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Boots Off the Ground: The Impact of Individual-Level Factors on American Public Approval of Lethal Drone Strikes

Katherine Fink
katfink@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract
Although the American public is divided on many policies, the majority of Americans (commonly close to 60%) continue to support a relatively controversial form of military technology: lethal drone strikes used to target terrorists in foreign countries. This study seeks to determine what factors affect American public approval of lethal drone strikes and which factor yields the greatest impact on support. Four main arguments for and against drone strikes are explored—military effectiveness, military ineffectiveness, violations of international law, and increased ease of military intervention. Employing a survey experiment on Amazon Mechanical Turk, I find that international law concerns produce the most substantial negative impact on approval; that is, respondents exposed to the International Law treatment are the most likely to disapprove of US usage of lethal drone strikes. The other experimental conditions resulted in slight increases in approval; however, the degree of these changes is relatively inconsequential. This study also shows that identification as a Republican, Hispanic/Latino origin, prior service in the armed forces, and having a relationship to someone who has served in the military are the most significant predictors of approval. Conversely, females are significantly more likely to disapprove of lethal drone strikes. These findings answer questions about not only what underpins public attitudes regarding lethal drone strikes, but also how these determinants could apply to public approval of increasingly autonomous weaponry systems.

Keywords
political science, drones, public approval, American, Social Sciences, Michael Horowitz, Horowitz, Michael

Disciplines
Political Science

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Boots Off the Ground: The Impact of Individual-Level Factors on American Public Approval of Lethal Drone Strikes

By
Katherine Fink

Advisor: Michael Horowitz

This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of
Bachelor of Arts Degree
Department of Political Science with Distinction
College of Arts and Sciences
University of Pennsylvania

Spring 2019
Abstract

Although the American public is divided on many policies, the majority of Americans (commonly close to 60%) continue to support a relatively controversial form of military technology: lethal drone strikes used to target terrorists in foreign countries. This study seeks to determine what factors affect American public approval of lethal drone strikes and which factor yields the greatest impact on support. Four main arguments for and against drone strikes are explored—military effectiveness, military ineffectiveness, violations of international law, and increased ease of military intervention. Employing a survey experiment on Amazon Mechanical Turk, I find that international law concerns produce the most substantial negative impact on approval; that is, respondents exposed to the International Law treatment are the most likely to disapprove of US usage of lethal drone strikes. The other experimental conditions resulted in slight increases in approval; however, the degree of these changes is relatively inconsequential. This study also shows that identification as a Republican, Hispanic/Latino origin, prior service in the armed forces, and having a relationship to someone who has served in the military are the most significant predictors of approval. Conversely, females are significantly more likely to disapprove of lethal drone strikes. These findings answer questions about not only what underpins public attitudes regarding lethal drone strikes, but also how these determinants could apply to public approval of increasingly autonomous weaponry systems.
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“The program is not perfect. No military program is. But here is the bottom line: It works. I think it is fair to say that the targeted killing program has been the most precise and effective application of firepower in the history of armed conflict. It disrupted terrorist plots and reduced the original Qaeda organization along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to a shell of its former self.”


"[W]hen counterterrorism efforts neglect the rule of law at the national and international levels and violate international law, including the Charter of the United Nations, and fundamental freedoms, they not only betray the values they seek to uphold, but they can also fuel violent extremism...”

– Maleeha Lodhi, July 2016 speech to 110th plenary meeting of United Nations’ General Assembly Seventieth Session

Introduction

In the current age of increasingly polarized partisan politics, issues that enjoy a majority of American public support across party lines have become rare. In spite of this, in a national survey conducted by Pew Research Center in May 2015, 58% of the American public approved of US usage of lethal drone strikes to target terrorists in foreign countries while only 35% disapproved, which indicates a relatively high level of support for a single issue (Pew Research Center, 2015). Moreover, although Republicans are often found to be more likely to approve of missile strikes from drones than Democrats, the issue also possesses a high level of bipartisan support. This situation thus appears quite odd—in a political system in which fissures in American public support are the norm, why are so many Americans supportive of lethal drone strikes? An interesting wrinkle also emerges in the results of a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, which reveals that about 48% of Americans say that the use of military force against countries that may threaten the US, but have not yet attacked, can rarely or never be justified (Pew Research
Center, 2017). This appears to clash with the use of lethal drone strikes, which often involves preemptive attacks on countries with which the US is not involved in any direct military confrontation such as Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia. In an attempt to resolve this discrepancy, the question thus becomes, what are the individual-level factors that affect American public support for lethal drone strikes? Moreover, which of those factors shape Americans’ views about lethal drone strikes most strongly?

The use of drones in warfare offers a particularly appealing allure because by substituting capital for labor, drones reduce the number of lives risked in combat, which minimizes the risk of soldier casualty to zero. When formulating their opinions regarding the use of military force, Americans often conduct an internal cost-benefit calculus. By eliminating the possibility of American soldier casualties from such a calculation, the benefits of a military operation can be achieved in a much safer and lower-cost way. This means that for many Americans, the US can pursue its national objectives without putting any American soldiers in harm’s way. Thus, casualty aversion appears to form the foundation for American approval of lethal drones strikes. However, lethal drone strikes possess negative consequences as well, some of which the American public may be unaware. Thus, upon being presented with potential drawbacks of drones, one will be able to assess which of these negative consequences undermines support for lethal drone strikes most strongly. Since such unmanned airstrikes could revolutionize the nature of warfare, it is critical to gain a deeper understanding of which factors exert the greatest impact on American public approval. Moreover, a closer analysis of individual-level factors can help to assess the durability of American public support for lethal drone strikes. That is, is public approval of drones so high because the American public lacks all the requisite information about potential drawbacks to make a fully informed
judgment, or are drones a compelling enough form of military technology that Americans are willing to approve of their usage, regardless of the consequences?

Accordingly, a main objective of this project is to identify which factors most strongly influence American public support for lethal drone strikes used to target terrorists in foreign countries. That is, when respondents are presented with different consequences of lethal drone strikes, which factor will be most effective in altering levels of public support? The findings of this study also attempt to fill a gap in the existing literature surrounding lethal drone strikes. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on drones’ technological capabilities, current trends in drone proliferation, and debates over whether drones should be considered a transformative technology worthy of being incorporated as the central feature of US military strategy. Although many scholars have investigated the negative drawbacks of lethal drone strikes, few pieces of existing scholarship explore the connection between different consequences of drone warfare and public approval. Also, in order to determine whether drones are a unique military weaponry development that could fundamentally change the relationship between public opinion and the use of military force, this project seeks to compare American public support for unmanned airstrikes by drones and manned airstrikes.

This study employs a survey experiment designed to assess which factor, either positive or negative, yields the greatest impact on Americans’ approval of lethal drone strikes. Respondents are recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, and they are randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions—Militarily Effective, Militarily Ineffective, International Law, and Increased Ease of Military Intervention. All of the conditions present respondents with the same hypothetical scenario in which the United States discovers a group of extremists operating in a small village in Pakistan;
this group is suspected to possess plans to attack the US. Accordingly, the US is planning to launch lethal drone strikes to eliminate these extremists. In addition to this general prompt, each experimental condition contains a treatment wherein respondents receive a statement highlighting either a benefit or drawback of lethal drone strikes. In the Militarily Effective condition, the Joint Chiefs of Staff claims that the strikes have been critical in eliminating extremists and making Americans safer. The Militarily Ineffective condition utilizes the authority of nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Counterterrorism to claim that lethal drone strikes trigger anti-US sentiment, which allows extremist groups to recruit new members. Consequently, the Militarily Ineffective condition states that drone strikes may actually make Americans less safe. In the International Law condition, the same organizations from the Militarily Ineffective condition indicate that lethal drone strikes violate international law in two ways. First, drone strikes violate the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state in which the attack takes place. Second, these organizations argue that drone strikes fail to take necessary measures to prevent civilian casualties. The Increased Ease of Military Intervention condition highlights the argument that the ability to conduct strikes without risk to American lives lowers the threshold for authorizing lethal military operations, which could increase the frequency of American military intervention worldwide. Also, since drone strikes can be executed with the push of a button, they could make it too easy to kill human beings.

The results of this study show that the International Law condition yields the greatest negative impact on American public approval of lethal drone strikes. Although none of the experimental conditions produce statistically significant results,
international law concerns most strongly influence respondents to become less approving of lethal drone strikes. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating the resonance of international law concerns with the American public (Kreps and Wallace, 2016). Interestingly, both the Militarily Ineffective and Increased Ease of Military Intervention conditions increase the likelihood of approval, albeit very slightly. An increase in approval under the Militarily Ineffective condition could be due to patriotic distrust of intergovernmental organizations, which could be shaped by the current Trump administration. Also, the results show that partisan identification as a Republican, Hispanic/Latino origin, prior service in the armed forces, and having a relationship with someone who has served in the armed forces are the most significant predictors of increased approval of lethal drone strikes. Conversely, females are significantly less likely to approve of lethal drone strikes, which mirrors findings from previous studies investigating the relationship between gender and support for military force more generally. Neither age nor level of education is a significant indicator of approval.

The results of this project will not only be relevant for understanding which factors impact public support for drone strikes most strongly, but also for investigating future trends in American public opinion regarding the use of military force, especially when implemented via increasingly autonomous weaponry systems. First, this work inspires future research into the continued relevance of just war theory on public attitudes regarding the use of military force. That is, as means of warfare create more distance between the combatant and the battlefield, future studies could investigate whether fighting and killing with “honor” are still major concerns for the American public. With the advent of such technology, do Americans still care about fighting in a “just” way?
Moreover, these ethical concerns can be further expanded with the study of public opinion regarding autonomous weapons systems such as killer robots. Autonomous weapons systems not only widen the gap between the combatant and the battlefield, but they also possess the potential to remove the human factor in decision-making altogether. Although completely autonomous systems do not yet exist, future research can examine whether the public’s desire for the elimination of American casualties will result in a willingness to support a form of technology in which humans no longer conduct or oversee the mission. Such an inquiry could produce findings relevant to both academic literature and the future direction of public policy. Furthermore, researchers can study whether these findings apply to other countries or if the results of this cost-benefit calculus represent a uniquely American phenomenon.

Finally, future research can investigate how the Trump administration has affected the impact of international law concerns on public attitudes regarding warfare. President Trump’s “America First” rhetoric, which often criticizes the value of multilateral agreements, appears to signal his disdain for the supposed “interference” of international organizations in American affairs. Thus, his critiques of the United Nations, which functions as the primary body for the creation and dissemination of international law norms, could damage American public opinion regarding the UN’s legitimacy and authority. Future work can thus investigate whether the adoption of such beliefs will reduce the impact of international law concerns on public attitudes regarding use of military force. Will other factors become more influential in the public’s approval of military technology such as lethal drone strikes?

More broadly, as military technology begins to rely less on direct military intervention achieved through “boots on the ground,” one must consider what the
implications of this shift will be for democratic decision-making. Since lethal drone strikes do not require a formal declaration of war, which is debated in Congress, will American military decision-making become even less transparent? If so, could this render the influence of American public opinion on the direction of foreign policy increasingly irrelevant? Overall, this study provides a starting point for future research not only on public attitudes regarding drones but also the potentially broader consequences of the rise of new forms of military technology.

**Background and Related Scholarship**

**Part I. Existing Literature on Drones**

What is a drone?

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly referred to as drones, are aerial vehicles that can be flown without the need for a human operator. Drones can be categorized according to their intended usage and level of technological capability. First, UAVs can be either armed or unarmed. Whereas unarmed drones can only be used for surveillance missions, armed drones can carry out lethal missions as well as conduct surveillance (Fuhrmann and Horowitz, 2017). Second, there are two basic types of drones—advanced and basic. Advanced drones possess significant loitering capabilities in which they can stay in the air for at least 20 hours, operate at an altitude of at least 16,000 feet, and withstand a maximum takeoff weight of at least 1,320 pounds. UAVs with a higher technological capacity can be characterized by more advanced mission equipment such as gyro-stabilized high-power telescopes, laser designators, synthetic aperture radars, and precision munitions. Since requirements for target recognition and
successful attacks demand high levels of capital for development, typically only wealthy and technologically advanced countries such as the US and Israel can manufacture such advanced systems. Examples of advanced drones include the MQ-1 Predator, MQ-9 Reaper, and RQ-7 Shadow, which are commonly deployed by the US. Basic drones, on the other hand, offer a shorter range and typically contain less sophisticated technology. Some lower technology systems such as the Iranian Ababil use basic radio remote control to allow unmanned flight and video recording, yet such aircraft are highly susceptible to being shot down, jamming, or interception. Additionally, shorter-range systems, often only capable of flight for up to 300 kilometers, are commonly used for loitering and operating autonomously in enemy territory, which is described as “swarming use” (Davis et al., 2014). This study will focus on advanced, armed drones used to carry out precision strikes.

Although armed drones are a more recent phenomenon, unarmed drones have been utilized for surveillance since the 1960s, emerging out of a growing desire to overcome the vulnerability of piloted aircraft. For example, the US deployed Firebee UAVs to conduct surveillance during the Vietnam War and later relied upon unarmed Predators for surveillance in the 1990s Balkans war (Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, 2016). Armed drone strikes began to emerge as a means for conducting precision strikes against high-value targets in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks (Fuhrmann and Horowitz, 2017). Whereas the US commonly utilizes the Reaper and Predator, both of which are armed and capable of flying long distances at medium altitudes to conduct a strike, the majority of other countries’ militaries possess unarmed drones, which are used for surveillance purposes. Almost ninety countries possess military drones of some kind,
yet the majority does not possess armed and advanced drones (Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, 2016).

**Drone proliferation**

Despite their capital-intensive nature, drone programs have begun to spread internationally as more countries strive to develop their own armed drone fleets. As to be expected from the world’s foremost military power, US UAV procurement and R&D accounted for more than 50% of the total amount spent worldwide on military UAV procurement and R&D in 2014 (Davis et al., 2014). In 2013, the US was estimated to possess about 7,500 drones in operation, including a wide range of both smaller, surveillance-based drones as well as larger, lethal drones used for targeted killings. By comparison, China, which is considered the world’s second largest producer of drones, trailed behind the US by at least several thousand drones (Boyle, 2014). However, a 2014 study by the RAND Corporation projects US spending on drones to remain relatively constant over time and to not increase significantly from 2018 to 2022; this projection remains subject to change depending on policies set by presidential administrations. Also, despite its current preeminence in amount of drones, technological range, and strike capacity, the US is no longer the world’s leading exporter of drones. Instead, Israel has become the dominant exporter of drones for both domestic and military uses (Boyle, 2014). Thus, although the US has been the leading actor in the field of drones so far, the proliferation of drone technology throughout the international system portends America’s waning comparative advantage.

Looking beyond the US, the development and use of drones has exploded in recent years. For example, between 2004 and 2011, the number of states with active
UAV programs doubled, from 40 states to over 80 (Boyle, 2014). By the end of 2014, twenty-seven countries possessed advanced drones, seven countries possessed armed drones, and almost twenty-four other countries were reported to have plans for developing lethal UAV capability (Fuhrmann and Horowitz, 2017). Also, there has been a gradual increase in spending on UAV procurement and R&D by the rest of the world. A RAND study in 2014 found that China, India, Russia, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates were reportedly developing Category I systems, which encompass medium-altitude, long-endurance UAVs designed for surveillance, target acquisition, reconnaissance, and attack. Moreover, the same study determined that Israel, Pakistan, and South Africa sought to develop Category II systems, which possess a similar range to Category I yet carry a lighter payload (Davis et al., 2014).

Beyond just building up their own drone arsenals to be used for security, countries such as China and Russia have dedicated themselves to catching up to the US in research and development for drone technology. In particular, China wishes to become the world’s predominant exporter in the drone market. Over the past few years, China has sought to establish itself as an alternative manufacturer of armed drones, producing UAVs such as the CH-3 and Wing Loong. Currently, Chinese drones lack the same navigational capabilities, weaponry payload, and range as US drones, but the Chinese UAV program continues to actively improve (Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, 2016). The Chinese development of a widespread, sophisticated drone program raises potential concerns for the fate of the international system. US exports of drones are currently constrained by American involvement in the Missile Technology Control Regime, which limits the sale and export of heavy payload weapons, and the Wassenaar Agreement, which requires participants to disclose information about their deliveries. As a result, despite its
leading role in technological capacity and R&D, the US does not actually sell that many
drones on the international market, and when it does, most of these weapons are sold to
NATO allies (Boyle, 2014). In comparison, China possesses no such restrictions on drone
sales, enabling it to sell weaponry to countries such as North Korea, Iran, and Syria,
which are countries to which the US has refused to export (Boyle, 2014). Thus, by
potentially selling to erratic countries and non-state actors, China’s role as a rising
exporter in drone sales could lead to an increase in tension and violent conflicts
worldwide. An example of this can already be observed in 2015 when China supplied
Iraq, Nigeria, and Pakistan with armed drones, which were employed against domestic
insurgents (Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, 2016). Unfortunately, the sale of lethal
drones to a broader range of countries represents only one of many concerns about drone
proliferation.

In his 2014 article, “The Race for Drones,” Michael Boyle presents three primary
consequences of drone proliferation within the international system. As a premise for his
argument, Boyle suggests that states developing drones will likely not use them in the
same manner as the US, that is, as a means of targeted killing of suspected terrorists.
Rather, these countries will most likely use drones in order to gain an advantage in their
regional rivalries (Boyle, 2014). Building upon this supposition, Boyle first posits that
drone proliferation will result in a redefinition of the rules and norms governing
surveillance and reconnaissance. Although this could be beneficial in the short-term by
improving the flow of information between countries and reducing the risk of
miscalculation, Boyle argues that in the long-term, such an improved flow of information
could be lead to the development of more aggressive and riskier countermeasures to stop
drone surveillance. That is, in order to ensure the secrecy of their activities, states
being targeted by drones could utilize more aggressive means of protection such as shooting down drones in their airspace. Moreover, despite an initial increase in transparency, drone proliferation could ultimately lead to greater opaqueness as states implement radar systems to block surveillance, which would lead to greater information asymmetry and uncertainty. Second, since they are a low-cost and low-risk form of technology, Boyle claims that governments will use drones to test the strategic commitment of their rivals, which could undermine the deterrence inherent in many tense regional relationships. An example of this phenomenon can be observed in 2013 when China deployed drones over the contested Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea as a means of testing Japan’s commitment to controlling the territory. When Japan threatened to shoot the drones down, China stated that such an action would denote an act of war, which ratcheted up the preexisting level of tension in their relationship. Since drones do not possess the potential for loss of a human pilot, many governments might regard the shoot down of a drone as a negligible loss, yet such a response could lead to the rapid escalation of conflict. Finally, Boyle also outlines the concern that drone proliferation could lead to an increased risk of conflict spirals stemming from accidents or hijacked drones. As drone usage becomes more diffuse throughout society, it becomes more difficult to control where drones fly and prevent them from colliding with civilian aircraft, which could result in casualties. In response to these consequences, Boyle suggests restricting the sale of sophisticated drones, banning certain countries involved in regional rivalries from purchasing drones, applying user-end agreements that regulate how drones are used once purchased, and pursuing US-led efforts to establish norms for the use and sale of drones abroad (Boyle, 2014).
Other scholars advance concerns about drone proliferation due to the dual-use nature of drone technology, which could raise significant regulatory challenges. Drones are considered a form of dual-use technology because they can be utilized in both military and civilian settings. Unlike Boyle and other scholars who assume that drone-related problems could be managed if there were broader state-level agreement surrounding the enactment of regulations, Marcus Schulzke argues for the acceptance of drones as an immovable feature of war, the negative effects of which should be contained (Schulzke, 2018). He claims that drones are often difficult to regulate because they are dual-use in a more expansive sense than other technologies, the drone market is open to a more diverse array of actors, which makes the restriction of usage more difficult, and greater familiarity with drones in civilian life increases citizens’ support for armed drones (Schulzke, 2018). This final item raises an interesting point—in today’s society wherein average citizens interact with drones much more frequently, this familiarity can translate to higher levels of trust and confidence in the technology. Consequently, higher levels of trust can lead to greater support for arming drones (Schulzke, 2018). In light of these concerns, Schulzke advocates for an alternative solution to the consequences of drone proliferation wherein restrictions should seek to moderate the pace of development rather than attempting to stop it entirely or impose an overly elaborate system of regulatory mechanisms.

_Drones: transformative technology or nothing too special?_

Amidst weighing the benefits of drone warfare with concerns about potential drawbacks, a central question has risen to prominence in the existing literature on drones—should drones be considered a transformative technology or are drones just
another option in a country’s array of military capabilities? For some analysts, drones represent a “revolutionary military technology” capable of fundamentally altering the use of violence by both state and non-state actors. The driving force behind such an argument is that drones lower the costs of using military force. According to Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, “drones change decision-making because they do not inherently risk the life and limb of the user” (2016). Thus, for many scholars, drones represent a breakthrough in military weaponry by providing military leaders and policymakers with a low-cost, low-risk technological option.

Furthermore, drones can be considered transformative technology due to their enhanced capability for coercion. Although scholars such as Schelling would claim that credible threats rely upon the conveyance of costly signals, others argue that drones offer threat credibility through cheap fighting rather than costly signaling (Zegart, 2018). Traditional political theory claims that signals are thought to be more credible and costly if they invoke blood (loss of human life), treasure (high financial costs), or reputation (high international or domestic costs). However, drones deviate from this usage by offering a low-cost, low-risk alternative. Drones offer three unexpected coercion advantages—first, sustainability in long duration conflicts; second, certainty of precision punishment, which can change the psychology of the adversary; and third, shifts in the relative costs of war (Zegart, 2018). Zegart emphasizes the importance of the first and third factors. She argues that threats from a drone state are more likely to be carried out due to the possibility of sustaining a drone presence. That is, the ever-present nature of drones can exert a sense of pressure on the target state. Also, in a situation wherein the coercing state possesses armed drones but the targeted state does not, drones radically shift the balance of the costs of war. Drones enable the coercer to engage in military
action at a low cost, yet the targeted state will suffer disproportionately high costs. As such, drones can be used as a tool to compel submission. Zegart argues that in some coercion situations, drones are perceived to be as coercive as ground troops, yet they do not incur any of the danger to human lives (Zegart, 2018). Thus, as a result of their low-cost and low-risk nature, drones can represent a transformative military technology.

A drawback of this transformative technology is that by not placing American lives in danger, drones do not draw the same public criticism as more traditional troop deployments. Consequently, government decision-makers face a lower barrier to the use of force, which some believe will lead to a heightened willingness to order military strikes. Those who hold this perspective point to the frequency of US drone strikes in countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, arguing that instances of military force would be more infrequent if not for drones. Accordingly, some analysts worry that drones will destabilize the global security system by freeing decision-makers from the limitations imposed by human casualties, thus lowering the threshold for use of lethal military force (Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, 2016).

Conversely, many scholars believe that drones merely represent the newest development in military technology, yet they do not offer a unique advantage over preexisting forms of military force. According to some, drones should not be considered a transformative military technology because although drones provide militaries with another delivery system for targeted killings, similar effects can be achieved through other forms of military force such as ground troops or manned aircraft (Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, 2016). Furthermore, others base their argument upon the presumption that a revolutionary weapon, if present on one side of a conflict, should decisively tip the odds of winning towards the party possessing the technology (Davis et al., 2014). Given
that such findings have not yet been observed in reality, many are skeptical of the so-called transformative nature of drones.

Public knowledge about drones

Unlike certain issues in American foreign policy, drones often do not dominate the nation’s headlines, and as a result, the American public tends to be ill-informed about drones. A 2016 study by the Center for a New American Security highlighted this fact by demonstrating how the American public possesses a low level of knowledge about drones. First, based upon data collected from respondents, the US public struggles with distinguishing between manned and unmanned aircraft. 54% of respondents were unable to identify the MQ-1 Predator correctly while 66% were unable to identify the MQ-9 Reaper as an armed, unmanned aircraft. However, this inability to identify military apparatus extended beyond just different types of drones, which can be seen in the finding that 21% of respondents incorrectly identified the manned F-16 fighter as an unmanned aircraft. Second, Americans demonstrate a lack of knowledge regarding the weaponry apparatus with which drones are equipped. 32% of respondents believed that UAVs used guns, which they do not, and 31% believed that unmanned aircraft were capable of carrying 1000-pound bombs, yet in reality, they can only carry 500-pound bombs at a maximum. Broadly, the American people tend to believe that UAVs are more accurate and more likely to survive battlefield encounters than manned aircraft, both of which are untrue. Moreover, they believe that drones are more likely to launch airstrikes and are less constrained by rules of engagement. Despite their lack of substantive knowledge about drone capabilities, the public favored unmanned aircraft over manned airstrikes in all but two experimental scenarios. The two exceptions included a scenario
involving high risk to civilians, which prompted respondents to prefer manned over unmanned strikes, and a scenario with low risk to air crew, in which respondents did not display a clear preference between manned and unmanned platforms (Schneider and Macdonald, 2016). Based on these findings, one may conclude that on the whole, the American public is not highly knowledgeable about drones.

Despite possessing a low level of knowledge about drones, the American public’s support still acts as the foundation for policy. In light of the high levels of approval for lethal drone strikes among average American citizens, some scholars question whether the assumptions embedded in polls can affect attitudes (Kinder and Sanders, 1990). In her 2014 study, Kreps argues that with regard to drones, public opinion polls often present a viewpoint consistent with the government’s position, which glosses over controversial features that might prompt higher levels of opposition and lower levels of support (Kreps, 2014). She suggests that this effect does not stem from wording effects, but rather, surveys often appropriate a viewpoint that increases the likelihood that a larger proportion of the public will approve. Her study revealed that by incorporating questionable assumptions and omitting the most controversial aspects of drones, polls strongly influence support for the US drone program (Kreps, 2014). First, polls often frame drone strikes as targeting high-level terrorists, which neglects questions about whether the targets are actually terrorists and the amount of civilian collateral damage. Second, polls fail to include discussion of legal authorization for such strikes. Operating under the assumption that drone strikes are legally authorized and target the correct subjects, the public becomes more inclined to approve of US drone policy, which can be observed in consistently high levels of support across three years of polling data (Kreps, 2014). Consequently, the approval from polls becomes incorporated into the political
narrative surrounding drones, which further normalizes their usage. In light of these findings, public opinion polls can compound the public’s lack of knowledge about drones to produce a high level of approval for the US drone program.

Part II. Public Attitudes about the Use of Military Force

Despite the fact that Americans lack a substantial level of political knowledge pertaining to a wide variety of issues and often do not appear to possess a consistent set of political attitudes, some scholars still argue that Americans hold organized, reliable, and important attitudes about the use of military force. The institutional structure of the US empowers the American electorate to punish their representatives at the ballot box for a range of issues, particularly military activities overseas. Hurwitz and Peffley argue that the American people impose limits on policymakers in the field of foreign policy because military issues “are inherently more threatening to the public, are more often the object of media coverage, and are generally more salient in the people’s mind,” and as a result, “the public is more likely to think seriously about issues like military involvement” (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987). Consequently, policymakers consider public support as a vital factor when deciding to implement military force internationally. As this phenomenon has continued throughout the years and across a variety of different situations, a recurrent question has puzzled political scientists—what factors shape public attitudes about the use of military force? The following section will address the main hypotheses seeking to answer this question.
Casualties

Much of the scholarly literature centers on the role of casualties in public attitudes towards the use of military force. Conventional thinking suggests that Americans are unsupportive of military operations that produce casualties. This phenomenon, typically referred to as “casualty phobia,” occurs when those in the public reflexively lower their level of support in response to the presence of casualties. The shock and horror of casualties trigger an automatic, visceral reaction within the American public, which leads them to call for the immediate removal of troops. In order to illustrate this point, some scholars point to examples such as the decline in public support for American military involvement in the Vietnam War or American withdrawal from Somalia after the “Black Hawk Down” Army Ranger raid in October 1993 (Feaver and Gelpi, 2009). Although casualties do possess the potential to influence the level of public support, many scholars have argued that the American public is much more tolerant of casualties than previously thought (Feaver and Gelpi, 2009). However, under the broad umbrella of this conclusion, scholars differ in their explanations.

In the 1970s, John Mueller sought to understand the manner in which casualties undermined the American public’s support for the Vietnam War, which led him to the conclusion that public support declined according to a logarithmic model. That is, the public was sensitive to small costs of human life in the beginning, but was only affected by much larger losses later in the war (Mueller, 1971). Although his findings argued that public support declined reflexively, Mueller’s work disputed the casualty phobia thesis in part by showing that public support for a military operation didn’t dramatically drop as the amount of casualties increased. However, over time, the scholarly consensus began to dispute this model of inexorable decline of support and instead argued that the public
conducts a rational cost-benefit calculus. This perspective espouses that the American people assess all of the relevant factors at play and determine whether the benefits outweigh the costs of the military mission in question. Operating under this assumption, scholars diverge yet again when attempting to determine which factor is most important in determining one’s level of public support.

Bruce Jentleson argues that the casualty tolerance of a “pretty prudent public” is largely influenced by the “principal policy objective” of the military operation (Jentleson, 1992; Jentleson and Britton, 1998). Principal policy objectives (PPOs) include foreign policy restraint, which involves the use of military force to apply pressure on an aggressive adversary that threatens the US and its interests, humanitarian intervention, and internal political change within a country. Jentleson found that the American public possesses a hierarchical structure of tolerance with regard to each of these PPOs. The public regards foreign policy restraint as very important and deserving of a more serious price whereas support for humanitarian intervention and internal political change hinge upon a low threshold for cost. That is, Americans are the most tolerant of casualties when the military operation is designed to achieve foreign policy restraint (Jentleson, 1992).

In a similar vein, Héctor Perla argues that public support for military engagements depends on the public’s decision-making reference point, which is determined by what the public perceives the policy’s objective to be (Perla, 2011). He suggests a Framing Theory of Policy Objectives in which public support for military engagements will increase when the public perceives the mission’s principal objective as seeking to confront external threat but will decrease if the objective is viewed as seeking gains (Perla, 2011). Consequently, framing imposed by media coverage plays a critical role in influencing public support. For example, when the media frames the objective of
military force as seeking to protect the public from potential threats, the American public is more likely to back riskier, costlier, and more hawkish policies.

Similarly to Jentleson, Feaver and Gelpi assume that the American public is relatively rational and prudent when conducting a cost-benefit calculus about a military operation. However, Feaver and Gelpi argue that two main factors interact to influence casualty tolerance: expectation of the probability of success of the military operation and belief in the initial legitimacy of the decision to engage in military action (Feaver and Gelpi, 2009). That is, “the more likely you think the operation will be a success and the more correct you think the original decision was, the more you will be willing to pay a higher cost in the form of mounting combat fatalities” (Feaver and Gelpi, 2009: 20). Although both elements are required to yield a significant effect on casualty tolerance, expectation of success is argued to be the more important of the two factors.

*Elite cues*

Typically forced to form their attitudes without access to all of the relevant data about the use of military force, US citizens often turn to cues from political and military elite. In his 1992 book, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, John Zaller hypothesized that the public tends to hold the same views as their political leaders when the elite are united about what should be done. However, as fissures start to appear among the elite, the public soon divides as well, aligning with the ideological or partisan position of their preferred elite (Zaller, 1992). When Eric Larson tested this hypothesis with regard to the American public’s attitudes about US military involvement in a wide range of conflicts, his findings confirmed Zaller’s thesis. His 1996 study showed that support for US military operations and the public’s willingness to tolerate casualties
were based upon a rational cost-benefit calculation, which was heavily influenced by consensus among political leaders (Larson, 1996). That is, when political leaders agreed that the objectives of a military operation warranted the costs and benefits associated with it, the public became more likely to support the operation. However, this effect did depend on whether the public found those opinion leaders to be credible and trustworthy. Conversely, when leaders split along partisan or ideological lines, the public tended to divide in a similar manner. Larson’s findings also foreshadowed some of the findings of Feaver and Gelpi wherein the higher the probability that the intervention would be successful, the higher the probability was that the intervention would be supported (Larson, 1996). Adam J. Berinsky’s 2007 study yielded similar findings, showing that if elite discourse remained unified in support of military intervention, citizens were more supportive of government policy, regardless of their political predispositions (Berinsky, 2007). His results also demonstrated that in this context, perceptions of war casualties did not influence public attitudes toward war.

More recently, a 2018 study conducted by Golby, Feaver, and Dropp illustrated that under certain conditions, senior military officers often have the ability to nudge public attitudes about the use of military force. When told that senior military leaders opposed particular military interventions, the level of public opposition to that intervention increased. Interestingly, despite providing a small boost in public support, endorsements of support for a military operation impacted public attitudes less strongly than statements of disapproval. Moreover, partisanship appeared to play a critical role in shaping the conditions under which a respondent would respond to an elite military cue (Golby, Feaver, and Dropp, 2018). For example, Republicans were especially likely to adhere to senior military officers on the decision surrounding the use of force,
particularly force relating to terrorism and national defense. Although Democrats and Independents did listen to senior military officers when they opposed an intervention, the impact was less substantial than for Republicans.

Multilateralism

Some scholars have investigated the role of multilateralism in influencing public support for a military operation. Steven Kull found that multilateral involvement in a military mission boosted public support due to the belief that the US would not have to shoulder the costs of intervention independently (Kull, Destler, and Ramsay, 1997; Kull and Destler, 1999; Kull and Ramsay, 2000; Kull et al., 2002, 2003). That is, the public was more resistant to the unilateral use of force, yet when intervention was framed as part of a United Nations operation, that operation gained a majority of support (Kull, 1995). The increased comfort of not having to “go it alone” likely set the public’s minds at ease about the military involvement. The effect resulting from the cooperation of other international actors could stem from a lightened economic burden as well as external confirmation of the operation’s legitimacy.

Gender

Gender emerges as a key factor when investigating what underpins American attitudes toward the use of military force abroad. In the US, the rate of support for military actions is consistently higher for men than for women; however, the extent of the gender gap can depend to a large degree on situational context. Brooks and Valentino argued that the size of the gender gap depends on the stakes of the war, in particular whether the objective of the war was to promote a humanitarian agenda or protect
economic and strategic interests (Brooks and Valentino, 2011). They hypothesized that empathy and motherhood should moderate the relationship between gender, stakes of war, and support for going to war. Motherhood is believed to lower the likelihood of female support for war because women are saddened to see someone else’s children become the victims of military intervention. This heightened sense of empathy supposedly leads to an increased distaste for war. The results confirmed this hypothesis, showing that women were more likely to support a war when its purpose was to protect lives rather than serve economic or strategic objectives.

Yuval Feinstein believed the gender gap to be episodic rather than consistent, yet she attributed this gap to an interaction between gender, partisanship, and ideological identification. However, her results demonstrated that the gender gap in support for military engagement was not only due to partisanship; that is, a difference between men and women does not occur simply because women are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party and Democrats are less likely to support military action (Feinstein, 2017). By analyzing US involvement in the Gulf War, NATO’s campaign in Kosovo, and the Iraq War, she found that the gender gap fluctuated throughout the course of the military conflict. The divergence in support between men and women varied depending on specific military engagements or war events, which activated ideological dispositions differently. Using the Iraq War as an example, Feinstein’s results showed that differential ideological dispositions, primed by the war, led Democrats to oppose US involvement in the conflict. More specifically, an ideological disposition in question during the war on terror was the notion that the US should adopt a foreign policy that has international legitimacy. Throughout the course of the Iraq War, Democrats were more likely to possess concerns about the international standing of the US, which led to lowered
support for military action. Overall, Feinstein demonstrated that gender gaps could vary throughout the course of military involvement as wartime events activated certain ideological dispositions.

Others have attempted to compare gender differences by asking the American public about their support for military action in hypothetical situations as well as concrete, real-life scenarios. Richard C. Eichenberg’s study found that on average, women were less supportive of the use of military force for any purpose. Interestingly, when responding to abstract, hypothetical military operations, the gender gap was practically nonexistent, yet upon being presented with specific questions about the use of force in Iraq and potential civilian and military casualties, a substantial difference between men and women began to emerge (Eichenberg, 2003). The results demonstrated that 70% of American men and almost 60% of women supported any military action against Iraq when the action in question was abstract. When casualties were mentioned in surveys, men continued to respond with majority support for the use of force in four of seven proposed episodes whereas women only showed majority support for two of seven episodes. Much like other studies have shown, women are relatively more sensitive to humanitarian concerns and casualties.

Furthermore, while studying the gender gap relating to public attitudes about use of military force, some scholars have observed an interesting parallel with the gap in support between black and white Americans. Miroslav and Donna J. Nincic hypothesized that women and African Americans displayed lower levels of support for the use of military force abroad due to a higher degree of political alienation. As defined by Kevin Chen, political alienation refers to “estrangement or separation of an individual from particular political institutions, values, structures or regimes to which he belongs or is
related” (Chen, 1992: 42). Nincic operationalized this phenomenon by focusing on individuals’ self-reported levels of political efficacy, which can be measured by the amount of participation in the political process and perception of impact on political outcomes (Nincic and Nincic, 2002). Responses from two questions by the University of Michigan’s National Election Studies showed that black Americans experience a consistently higher level of political alienation than whites whereas the difference in men and women’s levels of political alienation is much smaller. Nincic’s model demonstrated that attitudes of African Americans and women appear to be rooted in traits particular to each group, although they did share some similar traits. That is, political alienation did partially unite women and African Americans with regard to their approval for military force abroad, yet it did not represent the entire basis for their preferences. Thus, social identity does play a role in shaping individuals’ attitudes toward US military involvement overseas, yet some aspects of this identity are rooted in structural features of US society while others can be understood as a consequence of the group’s previous historical experiences, such as the relation of the civil rights movement to the Vietnam War.

Partisanship

Conventional wisdom states that Republicans and Democrats are hawks and doves, respectively, with regard to their stance on foreign policy, particularly the use of military force. Republican hawks are often more willing to support military interventions, oppose foreign aid and the UN, and support higher levels of military spending. Conversely, dovish Democrats are typically less willing to support military interventions, support foreign aid and the UN more strongly, and oppose high levels of military spending. Although this phenomenon continues to hold true in the present day,
support for the use of military force has not always been aligned along the ideological spectrum in the way it is now. In fact, up until 1965, Democrats held hawkish positions while Republicans could be characterized as doves. Faced with the notion of such a radical transition in political ideology, various scholars have attempted to identify what factors prompted this change.

In the 1940s and 1950s, hawks were mostly Democrats who supported the use of military power to defeat fascism and promote collective security; conversely, Republicans tended to adopt dovish positions out of a desire for isolationism. Democrats tended to support military force because such hawkish policies could produce major benefits for their key constituencies, such as the Northeastern industries, which received a boost in business during the early postwar era (Clark, Fordham and Nordstrom, 2016). As for Republicans, they opposed military force due to the fiscal and regulatory consequences associated with high levels of military spending during the 1950s (Fordham, 2007; Hogan, 1998; Lo, 1982). High levels of military spending could impose price controls on raw materials, which hurt key Republican constituencies. However, beginning in the mid-1960s and continuing into the 1980s, the appeal of using military force declined for Democrats while it rose for Republicans. For Democrats, the benefits for Northeastern industries started to tail off, and during the 1980s, the Reagan administration’s military buildup imposed budgetary constraints on social programs supported by the Democratic Party (Clark, Fordham, and Nordstrom, 2016; Kamlet, Mowery, and Su, 1988). The Republicans’ support for the use of military force began to rise as the growth of the American economy by the mid-1960s ensured that military spending would not require the imposition of price controls on strategic raw materials (Clark, Fordham and Nordstrom, 2016). Furthermore, the Reagan administration’s
military buildup produced significant tax cuts, which pleased the Republicans. As a result, beginning in the mid-1960s, Republicans and Democrats began to shift in their foreign policy positions, ultimately adopting the previous stance of their opposing party.

After this initial shift in position, Republican and Democratic stances on foreign policy began to drift farther apart beginning in the 1970s, which led to a steady increase in foreign policy polarization that has continued into the present. In fact, by the 2000s, foreign policy polarization gained the same severity as polarization regarding general political ideology. Jeong and Quirk (2019) describe three main factors that contributed to this rise in polarization of foreign policy. First, historical events such as the end of the Cold War and the occurrence of the Iraq War played a role in creating and enabling the spread of such polarization. The end of the Cold War removed a potential unifying interest between Republicans and Democrats—the desire to block Soviet expansionism (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007; Prins and Marshall, 2001; Scott and Carter, 2002). Moreover, George W. Bush’s controversial invasion of Iraq, prompting the Iraq War, further divided the parties. Polarization surrounding issues such as these spilled over onto smaller, less significant issues while the overall level of polarization continued to ratchet up. Second, although partisan electoral rivalry cannot explain the entire phenomenon, it can contribute to an explanation of the development of foreign policy polarization. Jeong and Quirk found that the narrower the margin of seats possessed by the majority party in the Senate, the more polarized foreign policy positions became. Third, and most importantly, domestic political polarization appeared to spill into foreign policy, causing foreign policy polarization to initially match, and subsequently surpass, the domestic ideological divide (Jeong and Quirk, 2019). That is, senators tend to drift toward foreign policy positions that are consistent with their positions on domestic issues. Thus,
domestic conservatives are likely to become foreign policy hawks whereas domestic liberals are likely to hold dovish views. In light of these factors contributing to its existence, foreign policy polarization represents a key characteristic of American politics, particularly with regard to partisans’ support for the use of military force abroad.

**Part III. Primary Arguments For and Against Drones**

*Military effectiveness*

Strong supporters of drone warfare cite military effectiveness as a principal strength. Proponents claim that drones offer a no risk, low cost, and successful means for fighting terrorism. First, drones are argued to be a superior form of military force by eliminating risk to American soldiers. Second, armed UAVs are considered to be lower cost than other air systems due to less extensive training as well as removal of the need for search-and-rescue packages (Davis et al., 2014). Third, Byman argues that drones have proven to be successful in achieving US policy objectives, which is exemplified by the success of drones in damaging Al Qaeda and associated anti-American terrorist groups. According to his research, US drones have killed an estimated 3,300 Al Qaeda, Taliban, and other jihadist operatives in Pakistan and Yemen, including fifty senior leaders, since 2008 (Byman, 2013). Drones have not only eliminated key terrorist targets, he argues, but they have also disrupted terrorist operations by diminishing groups’ ability to communicate and train new recruits out of a need to avoid large group meetings lest they pose an easier target for drones. Such sentiments have been confirmed by the former director of the CIA, Leon Panetta, who said, “[t]hose operations are seriously disrupting al-Qaeda… It’s pretty clear from all the intelligence we are getting that they are having a
very difficult time putting together any kind of command control, that they are scrambling. And that we really do have them on the run” (Warrick and Finn, 2010).

Other researchers echo such findings, particularly with regard to the success of lethal drone strikes in Yemen and Pakistan. W. Andrew Terrill, a Middle East specialist at the Strategic Studies Institute, found that although drone strikes are highly unpopular with the local population in Yemen, such attacks have appeared to be successful at assisting the Yemeni government in their attempts to weaken Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (Terrill, 2013). He points to the death of Anwar al Awlaki in September 2011 as a notable success. Despite being a citizen of the United States, Terrill argues that the elimination of al Awlaki was still beneficial since, according to President Obama, he was considered a higher priority for capture or elimination than Ayman al Zawahiri, who replaced bin Laden as the head of Al Qaeda Central (Terrill, 2013). Moreover, Terrill believes that drone strikes functioned as a vital tool in supporting Yemen’s offensive against AQAP insurgents in May and June 2012. Following a series of public demonstrations against President Saleh’s regime, AQAP insurgents had taken control of significant territory in many southern Yemeni towns and cities. When President Hadi sought to retake these areas with a dysfunctional army and air force, US drone strikes provided intelligence to combatant forces as well as eliminated key leaders and individuals among AQAP fighters who were preparing to ambush government forces. Ultimately, the Yemeni government recaptured the last AQAP-controlled areas in June 2012, a fate likely made possible due to assistance provided by drone warfare. However, in light of such success, Terrill does acknowledge that, “drones, for all their value, cannot replace a legitimate government with a competent military in ensuring the national security of a strategically important country such as Yemen” (Terrill, 2013: 23). Thus,
the use of drone strikes can help to temporarily stabilize terrorist threats in foreign countries, yet the ability to relapse into instability suggests that drone strikes cannot permanently erase threats to US security.

Furthermore, a case study by Javier Jordan sought to investigate the effectiveness of the drone campaign against Al Qaeda Central in Pakistan, and his findings suggest that drones successfully damage the terrorist organization’s functioning by attacking its three key strengths. Jordan identifies Al Qaeda Central’s hierarchical structure, qualified human resources, and material resources as critical factors that enable the group to carry out destruction. He argues that drone strikes negatively affect the interaction between these factors, which diminishes the capacity of the terrorist organization to carry out highly lethal attacks. Data from the New America Foundation shows that a total of between 340 and 357 drone attacks occurred in the tribal territories of Pakistan between June 19, 2004 and May 31, 2013. These strikes consisted of a mix of high-value targeting, which attacks known leaders of terrorist groups, and signature strikes, which target unknown individuals whose pattern of behavior suggests potential terrorist activity. By the end of May 2013, the total number of deaths caused by drone strikes was between 2,010 and 3,336. However, problematically, a study by the New America Foundation showed that between 54 and 61 percent of fatalities during 2004-2007 were civilians.

First, Jordan argues that drone strikes impede the smooth functioning of the organization by targeting terrorist leaders, which force them to focus more on their self-protection rather than running the group’s operations. This fear of discovery disrupts communication between different branches of the organization, which can be seen in the fact that Al Qaeda Central did not publicly announce the appointment of Ayman al Zawahiri as its leader following the death of Osama Bin Laden for a month and a half.
Jordan comments that this delay seems odd considering that the shift to a new commander in chief should have been a swift decision that would be quickly broadcast. A diminished ability to communicate within the terrorist network reduces the possibility of coordinating a complex attack. Moreover, reduced communications lessen the amount of possible recruitment for fear that such activities could attract an attack. As such, Jordan argues that the CIA drone campaign has forced Al Qaeda Central to switch to a more decentralized organizational structure in which leaders have little operational capacity. Second, Jordan claims that drone strikes have negatively impacted qualified human resources by killing approximately 60 leaders and middle-ranking members of Al Qaeda Central, which represents a large percentage of its elite members. Such deaths include members in roles such as chief executive of the organization, advisory council positions, military committee leadership, religious committee, financial committee, and propaganda wing. Jordan argues that based on the available information, Al Qaeda Central’s level of infrastructure is considerably less than it was before 9/11. Third, Jordan illuminates how drone strikes have impacted key material resources of Al Qaeda Central such as money, sanctuary, training camps, and weapons. According to Pakistani intelligence officials, the pressure from drone strikes diminished the flow of money to Al Qaeda officials by shutting down some transfer channels. Financial resources were also damaged due to the death of Mustafa Abu Al Yazid in May 2012, who was identified by the 9/11 Commission Report as Al Qaeda Central’s main financial manager. Moreover, drone strikes eliminated some of the Al Qaeda sanctuary in North Waziristan, which required the group to move some of its members out of the region. Finally, a constant drone presence reduced the duration of training courses, which would likely trigger a signature strike. As a result of shortened training courses, operatives did not possess as much
knowledge regarding how to successfully execute certain tasks, such as detonation of a car bomb. An example of this can be seen in Faisal Shahzad’s failed attempt to detonate a car bomb in Times Square in May 2010. Prior to this attack, he had only received a training course lasting five days as opposed to the typical one-month of explosives training characteristic of Al Qaeda in its Afghanistan and early Pakistan years.

Additionally, Jordan argues that drone strikes have reduced the lethality of Al Qaeda Central attacks in the West. Between 2001 and 2006, Al Qaeda carried out three successful terrorist operations—9/11, the Madrid train bombing, and the London bombings—which resulted in 3,220 fatalities. However, between 2007 and 2012, 13 attempted attacks did not result in a single fatality. Despite some limitations of his findings such as insufficient information and difficulty of isolating the effect of drone strikes on Al Qaeda Central’s operation from other confounding variables, Jordan still affirms that drone strikes have proved militarily effective in diminishing the threat posed by terrorist groups (Jordan, 2014).

**Military ineffectiveness**

Conversely, in light of these tactical benefits, some doubt the military effectiveness of lethal drone strikes, which leads to the belief that drones should not be embraced as a critical strategy for American counterterrorism. In her article “Why Drones Fail: When Tactics Drive Strategy,” Audrey Cronin comments that drones are not as militarily effective as they may seem. Since terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda do not operate solely under hierarchical leadership, targeting leaders does not fundamentally damage a terrorist organization (Cronin, 2013). Also, drones could potentially perpetuate the existence of terrorism by alienating local populations and cultivating a desire for
vengeance, which could lead to the creation of future terrorist recruits. Moreover, drones eliminate the possibility of arresting and interrogating targets. By killing rather than capturing terrorists, drones do not offer an opportunity to gain further intelligence about the terrorist organization, which could be a more effective strategy in broader counterterrorism efforts (Cronin, 2013).

In adherence with a similar viewpoint, Megan Smith and James Igoe Walsh conducted an empirical study to investigate the military effectiveness of lethal drone strikes. Based on the assumption that producing effective propaganda is an important objective of most terrorist groups, they selected Al Qaeda propaganda output as a proxy for Al Qaeda’s capacity to organize political action. As a result, they sought to evaluate the relationship between drone strikes and Al Qaeda propaganda output. Their results suggest that at best, drone strikes have little or no effect on Al Qaeda’s ability to create and distribute propaganda. In fact, their results show that drone strikes may be associated with higher, rather than lower, levels of propaganda output. These findings could mean that drone strikes have killed many terrorist militants associated with Al Qaeda, yet such deaths have not truly undermined the functional capacity of the organization (Smith and Walsh, 2013). Despite temporarily lowering the membership of the group, these drone strikes may be counterproductive to US security by fostering greater hatred towards America and inspiring further terrorist recruitment.

International law concerns

A key concern surrounding drone warfare stems from a fundamental tradeoff between security and international law. Opponents argue that lethal drone strikes tend to neglect two key components of just war theory: *jus ad bellum*—rules concerning the
resort to use of force—and *jus in bello*—rules governing wartime conduct. When considering *jus ad bellum*, many critics argue that since the United States is not at war with countries such as Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan, drone strikes are illegal (O’Connell, 2011). Article 51 of the UN Charter allows for self-defense, which is triggered by a threat that is “instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice of means and no moment of deliberation,” but this definition appears to clash with the rather deliberative and slow-moving nature of the target selection process for drones (Caroline Case, 1838). As such, the right to claim anticipatory self-defense as justification for drone strikes has not been widely accepted by the international community. Members of the Human Rights Council of the UN also note that the self-defense argument requires higher thresholds for necessity and proportionality, which the US has failed to demonstrate in its drone program (Alston, 2010). By contrast, Harold Hongju Koh, the legal adviser to the US Department of State under the Obama administration, has argued that a US drone strike authorized in the name of self-defense cannot be considered an unlawful assassination because “under domestic law, the use of lawful weapons systems—consistent with the applicable laws of war—for precision targeting of specific high-level belligerent leaders when acting in self-defense or during an armed conflict is not unlawful, and hence does not constitute ‘assassination’” (Alston, 2010). In light of the controversy surrounding the *Al-Awlaki* case, in which an al-Qaeda-affiliated US citizen living in Yemen was killed by a drone strike without due process of law, the Obama administration established a set of parameters regarding permissibility of drone strikes. These parameters included the following:

1. Suspects, such as Mr Al-Awlaki, can only be killed through drone attacks in the event that an incarceration of such person is illusory;

2. The person in question has to be involved in preparing ‘acts of war’ against
3. Consequently, that individual should pose an immediate and significant threat to the U.S.;

4. The State ‘hosting’ such an individual must not be able or willing to apprehend him or her (Savage, 2011).

Many scholars worry that these rules hinge upon the definition of ambiguous concepts such as “acts of war” and “immediate and significant threat.”

With regard to *jus in bello*, the Geneva Convention stipulates that parties involved in a conflict must be able to distinguish between a civilian and a combatant as well as take all possible precautions in both means and methods of attack to avoid or minimize damage to civilian life. However, since many terrorists wear normal clothes and integrate themselves within the civilian population, drone programs often struggle to differentiate between civilians and combatants. As a result, drones carry the implicit risk of inflicting civilian casualties. Moreover, the US often utilizes signature strikes to target terrorists, which sometimes fall short of the standard for distinction. A signature strike uses the patterns of behavior of a target to indicate that they intend to engage in combat against the US or local allies; as such, signature strikes usually target training camps and compounds suspected of containing enemy combatants (Boyle, 2013). Signature strikes typically rely upon the assumption that the person launching the strike is certain, within reason, that the activity witnessed is aiding the enemy (Boyle, 2013). Unfortunately, drone strikes do not always achieve this standard because the definition of “aiding an enemy” can vary drastically.

Drone strikes have also been argued to constitute a violation of the distinction principle by subjecting civilians to constant anxiety and fear through a high frequency of attacks. Coyne and Hail argue that the use of drones to combat terrorism results in a
paradox because “drones, which are intended to kill terrorists, thereby reducing terrorism, create terror among the populace living in the targeted area” (Coyne and Hail, 2018). Although the creation of an atmosphere of terror can often be effective in disrupting the operations of targeted organizations, drone-created terror does not discriminate between civilians and enemy combatants. Instead, psychological damage is inflicted upon the entire neighborhood, which subjects everyone to the negative externalities of such a culture of fear, as seen in the following passage:

“Imagine that you are living somewhere in Pakistan, Yemen, or Gaza where the United States and its allies suspect a terrorist presence. Day and night, you hear a constant buzzing in the sky. Like a lawnmower. You know that this flying robot is watching everything you do. You can always hear it. Sometimes, it fires missiles into your village. You are told the robot is targeting extremists, but its missiles have killed family, friends, and neighbors. So, your behavior changes: you stop going out, you stop congregating in public, and you likely start hating the country that controls the flying robot. And you probably start to sympathize a bit more with the people these robots, called drones, are monitoring” (Owen, 2013).

As noted in the passage above, terrorist organizations can harness this drone-created terror as a recruitment tool, which could undermine the very purpose of drone strikes in the first place. Thus, although drone strikes are effective in eliminating targets, many worry that their unintended consequences might offset the benefits.

In lights of these concerns about violation of international law and the potential consequences of drone strikes, I advance the following hypothesis:
**H1**: International law concerns will yield the greatest negative impact on public approval of lethal drone strikes used to target terrorists in foreign countries.

In their 2016 study, Kreps and Wallace found that highlighting inconsistencies between American usage of lethal drone strikes and principles of international law significantly altered public attitudes toward drone warfare (Kreps and Wallace, 2016). Their findings suggested that questions about legality influenced public attitudes more strongly than military effectiveness, and I expect similar results from this survey experiment. I expect most respondents to not have previously considered international legal concerns when formulating their opinions about drones, focusing instead on the removal of American casualties. However, when presented with such information about legal dilemmas surrounding drone warfare, I predict that respondents will display a lower level of approval.

Moreover, in addition to concerns about violation of international law, many criticize drone strikes for lacking an appropriate foundation in domestic legal authority. The primary basis for legal authorization of drone strikes is the Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) passed on September 14, 2001. The AUMF enables the president to “use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations, or persons” (Congress, 2001). The Bush and Obama administrations both relied upon an extensive interpretation of this law to pursue terrorists abroad, which includes the use of drone strikes. The Obama administration often cited the AUMF as justification for expanding the use of drone strikes in countries such as Pakistan,
Yemen, and Somalia by arguing that its “authority has no specified temporal or geographic limit” (Boyle, 2013). However, many scholars are concerned that the AUMF provides the US with a blank check to use military force anywhere in the world until terrorist organizations are completely eradicated.

**Increased ease of military intervention**

Although the elimination of American military casualties represents a key benefit of drones, many scholars worry that this capability will excessively lower the threshold for authorizing lethal military operations, thus facilitating a great number of strikes. Singer argues that “when politicians can avoid the political consequences of the condolence letter—and the impact that military casualties have on voters and on the news media—they no longer treat previously weighty matters of war and peace the same way” (Singer, 2012). That is, by removing military casualties from the decision-making calculus, drones reduce the need for extensive political debate, which could lead to a greater willingness and ease of deploying lethal military force. Such an increase in the ease of military intervention could destabilize the global security environment by creating the potential for more conflicts to emerge.

Moreover, since the use of drones is not treated as a part of “war” in a formal sense, drone strike operations are typically not discussed in Congress. Instead, the CIA usually executes them clandestinely. According to Knoops, CIA methodology surrounding drone attacks remains obscure; such a lack of clarity can potentially give the CIA free reign to order killings as it sees fit (Knoops, 2012). Thus, some worry that drone warfare fundamentally challenges the decision-making process of a republican government, which, according to Kant, is less likely to go to war since a republican
government must remain accountable to its citizens. Kant asserts that justification for war stems from public deliberation and representative action, so after discussing the potentially disastrous consequences of war, communities will generally agree upon actions that generally promote peace (Kaag and Kreps, 2013). When drones are introduced in the equation, however, the consequences of war experienced most directly by American citizens vanish. Consequently, citizens will place less pressure on their representatives to prevent war, which means that the frequency of war could increase.

Furthermore, in addition to diminished political and tactical thresholds for military interventions, potential ethical concerns arise from a lowered moral threshold to kill human beings. Some argue that as a result of the greater distance between operator and target, the use of drones can reduce the amount of contemplation regarding the decision to kill a target. It is argued that drone pilots may not fully comprehend the implications of their attacks because carrying out an attack from behind a control screen may produce a less visceral reaction than a more direct interaction such as battlefield engagement or a manned airstrike (Knoops, 2012). The ease of remotely pushing a button capable of killing someone could create the potential for a so-called “video game” mentality in which human targets are reduced to mere blips on a screen.

Based on such concerns about the consequences of an increased ease of military intervention resulting from lethal drone usage, I predict the following:

**H2:** Increased ease of military intervention will yield a weaker negative impact on public approval of lethal drone strikes than international law concerns.

I expect that increased ease of military intervention will result in a less significant impact on public approval of lethal drone warfare because I predict that respondents will struggle more with conceptualization of this potential consequence. The implications of a
lower threshold regarding the use of force may be a less tangible concept to comprehend in comparison with questions of international law, which leads to the expectation that increased ease of military intervention will yield a less significant impact on approval.

**Experimental Design**

In light of the existing concerns documented in the literature, I focused on four main factors—military effectiveness, military ineffectiveness, international law, and increased ease of military intervention—to determine which has the greatest impact on American public approval of lethal drone strikes. To test this, I conducted a survey with embedded experimental manipulations on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online service through which MTurk “Workers” are compensated for completion of surveys. MTurk offers researchers and companies a means to recruit individuals to accomplish tasks typically requiring human intelligence, such as the classification of pictures, transcription of handwriting or completion of surveys with embedded experimental manipulations (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). To get started, a researcher, the “Requester” as labeled on MTurk, creates an account, allocates funds to his or her account, and posts “job listings” describing the requirements of the Human Intelligence Task (HIT) and amount paid for completion. Workers’ payment can range from as low as $0.15 to as high as $0.75 per HIT. In order to ensure a higher quality sample, the Requester can restrict how many times a Worker may complete the task and set requirements for respondents including their country of residence, age, and prior approval ratings. A limitation of this project is that although Amazon Mechanical Turk offers a more representative sample than the undergraduate student body at the University of Pennsylvania, mTurk respondents are not representative of the entire American public.
That being said, many scholars continue to utilize this service because mTurk samples tend to fare better than other common convenience samples (Kreps and Wallace, 2016). Also, past research studies have shown that studies using mTurk produce comparable treatment effects to studies utilizing more representative samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). Researchers often use two primary measures in order to assess the validity of the research conducted using MTurk—external and internal validity of the findings. In order to assess the external validity of MTurk findings, that is, whether the causal estimates from the research can be generalized to other settings and samples, Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz compared the characteristics of MTurk samples to those of other samples commonly used in political science research such as convenience samples, samples generated by high-quality Internet panels, and probability samples of US residents (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). To further address concerns about generalizability, they also used MTurk to replicate prior experiments. Their findings suggest that MTurk samples fare well in comparison to the characteristics of other research samples. For example, on many demographics such as gender and education, an MTurk sample was very similar to the unweighted data from American National Election 2008-2009 Panel Study (ANESP); however, the MTurk sample underrepresented blacks and Hispanics as well as overrepresented younger and ideologically liberal citizens (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). These results suggest that although the MTurk sample does not represent the US population, it certainly does not present a drastically distorted view of the American demographic makeup. Furthermore, the replication of three different experiments using an MTurk sample yielded highly similar results to those found in the published research, which suggests that MTurk can produce generalizable findings.
In order to assess the internal validity of MTurk findings, which determines whether the experiment’s causal estimates appropriately reflect the effects of the experimental manipulation, Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz investigated concerns about multiple completions of the survey and subject inattentiveness. They found that for a given survey, only 2.4% of the total responses came from the same IP address, yet this does not provide convincing evidence of a pattern of repeat survey takers. Even if these findings did reflect repeat survey takers rather than multiple people taking the survey from the same public location, the percentage is so low that only a small amount of responses would be contaminated (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). With regard to concerns about subject inattentiveness, Berinsky et al. found that when asked to recall a detail from a story previously read in the survey, 60% of MTurk respondents answered the question correctly. MTurk workers thus dramatically outperformed samples from Polimetrix/YouGov and Survey Sampling International, of which only 49% and 46%, respectively, correctly responded to an identical question. These findings suggest that subject inattentiveness should not represent a major concern about MTurk samples. Rather, due to their payment incentive, MTurk Workers might even be overly attentive, which could be problematic if a heightened level of attention to experimental stimuli enables respondents to determine the experimenter’s intent and behave accordingly (Orne, 1962; Sears, 1986). Overall, with the caveat that MTurk Workers tend to be younger and more ideologically liberal than the general American public, which could limit their suitability for some research topics, MTurk samples fare no worse than commonly used convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012).

I received funding from CURF, which was used to compensate respondents $0.50 for their answers. The survey instrument consisted of presenting the participant with a
passage describing a hypothetical scenario about US usage of lethal drone strikes in a potentially threatening military conflict. The beginning of the passage in each treatment presented the same information about the scenario. Namely, the United States had discovered a group of extremists operating in Pakistan. This group of extremists was thought to possess plans to attack the United States. In response, the United States was planning to launch lethal drone strikes, and the passage described the basic functioning of a drone, including how drone strikes eliminate the possibility of American military casualties. The passages diverged across conditions by ultimately incorporating statements that related to one of the four factors relevant to the broader discussion of drones. The experimental conditions are as follows:

*Militarily Effective:*

- Highlights the main strategic appeal of lethal drone strikes in that they possess the capability to kill suspected terrorists, which can make Americans safer.
- Invokes the authority of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who is the highest-ranking and most senior officer in the US Armed Forces.
- Treatment: “The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has indicated that the strikes have been instrumental in killing suspected militants and making Americans safer.”

*Militarily Ineffective:*

- Highlights the notion that lethal drone strikes may undermine their intended purpose of making Americans safer by generating anti-American sentiment.
• Invokes the authority of prominent non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations dedicated to the protection of international law and human rights.

• Treatment: “Non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Counterterrorism have indicated that the strikes trigger anti-US sentiment and help militants recruit new members, making Americans less safe.”

*International Law:*

• Highlights the concern that lethal drone strikes violate fundamental principles of international law.

• Invokes the authority of prominent non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations dedicated to the protection of international law and human rights.

• Treatment: “Non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Counterterrorism have indicated that the strikes violate international law in two ways. First, these organizations have indicated that these strikes violate international law because they break the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country where the attack takes place. Second, these organizations have indicated that these strikes also violate international law because they do not take necessary measures to prevent the death of civilians.”

*Increased Ease of Military Intervention:*
• Highlights the concern that lethal drone strikes lower the threshold for conducting military operations overseas, which could lead to an increase in the frequency of military interventions and a decrease in the ethical obstacles to killing a human being.

• Does not invoke a relevant authority figure or organization.

• Treatment: “Scholars have indicated that the ability to conduct strikes without risk to American lives will lower the threshold for authorizing lethal military operations, which could increase the level of American military intervention worldwide. Also, since drone strikes can be executed with the push of a button, some scholars have indicated that drone strikes could make it too easy to kill human beings.”

After being presented with the stimulus, respondents were asked to rank their level of approval of the US conducting missile strikes from drones in that particular scenario on a scale of 1 to 5 wherein 1 indicated strong approval and 5 indicated strong disapproval. After numerically ranking their level of approval, respondents were asked to explain why they gave their response, which took the form of an open-ended question. Next, they were asked, “Now imagine that a strike is going to happen whether you approved initially or not. If given the choice between unmanned airstrikes (drones) or manned airstrikes to target extremists in this scenario, which would you favor?” Furthermore, respondents were asked to rank their approval of US drone strikes to target extremists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia more generally, which was also ranked on a 1 to 5 scale. Finally, the survey collected relevant information about the respondents’ partisanship, race, age, gender, prior military service, close relationship to
someone who has served in the armed forces, level of education, knowledge about drones, and familiarity with robots. Since self-reported measures of knowledge can be inaccurate, respondents’ actual level of knowledge about drones was checked with a question requiring them to identify unmanned aircraft capable of missile strikes from a list. The entire survey instrument can be found in the appendix.

**Experimental Results**

The sample is composed of 842 respondents. As expected, this sample is not entirely representative of the American public; however, in some demographics, it does not differ drastically. First, compared to the results from the US Census in July 2018 showing that women make up 50.8% of the American population, the mTurk sample in this study overrepresents men and underrepresents women, who make up 62.47% and 37.53% of the sample, respectively. In terms of race, the sample is 79.45% white, 9.14% African-American, 1.19% American Indian, and 7.48% Asian-American. Compared to the US public at large, whites are overrepresented, yet the percentages of African-Americans, American Indians, and Asian-Americans are roughly equivalent. Moreover, those who identify as having Hispanic or Latino origin make up 13.66% of the sample, which closely resembles the 12.5% found in the American public at large. With regard to partisan identification, 45.12% of the sample report being Democratic, 29.64% as Republican, and 25.24% as Independent. Thus, the sample overrepresents Democrats, which a Gallup poll in February 2019 found to make up 30% of the American people (Gallup, 2019). Most surprisingly, the sample drastically overrepresents the percentage of those who have served in the US armed forces. According to a 2015 study by
FiveThirtyEight, 7.3% of all living Americans have served in the armed forces at some point in their lives (Chalabi, 2015). Interestingly, 18.41% of this sample reported having served in the US armed forces. In light of the composition of this sample, let us now turn to the findings.

Despite self-reporting relatively high levels of familiarity with drones, the findings seem to confirm the general consensus in the literature that Americans possess a low level of knowledge about drones. When asked to self-report how much they’ve read or heard about drone usage by the US military, about a quarter of respondents report having heard either a “great deal” or “a lot” (28.21%). Furthermore, 39.17% of respondents report having exposure to a “moderate amount” of information about use of drones by the US military. When combined, the findings show that about two-thirds of respondents have read or heard at least a moderate amount about the US military’s use of drones (67.38%). Conversely, only 3.93% of respondents state that they have no familiarity with use of manned surveillance aircraft. Thus, these findings seem to suggest that US military drone usage represents a topic of interest with which many Americans are at least somewhat familiar. However, does this relatively high level of self-reported familiarity translate to actual knowledge about drones? Sadly, the answer is no. In order to measure respondents’ level of knowledge about drones, they were asked to identify the unmanned aircraft capable of missile strikes from a list of US military aircraft, which included unmanned aircraft capable of lethal operations (e.g. MQ-1 Predator), unmanned aircraft only used for surveillance (e.g RQ-4 Global Hawk), and manned aircraft (e.g. F-16). By selecting MQ-1 Predator, MQ-9 Reaper, and RQ-7 Shadow, the respondent is recorded as completely and correctly answering the question. Only 1.78% of respondents correctly identify all three forms of unmanned aircraft capable of missile strikes.
without the selection of any incorrect answers. Given that this metric for measuring level of knowledge about drones is rather high for an average citizen, we also examine how many respondents correctly identify two of the three correct answers without the inclusion of any incorrect responses, which makes up 7.60% of the sample. Lowering the bar for knowledge even further, we also look at the amount of respondents who correctly identify at least two of the three correct answers but also mark an incorrect answer. These correct-incorrect mixed responders represent 6.41% of the sample. Interestingly, the most common erroneous responses that occur in conjunction with correct answers are the RQ-4 Global Hawk, an unmanned aircraft used for surveillance, and the EA-18G Growler, a manned aircraft capable of lethal strikes. Also, 9.38% of respondents fail to select a single correct option. Finally, and perhaps most notably, 54.75% of respondents respond, “don’t know” and do not select any of the aircraft options. This appears to contrast with the findings above showing that the majority of respondents possess at least a moderate amount of familiarity with the US military’s usage of drones. As such, this seems to indicate that self-reported levels of knowledge can be overly optimistic. Thus, these results echo previous findings in the literature suggesting the American public knows very little about unmanned aircraft capable of missile strikes, or as they’re commonly referred to, lethal drone strikes.

Next, we turn to how respondents’ levels of approval varied across experimental conditions. Figure 1 illustrates the aggregated levels of approval and disapproval across experimental conditions. As expected, the majority of respondents approve of the usage of drone strikes, regardless of the particular treatment to which they were assigned. Surprisingly, the greatest percentage of approval can be found in the Militarily Ineffective condition.
Also, quite interestingly, the second largest percentage of approval can be found in the Increased Ease of Military Intervention condition. The International Law condition contains the lowest percentage of approval and highest percentage of disapproval, which mirrors the findings of preexisting literature claiming that international law concerns can be impactful on respondents’ level of approval (Kreps and Wallace, 2016). However, the highest percentage of “neither approve nor disapprove” can be found in the International Law condition, which could suggest that some respondents do not fully comprehend the international law concerns with which they’re presented. If confused by concepts such as the violation of a country’s sovereignty, these respondents might feel as though they do not know enough to render a judgment on drone strikes in one direction or the other. Thus, these respondents might opt for a statement of neutrality. Conversely, respondents
in this condition could choose “neither approve nor disapprove” to reflect their conflicted feelings about approval. Although they admire the benefits of drone strikes, their support could waver after being presented with statements about violation of international law. Finally, the second highest percentage of aggregate disapproval can be found in the Militarily Effective condition, which is somewhat surprising. Despite being presented with the positive treatment about drones, that is, the condition emphasizing how drones make Americans safer, 27% of respondents in that treatment still disapprove.

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of respondents that fell into each approval category for all 4 treatments. Across all conditions, the largest percentage of respondents can be categorized as “somewhat approve” (35.1% in total). Those who “somewhat approve” outnumber those who “strongly approve” (25.7% of all respondents), which seems to indicate that respondents could be reluctant about wholeheartedly approving of drone strikes, yet still find them to be a valuable military weapon. Interestingly, the highest percentage of respondents who “strongly approve” can be found in the Increased Ease of Military Intervention condition (29.1%), followed by 28.8% in the Militarily Effective condition. The relatively high percentage of “strongly approve” respondents in the Militarily Effective condition is not surprising given the fact that those respondents were presented with the claim that drone strikes make Americans safer, which would seem to naturally increase the intensity of approval. However, the fact that the largest percentage of “strongly approve” can be found in the Increased Ease of Military Intervention condition could possibly indicate respondents’ perception of increased frequency of military intervention as a positive factor. Respondents might wish the US
to possess the flexibility and resources to intervene militarily as it sees fit. In light of this, respondents’ stronger level of approval for such technology would make sense.

The greatest percentage of "strongly disapprove" respondents can be found in the Militarily Effective condition (13.5%). This is somewhat surprising considering that this is the condition claiming that drones make Americans safer. However, this could perhaps be attributed to the fact that this condition explicitly states that drones kill suspected militants. Such straightforward language could deter respondents from approval. The second largest percentage of "strongly disapprove" can be found in the International Law condition, which does make sense. The magnitude of this percentage (11.9%) still seems somewhat low in light of the expectations in the majority of drone literature, which claims that international law violations are a major concern about drones. However, the fact that international law violations might be more salient to scholars than average citizens can be reflected in the 18.1% of respondents who neither “approve nor dis-
Table 1. Levels of approval across experimental conditions, aggregated. Results presented graphically in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aggregate Levels of Approval</th>
<th>Militarily Effective</th>
<th>Militarily Ineffective</th>
<th>International Law</th>
<th>Increased Ease of Military Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither approve nor disapprove</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproval</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Levels of approval across experimental conditions. Results presented graphically in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of approval</th>
<th>Militarily Effective</th>
<th>Militarily Ineffective</th>
<th>International Law</th>
<th>Increased Ease of Military Intervention</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly approve</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat approve</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither approve nor disapprove</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disapprove</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disapprove</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
-approve” in the International Law condition.

After the treatment, when told that a strike was going to occur regardless of their initial level of approval and asked whether they would prefer unmanned airstrikes or manned airstrikes, the vast majority of respondents across conditions still opt for unmanned airstrikes. For those in the Militarily Effective condition, 72.38% of respondents prefer unmanned airstrikes, which represents the highest percentage of those favoring drones across conditions. The lowest percentage of respondents demonstrating this preference can be found in the Increased Ease of Military Intervention; however, even still, 66.20% of those in this treatment choose unmanned over manned airstrikes. Thus, these findings show that even if respondents do not necessarily approve of them, they still tend to prefer drone strikes to manned airstrikes, likely due to the elimination of the possibility of military casualties.

After looking at the breakdown of approval levels across experimental conditions, we turn now to determining which demographic factors and treatment condition influence the likelihood of overall approval of drone strikes most strongly. Since the levels of approval ranged from 1 (strongly approve) to 5 (strongly disapprove), a negative coefficient indicates a greater likelihood of approval. Conversely, a positive coefficient points to a lower likelihood of approval and a higher likelihood of disapproval. The results show that the most significant predictors of overall approval of drone strikes are service in the armed forces, identification as a Republican, Hispanic or Latino origin, and having a significant relationship with someone who served in the armed forces. As indicated by Table 3, Republican partisanship is an extremely significant indicator of approval of drone strikes, which seems to be consistent with the preexisting literature (-1.010, p <0.01). Conversely, a bivariate regression between overall approval of
drone strikes and Democratic self-identification shows that Democratic respondents are more likely to disapprove of drone strikes. From these findings, Republicans do tend to be more hawkish than Democrats as suggested by previous studies.

Table 4 illustrates how service in the armed forces represents another significant indicator of approval. Those who previously served in the armed forces are statistically more likely to approve of lethal drone strikes to target extremists in foreign countries (-0.750, p<0.01). This finding makes sense given that those who were members of the US military likely risked their lives during their service. It seems natural that such respondents would opt for a form of military intervention that removes the possibility of American military casualties. Similarly, those who have a significant person in their lives who has served in the armed forces are also more likely to approve of drone strikes; however, this relationship is not as significant of an indicator as those who served in the armed forces themselves (-0.302, p<0.01; see Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Overall Approval of Drone Strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-1.010*** (0.092)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.833*** (0.050)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>1.224 (df = 840)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3. Analysis of partisanship and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Overall Approval of Drone Strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Served in Armed Forces</td>
<td>-0.750*** (0.113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.672*** (0.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>1.275 (df = 840)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4. Analysis of service in armed forces and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.
Furthermore, those who are of Hispanic or Latino origin are significantly more likely to approve of drone strikes, a finding which has not been commonly studied in the drone literature (-0.438, p<0.01; see Table 6). With regard to gender, females are statistically less likely to approve of the usage of drone strikes (0.168, p<0.1; see Table 7). This finding mirrors the results from previous studies wherein women tend to be more disapproving of the use of military force in general. Finally, neither age nor level of education appears to be significant indicators of approval of drone strikes. Although those who are 40-59 years old tend to be more likely to approve of drones and those who are 20-39 tend to be less likely to approve, these findings are not statistically significant (Table 8). Similarly, respondents who hold either a bachelor’s degree or graduate degree are more likely to approve of drone strikes, yet these relationships fail to achieve statistical significance (Table 9). Overall, these findings illustrate that those who are Republican, Hispanic/Latino, served in the armed forces, or know someone who has

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable: Overall Approval of Drone Strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant Person in Life Who Served in Armed Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5. Analysis of significant person in life who served in the armed forces and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.
served in the military are more likely to approve of drone strikes.

### Table 6. Analysis of Hispanic or Latino origin and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Overall Approval of Drone Strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino Origin</td>
<td>-0.438*** (0.130)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.594*** (0.048)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>842</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>1.299 (df = 840)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 7. Analysis of female and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Overall Approval of Drone Strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.168* (0.093)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.471*** (0.057)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>842</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>1.306 (df = 840)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 8. Analysis of age and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Overall Approval of Drone Strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-29 Years of Age</td>
<td>0.204 (0.357)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39 Years of Age</td>
<td>0.143 (0.356)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49 Years of Age</td>
<td>-0.176 (0.370)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59 Years of Age</td>
<td>-0.037 (0.380)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69 Years of Age</td>
<td>0.188 (0.397)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.429*** (0.349)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>842</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>1.305 (df = 836)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 9. Level of education and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Overall Approval of Drone Strikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some College, No Degree</td>
<td>0.197 (0.139)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree or Equivalent</td>
<td>-0.052 (0.120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate or Professional Degree</td>
<td>-0.124 (0.154)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.534*** (0.098)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>842</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual Std. Error</td>
<td>1.305 (df = 838)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 8. Analysis of age and drone strike approval. Standard error in parentheses.
In order to determine which experimental condition yields the greatest impact on the likelihood of drone strike approval, Table 10 displays the results of a multivariate regression of the treatment conditions and the most influential demographic factors. The Militarily Effective treatment was utilized as the baseline condition to which other conditions could be compared. A graphical representation of these findings can be found in Figure 3, which plots the average marginal effect across the conditions. First and foremost, the International Law condition produces the most substantial impact on approval of drone strikes compared to the other experimental conditions (0.162). This result thus confirms H1, which predicted that the International Law condition would yield the most negative impact on approval of drone strikes. Although this coefficient does not reach a level of statistical significance, this finding mirrors the results of previous studies. Furthermore, this demonstrates that the public does possess concerns about the international law violations inherent in drone strikes.
which lower their likelihood of approval. Neither the Militarily Ineffective condition nor the Increased Ease of Military Intervention produce substantial or significant impacts on the overall level of approval of drone strikes. Interestingly, and quite surprising, both the Militarily Ineffective and Increased Ease of Military Intervention conditions slightly increase the likelihood that a respondent will approve of drone strikes. Although this study does not possess any tangible evidence explaining why this result occurred, possible explanations for these findings will be discussed in greater depth later.

Figure 3. Average marginal effect of experimental conditions on approval.

H2 is partially confirmed by the findings since the Increased Ease of Military Intervention condition yields a weaker negative impact on public approval of lethal drone strikes than the International Law condition. However, as discussed above, quite unexpectedly, the Increased Ease of Military Intervention condition slightly increases the likelihood of approval, albeit not in a statistically significant fashion. This finding could be explained by a perception among respondents that the ability to intervene militarily in a foreign country with greater ease in fact represents a strength, rather than a liability, of drone strikes. Such respondents might believe that in order for the US to keep its citizens safe and maintain its military supremacy within the global order, it must possess the
capacity to intervene as it sees fit. Upon hearing that drones would enable such capability, respondents could be more willing to approve. Table 10 also displays similar findings with regard to which demographic factors are most influential in determining likelihood of approval of drone strikes. Republican identity and service in the armed forces both yield statistically significant impacts on approval wherein Republicans and veterans are significantly more likely to approve of drone strikes (-0.927, p<0.01; -0.433, p<0.01, respectively). Also, women are significantly less likely to approve of drone strikes in comparison to men (0.201, p<0.05). Holding a graduate or professional degree, however, yields only a slight impact on the likelihood of approval.

Figure 3 illustrates the average marginal effects of the experimental treatments and most significant demographic indicators. As a frame of reference, the points above the 0.0 line indicate a decline in approval whereas points below the 0.0 line indicate an increase in approval. The farther from the 0.0 line a point is, the more significant the relationship between the relevant factor and approval of lethal drone strikes. Also, these findings present relatively high margins of error, which could be due to a lack of representativeness in the sample. Quite clearly, one can see that being a Republican or veteran significantly increases the likelihood of approving of US usage of lethal drone strikes to target terrorists in foreign countries. These two factors also possess relatively lower marginal errors; that is, the effects vary less substantially than for other variables tested. Holding a graduate degree also appears to result in a higher likelihood of approval; however, this finding is not as statistically significant as other demographic factors tested and the range for error is considerably larger (0.119). Conversely, identification as a female decreases the likelihood of approval; thus, women are more likely to disapprove of US usage of lethal drone strikes. As seen with the other
statistically significant findings in this figure, the effect of being female on approval possesses a considerably smaller margin of error (0.086). Finally, when assessing the relative impacts of the experimental conditions, Figure 3 shows that only the International Law condition appears to produce a noticeable difference in approval. By comparison, both the Militarily Ineffective and Increased Ease of Military Intervention conditions fall below the 0.0 line, yet their seemingly insignificant distance from the baseline indicates that they increase respondents’ likelihood of approval only very slightly. Thus, these findings confirm H1, which predicted that the International Law condition would yield the greatest negative impact on public approval of the use of lethal drone strikes to target terrorists in foreign countries.

**Conclusion**

In a political environment typically characterized by fissures in public opinion on policy, the fact that a majority of Americans support a rather controversial form of military technology appears quite surprising. Thus, this thesis sought to identify the relevant factors that influence public attitudes about lethal drone strikes used to target extremists in foreign countries and determine which factor produces the greatest impact on approval. In order to do this, I conducted a survey experiment on Amazon Mechanical Turk in which respondents were randomly assigned to one of four experimental treatments—Militarily Effective, Militarily Ineffective, International Law, and Increased Ease of Military Intervention. All conditions presented respondents with a hypothetical scenario in which the US planned to execute a lethal strike using a UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) to eliminate a group of extremists with suspected plans to attack the US.
Each condition differed with the inclusion of a relevant argument from the scholarly literature highlighting either a benefit or negative consequence of lethal drone strikes.

First, my analysis showed that international law concerns exert the most noticeable effect on the American public’s level of approval for drone strikes, which is consistent with previous literature (Kreps and Wallace, 2016). That is, when presented with the claim that lethal drone strikes violate international law by disrupting the sovereignty of the targeted state and failing to appropriately prevent the occurrence of civilian casualties, respondents become less likely to approve. The results showed that the Militarily Ineffective condition produced a slight increase in the likelihood of approval, which seems puzzling considering that this treatment exposed respondents to a fundamental concern about lethal drone strikes. Although the study does not provide any explicit answers to make sense of these findings, a few potential explanations can be offered. An increased likelihood of approval in the Militarily Ineffective condition, which claimed that drone strikes might actually make Americans less safe, could reflect respondents’ distrust of nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations. This condition invoked the authority of organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Counterterrorism. In their written responses explaining their level of approval, a few respondents in this condition reported that they “don’t believe a single thing the UN says.” This indicates that when presented with a claim relying on the expertise of that organization, respondents could be inclined to automatically disregard that information. This explanation fits with the findings from Kreps and Wallace’s 2016 study, which showed that across three issue frames, at least 70% of respondents found the government (Joint Chiefs of Staff) credible whereas the UN’s credibility was relatively lower across the civilian and effectiveness
frames. Furthermore, Human Rights Watch was generally viewed as the least credible source with ratings around or below 50%. These results reflect some Americans’ skepticism about the motives and expertise of outside organizations, especially NGOs. As a result, distrust in intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations could have factored into Americans’ slight increase in approval of lethal drone strikes.

Second, the results of this study showed that partisanship, prior service in the armed forces, and gender are the most significant predictors of approval of lethal drone strikes. Republicans and veterans are significantly more likely to approve of drone strikes, which mirrors findings from previous studies investigating the determinants of public attitudes regarding the use of military force. Conversely, consistent with previous work regarding the relationship between gender and use of military force, women are much less likely than men to approve of lethal drone strikes. Although drone strikes operate in a fundamentally different way than other forms of military force, these results indicate that drones share similar demographic predictors with conventional military technology such as manned airstrikes or ground troops.

Third, despite the negative impact of international law concerns on approval, the vast majority of respondents across all conditions still favored unmanned over manned airstrikes, which illustrates the extent to which the American public values US safety above all else. Even in the International Law condition, two-thirds (66.67%) of respondents preferred unmanned to manned airstrikes. Respondents’ written responses clearly displayed an awareness of the cost-benefit calculus involved in the use of lethal drone strikes, yet the majority still stated that whatever consequences may arise represent only a small price to pay for America’s safety. Main concerns included the possibility of civilian casualties and the uncertainty of the information about the targets. Many
respondents were reluctant about drone strikes given the fact that the targets were only “suspected” extremists, and they often expressed a desire for more evidence of the targets’ violent intentions against the US. That being said, respondents overcame these doubts by stating that everything possible must be done to combat terrorism. Thus, these findings also indicate how the threat of terrorism continues to loom large in respondents’ minds. Overall, this study showed that US safety and protection of American lives trump all other concerns, leading to majority approval of actions required to achieve those goals.

This study leads to important conclusions in both scholarship and public policy. With regard to academic literature, this thesis confirms previous accounts of the determinants of public support for military force as well as situates those findings in the context of lethal drone strikes. Following in the footsteps of Kreps and Wallace’s 2016 study, these results challenge previous arguments asserting that military effectiveness is more influential than international law concerns on public support for use of force (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, 2009; Press, Sagan, and Valentino, 2013). Instead, my findings contribute to the growing body of literature demonstrating how international law concerns effectively frame public perceptions of US military actions. The results of this study also confirm Perla’s findings that public support for military engagements will increase when the public perceives the mission’s principal objective as seeking to confront an external threat (Perla, 2011). In this case, Americans perceived drones as addressing an external terrorist threat identified in a small village in Pakistan. Post 9/11, terrorism remains a salient concern for many Americans, especially given the recurrence of terrorist attacks worldwide in recent years. Furthermore, this study confirms the notion that the public is capable of engaging in a rational cost-benefit calculus with regard to
the use of military force (Larson, 1996). In their written explanations, respondents acknowledged a notable cost of drone strikes—civilian casualties—by expressing a desire to use drones in a way that minimizes the likelihood of this consequence. However, in light of the risks, the majority of respondents commented that protecting American lives, both in combat and back at home, was more important. This style of response indicates the presence of a cost-benefit calculus, confirming Larson’s thesis. Finally, my findings provide further evidence that Republicans tend to be more hawkish than Democrats regarding military intervention, and women often oppose the use of military force more strongly than men (Feinstein, 2017; Brooks and Valentino, 2011). However, the results of this study challenge Eichenberg’s findings that a gender gap is almost nonexistent in the presence of abstract, hypothetical scenarios (Eichenberg, 2003). This study’s experimental stimulus included a hypothetical opportunity for use of lethal drone strikes, yet the results clearly showed that women were less likely to approve than men.

With regard to public policy, my findings suggest that even in the face of criticisms from international organizations such as the United Nations, public support for lethal drone strikes remains rather durable. As discussed above, although violations of international law yielded the greatest negative impact on public approval, the majority of respondents still favored unmanned to manned airstrikes. Such a high level of public support for drones will likely encourage the continued usage of this technology. That being said, for those who wish to reduce the prevalence of US drone strikes, an appeal to international legal violations might offer the best avenue for diminishing public support. Due to the nature of the American democratic system, public support provides a critical foundation for the continuation of policy. Thus, arguments presented by international organizations could activate enough concern in the American public to the point where
they begin to rescind their approval and demand policy change. Even if the process does not occur quite this radically, such campaigns could still lead to public outcry for more regulation and oversight of US drone strike operations. As a result, the United States might have to be more selective in its choice of drone strikes.

In terms of future military technology policy, despite high levels of public approval for lethal drone strikes, the results of this study suggest that the American public remains apprehensive about technological malfunction, which could preclude the future development of increasingly autonomous weapons systems. In their written responses, many participants expressed concerns about the reliability of drones, worrying that machines can malfunction, rely on inaccurate information, and be hacked. Some respondents even remarked that they would not support the use of drones if they were not controlled by human operators. These findings suggest that the American public’s distrust of technology will likely preclude their approval of increasingly autonomous weaponry systems (so-called “killer robots”) wherein humans are either on the loop (monitoring or turning off the system as necessary) or completely out of the loop (allowing an autonomous system to make its own choices for the completion of its mission). Thus, although US safety and prevention of casualties are critical to many Americans, it remains highly unlikely that they will be willing to support autonomous weaponry anytime soon.

Finally, this thesis provides a starting point for future avenues of research. First, future researchers could investigate how the Trump administration has affected the impact of international legal concerns on public attitudes regarding warfare. As evidenced by the withdrawal of the US from the United Nations Human Rights Counsel on June 19, 2018, the Trump administration has challenged the legitimacy of the
United Nations and espoused a return to patriotism rather than use of multilateralism. Currently, the United Nations represents one of the preeminent centers for the creation and preservation of international law norms. However, if the American people begin to internalize such patriotic, “America First” rhetoric, their perceptions of the legitimacy, credibility, and usefulness of the United Nations could decline. Future work could thus investigate whether this decline results in a decreased impact of international law concerns on public attitudes regarding the use of military force, especially lethal drone strikes.

Also, this work could inspire further study of the continued relevance of just war theory on public attitudes regarding the use of military force. That is, as means of warfare create more distance between the combatant and the battlefield, future work could investigate whether fighting and killing with “honor” is still a concern for the American public. One could consider whether ethical concerns will threaten to curb the development of remotely controlled military weaponry, which represent a shift away from face-to-face combat. Conversely, could lethal drone strikes act as a slippery slope and lower the American people’s standards for ethical conduct in wartime wherein they opt for convenience and security over moral issues? I suggest these as future paths for research in order to develop a more robust understanding of how certain factors will continue to influence Americans’ attitudes about drones as well as how the use of drone strikes could shape American public approval of the use of military force more generally.

In conclusion, drones’ ability to remove the possibility of American military casualties forms the foundation for Americans’ high levels of approval. Although these findings appear to be quite stable, American approval of lethal drone strikes is not
completely invulnerable, which speaks to the potential for future shifts in public opinion.
References


Pew Research Center. (2017, November 27). Public split over use of pre-emptive force against nations that threaten U.S. Retrieved from


Tyson, A. (2017, November 28). Americans are split on the principle of pre-emptive


*Washington Post.*


Appendix

Consent statement:

You are invited to be in a research study on public opinion. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18 years old or older and a U.S. citizen. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Katherine Fink, undergraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania.

The purpose of this study is to examine your opinions about political events. If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to read a few excerpts, and fill out a questionnaire. The session will take no longer than five (5) minutes. Of course, you can choose not to answer any question.

There are no major risks in this study. Nonetheless, you may withdraw from the study at any point. You can contact the investigator if you would like to obtain the results of the study. If you successfully complete the survey, you will be given a code that can be entered into Mechanical Turk. If this code is entered correctly, you will be paid $0.50 for your participation in the survey.

The records of this study will be kept private. We do not collect information that would allow us to identify respondents. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question in the survey, though we would appreciate if you would answer all of them. If you choose to withdraw from participating, you may do so, though if you do not complete the study, you will not be paid.

The researcher conducting this study is Katherine Fink. If you have questions later, you may contact her at katfink@sas.upenn.edu. If you would like, you may print a copy of this form to keep for your records. If you have further questions you would prefer to address to someone other than the researcher, you may contact the University of Pennsylvania Office of Regulatory Affairs (3624 Market St, Suite 301S).

I have read the above information. I consent to participate in the study.
Respondents are randomly assigned to one of the following experimental conditions:

Militarily Effective condition:

There has been a lot of recent discussion about the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as drones, by the United States to target suspected militants. Imagine that the United States has discovered a group of extremists operating in a small village in Pakistan. This group is thought to possess plans to attack the United States. The US is planning to launch lethal drone strikes in support of an operation. Drones are aerial vehicles that can be flown without the need for a human operator, and lethal drone strikes use missiles to attack targets. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has indicated that the strikes have been instrumental in killing suspected militants and making Americans safer.

Do you approve or disapprove of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircraft called drones in this scenario?

Strongly approve
Somewhat approve
Neither approve nor disapprove
Somewhat disapprove
Strongly disapprove

Please explain why you gave this response, in your own words? (1-2 sentences)

Now imagine that a strike is going to happen whether you approved initially or not. If given the choice between unmanned airstrikes (drones) or manned airstrikes to target extremists in this scenario, which would you favor?

Unmanned airstrikes
Manned airstrikes

Militarily Ineffective condition:

There has been a lot of recent discussion about the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as drones, by the United States to target suspected militants. Imagine that the United States has discovered a group of extremists operating in a small village in Pakistan. This group is thought to possess plans to attack the United States. The US is planning to launch lethal drone strikes in support of an operation. Drones are aerial vehicles that can be flown without the need for a human operator, and lethal drone strikes use missiles to attack targets. As a result, drone strikes eliminate the possibility of American military casualties. Non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Counterterrorism have indicated that the strikes trigger anti-US sentiment and help militants recruit new members, making Americans less safe.

Do you approve or disapprove of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircraft called drones in this scenario?
Strongly approve
Somewhat approve
Neither approve nor disapprove
Somewhat disapprove
Strongly disapprove

Please explain why you gave this response, in your own words? (1-2 sentences)

Now imagine that a strike is going to happen whether you approved initially or not. If given the choice between unmanned airstrikes (drones) or manned airstrikes to target extremists in this scenario, which would you favor?

Unmanned airstrikes
Manned airstrikes

International Law condition:

There has been a lot of recent discussion about the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as drones, by the United States to target suspected militants. Imagine that the United States has discovered a group of extremists operating in a small village in Pakistan. This group is thought to possess plans to attack the United States. The US is planning to launch lethal drone strikes in support of an operation. Drones are aerial vehicles that can be flown without the need for a human operator, and lethal drone strikes use missiles to attack targets. As a result, drone strikes eliminate the possibility of American military casualties. Non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Counterterrorism have indicated that the strikes violate international law in two ways. First, these organizations have indicated that these strikes violate international law because they break the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country where the attack takes place. Second, these organizations have indicated that these strikes also violate international law because they do not take necessary measures to prevent the death of civilians.

Do you approve or disapprove of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircraft called drones in this scenario?

Strongly approve
Somewhat approve
Neither approve nor disapprove
Somewhat disapprove
Strongly disapprove

Please explain why you gave this response, in your own words? (1-2 sentences)

Now imagine that a strike is going to happen whether you approved initially or not. If given the choice between unmanned airstrikes (drones) or manned airstrikes to target extremists in this scenario, which would you favor?
Unmanned airstrikes
Manned airstrikes

Increased Ease of Military Intervention condition:

There has been a lot of recent discussion about the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as drones, by the United States to target suspected militants. Imagine that the United States has discovered a group of extremists operating in a small village in Pakistan. This group is thought to possess plans to attack the United States. The US is planning to launch lethal drone strikes in support of an operation. Drones are aerial vehicles that can be flown without the need for a human operator, and lethal drone strikes use missiles to attack targets. As a result, drone strikes eliminate the possibility of American military casualties. Scholars have indicated that the ability to conduct strikes without risk to American lives will lower the threshold for authorizing lethal military operations, which could increase the level of American military intervention worldwide. Also, since drone strikes can be executed with the push of a button, some scholars have indicated that drone strikes could make it too easy to kill human beings.

Do you approve or disapprove of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircraft called drones in this scenario?

Strongly approve
Somewhat approve
Neither approve nor disapprove
Somewhat disapprove
Strongly disapprove

Please explain why you gave this response, in your own words? (1-2 sentences)

Now imagine that a strike is going to happen whether you approved initially or not. If given the choice between unmanned airstrikes (drones) or manned airstrikes to target extremists in this scenario, which would you favor?

Unmanned airstrikes
Manned airstrikes

All respondents see the following set of questions:

Do you approve or disapprove of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircraft called drones to target extremists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia?

Strongly approve
Somewhat approve
Neither approve nor disapprove
Somewhat disapprove
Strongly disapprove

*Have you ever served in the armed forces of the United States of America?*

Yes
No

*Is there a significant person in your life that has served in the armed forces of the United States of America?*

Yes
No

*I am:*

Male
Female

*I consider myself to be:*

Caucasian (white)
African-American
American Indian or Native American
Asian American
Other

*Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin?*

Yes
No

*I consider myself to be:*

Republican
Democratic
Independent

*My age is:*

18-19
20-29
30-39
40-49
50-59
60-69
Older than 69

*My highest level of education was:*
Didn’t finish high school
High school graduate, but no further schooling
Some college, but no degree
Community College or Associate’s Degree
Bachelor’s degree or equivalent
Graduate or professional degree

Have you ever used, or are you currently using, robots at home or at work (e.g. a robotic vacuum cleaner at home or an industrial robot at work)?

Yes
No

How much have you read or heard about the use of unmanned surveillance aircraft, sometimes called drones, by the U.S. military?

A great deal
A lot
A moderate amount
A little
None at all

Which of the following are unmanned aircraft capable of missile strikes?

Global Hawk
F-16
MQ-1 Predator
B-2 Spirit Stealth Bomber
MQ-9 Reaper
EA-18G Growler
RQ-7 Shadow
Don’t know

How would you characterize your level of knowledge about drones?

Very high
Somewhat high
Neither high nor low
Somewhat low
Very low