Democratic Peace and Covert Military Force: 
An Experimental Test *

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Abstract: How should we reconcile covert war with normative theories of the democratic peace? Proponents argue that these interventions are consistent with democratic peace theory, as leaders intervene covertly to escape backlash by a public that has internalized liberal norms. Yet we know little about public opinion regarding the covert use of force. Using a survey experiment, we find that respondents are more favorable towards covert interventions against democratic targets than our theories assume, and that even citizens who value transparency the most still wrestle with a trade-off between their normative commitments and the instrumental benefits they perceive covert actions to hold. Our results thus help to explain why American leaders have repeatedly chosen to conduct covert military operations against fellow democracies, and raise important questions about the scope conditions of normative theories of the democratic peace.

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How can we reconcile covert war between democracies with normative theories of the democratic peace? An established body of literature in international relations holds that democracies do not use force against each other, in large part due to the liberal norms and values shared by democratic publics (Doyle, 1986; Russett, 1994). Yet a recent wave of research on secrecy in the field\(^1\) shows the relatively high frequency with which democracies engage in the covert use of force against one another. For example, the United States successfully overthrew many other democracies including Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), British Guiana (1961-71), Brazil (1964), the Congo (1960) and Chile (1970-73), tried and failed to do so twice (Indonesia (1954-58) and Syria (1956-57)), and employed covert tactics to influence the results of foreign democratic elections sixteen times from 1947-1989 (O’Rourke, 2018, 94). Moreover, such practices are not confined to the Cold-War era, as covert interventions have occurred frequently since then.\(^2\)

This literature not only demonstrates the enduring relevance of covert action, but also raises fundamental questions about the role that norms play in shaping democratic publics’ preferences about the use of force. On the one hand, critics argue that the frequency of these interventions reveals that democratic citizens have not truly internalized liberal norms of non-violence against other democratic states. For some, this constitutes evidence against the normative democratic peace;\(^3\) for others, it constitutes evidence against the democratic peace altogether.\(^4\)

On the other hand, proponents argue that the covertness of these interventions constitutes supportive evidence for their theory: leaders carry out these interventions covertly precisely to escape the watchful eye of the public, who have internalized liberal norms of non-violence against other democratic states.\(^5\) In this sense it should not be surprising that many of the founding figures of covert operations in American foreign policy were also among the deepest skeptics of public opinion. As head of the Policy Planning Staff, for example, George Kennan argued the public simply did not have the stomach for covert action (Gaddis, 2011, 294). After all, the very nature of government secrecy violates liberal norms about transparency and accountability. Central to these accounts, then, are a set of assumptions about the content of the public’s preferences: that democratic citizens have internalized liberal

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\(^1\)See Yarhi-Milo (2013); Poznansky (2015); Carson (2016); Carson and Yarhi-Milo (2017); O’Rourke (2018); Carnegie and Carson (2019, 2020); Downes and O’Rourke (2016).

\(^2\)A new dataset finds that the U.S. intervened covertly to affect the results of foreign democratic elections 6 times from 1989 - 2000 (Bulgaria 1991, Albania 1992, Romania 1993, Cambodia 1993, Slovakia 1998, and Israel 1999). These interventions occurred twenty-four times between 1946 and 2000, in addition to six additional overt interventions that included significant covert components (Levin, 2016). Note that the definition of democracy is debated, as we discuss subsequently (Doyle, 2005; Forsythe, 1992; Kinsella, 2005; Rosato, 2003).

\(^3\)See, for example, Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, 221.

\(^4\)See, for example, James and Mitchell, 1995; Rosato, 2003, 591.

\(^5\)See, for example, Russett, 1994.
norms vis-à-vis other democracies, that they oppose the use of covert action, and that they especially disapprove of covert action against fellow democracies.

We show here that these assumptions are wrong. Even if leaders conduct illiberal policies covertly to escape public opprobrium, the mass public has fewer qualms about covert action than normative theories of the democratic peace would suggest. Further, even if the public espouses liberal norms, their commitment to these norms flounder when policies are conducted in secret. Moreover, even though the public cares about transparency, some segments of it care less than others. Indeed, even those who value transparency the most still wrestle with a trade-off between this normative commitment and the instrumental benefits they perceive covert actions to hold. Finally, our findings suggest that leaders may pursue covert operations against democracies due to the belief that the public will be more likely to support them if their actions are revealed, and that they are correct in this assessment (Russett, 1994).

We reach these conclusions using an original survey experiment that enables us to uncover public preferences about the use of force against democracies, to explore the extent to which these opinions shift when the military mission is conducted covertly, and to probe the underlying mechanisms. Our experimental set-up also allows us to disentangle whether public opinion about covert action is driven by the content of the activity versus the secrecy of the activity. For example, in Kennan’s statement above, did he mean that the public dislikes a lack of transparency or a particular type of behavior that the public would imagine would be taken covertly (e.g. assassinating leaders)?

Our results suggest that, consistent with prior experimental studies, Americans are reluctant to attack fellow liberal democracies. However, we find an increase in public support for identical missions against liberal democracies when they are carried out covertly. Employing a series of nonparametric causal mediation models and structural topic models analyzing how participants discuss covert interventions, we observe that the bump in public approval for covert missions is attributable to pragmatic considerations, such as the perceived cost of the mission and its likelihood of success, rather than concerns about morality or reputation. Yet we also find that many participants strongly value transparency, and show how they struggle with whether to prioritize this normative commitment versus countervailing instrumental considerations.

Our paper makes both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, our experimental approach allows us to overcome the endogeneity concerns inherent in the use of observational data.\footnote{Though see Myrick (2020).}
Military operations may be conducted haphazardly (Edelstein, 2008; Rapport, 2015), but are not undertaken randomly, making it hard to isolate the causal effects of interest. If the purpose of covert intervention is to escape the prying eyes of the mass public, it is unsurprising that a paucity of data exists on support for covert war, which we would need to adjudicate between competing theoretical expectations about what publics want. Moreover, the role of regime type is inherently intertwined with many other variables such as common interests (Gowa, 2011), political ideology (Owen IV, 2010), and the likelihood of being an ally or trading partner (Geipi and Griesdorf, 2001). Our approach allows us to clearly separate the effects of these confounding variables.

Additionally, we depart from existing experimental work on the democratic peace by distinguishing between overt and covert uses of force. Doing so allows us test whether the apparent public reluctance to support force against other democracies is due to the public nature of the action or the use of force itself.\footnote{While Rousseau (2005) asks survey respondents about their level of support for a secret military operation, it does not experimentally manipulate the level of secrecy, nor does it explore mechanisms explaining this support aside from moral concerns.} Our experiment thus provides well-identified results that help explain why American leaders often choose to pursue covert military operations against fellow democracies, a task that is particularly important in light of recent work emphasizing the salient role of public opinion in leaders’ foreign policy decision-making (Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020).

Finally, this study has implications for the role of norms in international relations more broadly. We find consistent evidence that norms against attacking other democracies exist, but also that they break down in certain situations. Specifically, we identify covert settings (Carson, 2016; Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 2017) as an important area in which these norms flounder. At the same time, we also reveal the outward bounds of covert action. Our results indicate that when norms against attacking democracies are no longer at stake – such as when the target is a dictatorship – the covert sphere ceases to be preferable for conducting military missions. Moreover, we demonstrate that norms of transparency often clash with norms of a democratic peace, as we discuss further subsequently. We therefore identify a more nuanced and contextual understanding about how norms shape public opinion (Herrmann and Shannon, 2001).

In what follows, we develop and empirically test a theory of public support for covert operations. Since most analyses of covert force are conducted in the context of the democratic peace, we begin by situating our theory within this literature. We then discuss the factors that may drive public preferences toward the overt and covert use of force. Next, we describe our experimental design and present our
results, along with evidence of the mechanisms driving our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our study, especially for debates about the use of force more broadly, along with directions for future research.

The Democratic Peace and the Role of Public Opinion

In its most basic form, the dyadic democratic peace thesis posits that democratic states rarely go to war with one another. Two strands of this literature exist, which attribute this phenomenon to different mechanisms: the normative and the structural. In this paper, we focus on the normative mechanism, whereby democratic societies venerate liberal norms of non-violent conflict resolution and respect for individual autonomy, which their citizens externalize in their interactions with other democracies. In this sense, the normative democratic peace rests on public opinion, based on citizens’ moral reluctance to, as Tomz and Weeks (p. 2) put it:

“...overturn policies that the citizens of other democracies have chosen freely. Coercively interfering with another democracy would, by this argument, count as an illegitimate assault on the freedom and self-determination of individuals. In contrast, democratic publics might have fewer moral qualms about using force to reverse the will of a dictator who has imposed foreign and domestic policies without popular consent.”

Because democratic publics perceive fellow democracies as less threatening, they resist forceful intervention against other democracies (Owen, 2000; Hayes, 2012). They also limit leaders’ abilities to do so, since democratic leaders must mobilize public opinion in order to use force. Thus, “insofar as elites’ foreign policy decisions are constrained by public preferences, mass opinion helps to maintain the democratic peace” (Johns and Davies, 2012, 5).

Despite the plethora of evidence suggesting the existence of a democratic peace, opponents of this thesis have pointed to an important empirical anomaly: if democratic countries do not use military force against one another, what explains democracies’ covert use of military force against other democracies? Indeed, the observation that democratic countries do so appears to pose a particularly strong challenge to the normative explanation of the democratic peace, as it indicates a failure on the part of democracies both to respect the autonomy of other democracies and to resort to non-violent means of conflict.

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8We follow Katzenstein (1996, 5) in defining norms as “collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors within a given society.”
However, proponents of the normative democratic peace have raised several counter-arguments to the claim that covert war against democracies poses an important challenge to the theory. First, they argue that target states of these covert actions are not truly liberal democracies. Instead, target states may be “anocracies” (Russett, 1994), or simply not “well-established liberal democracies” (Doyle, 1986). Second, even when using covert actions against other true democracies, these states “did not fight in an organized fashion” (Russett, 1994, 123), because soldiers of the democratic state did not participate in any direct combat on the ground, thereby generating little risk of casualties. Finally, these scholars counter that covert intervention by democracies actually constitutes evidence in favor of the normative argument because leaders of democratic regimes chose to act covertly due to the normative constraints imposed by their publics (Starr, 1997, 158).

In sum, the literature on the normative democratic peace has emphasized the link between public preferences and inter-democratic overt peace, while also using these same public preferences to explain the prevalence of inter-democratic covert war. This inconsistency exists in part because the content of these public preferences are rarely directly explored. We know little regarding how the public thinks about the covert use of force in general, or how public preferences about force shift when military missions are conducted covertly. Without these micro-foundations and scope conditions, it is difficult to tell whether decisions to use force against democracies using covert means allow leaders to avoid the public eye. We also do not know whether leaders correctly anticipate that doing so will be consistent with the public’s preferences.

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9See Downes and Lilley (2010) for an overview. Some argue for a more nuanced interpretation; for example, Poznan-sky (2015) claims that if decision-makers in one democracy anticipate regime collapse in another democracy then the constraints of the democratic peace will be negated.

10Two main institutional explanations also bear on this debate. First, according to the “checks and balances” argument, since mobilization for war in democracies is a slow, complex, and public process, democracies have more time for peaceful negotiation (Russett, 1993, 38, 40). This suggests that democracies might use force covertly to prevent veto players from blocking actions that target other democracies. Second, selectorate theory argues that democratic leaders are elected to power based on a large winning coalition and so must avoid policy failures such as losing a war to maintain support. Since democracies are therefore more cautious in selecting targets and only initiate wars they are likely to win, they avoid fighting other democracies (De Mesquita et al., 1999; Lake, 1992). Downes and Lilley (2010) propose that covert intervention is thus more common when failure is unlikely to be discovered or when leaders act on behalf of private actors, since covert interventions are not bound by the need to deliver public goods to the democratic majority.
Liberal Norms and Interventions

Our central aim in this paper is to identify the precise function of liberal norms in theories of the democratic peace, and the extent to which these norms are followed when compliance is unobserved by others. Prior work suggests that leaders make decisions about whether to choose covert or overt operations based on their assessments of the public’s likely reaction (Kim, 2002; O'Rourke, 2018; Gibbs, 1995). If leaders conduct covert operations against democracies to try to escape public opprobrium, as proponents of the normative democratic peace theory argue, would they be correct in this assessment? Or, would leaders be right to anticipate that the public is amenable to covert operations against democracies? More generally, how and when do liberal norms shape opinions about military intervention?

Normative Concerns

One possibility is that citizens are motivated almost entirely by institutionalized normative concerns that guide their behavior across situations. Normative accounts of the democratic peace hold that the internalization of democratic norms, such as respect for individual freedoms and non-violent conflict resolution with like-minded countries, reduces democratic publics’ willingness to support military operations against fellow liberal democracies. Citizens in democracies may believe that disputes should be handled peacefully, and that citizens in other democracies believe this too, and thus do not support war against fellow democratic regimes. Citizens in democracies may also have shared interests, and therefore think that their disputes can and should be resolved peacefully (Russett and Oneal, 2001).

Similarly, these dynamics could also be driven by concerns about rights and values. For instance, a shared commitment to liberal norms may make citizens favor more peaceful conflict resolution with other liberal states. Or, citizens may believe that it is morally repugnant to attack fellow democracies or liberal societies. Doing so could undermine democratic values; for example, if the leader of another country were democratically elected, overthrowing that leader would represent an affront to liberal democratic principles. Especially if those societies respect human rights, such an intervention could undermine rights and should not be favored by the democratic public (Donnelly, 1995).

Liberal norms may also play a role in determining support for covert versus overt operations, for two reasons. First, if liberal norms are both institutionalized and internalized, the level of public support for military operations against other liberal democracies should be low regardless of whether the international community can observe compliance with them. Because citizens would feel that
maintaining peace with other liberal democracies is the right thing to do, the visibility of the operation to outside actors would not make them feel otherwise.

Next, the preference for the liberal norm of transparency may influence citizens' views. Transparency is fundamental to democracy, as a clear and open political system along with free speech and press underpin liberal democratic societies (Dahl, 1991). Some have argued that transparency allows democracies to ascertain other democracies' types and therefore avoid fighting each other (De Mesquita and Lalman, 1992), contributing to the democratic peace. Citizens in a liberal democracy might therefore oppose the covert use of force due to its secretive and non-democratic nature, and their belief that liberal democracies should behave in a transparent manner with other liberal democracies. Covert operations may be seen as corrupt, and indeed, covert action is often presumed to be illegal simply because of its secretive nature (Reisman and Baker, 1992). Thus, this logic expects citizens to oppose both covert and overt military interventions against other liberal democracies, and to maintain more negative assessments of covert operations against democracies than against dictatorships.

Another possible pathway linking norms regarding the use of force against liberal democracies to support for such operations is the fear – real or perceived – that publicly violating a shared norm could induce a hypocrisy cost. Recent work shows that the public values the international community’s opinion and cares about their state’s reputation in many settings (Brutger and Kertzer, 2018), especially for compliance with international norms and laws (Tomz, 2008). Public opinion in liberal democracies might therefore be shaped by expectations about what others think. In this account, the norm of not using military force against liberal democracies would be upheld in visible arenas because the state could be sanctioned otherwise. However, when the use of force is moved into the covert realm, violators can no longer “be named and shamed” for breaking the norm (O’Rourke, 2018; Poznansky, 2020, 41-2).

Citizens of a liberal democracy thus might favor an intervention against another liberal democracy, but fear allegations of applying a double standard by promoting liberal democracies around the world, yet attacking those same countries once they pose a threat. As a result, citizens in such democracies may seek to conduct these missions in secret. Indeed, as Poznansky (2020) shows, concerns about hypocrisy costs have led US decision-makers during the Cold War and beyond to conduct military interventions covertly. Citizens guided by this logic should thus be against attacking liberal democracies overtly, but should be more likely to support such an operation if it is conducted in secret.
**Instrumental Concerns**

While the two mechanisms above focus on the role of norms in affecting public support for military missions against liberal democracies, citizens’ preferences over the nature of the operation could also be shaped by instrumental calculations. These might include concerns about the operation’s human and financial costs, the risk of retaliation, and the likelihood of its success (Reisman and Baker, 1992, 14). We consider each in turn.

First, human and financial costs could shape the public’s views of military operations, as citizens’ support for war — and the incumbents responsible — plummets as battlefield fatalities mount (Mueller, 1973; Eichenberg, Stoll and Lebo, 2006; Karol and Miguel, 2007; Kertzer, 2016) and the financial cost of the war increases. Both the total amount of money spent (Geys, 2010) and the type of financial burden (Flores-Macías and Kreps, 2016) negatively impact public opinion, particularly due to extensive media attention. These factors are especially important for our purposes because both fighting and losing wars are thought to be costlier for democracies (De Mesquita et al., 1999), which mobilize more resources from their economies (Lake, 1992) and are thus more selective about the wars they fight (Reiter and Stam, 2002). Additionally, covert operations may demand fewer resources since politicians have incentives to minimize personnel and equipment to avoid the operation’s detection, and may result in fewer casualties (O’Rourke, 2018). The more soldiers die in war, the greater the likelihood that the operation will be discovered. Finally, covert conduct may decrease the post-intervention military and economic costs associated with governing the target country, as the covert nature of the operation allows them to avoid those responsibilities (O’Rourke, 2018). Therefore, the public may believe that covert operations are less costly and so be more willing to engage in covert warfare against other democracies.

A second factor that might influence citizens’ views regarding military operations is the operations’ likely impact on retaliation, which is shaped by both regime type and the operation’s level of secrecy. The democratic peace literature expects that citizens of liberal democracies view other democracies as less threatening than non-democratic regimes because these citizens share their liberal norms and thus will not attack them.公共s in democracies are more difficult to mobilize and thus more effectively restrain their leaders, minimizing the danger of retaliation (Owen, 2000). Moreover, whether an operation is conducted secretly could influence the perceived threat of retaliation since acting covertly provides plausible deniability to an aggressor, obscuring its identity. Many covert operations involve

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11See Avant and Sigelman (2010) on the use of private military contractors as a means to render the human costs of war more opaque.
collaborations with third-parties that are well positioned to take the blame if the operation fails, thereby further decreasing the target’s ability to gauge who orchestrated the operation. Indeed, reviews of the decision-making processes that took place prior to American covert operations claim that fear of retaliation was a significant factor shaping U.S. leaders’ choices to act covertly (O’Rourke, 2018; Prados, 2011). Secrecy may thus reduce the perceived threat of retaliation regardless of whether the target is a democracy or a dictatorship.

Third, the public may show stronger support for successful operations (Feaver, Gelpi and Reifler, 2005), and regime type and the level of transparency both influence the likelihood of success. The same factors that make wars less costly for democracies, described previously, also lead democracies to win more wars (O’Rourke, 2018). Clandestine wars in particular tend to be more successful against liberal democracies since leaders in attacked liberal democracies are accountable to larger public selectorates and may thus be compelled to fight harder to remain in office. Liberal democracies can thus marshal greater resources to counter the operations, devoting more effort to the mission. A covert operation, by contrast, can challenge the regime without detection, allowing leaders to reach a bargain without incurring audience costs (O’Rourke, 2018). Moreover, even if covert operations fail at higher rates than overt operations (O’Rourke, 2018, 53), citizens may not know or believe this to be true. If citizens care primarily about the efficacy of the operation, and believe that covert operations are more likely to be successful, we should observe that conducting an operation in a covert manner increases the U.S. public’s support for the mission against liberal democracies.

Untangling these mechanisms is critical for understanding leaders’ decision calculus. If the normative mechanism is operative, and leaders correctly anticipate this, they may attack democracies covertly to avoid public opprobrium. However, if hypocrisy costs guide public opinion, and leaders know this, then leaders may opt to attack democracies in secret in line with the public’s preferences. If instrumental factors govern public opinion, such that the public believes that covert operations are less costly, less likely to result in retaliation, or more successful, leaders may not rely on public opinion in deciding whether to use secrecy. Since leaders have more information than the public, they may assess a given potential operation on these dimensions and select their actions accordingly since they may understand that ultimately the public cares about the end result.

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12 This represents a kinetic version of what cybersecurity scholars frequently call the “attribution problem” (Rid and Buchanan, 2015; Shandler et al., 2022).
Empirical Analysis

We now explore the mechanisms undergirding the normative democratic peace. To sum up the logic of our previous discussion, if we find that our participants dislike the idea of fighting democracies regardless of whether the operation is covert, it would suggest that our participants believe that it is fundamentally wrong to attack other democracies no matter how the operation is carried out. However, if we find that our participants are more willing to attack democracies if it can be done secretly, this would suggest a more nuanced explanation for when and why we observe a democratic peace.

Research Design

To test our theory, we fielded an experiment on 1,803 American adults recruited via the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform in Autumn 2015. We used this platform because these surveys can be run faster and at lower expense while still being “more representative of the general population” than other convenience samples frequently employed by researchers (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012). Indeed, many researchers have shown that MTurk can successfully replicate other published studies that used nationally representative samples and that the MTurk population behaves similarly to other populations.\textsuperscript{13}

Participants were each paid $1 for their participation. After the consent process, subjects were asked several individual-level characteristic questions borrowed from Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser (1999), as well as questions measuring their level of international trust and militant assertiveness (Brewer, 2004). After these questions, they were presented with the following introductory screen:

On the next page, you will be asked to read about a hypothetical scenario. You will read about a situation our country has faced many times in the past and will probably face again. Different leaders have handled the situation in different ways. We will describe one approach US leaders have taken, and ask you for your views. Please read the scenario and imagine how you would feel if these events were happening today.

\textsuperscript{13}For example, Mullinix et al. (2015) find a correlation between an MTurk sample and a nationally representative sample of 0.75 and Coppock (2019) finds a correlation of 0.81. On the benefits of MTurk for experimental research, see Berinsky, Huber and Lenz (2012); Buhmester, Kwang and Gosling (2011); Paolacci, Chandler and Ipeirotis (2010); Rand (2012); Mason and Suri (2012). Some studies have shown that MTurk subscribers differ from the national population in the United States on some dimensions such as race, gender, age, education, and political party identification.
The experiment included a hypothetical scenario in which the U.S. president was considering executing a military operation against another country that poses a significant threat to U.S. interests. It read:

A US president deliberated with his advisors about whether to conduct a military operation against Country B. At the time, Country B was a [democracy, with free and fair elections and a history of respecting the rights of all its citizens / democracy, with free and fair elections, but a history of not respecting the rights of all of its citizens / dictatorship, without free and fair elections, and without a history of respecting the rights of all of its citizens]. Country B had a moderate-sized military, and was neither a major trading partner nor an ally of the United States, but posed a significant threat to U.S. security and economic interests.

The goal of the operation, which involved the use of military force, was to [overthrow / collect classified information about / provide military assistance for those who opposed] the government of Country B. If the operation succeeded, the threat to U.S. interests would have significantly decreased. If the operation failed, it could have led to retaliation against U.S. interests abroad.

After deliberation with his close advisors, the president decided to authorize the proposed operation against Country B. He decided that the operation [would be carried out secretly and would not be disclosed after its completion. National security experts said that it was highly unlikely to ever be revealed / would be carried out publicly and the U.S. would disclose that it was behind the operation. National security experts said that it would be announced to the public right after the operation began].

The scenario manipulated three types of variables. The first, “regime type,” was intended to capture the importance of the target state’s regime type (Country B) to respondents’ level of support for the mission, holding all other variables constant. While most experiments that manipulate regime type typically use two treatment conditions, democracy or autocracy, our experiment used three: the “liberal democracy” treatment depicted Country B’s regime as a “democracy, with free and fair elections and a history of respecting the rights of all its citizens.” The “illiberal democracy” treatment portrayed Country B’s regime as a “democracy, with free and fair elections, but a history of not respecting the
rights of all of its citizens.” Finally, the third treatment, “illiberal dictatorship,” depicted Country B’s regime as a “dictatorship, without free and fair elections, and without a history of respecting the rights of all of its citizens.” The three treatment conditions allow us to compare the importance of democratic norms to democratic procedures and institutions in the public support for the use of force.

Specifically, comparing the “liberal democracy” treatment to the “illiberal democracy” treatment allows us to hold constant the effects of the regime’s democratic institutions while varying whether the target state was “liberal”. In contrast, by comparing the “illiberal democracy” treatment to the “illiberal dictatorship” treatment, we hold constant the target state’s “illiberalness,” but vary the nature of its domestic institutions. By independently randomizing the target’s regime type and liberalness, the experiment permits us to test whether support for this mission depended on the norms of the target state or its regime type (i.e., institutional configuration).

Testing for the relative effect of the presence of democratic elections compared liberal norms is important for a variety of reasons. First, it allows us to probe which of these two features is actually driving citizens’ preferences against the overt use of force against democracies that other experiments have shown. Second, according to some explanations for the democratic peace, citizens of liberal democracies will view only countries that share their respect for liberal norms as members of their ingroup, suggesting that preferences about the use of force will be qualitatively different when the target is an illiberal democracy versus a liberal democracy. Finally, one of the arguments that proponents of the democracy peace theory have raised is that although covert actions have been taken against illiberal democracies, they have rarely if ever been taken against other truly liberal democracies. Applied to this study, this would suggest that perhaps citizens of liberal democracies are significantly less likely to support covert use of force against another liberal democracy, but more likely to do so against an illiberal democracy.

The next factor we manipulated concerns the goal of the mission. Here subjects were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions: “overthrow” / “provide military assistance for those who opposed” / or “collect classified information about” the government of Country B. The different treatments were intended to test whether holding all other factors constant, participants would support certain goals of covert missions but not others. We are most interested in exploring the effects of secrecy and regime type on support for overthrowing Country B’s regime, because this operation involves direct and brute use of the intervening state’s own military force (as opposed to supporting the target state’s

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14 The overthrow condition is not the same as the transformative interventions in Saunders (2009) because here the aggressor is not installing a new regime.
military force), and thus potentially infringes most forcefully on others’ rights. The other mission goal
conditions, however, allow us to establish whether our hypotheses hold for a wider range of policy goals,
and thus speak to the generalizability of our findings.15

Finally, to be able to adjudicate between the different sets of observable implications we posed
above, we manipulated whether the mission was carried out overtly or covertly. Respondents who
received the “covert” treatment were told that the mission “would be carried out secretly and would
not be disclosed after its completion. National security experts said that it was highly unlikely to ever
be revealed.” The overt treatment read “[the mission] would be carried out publicly and the U.S. would
disclose that it was behind the operation. National security experts said that it would be announced to
the public right after the operation began.” Importantly, in both conditions the mission began as a secret
operation due to the concern that if the operation were overt from its inception, citizens might view
its effectiveness differently, which could confound our results. The differences between the treatments
concern, first, the U.S. taking responsibility for the mission in the overt treatment but not the covert
one; and second, the public becoming aware of the operation almost immediately after its launch in the
overt but not the covert condition.

Immediately after the scenario subjects were asked, “Given the facts described in the scenario, do
you support the U.S. government’s actions?” using a 7 point sliding scale ranging from “Definitely Not”
to “Yes, Absolutely.” To gain leverage on how subjects reason about their support or objection to the
proposed mission, subjects were asked to explain their decision in their own words. They were also
given a battery of questions intended to understand the degree to which a variety of factors affected
their decision.

Results

We present our results in three stages. We begin with a presentation of our average treatment effects,
showing how covert action increases support for interventions against liberal democracies. We then show
that although participants generally emphasize the importance of transparency across a range of issue
areas, some participants value transparency significantly less than others, and this is the subset of the
population who reward covert action the most. Finally, we turn to the question of causal mechanisms,
conducting a two-pronged analysis. First, we estimate a series of moderated mediation models to show

15 An important scope condition on our findings is that they are more likely to hold the more forceful the mission. Our
results are strongest in the treatment condition in which the military mission’s goal is to overthrow a leader, and some
of our results are no longer significant when we focus on missions with a goal of merely collecting sensitive information.
This is in line with the democratic peace theory, which is also more applicable to settings in which military force is used.
Figure 1: The differing effects of secrecy on support for interventions against liberal democracies versus illiberal dictatorships

(a) Cell means

(b) Difference in difference

Note: The top panel (Figure 1a) shows that secrecy increases support for interventions against illiberal democracies, and decreases support for interventions against illiberal dictatorships; similar patterns are detected in terms of respondents’ expressed likelihood of voting for the president. In each half of the panel, the average level of support when the mission is conducted overtly is shown on the left-hand side of each pair, and the average level of support when the mission is conducted covertly is shown on the right-hand side of each pair (with 90% and 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals surrounding each point estimate, alongside p values from bootstrapped tests). The bottom panel (Figure 1b) shows that there is a statistically significant difference in difference in the effect of secrecy between the two regime types, and that the magnitude of the difference increases with the severity of the intervention.
that although high- and low-transparency individuals evaluate covert interventions differently, even high-transparency individuals wrestle with tradeoffs between their normative commitments and the instrumental benefits they perceive covert interventions to bring. Second, we turn to structural topic modeling to analyze the rationales our participants give for their decisions, showing participants in the covert condition were systematically less likely to bring up the regime type of the target.

**Support for Intervention in the Covert Realm**

Figure 1a presents the average level of support for the intervention, conditioning on the regime type of the target and whether the intervention was conducted overtly (the left item in each pair) or covertly (the right item in each pair). The plot shows that consistent with a normative democratic peace, the U.S. public dislikes intervening against democracies compared to dictatorships regardless of whether the intervention is conducted covertly.

However, even though our participants tend to favor intervening against dictatorships over democracies, we also find that support for intervening against liberal democracies increases from 3.14 in the overt condition to 3.36 in the covert one. This suggests that while the public opposes the operation overall, it is more likely to support the operation when it is conducted covertly than when it is conducted overtly.

How politically consequential is this change in support? We asked respondents whether they would be willing to vote for the President who carried out the intervention, whether they would support impeachment proceedings against that President, and whether they would support congressional hearings about the intervention, all on seven-point Likert scales ranging from “Definitely not” to “Absolutely.” While we find no effect on support for impeachment or a Congressional hearing, we find a substantively large difference in the self-reported likelihood of voting for the President: participants were more likely to indicate that they were willing to vote for the President when intervening covertly against a liberal democracy than when the intervention was overt (3.42, versus 3.22). This is particularly important in light of recent findings that public opinion impacts elites’ foreign policy decision-making (Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020).

In the context of the democratic peace, our findings may help to explain why American leaders have repeatedly chosen to conduct covert military operations against fellow liberal democracies when national security was claimed to be at stake. As our results indicate, although military operations

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16 For presentational purposes, we pool across the different types of interventions.
against liberal democracies are unpopular in general, a clear and significant bump in public support for such operations emerges when they are conducted covertly. Rather than avoiding public opprobrium by carrying out covert missions, then, leaders may correctly anticipate that they will receive greater support from the public by doing so. Leaders may recognize that the public often finds out about secret operations, and is more likely to back the operation if it was conducted in this manner. This finding stands in direct opposition to many proponents of the normative democratic peace (e.g. Russett (1994)) who argue that leaders turn to covert action to avoid incurring the wrath of their own public, who may find such actions distasteful.

One possible explanation for these results would suggest that they merely reflect the American public’s overall preference in favor of covert missions, and that the democratic regime of the target has little effect on the increased support we observe for such missions. To test whether this is the case, we evaluate support for covert activities against illiberal democracies, as well as against dictatorships. We find that support for military interventions against illiberal democracies does not significantly vary based on whether the intervention is conducted covertly, and we find that support for an operation against an illiberal dictatorship decreases when it is covert (4.0) rather than overt (4.23); our participants prefer to intervene covertly against liberal democracies, but overtly against dictatorships. Figure 1b shows that the difference-in-difference in the effect of secrecy between liberal democracies and illiberal dictatorships is positive and statistically significant, and increases in magnitude with the severity of the type of intervention. In Appendix §1.1, we use a decomposition strategy to show that the target state’s liberalism matters more for participants weighing the merits of covert action than the presence of democratic institutions per se.

Moreover, we observe that presidents who intervene covertly against dictatorships pay a price: respondents were less likely to be willing to vote for the President when she intervened covertly against a dictatorship compared to when the intervention was overt (3.96, versus 4.18). This indicates that support for covert missions is conditioned by the target of the regime, and that American citizens are willing to give the president a blank check to conduct military missions behind closed doors only when those missions are conducted against liberal democracies.

The Conditioning Effect of Transparency

Our results reveal that participants are more willing to sacrifice transparency in support of covert operations when the target is a liberal democracy than when the target is either an illiberal democracy
or a dictatorship. Still, it is thus far unclear to what extent our subjects think about liberal norms in the way accounts of the normative democratic peace postulate, and if so, whether individuals find it acceptable to attack fellow democracies covertly. Perhaps the strength of norms of transparency varies across the population. If this is true, it would seem to challenge top-down structural variants of constructivism (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein, 1996; Meyer et al., 1997; Wendt, 1999), which would expect a relatively high degree of intersubjective agreement across actors. After all, they are all subject to the same socialization processes and should thus arrive at a relative consensus regarding their preferences for not attacking democracies. If instead we see a divergence of opinion, our results would be more in line with the public opinion literature, which tends to find much more heterogeneity in views (e.g. Holsti, 2004; Berinsky, 2009; Kertzer and Brutger, 2016).

To answer these questions, we begin by investigating how much our subjects value transparency as a norm to be protected. Specifically, we examine responses to our questions about subjects’ general attitudes towards transparency, which we included as part of a longer battery of demographic characteristics and pre-treatment covariates. Participants were asked: “How important do you think it is for the public to be informed of the government’s actions in the following issue areas?” and then presented with a series of issues, including the content of trade agreements, a military invasion of another country, the air power/bombing of another country, the overthrowing of a leader of another country, or the imposition of economic sanctions on another country. Answers were given on a sliding scale from 1-5 ranging from “not important” to “very important.”

As shown in Figure 2(a), subjects viewed transparency as an important factor across all issue areas, though people cared slightly less about being informed about trade relative to other issues. Indeed, the average response in the first quartile is a “4” – only one step down from “extremely important.” Further, the reliability of the measure is high ($\alpha = 0.85$), which indicates that respondents’ views are very consistent; that is, they generally value transparency either a lot on all issues, or not very much on all issues. We thus combine the answers across all issue areas to create a single transparency scale, the skewed distribution of which is shown in Figure 2(b).17

The importance with which subjects view transparency suggests that a greater willingness to attack liberal democracies covertly entailed a real sacrifice in this area. At the same time, however, not all

17Importantly, this transparency scale appears to be relatively distinct from standard demographic characteristics and political orientations (with gender: $r = -0.04$, education: $r = -0.01$, partisanship: $r = -0.08$, left-right political ideology: $r = -0.11$, interest in foreign affairs $r = 0.15$, international trust: $r = -0.03$). The strongest correlations are for militant assertiveness (hawks care less about transparency than doves) and trust in government (the higher your trust in government, the less you care about transparency), but the correlations are still low enough ($r = -0.25$ and $r = -0.26$, respectively), that we should think about it as a distinct construct.
Figure 2: Participants display a strong norm of transparency

(a) Importance of transparency across issue areas

(b) Distribution of attitudes towards transparency

Note: Panel a shows that subjects believe that transparency is very important across issue areas. Panel b shows the overall distribution of our respondents’ belief in the importance of transparency.
subjects value transparency equally. We thus explore whether those who value transparency most are, on average, less likely to support covert missions, whereas those who value transparency the least are more likely to support covert missions regardless of whether they are conducted against democracies or dictatorships.

To do so, we estimate a regression model in which the effect of the covert treatment interacts with participants’ transparency scores, controlling for a series of pre-treatment covariates (gender, age, trust in government, military assertiveness, etc.). We find that consistent with our expectations, the interaction term is negative and significant ($p < 0.025$); as illustrated in Figure 3(a), subjects in the high transparency group are significantly less likely to support covert missions against a liberal democracy compared to subjects in the low transparency group. In particular, our results reveal that subjects who care about transparency norms the most are indifferent between attacking liberal democracies overtly or covertly, while those who do not hold this value strongly prefer covert interventions to overt ones.

As shown in Figure 3(b), a similar pattern holds when we probe support for covertness against dictatorships among the high and low transparency groups. Specifically, we find a strongly significant negative interaction between the covert treatment and the transparency measure when the target is a dictatorship ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, subjects who care the least about transparency are more likely to prefer intervening covertly against a dictatorship (as in the case of liberal democracies), but subjects who care the most about transparency appear to “punish” covert interventions against dictatorships, although the confidence intervals here are wide.

Overall, these findings suggest that individual differences in our subjects’ attitudes toward transparency norms have an important moderating effect on the public’s willingness to support covert missions both against democracies and dictatorships. Citizens appear to hold these values and to make decisions based on the strength of their beliefs. However, subjects also value transparency highly overall, suggesting that many people make real trade-offs when deciding to support covert missions. That is, they seem to do so even though the mission violates transparency norms. We next turn to a mediation analysis examine whether citizens make this sacrifice and if so, why they willing to do this.

**Testing the Mechanisms: Mediation Models**

Why does conducting an intervention covertly against liberal democracies bolster public support, despite the loss of transparency associated with this type of a mission? Broadly, we probe whether enthusiasm for such covert missions stems from normative reasons — namely, the perception that secrecy allows
Figure 3: Conditional effects of covert action on orientations towards transparency

(a) Liberal democracy
(b) Illiberal dictatorship

Note: Against both liberal democracies (panel a) and illiberal dictatorships (panel b), individuals who place a high value on transparency are not significantly more supportive of interventions when conducted covertly, while those who place less of an emphasis on transparency are significantly more supportive of covert missions. The plot shows bootstrapped 90% and 95% confidence intervals.
democracies to violate liberal norms while maintaining the façade of a norm follower — or is a result of more pragmatic considerations — the belief that covert missions are less costly, less escalatory, and more likely to succeed.

To evaluate these claims, we asked respondents how much they thought the operation would cost financially, on a scale from 1-4 (from not expensive at all to very expensive). We also queried the perceived likelihood that the U.S. military would suffer fatalities as part of the operation, on a scale from 1-5. Next, we asked what respondents thought the effect of the mission would be on the expected probability of retaliation on the same scale. To determine the public’s attitudes about efficacy, we asked how much respondents thought the operation would benefit American national security interests on a scale of 1-7 (not at all to very much), as well as how likely they thought the operation would be to succeed, from 1-7 (very unlikely to very likely). Then, to capture reputation as a potential mediator we asked respondents first how supportive they thought the American public would be of the government’s actions, and then how supportive the international community would be, both on a scale from 1-7 from very unsupportive to very supportive. We also inquired what effect they thought the operation would have on America’s standing in the world on a scale from 1-7, from definitely hurt to definitely helped. Finally, we asked whether people thought that attacking democracies covertly was less morally repugnant. Specifically, respondents told us how morally wrong they thought it would be for the United States to carry out the military operation, specifying whether it would be not at all wrong, not too wrong, somewhat wrong, very wrong, or extremely wrong.

Figure 4 estimates a series of nonparametric causal mediation models (Imai et al., 2011) in which we explore the extent to which the effects of the covert treatment are mediated by the series of causal pathways outlined above. Given the significant moderating role of transparency attitudes, we carry out a two-pronged analysis. First, we mean-split the transparency scale and estimate separate causal mediation models within each subsample, beginning with subjects who value transparency the least in our sample, and then turning to their high-transparency counterparts. These analyses allow us to investigate how the effect of covert action changes beliefs about the morality of the mission, the degree of public and international support, the mission’s costs, likelihood of success, national security benefits, and the United States’ standing in the world. Second, we conduct a formal moderated mediation test, in which we test whether the average causal mediation effects vary with subjects’ stated importance of transparency.

The results show three interesting findings. First, as expected, high- and low-transparency par-
Figure 4: Why are covert interventions against liberal democracies more popular?

Note: The figure presents average causal mediation effects (ACMEs) for both participants who place a high emphasis on transparency (point estimates for whom are shown with solid circles), and who place a low emphasis on transparency (shown with white squares); all ACMEs also show 95% quasi-Bayesian confidence intervals derived from 1500 simulations.
Participants differ significantly on norms-related mechanisms: high-transparency individuals see covert intervention as significantly less moral ($p < 0.088$), and as likely to induce public disapproval ($p < 0.050$) than low-transparency individuals. Second, the two subgroups do not significantly differ in instrumental mechanisms like costs and success: both high and low-transparency individuals have positive and significant ACMEs for those mediators, even though the direct effects significantly differ. This implies that both high- and low-transparency individuals think that covert actions are cheaper and more likely to succeed. In other words, high-transparency individuals oppose covert actions despite perceiving these instrumental benefits. The results thus indicate how those who value transparency the most and least also calculate the normative trade-off between attacking democracies covertly rather than overtly. While those who place little value on transparency may not perceive a large trade-off, those who value it highly are often willing to sacrifice this benefit in favor of higher rates of success and greater cost-effectiveness.

**Testing the Mechanisms: Structural Topic Models**

To further explore why our participants generally prefer the covert use of force against liberal democracies, we turn to automated content analysis of participants’ open ended responses. Specifically, we examine the considerations mentioned by our participants when asked to explain their support for the use of force in the experimental scenario. Participants were then presented with a number of questions probing their beliefs about the mission, including an open-ended response question, in which they were asked to explain whether they “think it is acceptable for democracies like the United States to conduct missions like this one? Why or why not?” We use Structural Topic Models (STMs) (Roberts et al., 2014) to investigate whether the answers offered by our participants in the “liberal democracy” target condition systematically vary when we move from the overt to the covert use of force.

Structural topic models are an unsupervised form of automated text analysis, in which each text excerpt is modeled as a mixture of multiple “topics,” or distributions of words. Structural topic models differ from supervised text analysis methods in that the model discovers topics in the text without being directed by the researcher, and they differ from traditional mixed-membership models like Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) by also leveraging metadata — in our context, this is information about the treatment conditions to which our participants were randomly assigned.\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\)See Roberts et al. (2014) for more details on the application of topic modeling to political science, as well as Brutger and Kertzer (2018) for an additional empirical application.
Figure 5: Change in topical prevalence in the covert condition

Note: The figure presents the change in topical prevalence from the overt to the covert condition for democracies. The results show that participants in the liberal democracy treatment who were given the covert versus overt treatments significantly differ from one another on two topics: the first about anti-interventionist sentiments (higher in the overt condition than the covert one), and the second pragmatic arguments about the realities of international politics (higher in the covert condition than the overt one). The plot also shows the results for seven other topics, which are neither semantically interpretable nor statistically significant.
We therefore estimate a set of structural topic models on our participants’ responses. We are interested in the extent to which the rationales offered by participants who received an experimental scenario with an overt intervention against a liberal democratic target systematically differ from the rationales offered by participants who received an experimental scenario with a covert intervention against a liberal democratic target.

The changes in topical prevalence depicted in Figure 5 suggests that subjects in the liberal democracy treatment who were given the overt versus the covert treatments significantly differ from one another on two distinct topics, one of which is associated with anti-war or anti-interventionist sentiments, and the other of which relates to a pragmatic view about the exigencies of international politics. First, participants in the covert condition are systematically less likely to give answers expressing a general reluctance to intervene in others’ affairs, as shown by an examination of the representative responses associated with this topic. “Attacking a country that hasn’t done anything is like convicting someone of a crime without a trial”, one respondent wrote. Another said “I think we need to look less to attaining strategic advantages overseas and more towards correcting the vast inequality and injustices that are occurring globally but especially in our own country, like with the gap between the rich and poor being so very extreme.” “…it is not the job of the US to police the entire world”, said another. The prevalence of this anti-interventionist topic was significantly lower in the covert condition than in the overt one.

Second, participants in the covert condition were systematically more likely to give answers expressing a pragmatic view about the realities of international politics. “I don’t think it’s acceptable or unacceptable, it is just a fact of life in our world. It happens to us and it happens to them”, one respondent wrote. Another noted that “it is necessary in certain situations... sometimes the democratic process is too cumbersome when something needs to be done immediately”. Another respondent was more circumspect, noting that it came down to whether national security was at stake: “if it really is such a threat to the public’s safety... alternative measures [may] need to be implemented.” These types of comments — which significantly increase in prevalence in the covert condition – show that even if respondents don’t love the notion of attacking other democracies, they still recognize the utility of these approaches.

The models are estimated using the \texttt{stm} package in R. Because we have no theoretical reason to expect differences across our three different types of mission objectives, we pool them together. For model selection, we present the results from a 9 topic model, based upon semantic coherence and exclusivity.
Robustness and Extensions

While our novel survey experiment alleviates many of the concerns associated with the use of observational data, several potential issues may remain. First, one might question how plausible subjects found our treatments. To investigate this issue, we asked subjects whether they thought that the scenario they were presented was realistic. The vast majority (85%) answered in the affirmative. Interestingly, respondents did not find open intervention against democratic targets as believable as covert intervention. Indeed, subjects viewed covert intervention against liberal democracies as 14.5% more realistic, and against illiberal democracies as 5% more realistic. These results offer further evidence about the extent to which covert action has become normalized in the mass publics’ eyes.

Second, in our covert treatment, respondents were told that it was highly unlikely that the military operations would ever be revealed. This was done by design to ensure that respondents’ support for the mission would not depend on their assessments about the potential costs and risks stemming from unintentional revelation of the mission (a parameter that is outside this study’s scope). To confirm that our subjects’ level of support was not motivated by such calculations we also asked them how likely they thought it was that the operation would be revealed on a scale from 1 – 7, from “very unlikely” to “very likely.” Overall, respondents thought that it was fairly likely to be revealed, with a mean response of 4.66. We find that respondents believed that the probability of exposure was lower in the covert condition, as the mean in the overt condition was 4.91 while the mean in the covert condition was 4.42, implying that our treatment worked as designed. Further, they thought that this probability was greater the more intensive the purpose of the intervention – compared to collecting information, we found an effect of 0.633 ($p < .001$) when the purpose was to overthrow the regime, while it was 0.52 ($p < .001$) when the purpose was to assist the opposition. However, the regime type of the target had no impact on their belief, as the effect for an illiberal democracy was −0.06 ($p = 0.53$) while for a liberal democracy it was 0.05 ($p = 0.61$).

Third, we assess whether individual predispositions (such as those regarding general beliefs about the use of force, or trust in government), demographics (such as age, gender, education), or interest in foreign policy have a significant interaction effects with our treatments. One may wonder whether, for example, those who witnessed some of the failed U.S. covert military interventions during the 1970s and 1980s might be more reluctant to support such missions compared to younger adults without such memories or reference points. Similarly, it might be that those individuals who are more military

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20 Overall, subjects viewed covert intervention as being 8% more realistic than overt ones.
assertive are more likely to support overt operations compared to less military assertive individuals. The results, reported in Tables 1-2 of Appendix §1, however, fail to find evidence of such heterogeneous treatment effects apart from those relating to individuals’ preferences toward transparency, discussed above.

Fourth, an important finding that emerges from our analysis is that the American public dislikes covert missions against dictatorships, and was less likely to support presidents who attack dictators covertly rather than overtly. We also find that this effect is moderated by individuals’ preference toward transparency. However, to further probe what drives such preferences we present a formal mediation analysis in Figure 3 of Appendix §1.1, which reveals that domestic public support and international support for the mission are the only two significant mediators. This suggests that when the target is a dictatorship, citizens are less likely to support covert missions because they believe that such missions will enjoy less support both in the U.S. and worldwide. Thus, not only is the effect of secrecy on public support for a mission conditioned by whether the mission targets liberal democracies or dictatorships, but different mechanisms also underlie citizens’ assessments of the value of secrecy in the two conditions.

We further investigate which of our mediators account for the differences in the relationship between covertness and target’s regime type by estimating a series of moderated mediation models, in which the effect of each mediator varies with regime type. The results suggest that the effect of the success, interests, and public support mediators significantly vary with regime type, explaining some of the divergence in the results. See Figure 3 in the Supplemental Appendix for details.

Conclusion

This paper reexamines a core claim in international relations – that democracies do not go to war against other democracies due to their shared commitment to non-violent conflict resolution and liberal norms – by evaluating public opinion about the use of covert military operations against democracies. Our central findings diverge sharply from the view advanced by normative democratic peace scholars, who argue that leaders use secrecy to attack democracies to avoid public opprobrium. In contrast, we see that while the public dislikes military intervention against democracies in general, respondents prefer covert missions against democracies to overt ones. If leaders correctly anticipate this, our results suggest that they may select covert missions against democracies because the public prefers them for instrumental reasons (despite also valuing transparency). Since such missions are often exposed, leaders
may wish to reap the political gains derived from following the public’s preferred type of intervention.

In addition, our results also contribute to studies of secrecy in democratic foreign policy. Scholars have long debated whether democratic publics view covert operations as necessary for national security reasons, or merely as a tool that politicians use to pursue reckless or illegal foreign policies without being accountable to their domestic audiences. We find that the masses are not averse to secrecy after all. At the same time, public judgments towards covert action depend on the regime type of the target. Covert action is viewed positively when it is conducted against liberal democracies, but negatively when it is conducted against illiberal democracies or illiberal dictatorships, whereupon the tradeoffs between transparency and efficacy are calculated differently.

Finally, our findings have implications for scholarship on norms, public opinion, and decisions to use military force more broadly. Our study offers support for the effects of norms on foreign policy preferences, but also complicates current understandings of how norms operate in this realm. While our subjects viewed both covert and overt missions against liberal democracies as morally wrong, they were nevertheless significantly more likely to support such covert missions even though these also violated the important democratic norm of transparency. These results point to the merit of research designs capable of evaluating tradeoffs between normative commitments and instrumental considerations (Herrmann and Shannon, 2001; Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013). Whereas Kertzer et al. (2014) found that moral appraisals affect how individuals construct perceptions of interests, the results of our moderated mediation analyses show that in some contexts individuals are able to keep the two distinct, raising questions about how the architecture of choice situations facilitates the construction of ethical judgments.

These findings suggest numerous directions for future work. For example, our results focus on the preferences of the American public. Given the frequency of American covert military interventions, this population arguably represents a crucial case for testing assumptions about public opinion and the covert use of force, but future work should field similar studies in other countries. In particular, investigating how citizens in dictatorships think about covert actions, and comparing and contrasting their opinions with those of citizens in democracies remains a fruitful direction for future scholarship. Additionally, future work could investigate whether our results generalize to other time periods; for example, norm erosion over time is possible, particularly as the nature of war and other structural factors have changed.

21 For a review see Carnegie (2021).
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