger, "Shape of National Politics to Come," pp. 21-22.

[69] Rostow to Cox, (October 10, 1960) JFKL Cox Files, Box 202.

[70] Harris, "Analysis of the Third Kennedy-Nixon Debate," 19 October 1960, JFKL, Richard M. Scammon Papers, Box 8.

of power."[71] By contrast, Kennedy promised to be "a vigorous proponent of the national interest…

a man capable of acting as the commander-in-chief of the Great Alliance, not merely a bookkeeper

who feels that his work is done when the numbers on the balance sheet come even."[72]

Why, then, did Nixon not simply match Kennedy's hawkishness on defense spending? Several

Republican leaders – most notably New York governor Nelson Rockefeller – urged him to do just

that. However, accepting Rockefeller's position would have required Nixon to repudiate

Eisenhower's long-standing efforts to restrain the growth of military expenditures. Rostow

described these cross-pressures as being one of the main reasons why Kennedy should hammer

Nixon on military expenditures.[73] As Rostow explained it, this line of attack "may well yield a

clear break in the Republican position for the following reason: Nixon is already torn between

presenting himself as the man who will simply carry forward the Eisenhower formulae or

presenting himself as a young man of independence and vigor."[74] In other words, Kennedy's stance

forced Nixon to choose between preserving his image of being an energetic Cold Warrior and

riding Eisenhower's coattails, both of which were key elements of Nixon's claim to foreign policy

competence.

Kennedy and his aides understood that the political value of their stance on defense spending

was uniquely well-suited to diminishing Nixon's reputation for handling foreign policy issues.

When Arthur Schlesinger originally recommended that Kennedy orient his foreign policy platform

around increasing the defense budget, he warned that this strategy would not work if the

Republicans selected Rockefeller as their presidential nominee. Since Rockefeller was not tied to

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[71] Kennedy 1960, 4; San Diego, Calif. (9/11/60).
[72] Washington, D.C. (1/14/60).
[73] Rostow to Sorensen and Cox, 26 July 1960, JFKL, DNC Files, Box 204.
[74] Rostow, "Democratic Strategy for 1960," p. 6.

Eisenhower's administration, Schlesinger argued, he could match Kennedy's position on military expenditures, critique Eisenhower for being complacent, and offer his own promises to reinvigorate U.S. foreign policy.[75] Ted Sorensen later recounted how Kennedy agreed with that argument: "Had the Republicans, he felt, nominated Nelson Rockefeller, who would not need to defend the administration and who often sounded like Kennedy on defense and economic growth, the New York Governor might have been able to outflank the Kennedy position and win the race."[76]

These statements capture two points that are relevant to this article's argument. First, Kennedy appears to have believed that the success of his presidential campaign depended on taking a stance on defense spending that voters overwhelmingly opposed. Second, Kennedy's statement suggests that, if Nixon had not received the Republican nomination in 1960, then *both* presidential candidates would have been likely to support major increases in defense spending to seem like strong leaders. The fact that the public did not actually want to raise the defense budget in 1960 was irrelevant to the politics of the issue as Kennedy and his advisers saw them. The crucial thing was that promising to raise the defense budget helped to craft an appealing personal image, and Kennedy expected any other candidate to see it the same way.

Discussion

This article developed a theory of how leaders can use foreign policy positions to shape perceptions of their personal attributes. It explained how this dynamic can force leaders to make tradeoffs between crafting their personal images and maximizing voters' policy preferences. In particular,

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[75] Schlesinger, "Shape of National Politics to Come," p. 22.
[76] Sorensen 1965, 183-184.

this article argued that leaders have incentives to take hawkish foreign policy positions in order to cultivate perceptions of leadership strength. The article documented this "hawk's advantage" across three decades of data on presidential voting; it used a survey experiment to confirm the causal foundations and generalizability of the article's argument; and it drew on archival records to show how leaders deliberately use foreign policy positions as tools in the politics of image-making, even if this involves taking foreign policy positions that are more hawkish than what voters support on the merits.

The article's argument offers a new lens for understanding why foreign policy departs from voters' collective preferences. Scholars frequently attribute these "disconnects" to the influence of elites or special interests.[77] But this article has shown that unpopular foreign policies are not necessarily disconnected from mass public opinion. Instead, these policies may reflect leaders' attempts to craft favorable personal images. The article's argument may also help to explain why America's political leaders have traditionally adhered to a relatively narrow consensus that favors expansive, militarized foreign policies.[78] If dissenting from these policies exposes leaders to charges of being weak on national security, then those leaders could have incentives to conform to a hawkish consensus, even in cases where that consensus does not reflect voters' policy preferences.

The article's theory and evidence raise new questions about how scholars should evaluate voters' foreign policy attitudes. It certainly makes sense for voters to prioritize electing presidents who are strong leaders, or who have other personal attributes that make for a competent commander-in-chief. Yet, it is questionable whether voters possess a valid basis for judging

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[77] Jacobs and Page 2005; Page and Bouton 2006; Mearsheimer 2018.
[78] Porter 2018; Walt 2018.

leaders' personal attributes.[79] Such difficulties are likely to be especially severe when attempting to assess the competence of political leaders who specialize at image-crafting, who employ large teams of public relations specialists to enhance their personal appeal, and who can be quite cynical in seeking to manipulate public perceptions of their personal traits.[80] In order to evaluate these perceptions, it is necessary to gather information on how accurately voters perceive leaders' personal attributes, and on the extent to which those attributes actually predict presidential performance. That endeavor would be quite different from analyzing the coherence of voters' policy preferences or voters' factual knowledge of foreign policy issues, which are the traditional measures by which international relations scholars measure political sophistication.[81]

While this article focused on leaders' attempts to craft impressions of leadership strength, that is presumably just one of many personal attributes that voters associate with a competent commander-in-chief. Different voters may hold different conceptions of what kinds of performance traits an ideal commander-in-chief should have.[82] Some foreign policy positions might help leaders bolster perceptions of one personal trait while undermining their reputation in other areas. These are just some of the ways in which treating foreign policy positions as tools in the politics of image-making raises a host of theoretical and empirical questions about the dynamics of political strategy.

Further research could examine how the relationship between policy positions and personal images varies according to leaders' party, gender, race, or incumbency. For example, there is evidence that women face unique hurdles in developing and maintaining reputations for

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[79] Barber 1992.
[80] Jamieson 1992, 1996.
[81] Luskin 1987; Holsti 2004; Lupia 2006.
[82] Brutger and Kertzer 2018; Brutger 2021.

toughness.[83] This could give women who run for elected office more incentive to take hawkish foreign policy positions to shape their personal images. However, there is also evidence that assertive women are more commonly seen as dislikable when compared to assertive men.[84] That could be one reason why, even though voters tended to rate Hillary Clinton quite highly on traits related to leadership strength, Clinton also tended to score poorly on traits related to warmth and compassion.[85] If crafting impressions of leadership strength undermines other facets of a woman's political image, then women might have *less* incentive to behave in a manner consistent with the article's theory. Resolving this ambiguity is important for predicting how increasing diversity in America's national leadership could reshape the dynamics of presidential politics.

Finally, it would be valuable to study the extent to which the article's argument generalizes beyond its empirical focus on U.S. foreign policy. For instance, the article's hypothesized link between hawkishness and perceived leadership strength is consistent with evidence that citizens assume militarily stronger combatants in civil wars will also be more likely to provide competent post-conflict governance.[86] British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's campaign for Brexit may have appealed to voters on the basis of demonstrating Johnson's willingness to "put Britain first" in ways that burnished his political image, despite the fact that British voters were equally divided on Brexit's merits at the time of Johnson's 2019 election. The article's theory can also plausibly explain why leaders support domestic policies that do not seem designed to capture support from the median voter, as with conservatives who propose abortion restrictions to convey their commitment to traditional values or progressives who support socialized health care to

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[83] Schwartz and Blair 2020.
[84] Phelan and Rudman 2010.
[85] Carroll 2009.
[86] Zukerman Daly 2019.

demonstrate concern for the well-being of the working class. These are just some examples of how political scientists' traditional focus on analyzing the origins and consequences of voters' policy preferences captures only part of how leaders use their political positions to cultivate public support.

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