# Elite Misperceptions in Foreign Policy

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Abstract: Many models of domestic politics in international relations presume that political elites correctly perceive public preferences, even as a growing body of research in political behavior calls this assumption into question. Leveraging seven paired surveys of 4852 foreign policy elites and 13687 members of the American public from 2004-2024 on 24 different questions, we show elites systematically misperceive public opinion in foreign policy, misperceiving the public as more isolationist and inward-looking than it actually is. We replicate this finding with a paired experiment showing elites effectively underestimate the public's responsiveness to cues from international organizations, and that elites with isolationist stereotypes underestimate public approval the most. These dynamics – which operate predominantly through stereotyping, rather than projection – have important implications for the study of political elites, public opinion about foreign policy, and efforts to test theoretical models of domestic politics in IR using public opinion data alone.

Keywords: Political elites, Misperceptions, Public opinion about foreign policy, Political Psychology

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## Introduction

The linkage between public opinion and policy is a basic principle of democratic government (Pitkin, 1967). It is also central to many of our models of the domestic politics of international relations, which argue that democratic states conduct themselves fundamentally differently in both conflict and cooperation because policymakers can be held accountable by the public at large (Fearon, 1994; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999, though see Weeks, 2014). There are a variety of mechanisms through which public opinion can shape foreign policy (Foyle, 1999; Payne, 2019), ranging from the direct effect of the ballot box (Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida, 1989), to indirect effects channeled through elected (Gelpi and Grieco, 2015) and unelected officials (Lin-Greenberg, 2021). In some of these models, strategic policymakers take public opinion into account *ex ante*, while in others retrospective publics sanction policymakers for their misbehavior *ex post*. Yet most of these models rest on two assumptions about information. First, the public is aware of foreign policy; voters can't hold policymakers accountable if they aren't paying attention. Second, policymakers are aware of public opinion; it's harder to do what the public wants if you're misreading the room.

While International Relations (IR) scholars have extensively investigated the accuracy of the first assumption (e.g. Holsti, 2004; Saunders, 2015), the plausibility of the second assumption – that political elites generally understand what the public thinks – has yet to be systematically explored in foreign policy. Instead, this assumption has more thoroughly been investigated by a rapidly growing body of research in American and Comparative politics, which has found that political elites tend to systematically misread public opinion (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Clausen, 1977; Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019; Pereira, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2023). Elites often perceive public sentiment to be more conservative than it really is (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019; Pilet et al., 2023), or project their own views onto the masses (Pereira, 2021; Sevenans et al., 2023; Furnas and LaPira, 2024; Franceschet, Lucas and Rayment, 2024). Yet this literature typically focuses on domestic rather than foreign policy issues. We thus have little sense whether the same elite misperceptions that occur in the domestic realm also hold in foreign policy, and whether the psychological dynamics that these studies have identified also operate in this very different context.

In this article, we show that elite misperceptions of public opinion do not stop at the water's

edge: foreign policy elites systematically misperceive public preferences across a wide range of foreign policy issues. Leveraging seven paired surveys drawing on 4852 foreign policy leaders and 13687 American adults spanning four different Presidential administrations from 2004-2024, we show that foreign policy elites consistently underestimate Americans' support for global engagement. Across a wide range of international policy questions — from security, to the environment, to international political economy — we find that elites harbor a stereotype of the public as isolationist, misperceiving the US public as being less internationalist than they are. Whereas the existing literature on elite misperceptions of public opinion in the context of domestic political issues has found that elites tend to suffer from projection biases, exaggerating how much the public shares their views (Pereira, 2021; Sevenans et al., 2023; Furnas and LaPira, 2024; Franceschet, Lucas and Rayment, 2024), we show that in the foreign policy domain the effects of projection are dominated by pluralistic ignorance, in which elites exaggerate how much the public disagrees with them. We also replicate and extend these findings in a paired survey experiment on foreign policy elites and a nationally representative sample of the American public in the context of the domestic politics of multilateralism. The experiment provides more direct evidence in support of our proposed stereotype mechanism, shows our findings are robust across both elected and unelected elites, and demonstrates that because of this isolationist stereotype, elites actually misperceive public opinion in foreign policy to a greater extent than the public itself does.

Our findings contribute to a growing body of research on political elites and public opinion in two ways. First, they have important implications for the study of elite political behavior more generally, identifying a distinctive dynamic in how elites perceive public opinion in foreign policy issues in the United States that differs from how we typically understand elite misperceptions in domestic political issues. In domestic politics, U.S. political elites tend to project their own views onto the public, exaggerating how much the public agrees with them, whereas in foreign policy, elites tend to underestimate how much the public agrees with them, relying on stereotypes that swamp the effects of projection. Second, they encourage IR scholars who study public opinion to also consider an additional quantity of interest: not just what the public thinks about foreign policy, but *what leaders think the public thinks* – a shift to second-order beliefs that has implications for everything from our theoretical models of the domestic politics of conflict, to the empirical strategies we use to test microfoundations in IR.

## Public opinion and democratic constraint

Many models of domestic politics in IR argue that one reason why democracies behave fundamentally differently in foreign policy than their non-democratic counterparts has to do with the constraining effects of public opinion, which occupies a prominent place in everything from audience cost models (Fearon, 1994; Smith, 1998), to selectorate theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999; see also Croco, 2011). Democratic constraint, however, implies democratic responsiveness (Pitkin, 1967), and most models of democratic responsiveness rest on two key informational assumptions.[1] First, the public is aware of foreign policy; foreign policy is less likely to reflect public opinion if the public isn't paying attention. Second, policymakers are aware of public opinion; foreign policy is less likely to reflect public opinion if policymakers don't know what the public wants.

A large literature has probed the accuracy of this first informational assumption, testing the extent to which the public responds to events on the ground (Mueller, 1973; Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida, 1989). In response, critics have pointed to the public's low levels of knowledge about international politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), the low salience of foreign policy issues (Guisinger, 2009), and the ways in which leaders can conduct foreign policy outside of the public's view by co-opting key elite cue-givers (Saunders, 2015). If the public only thinks what elites tell them to think (Berinsky, 2009), or if it lacks a robust media to inform it about foreign policy (Baum and Potter, 2015), its ability to constrain policymakers will be limited.

In contrast, the plausibility of the second informational assumption – that political elites understand what the public thinks – has barely been explored in the domain of foreign policy, despite its centrality to questions of representation more generally (Miller and Stokes, 1963). Importantly, the question of whether leaders accurately perceive public opinion in foreign policy is distinct from the question of whether leaders care what the public thinks (Foyle, 1999), since leaders can believe that public opinion should shape foreign policy, but misperceive the state of public opinion. As Geer (1996, 7) argues, political elites need to be able to accurately read the room regardless of whether they think of themselves as delegates or trustees: delegates need to read the public mood in order to translate it into policy, but even trustees need to gauge the state of public opinion in order to determine how to lead it.

[1] An alternative model of public opinion emphasizes selection (see Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020)).

One reason why this assumption that policymakers are aware of public preferences has been understudied in IR is because IR scholars have tended to see it as trivial. Rationalist theories presume democratic leaders should understand public opinion very well, for the same reasons that rational actors should be aware of their incentive structures more generally. There may have been an era, before the rise of public opinion polls, when democratic elites facing large legislative districts were uncertain about what their constituents wanted, but those days have passed (Geer, 1996). If anything, leaders' uncertainty about citizens' preferences is more commonly featured in models of non-democratic regimes: part of the "dictator's dilemma", for example, is that dictators' preponderance of power gives them uncertainty about citizens' preferences (Wintrobe, 1998, 20-25), a degree of uncertainty that democratic leaders are not presumed to possess.

## Elite misperceptions

Yet a growing body of research in political behavior suggests we may wish to subject these assumptions about the accuracy of leaders' perceptions of public opinion in foreign policy to empirical testing. This literature, which tends to focus on domestic political issues, has tended to emphasize three main findings. First, elites routinely and systematically misperceive public preferences (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Clausen, 1977; Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019; Pereira, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2023). This pattern holds both inside and outside the United States (e.g. Pereira, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2023), for elected elites and unelected ones (Furnas and LaPira, 2024), for party leaders and backbenchers (Walgrave et al., 2025), and is typically attributed to who elites come in contact with, such as corporate interest groups or unusually mobilized constituents (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019; Pereira, 2021; Broockman and Skovron, 2018). Second, in the American context, political elites tend to perceive public opinion as more conservative than it actually is, with Republican elites being especially susceptible to these misperceptions (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019). Third, political elites tend to engage in projection, presuming the public agrees with them more than they actually do (Pereira, 2021; Sevenans et al., 2023; Furnas and LaPira, 2024; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2025). The more elites share the public's views, the more accurate their perceptions are of public opinion (Franceschet, Lucas and Rayment, 2024).

If elite misperceptions of public opinion are so pervasive in domestic politics – including on political issues where the electoral implications of being on the wrong side are high (Broockman and Skovron, 2018) – it seems plausible that they should also appear in the foreign policy domain. However, it is not clear that the dynamics documented by the existing literature, compelling as they are in the context of domestic politics, should necessarily manifest the same way in foreign policy. First, as Milner and Tingley (2015) note, many foreign policy issues in the security domain (Should we send troops to another country? Should we work through international organizations?) tend to feature relatively diffuse rather than concentrated distributional impact, thereby rendering corporate lobbying less central than in many domestic political issues. And, in IR we are often interested in a much broader set of political elites than elected officials: the notion of a "foreign policy establishment" (sometimes pejoratively referred to as "the blob") (Busby and Monten, 2008) stretching far beyond Capitol Hill, to Foggy Bottom, defense intellectuals, foreign policy think tanks, and so on. In this sense, the determinants of constituency-level dyadic representation may not necessarily translate to broader questions of what foreign policy elites writ large think the public wants.

Second, foreign policy issues tend to be less strongly ideologically sorted than their domestic political counterparts (Holsti, 2004). The traditional axis of debate in US foreign policy centers on the question of how large a role the US should play in the world (Klingberg, 1952) – with interventionists on one side, and isolationists on the other – a distinction not consistently correlated with left-right political ideology (Kertzer, 2013, 232; Tama, 2024), which is why partisan stereotypes about Democrats and Republicans tend to be much weaker in foreign policy than domestic politics (Kertzer, Brooks and Brooks, 2021). Traditionally, left- and right-leaning parties in the United States overlapped considerably in foreign policy stances, and where they diverged, the disagreement centered on *the manner* in which the US was involved, rather than the extent: whether the US should prioritize working with international institutions to solve global problems, or prioritize military means, for example (Wittkopf, 1990; Holsti, 2004).

Third, and most importantly, while projection is one social inference strategy observers can utilize to assess what other people think, there are others that may be more relevant in the context we study here (Nisbett and Kunda, 1985). At its heart, estimating the views of others requires observers to engage in perspective-taking (Pronin, 2008). Sometimes when we engage in perspective-taking,

we incur false consensus effects, incorrectly projecting our own views onto others (Fields and Schuman, 1976; Marks and Miller, 1987), but we can also incur pluralistic ignorance effects, relying on stereotypes and incorrectly assuming others don't share our views (Miller and McFarland, 1987; Shamir and Shamir, 1997). Although the existing literature in political behavior has tended to emphasize projection as the strategy elites use when estimating public opinion, presumably both projection and stereotyping occur (Franceschet, Lucas and Rayment, 2024, 592); otherwise, it is not clear why liberal elites would perceive publics as as more conservative than they actually are (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Pilet et al., 2023), for example.

The similarity contingency model of social inference (Ames, 2004) argues that which inferential strategy will dominate depends on the perceived similarity of the target, which we can formalize as $Y_{it} = D_t \times E_i + (1 - D_t) \times S_{it} + \epsilon_i$, where $Y_{it}$ is observer $i$'s estimate of target $t$'s preference, $E_i$ is observer $i$'s own preference, $D_t$ denotes the perceived similarity between the estimator and target groups (where $D \in [0, 1]$), and $S_{it}$ is the observer's stereotype about the target group. When observers perceive a target group as more similar to themselves (e.g. $D \to 1$), they will be more likely to engage in projection and attribute their own views to the target ($Y_{it} \to E_i$) – which is why people assume their friends are more likely to share their political views than they actually do (Goel, Mason and Watts, 2010), and tend to make more egocentric errors when thinking about their friends than thinking about strangers (Clement and Krueger, 2002). In contrast, when observers perceive a target group as being dissimilar (e.g. $D \to 0$), they will be more likely to rely on stereotypes to infer the group's views ($Y_{it} \to S_{it}$).[2] Although stereotypes may contain a "kernel of truth," they also tend to be more extreme, exaggerating differences between groups, known as the "contrast effect" in social judgment (Hovland, Harvey and Sherif, 1957) – which may explain why partisans tend to perceive outpartisans as more extreme in their views (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016) and demographic composition (Ahler and Sood, 2018) than they actually are.

Which social inference strategy elites use, then, will depend on the context. Projection may be a useful inferential strategy when politicians seek to estimate the views of their base, who they perceive as a member of the ingroup (Sevenans et al., 2023), but it is arguably less relevant in the foreign policy context, because foreign policy elites tend to perceive the mass public as *dissimilar*,

[2]Crucial here is that perceptions of similarity occur prior to the act of projection, rather than a consequence of it: I perceive myself as being similar to other political scientists, which makes me likely to project my taste in TV shows onto them, whereas I'm less likely to project my taste in TV shows onto economists. Ames (2004, 574-75).

which is why a prominent strand in foreign policy discourse seeks to insulate foreign policy-making from mass politics (Morgenthau, 1948). In foreign policy a widespread narrative exists of the American public as being more inward-looking than elites: nationalists rather than cosmopolitans, skeptical of international engagement and international institutions, focused on problems at home and leery of opening their country up or bearing costs abroad (Kull and Destler, 1999), and disconnected both from the world around them and from decision-makers inside the Beltway (Page and Bouton, 2007). For purposes of simplicity, we call this stereotype ($S_t$) *isolationism*.

This stereotype of the American public as isolationist or inward looking is a longstanding one, dating back to the interwar period, the League of Nations, the Neutrality Acts, and the America First Committee: organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations were formed precisely to counteract what it saw as the American public's isolationist tendencies (Parmar, 1999), and political cartoons from the early 1940s frequently depicted Americans as an ostrich with their head in the sand (Minear, 1999). This narrative about the public is still salient today: pollsters and pundits routinely publish analyses warning of an "isolationist backlash" in the wake of the drawn-out war in Afghanistan and failed intervention in Iraq, or warning of "a strong isolationist streak" in the public's mood (e.g. Alden, 2005; Rutenberg and Thee, 2006). Political memoirs are littered with similar inward-looking imagery about the public. Obama (2020, 656) recalls his chief of staff opposing a possible U.S. intervention in Libya on the grounds that "I don't think we got clobbered in the midterms because voters don't think you're doing in enough in the Middle East." Bolton (2020, 216) quotes President Trump as routinely referring to his base's aversion to foreign interventions. The previous Secretary of State has made similar comments about the public's skepticism as well (Blinken, 2021). Given the ubiquity of this narrative, it seems less likely that elites will simply project their own views onto the public when asked to assess public opinion in foreign policy issues, and more likely that they will also anchor on these isolationist stereotypes.

Our theoretical framework suggests a series of observable implications. First, foreign policy elites will misperceive public opinion on foreign policy issues, just as political elites frequently misperceive public opinion on domestic issues. Second, the dynamics driving these misperceptions will substantively differ from those emphasized by the existing literature on elite misperceptions in domestic politics. Given the extent to which elites tend to perceive the public as unsophisticated on foreign policy issues (Powlick, 1991), and the widespread perception of a gulf or disconnect

between elites and masses in foreign policy more generally (Kertzer, 2022), elites' perceptions of public opinion on foreign policy issues will be characterized by a reliance on stereotypes, rather than just projection. Political elites will thus underestimate how much they agree with the public, rather than solely imputing their own preferences.

## Observational data

### Methods

We first investigate these questions using observational data. Beginning in the 1970s, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) began fielding paired surveys on nationally representative samples of the American public, and samples of "foreign policy opinion leaders", including members of executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups, and NGOs. This type of "heterogeneous elite" sample (Kertzer and Renshon, 2022) has several advantages for understanding elite perception and democratic responsiveness in the context of foreign policy. This wider elite, although not always directly involved in day-to-day government decision-making, plays a crucial role in shaping what foreign policy issues receive national attention, scrutinize policy responses, and form the pool of experts from which government officials are largely drawn (Saunders, 2022; Busby et al., 2020; Hafner-Burton, Hughes and Victor, 2013). As Furnas and LaPira argue, unelected elites "are important to democratic responsiveness in their own right because they influence the policy agenda, craft and implement policy, promote and critique policy decisions... and frame the rhetoric that reelection-motivated politicians use to justify the policy positions they take" (Furnas and LaPira, 2024, 959). Focusing exclusively on the perceptions of elected officials thus misses an important set of pathways through which public opinion shapes political outcomes, especially in foreign policy (Lin-Greenberg, 2021).

Beginning in 2004, the CCGA elite survey included a series of questions asking respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who held particular views on foreign policy questions: for example, whether the US "should or should not participate in the Kyoto agreement to reduce global warming", or the proportion of Americans who would "favor the use of U.S. troops to stop a government from committing genocide and killing large numbers of its own people." Following the 2004 survey, these elite surveys went on hiatus for a decade. We partnered with the CCGA to

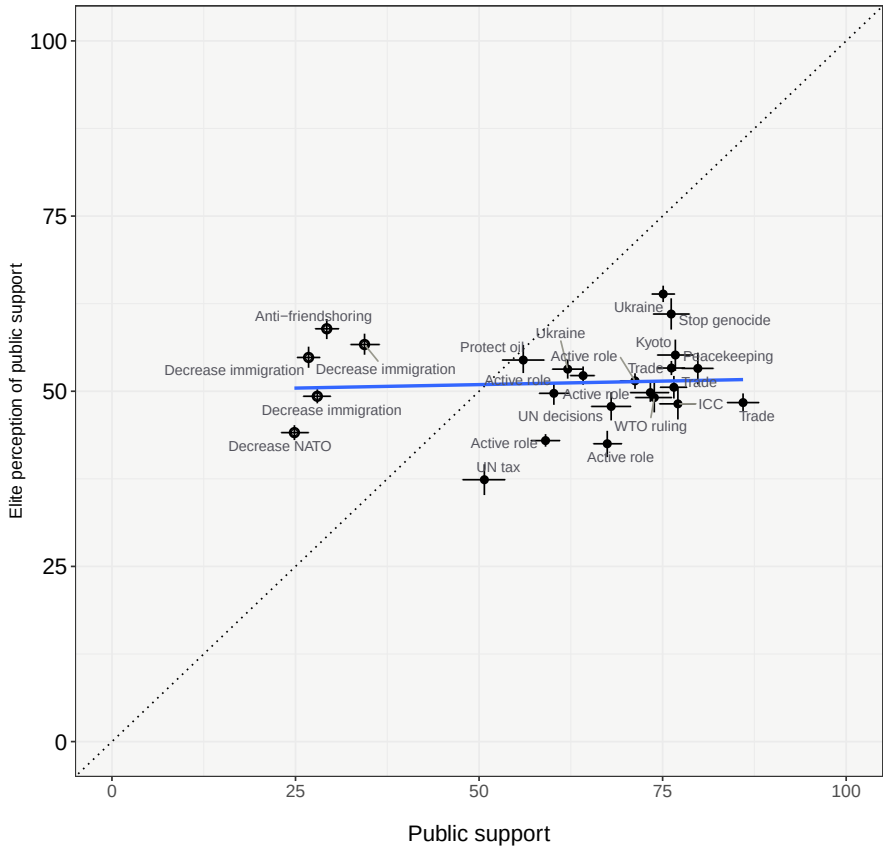
reinstitute them on a biannual basis beginning in 2014, whereupon we included questions asking elites to assess public support for a set of foreign policy statements – for example, the proportion of Americans who believe the US should play an active part in world affairs, who support sending weapons to Ukraine, and so on. Some of these statements are internationalist in orientation (e.g. that trade is good for the US economy) whereas others are isolationist in orientation (e.g. that the US should decrease its commitment to NATO). By comparing elites' estimates with the actual levels of support expressed by respondents in the public survey in a given year, we are able to assess how accurately foreign policy elites estimate public opinion – the same approach traditionally used by studies of elite perceptions of public opinion in domestic issues (e.g. Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Pereira, 2021). Altogether, we measure elite perceptions of public opinion in foreign policy using 24 different questions, fielded on 4852 foreign policy elites and 13687 members of the American public across seven different waves from 2004-24, constituting what we believe to be the largest and most wide-ranging collection of elite perceptions of public opinion in foreign policy to date. Information about sampling strategy, sample composition, and representativeness is discussed in Appendix §1, along with question wording in Appendix §2.

**Results**

As a first cut we begin with Figure 1, which simply plots the average level of public support for each policy (on the x axis), versus elite perceptions of public support for each policy (on the y axis), with 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.[3] The dashed diagonal line indicates what a perfect correspondence between mass opinion and elite perceptions would look like; points situated above the diagonal indicate policies for which elites overestimate public support, whereas points situated below the diagonal indicate policies for which elites underestimate public support. As Figure 1 shows, elites systematically misperceive public opinion in foreign policy; only on one of the twenty-four items do elite perceptions resemble reality. Interestingly, elite perceptions of public opinion in foreign policy appear remarkably uncorrelated with actual levels of public support ($r = 0.06$); If we fit a linear smoother to the data (shown in blue), its slope is nearly flat. Appendix §2.1

[3]Formally, it plots the average estimated percentage of public support for issue $i$ provided by the elite respondents ($\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} Y_{e,i,j}}{N}$), alongside the actual percentage of respondents in our mass public sample who support issue $i$ ($100\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} w_j X_{m,i,j}}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} w_j}$), where $x_{m,i,j} \in \{0, 1\}$, and $w_j$ represents the survey weight for respondent $j$.

Figure 1: Elites systematically misperceive public opinion in foreign policy

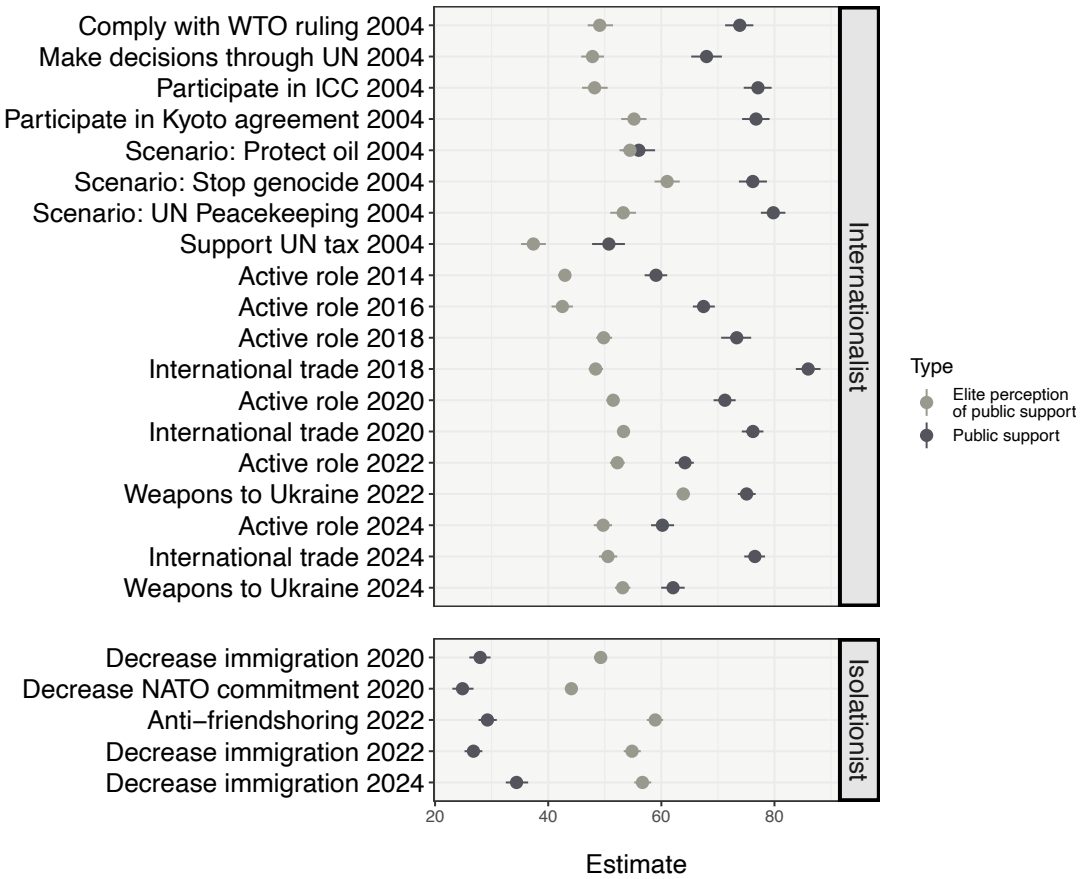


conducts a meta-analysis of studies documenting elite misperceptions of public opinion in domestic politics, showing that if anything, elite misperceptions in the foreign policy domain appear to be significantly starker than they do in the domestic political questions studied by Broockman and Skovron (2018), Furnas and LaPira (2024), Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes (2019), and Pilet et al. (2023), where the correlation between public support and elite perceptions range from $r = 0.58$ to $r = 0.82$.

To substantively interpret the results, we turn to Figure 2, which presents the actual level of public support in our surveys (in black) with elites' estimated levels of public support (in grey), alongside 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals, for each foreign policy question within each year. As Figure 2 shows, whether gauging real world policy questions (e.g. should the United States participate in the Kyoto agreement to fight climate change? Should we send weapons to Ukraine?) or alternative hypothetical interventions (for either humanitarian goals or material security interests), and whether under Democratic or Republican administrations, foreign policy elites systematically misperceive public opinion about foreign affairs.

Crucially, though, Figure 2 shows that these misperceptions are not random, and instead are remarkably directionally consistent. First, elites consistently *underestimate* public support for internationalist policies — whether in regards to multilateral questions about working through international institutions, militant internationalist questions about engaging militarily, or economic internationalist questions about trade. For example, in 2004, 80% of elites underestimated the extent to which the public is interested in participating in the International Criminal Court, or complying with rulings from the World Trade Organization, while in 2018 and 2020, 94-99% of elites underestimated the extent to which the public saw international trade as beneficial for the US economy. Second, elites consistently *overestimate* public support for isolationist policies in which the US looked inward or was unwilling to shoulder costs: 88-95% of elites overestimated the extent to which the public wanted to decrease immigration, 91% overestimated the extent to which the public wanted to decrease America's NATO commitment, and 97% overestimated the public's opposition to "friendshoring" – the practice in which supply chains are routed through American allies at the expense of consumer prices – presuming instead that the public would prioritize their personal pocketbooks over geopolitical considerations. Altogether, these findings suggest elites have an overarching isolationist stereotype of the public. Given the variation in types of questions studied

Figure 2: Elites systematically misperceive the public as more isolationist than it really is




Note: dots in black denote the percentage of the American public that supports a given policy; dots in grey denote the average elite perception of public support (both accompanied by 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals). The results show that elites systematically underestimate the public's support for internationalist policies, and overestimate the public's support for isolationist policies.

here, which were fielded during four different presidential administrations, it seems unlikely that these consistent patterns are reducible to question wording effects, or are artifacts of a particular presidency.[4] Public support for internationalist policies in our data is underestimated by an average of 78% of elite respondents, while public support for isolationist policies in our data is overestimated by an average of 93% of elite respondents.[5] Supplementary analysis in Appendix §2.3 show that these results do not appear to be the result of satisficing, or elites simply picturing the public as being split down the middle.

We can further disentangle the relative effects of stereotyping and projection in the radar plots in Figure 3, which disaggregate elites' estimates of public support based on whether the elites themselves personally support or oppose the policy. If elite misperceptions of public opinion in foreign policy are driven by projection effects, we should expect that supporters (in blue) will overestimate public support ($\mathbb{E}[Y_i \mid E_i = 1] > P$), while opponents (in red) underestimate it ($\mathbb{E}[Y_i \mid E_i = 0] < P$). Instead, the radar plots show that even though supporters generally perceive higher levels of public opinion than opponents do, both supporters and opponents alike underestimate support for internationalist policies, and overestimate support for isolationist policies. Appendix §2.2 replicates this pattern at the individual-level with a set of hierarchical models that estimate the simultaneous effects of projection and stereotyping, confirming that stereotyping not only offsets, but dominates the effects of projection in our sample, consistent with our theoretical framework.[6]

These results also highlight another difference between the study of elite misperceptions in domestic versus foreign policy. In domestic politics, elite misperceptions of public opinion are often attributed to the distorting role of corporate lobbying, which lead legislators to mistake interest group demands for the public's preferences (e.g. Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019). In foreign affairs, however, corporate interest groups tend to favor the same outward-looking policies (increased immigration, the US playing an active role in global affairs, etc.) that our elite respondents presume the public opposes.[7]

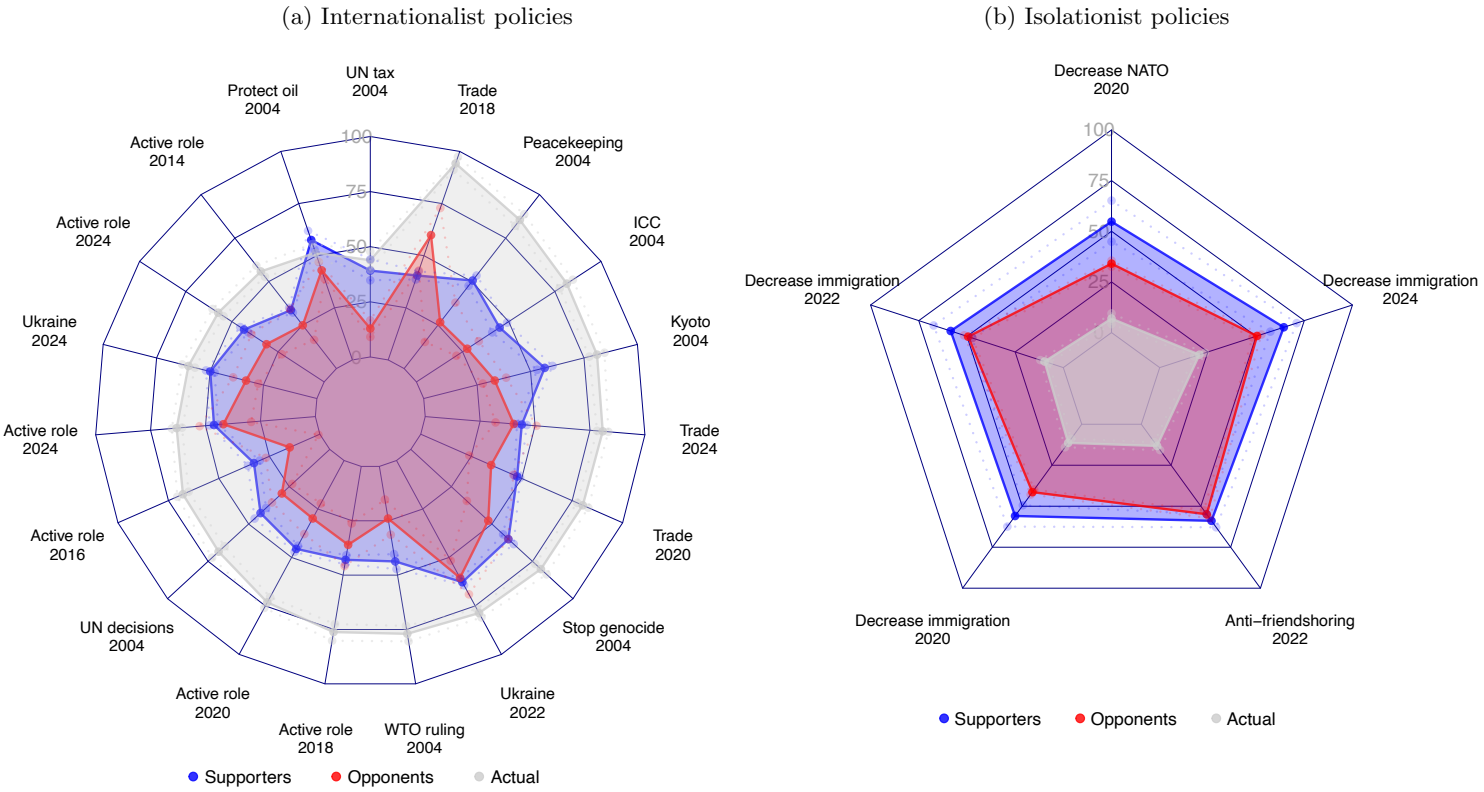
[4] Elite misperceptions of public opinion appear to be the most accurate in the 2024 wave, although interestingly, this is less because elites updated their views in response to public opinion, and more because public opinion (most notably towards arming Ukraine) shifted.

[5] In contrast, public support for internationalist policies in our data is overestimated by an average of 13% of elite respondents, while public support for isolationist policies in our data is underestimated by an average of 7% of elite respondents.

[6] Appendix §2.2 also shows that it is internationalism in general, rather than more specific forms such as militant or cooperative internationalism, that is associated with misperceptions.

[7] Reflecting the extent to which public opinion in foreign policy is less strongly sorted on a left-right dimension

Figure 3: Stereotyping dominates projection in elite assessments of public opinion in foreign policy




Note: each radar plot compares the distribution of elites' estimates of public opinion based on whether the elites personally support (in blue) or oppose (in red) the policy in question, alongside the actual level of public support (in gray). Faint dotted lines denote 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals. If misperceptions in foreign policy were driven by projection, we would expect that supporters would overestimate public support, and opponents underestimate it. Instead, we find that even supporters underestimate public opinion for internationalist policies, and even opponents overestimate public opinion for isolationist policies.

## Experimental data

The previous analysis utilized survey data to show that elite misperceptions of public opinion extend to foreign policy, but in a distinct manner from how existing studies have shown political elites to misperceive public opinion in domestic issues: in the foreign policy context, these misperceptions are consistent with elites relying predominantly on stereotyping as a strategy of social inference, systematically viewing the public as more isolationist or inward-looking than it really is.

At the same time, this analysis has three limitations. First, while our findings are consistent with a stereotyping mechanism, they do not offer a direct test of the mechanism itself, which requires obtaining an individual-level measure of elites' stereotypes about the public ($S_{it}$) to show that elites who embrace an isolationist stereotype of the public are more likely to misperceive public opinion in foreign affairs. Second, it is missing a crucial counterfactual of how non-elites fare at these tasks: if everyone gets these kinds of questions wrong, then our observational results tell us less something systematic about foreign policy elites misreading the public due to deep-seated stereotypes, and more about how difficult assessing second-order beliefs are more generally. Third, because of the breadth of issues explored above, we lack the space to analyze how these misperceptions vary across types of elites, or whether elites have specific subsets of the public in mind.

To address these questions, we fielded a follow-up experiment studying public support for one of the central foreign policy issues featured in the analysis above: multilateralism. In the past decade, IR scholars have been interested in why powerful countries like the United States work through international institutions, given that the ostensible gains from burden sharing are often trumped by a loss of control. One set of explanations for this multilateral push has to do with public opinion: democratic leaders prefer to intervene multilaterally because multilateral interventions are more popular among the public as a whole (Thompson, 2009). As a result of these important insights, a flood of research has emerged, using public opinion data and survey experiments to show that interventions conducted with the blessing of an international institution are indeed more popular than those without, and offering a range of potential explanations – from instrumental arguments about burden sharing, to normative arguments about morality – about why this might be the

than domestic political issues are, supplementary analysis in Appendix §2.4 shows that elite misperceptions in foreign policy are not systematically biased in a conservative direction, unlike in studies of elite misperceptions of domestic politics.

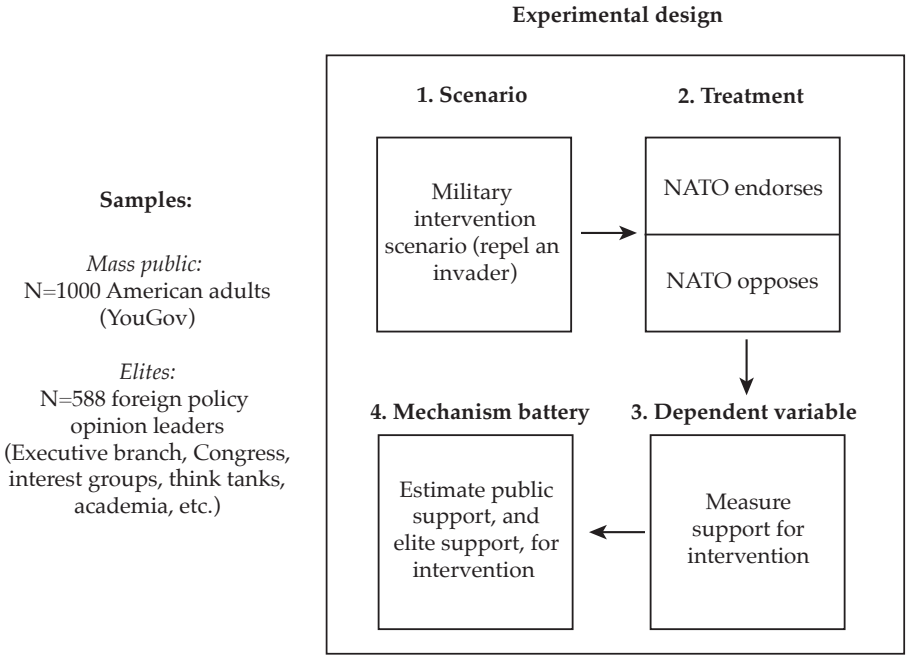
case (Chapman, 2011; Grieco et al., 2011; Tago and Ikeda, 2015; Busby et al., 2020; Mikulaschek, 2019; Chu, 2025). Yet like most IR scholarship using experiments to study microfoundations of our theoretical models, it measures actual public attitudes and treats those as leaders' incentives, rather than measuring what leaders *think* their incentives are. Given our findings above, we should not presume the two to be the same.

## Methods

In our 2018 elite and mass surveys, we embedded a survey experiment, whose general structure is summarized in Figure 4. In it, respondents were told they would be presented with a hypothetical scenario, using language modified from Tomz and Weeks (2013).

They were then presented with the details of a military intervention scenario, building off of the classic repel-an-invader scenario used in experiments like Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser (1999); Tomz (2007); Kertzer and Brutger (2016), and others. The vignette language is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 4: Paired experimental design




The scenario was designed both to avoid priming respondents to think about a specific recent military intervention, and to generate disagreement among our respondents: it implicates both humanitarian concerns and concerns about political instability and terrorism, for example (offering

Figure 5: Experimental vignette

*We are going to describe a situation the United States could face in the future. For scientific validity the situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may strike you as important; other parts may seem unimportant. Please read the details very carefully. After describing the situation, we will ask a few questions.*

A country in Africa recently sent its military across the border into the territory of a weaker neighbor. The attacking country is not a democracy and invaded its neighbor as part of a long-standing feud. The invading military is now carrying out brutal killings of civilians. There is also some concern that political instability in the wake of the invasion will contribute to terrorism and the flow of migrants out of the country. The attacking country's military is much stronger than that of its neighbor, but much weaker than that of the United States.

both moral and strategic rationales for intervening), but also locates the conflict in an area many Americans do not perceive as paramount to US security interests. It also deliberately controls for a number of contextual factors that might cause "information leakage" as would be the case if the experimental treatment also affects beliefs about unintended features of the scenario.

Building off of prior experimental research on the effects of cues from international organizations on support for the use of force (Grieco et al., 2011; Chu, 2025; Mikulaschek, 2019; Busby et al., 2020), we also randomize whether respondents are told that the mission has received the blessing of an international organization – in our case, NATO, whose stance on military intervention, Chu (2025) shows, has historically been associated with higher levels of support for the use of force. Military interventions endorsed by NATO have been significantly more popular among the American public than interventions without any IO endorsement, and no less popular than military interventions endorsed by both NATO and the UN.[8] Half of respondents were told that "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supports taking military action to push out the invading army"; the other half were told that "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) opposes taking military action to push out the invading army". Respondents were then asked the extent to which they support or oppose the U.S. sending its military to push out the invading army, on a six-point Likert scale ranging from "Support a great deal" to "Oppose a great deal".[9]

[8]Of course, as Chu (2025) notes, the prospect of strategic selection means this type of observational data has its limits, hence the value of the experiment we employ here.

[9]Regardless of treatment condition, following Chu (2025), and to ensure respondents understood the treatment, all respondents were given some brief context about NATO, namely that "NATO members include the U.S., Canada, and several European countries like the United Kingdom and France." Unlike in experiments on the effect of the UN Security Council on public opinion, NATO operates via consensus and thus doesn't formally vote; thus, the treatment language emphasized NATO support or opposition more generally, rather than providing vote tallies. We

The value of this study is threefold. First, in addition to measuring respondents' support for the use of force, we also asked respondents in both samples to estimate the proportion of the American public that would support the mission, along with the percent of "foreign policy decision-makers and experts" that would do the same. In this manner, we can assess the accuracy of each group's second-order beliefs, comparing the estimated and actual popularity of the intervention across each sample. Second, we can directly test the stereotyping mechanism, testing whether elites who perceive the public as isolationist in general are more likely to misperceive public opinion in the specific use of force scenario implicated by survey experiment. Third, if the results are driven by a widely-held stereotype of the public in the foreign policy establishment, our results should be robust across types of elites, and should not merely correspond to the views held by particular subgroups of the public.

## Results

We present the results in three stages. We begin by showing that NATO endorsements bolster support for the use of force, with strikingly similar results for both the public and elites, but that despite these similarities, elites systematically underestimate the popularity of NATO endorsements, and that these results are not limited to particular types of foreign policy elites. We then show that the main predictor of these misperceptions is the magnitude of elites' isolationist stereotypes about the public. We conclude by showing that elites misperceive public opinion more than the public misperceives public opinion, and that elites' misperceptions cannot be attributed to the views held by particular subgroups of the public.

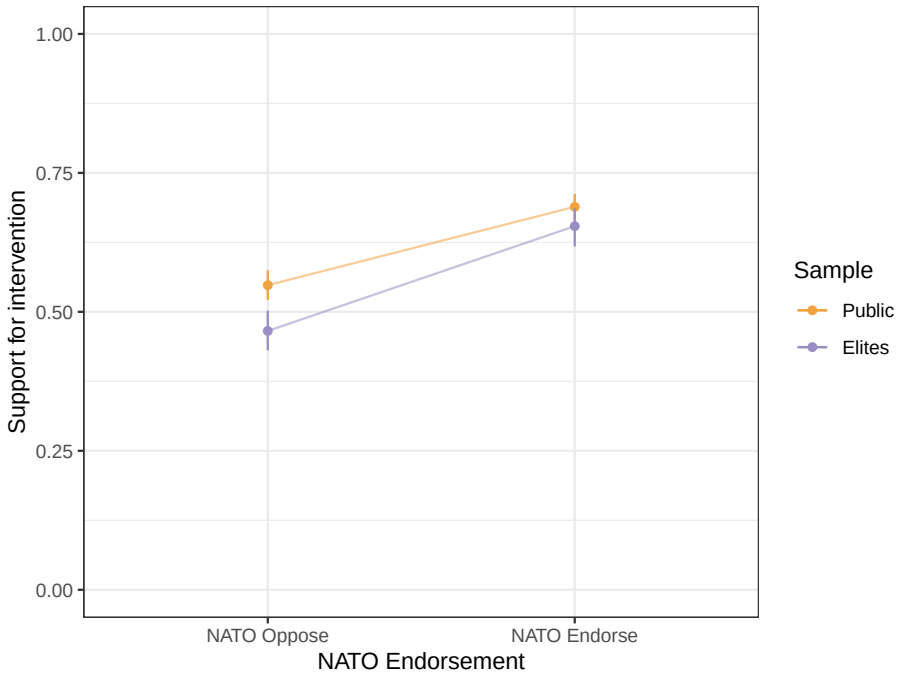
### IO endorsements and elite misperceptions

Figure 6 presents the cell means of the endorsement experiment. Although elites are less supportive than the public when NATO opposes the intervention, a NATO endorsement brings both groups onto the same page, and the magnitude of the treatment effect does not significantly differ by sample. These results are not only consistent with claims that elite-public gaps may be smaller than political scientists often assume (Kertzer, 2022), but are also broadly consistent with the magnitude

also deliberately use NATO opposition as a control condition to maximize internal validity, since in a control condition without an explicit NATO cue, many respondents may inadvertently assume NATO support or opposition.

of the NATO endorsement effects estimated in Chu (2025), who varies the instrumentation a number of ways (including altering the target of the intervention, the NATO endorsement language, and whether the names of NATO member countries are mentioned), suggesting these findings are also unlikely to be an artifact of our question wording.

Figure 6: NATO endorsement effects do not significantly differ between the public and elites




Note: Plot shows cell means and 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

More importantly for our purposes, as Figure 4 shows, in addition to asking respondents for their own levels of support for the proposed military intervention, we also asked them to estimate the proportion of the public, and the proportion of foreign policy elites, that support the mission. In this way, we can test i) whether elites effectively underestimate the effect of NATO cues on support for the use of force; ii) which types of elites read public opinion more accurately; iii) and whether the level of elite misperceptions of public opinion is greater or lower than the level of public misperceptions of public opinion, providing a comparative perspective that is often missing in studies of elite misperceptions of public opinion.

Figure 7 presents a set of density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects. The distributions in red denote the average treatment effect of NATO endorsements on the public's support for the use of force, while the distributions in yellow indicate the average treatment effect

Figure 7: Elites underestimate the power of NATO endorsements

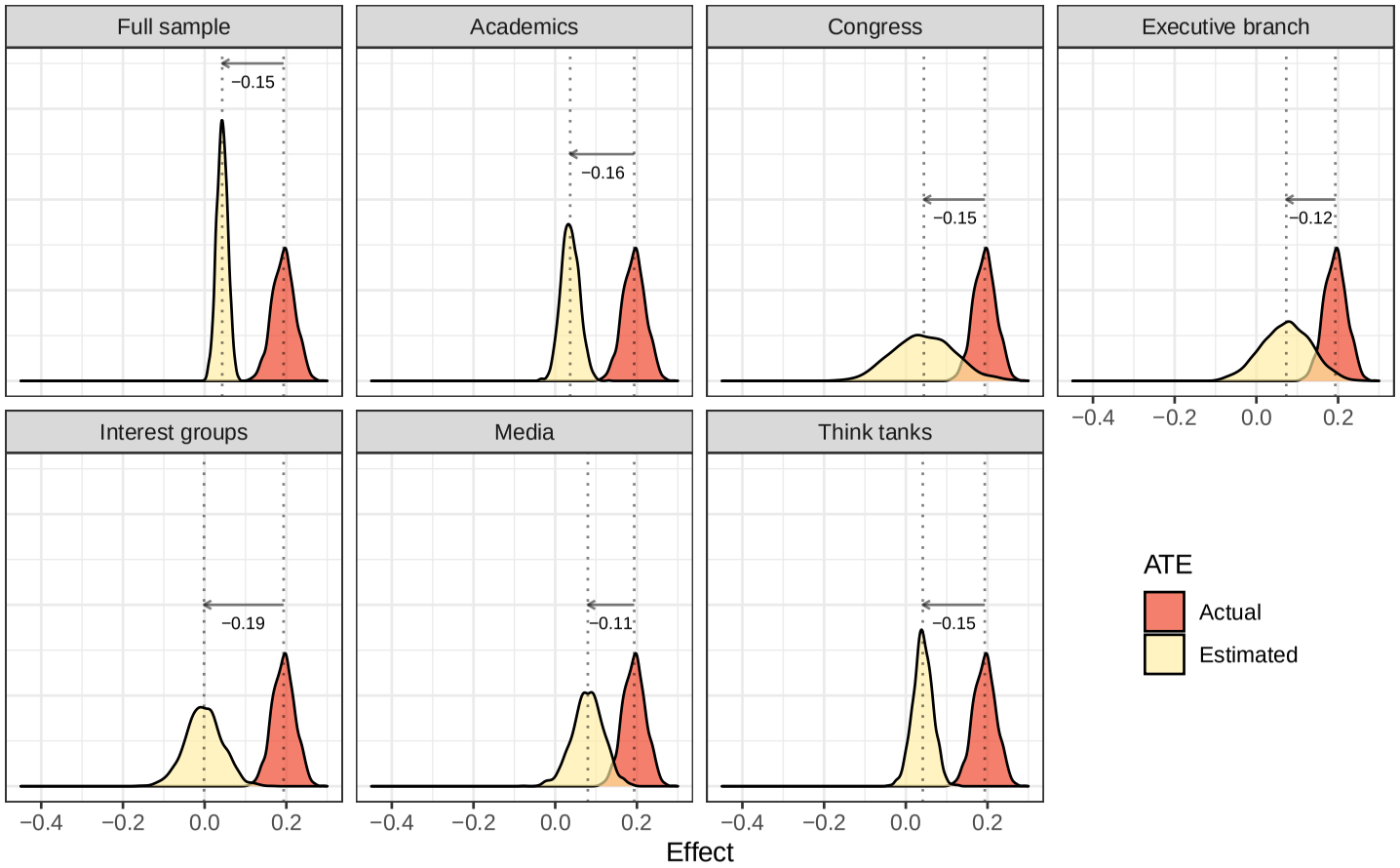



Figure 7 presents density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on the public's support for the use of force (in red), and on elites' estimates of the public's support (in yellow). The plot shows that although NATO bolsters support for the use of force in the public by an average of 19 percentage points, elites generally assume NATO has a much more modest (4 percentage point) effect on public support, and that these misperceptions are of similar magnitude for all elite subsamples.

of NATO endorsements on elites' *estimates* of the public support for the use of force. The arrow in each panel thus denotes the degree of misperception; the fact that the arrow points to the left in each panel shows that all of our elite subsamples underestimate the effect of NATO on public support for the use of force; in the full elite sample, for example, the effect of a NATO endorsement on estimates of the public's support for the use of force is only 4 percentage points, 15 percentage points lower than the actual level.[10] As the figure shows, the results are also largely consistent across different types of elites. It is not the case, for example, that elites more directly connected to electoral pressures more accurately perceive public opinion. Figure A6 in Appendix §3 present cell means rather than average treatment effects, showing that elites underestimate the popularity of the intervention in both conditions, but that the degree of misperception is larger in the NATO Endorse condition than the NATO Oppose condition. On average, elites underestimate the popularity of an intervention with NATO's blessing by 43 percentage points, while underestimating the popularity of an intervention without NATO's blessing by 28 percentage points.

**Isolationist stereotypes moderate treatment effects**

To capture the role of elite stereotypes about public opinion, we leverage the two elite perception questions fielded in the same 2018 study wave as the experiment. The first asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who agree that the United States should play an active role in the world; the second asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who agree that international trade is good for the United States. In each case, low estimates indicate the presence of an isolationist image of the public, skeptical about the benefits of international engagement. Consistent with the previous analysis, foreign policy elites vastly underestimate the proportion of Americans who agree with each statement, but importantly, these estimates are correlated with one another ($r = 0.44$), suggesting they tap into the same latent construct – elites' beliefs about the extent to which the public is isolationist in orientation. We therefore take the mean of these two items and reverse-code them to create an individual-level measure of how isolationist each respondent perceives the American public to be.[11]

We then estimate a series of regression models to study the determinants of elite misperception

[10] In Appendix §3.5, we replicate these results raising our threshold for defining support from "support a little" and up to "support a moderate amount" and up, and find the same pattern of results obtain.

[11] See Appendix §3.1.

Table 1: Isolationist stereotypes, not elite experience or media consumption, is positively associated with misperceptions

| | NATO Oppose | | | NATO Endorse | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Age 30-44 | −0.558 | 0.438 | 1.319 | −6.932 | −5.416 | −10.933** |
| | (5.094) | (5.122) | (4.889) | (6.001) | (5.811) | (5.400) |
| Age 45-59 | −0.624 | 0.697 | 1.091 | 0.210 | 1.870 | −3.025 |
| | (5.087) | (5.039) | (4.842) | (6.037) | (5.820) | (5.346) |
| Age 60-74 | 4.410 | 6.157 | 6.781 | −5.460 | −3.708 | −6.521 |
| | (5.193) | (5.061) | (4.853) | (6.164) | (5.871) | (5.330) |
| Age 75+ | 0.754 | 3.084 | 6.250 | −0.060 | −0.174 | −2.461 |
| | (6.482) | (6.110) | (5.833) | (7.173) | (7.053) | (6.377) |
| College/university | 36.180*** | 35.631*** | 32.766*** | 16.236* | 12.561 | 11.395 |
| | (10.710) | (10.647) | (10.247) | (8.623) | (8.321) | (7.614) |
| Postgraduate | 33.135*** | 32.939*** | 30.834*** | 20.417** | 17.586** | 15.899** |
| | (10.389) | (10.341) | (9.924) | (8.083) | (7.824) | (7.141) |
| Male | −1.337 | −1.735 | −1.488 | −7.732*** | −5.780** | −5.667*** |
| | (2.241) | (2.182) | (2.096) | (2.404) | (2.386) | (2.161) |
| White | −5.718* | −6.135* | −6.335** | 8.974*** | 10.091*** | 6.934** |
| | (3.202) | (3.189) | (3.053) | (3.035) | (2.939) | (2.715) |
| Party ID | 0.064 | 0.636 | 0.474 | 1.069 | 4.715 | 0.222 |
| | (3.297) | (3.474) | (3.086) | (3.250) | (3.412) | (2.911) |
| Civil service | 1.700 | | | −4.229 | | |
| | (2.293) | | | (2.827) | | |
| Political appointee | 4.067 | | | −0.126 | | |
| | (3.213) | | | (3.408) | | |
| Foreign service | 4.519 | | | 1.560 | | |
| | (3.182) | | | (3.713) | | |
| Congress | −0.785 | | | 0.272 | | |
| | (2.809) | | | (3.415) | | |
| Schedule B | −6.428 | | | 0.008 | | |
| | (4.571) | | | (7.062) | | |
| Military service | 0.632 | | | 6.946** | | |
| | (3.423) | | | (3.188) | | |
| USA Today | | 1.128 | | | 0.279 | |
| | | (3.692) | | | (3.857) | |
| WSJ | | 2.324 | | | −7.284*** | |
| | | (2.131) | | | (2.476) | |
| NYT | | 2.175 | | | 4.311 | |
| | | (2.698) | | | (2.739) | |
| Washington Post | | 1.371 | | | −1.118 | |
| | | (2.489) | | | (2.601) | |
| Isolationist stereotype | | | 27.938*** | | | 44.892*** |
| | | | (6.445) | | | (7.224) |
| Intercept | 0.153 | −2.605 | 15.753 | 24.987** | 23.602** | 55.485*** |
| | (11.332) | (11.552) | (11.368) | (10.801) | (10.662) | (10.646) |
| N | 242 | 242 | 242 | 175 | 175 | 175 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.044 | 0.044 | 0.115 | 0.126 | 0.149 | 0.283 |

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01. Positive values = larger misperceptions.

of public opinion in a multivariate context. As Table 1 and Table A6 in Appendix §3.2 show, neither the type of foreign policy elite sampled, elites' types of experience (e.g. experience in the civil service, versus being a political appointee), nor elites' information environments as measured by their media consumption patterns consistently predict their levels of misperception of public opinion. In fact, a series of Wald tests suggest there is little evidence that elite type, or experience, significantly improve model fit at all. Importantly, however, our stereotype measure has a substantively large and statistically significant effect. Changing a respondent's isolationism stereotype from one standard deviation below the mean, to one standard deviation above the mean, is associated with an 8 percentage point increase in misperceptions in the NATO oppose condition, and a 12 percentage point increase in misperceptions in the NATO endorse condition. The more elites cling to an isolationist stereotype of the public more generally, the less accurate their estimates of public opinion are in the experiment. The other covariate significantly and substantively associated with the size of misperception is education: the most educated respondents (who are most likely to be exposed to narratives about the public's isolationist tendencies) display the largest misperceptions. Finally, consistent with our observational results, Appendix §3.3 finds that the effect of stereotyping in the experimental data dominates that of projection.

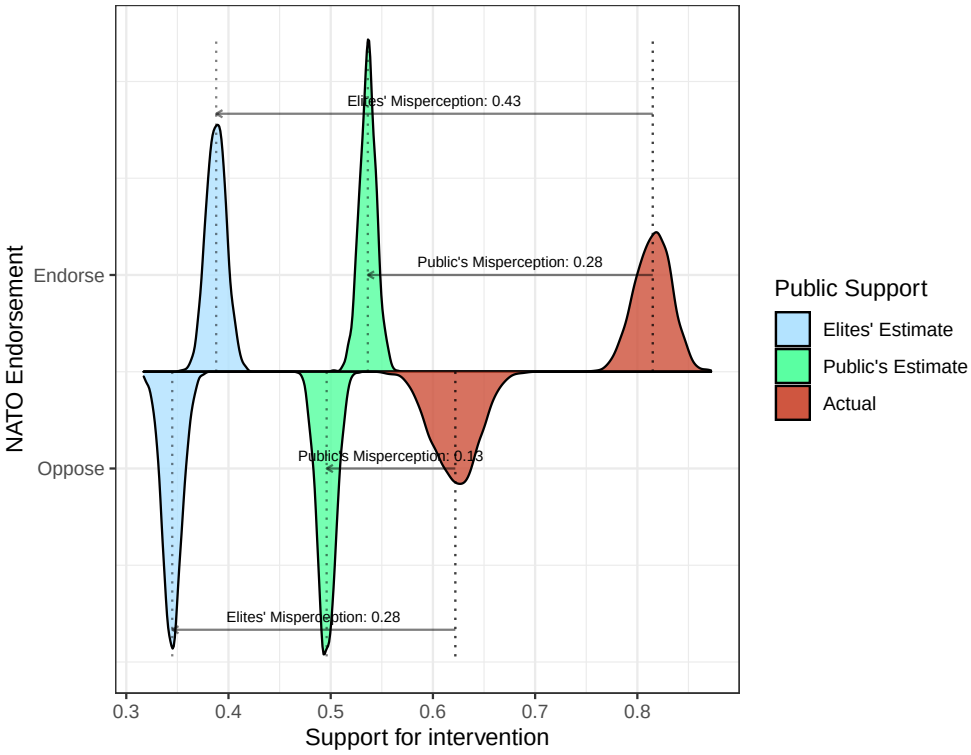
**Robustness checks**

These experimental results are robust to several other alternative explanations. One alternative interpretation might be that these systematic misperceptions about public opinion are simply an artifact of question wording, or respondents' tendency to not be very good at estimating numeric properties of groups more generally, even in the absence of biased information (Landy, Guay and Marghetis, 2018). If so, then these results tell us less about how foreign policy elites systematically misread the public, and more about the difficulty of assessing second-order beliefs more generally. Importantly, however, the experiment also asked the public to estimate public support for the intervention. As Figure 8 shows, foreign policy elites are systematically less accurate in their views about public opinion than the public itself is; in each treatment condition, elites underestimate public support by about 15 percentage points more than the public does.[12] These findings are particularly important because they stave off a potential critique of some existing studies of elite

[12]See Figure A7 in the Supplementary Appendix for additional robustness checks.

misperceptions of the public (e.g. Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019), which show that elites misread the public, but leave open the possibility that everyone does; we show this is incorrect. These results also offer an interesting contrast with Walgrave et al. (2023), who found that elites have more accurate perceptions of public opinion in domestic political issues than the public does itself; in our data from the foreign policy domain, this appears to not be the case.

Figure 8: Elites misperceive public opinion more than the public itself does




Finally, another interpretation of these results might be that elites estimating public opinion are not holding onto a stereotype about the public as a whole, but rather, are thinking about the most vocal or politically engaged subset of the public (Pereira, 2021). Yet as Figure 9 shows, the effect of a NATO endorsement is even *stronger* among individuals who are more politically engaged or politically sophisticated, suggesting the degree of misperception would actually be larger rather than smaller. In fact, Figure 9 shows more generally that there there are no subgroups of the public whose distributions of support even remotely match those estimated by foreign policy elites.

Figure 9: Are elites thinking of specific subgroups of the public when they estimate public opinion?

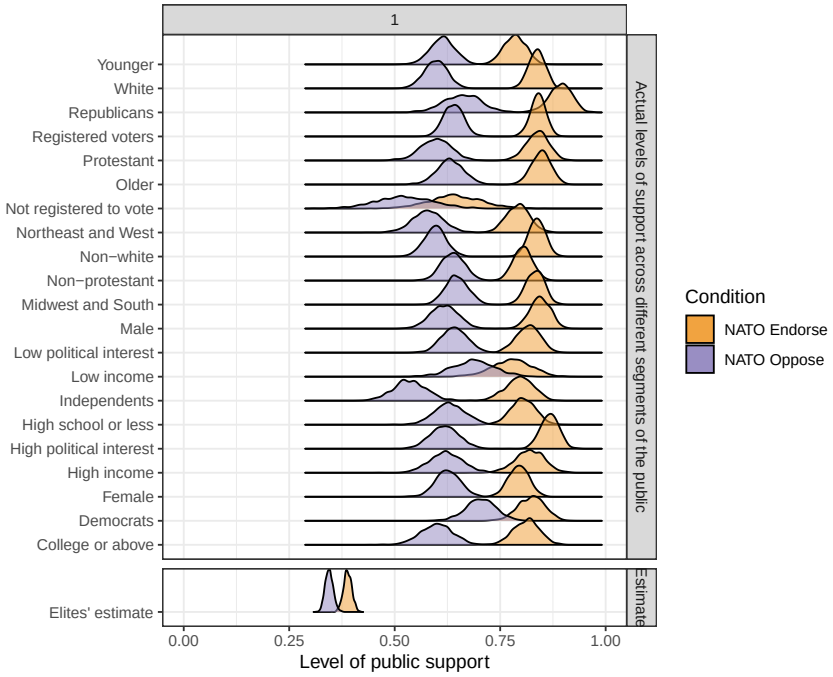



Figure 9 shows that elites' estimates are inaccurate compared to the actual levels of public support expressed by any subgroup of the public; it is not the case that elites' perceptions of public opinion better correspond with the views of more politically engaged or politically sophisticated members, for example.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to foster dialogue between two areas of political science that often don't engage with one another. IR scholars are familiar with the important role that misperceptions play in international politics, but tend to focus on how leaders misperceive actors abroad, rather than voters at home. Political behavior scholars have shown that political elites tend to misperceive public opinion, but typically focus on domestic rather than foreign policy issues.

Using an analysis of paired elite and mass surveys from 2004-24, we show that foreign policy elites systematically misperceive public opinion, but using a distinct mechanism from those documented in much of the existing literature in political behavior. Rather than merely project their beliefs onto the public, elites also rely on an isolationist stereotype that assumes the public is more inward-looking and skeptical of global engagement than polling data suggests it is. Fielding a paired experiment, we replicate this finding in the context of the domestic politics of multilateralism, where we show elites significantly underestimate how much Americans respond to the blessing of NATO, and that the main predictor of these misperceptions are elites' stereotypes about the public. The

combination of observational and experimental data increases our confidence in the validity of the findings. One critique one might levy against the experiment, for example, is that the results might be an idiosyncratic effect of survey wording in response to a hypothetical scenario, or an artifact of a particular issue rendered unusually salient by the Trump administration. Yet this cannot explain why we obtain similar results with the observational data, across 24 different questions, spanning four different presidential administrations. Similarly, one might interpret the observational results not as elites misreading the public, but as these types of social inference questions being inherently challenging more generally. Yet the experimental results shows that not only does the mass public outperform elites at assessing public opinion, but elites misperceive public opinion more than the public misperceives elite opinion.

These findings have a number of implications. For public opinion scholars, our findings suggest that theories of domestic politics in IR that link the behavior of leaders to the attitudes of citizens should give greater attention to elite perceptions of public opinion, rather than just public opinion itself. The implications here go beyond the study of IOs: if leaders misperceive what the public thinks about foreign policy issues, survey and experimental data on public attitudes should not serve as the only basis for studying microfoundations in IR. While our experiment here concerns the domestic politics of multilateralism, the general theoretical question applies to other issues in IR investigated by survey experiments as well – whether leaders can back themselves up out of audience costs (Lin-Greenberg, 2019) may matter less than whether leaders think they can; whether the public views nuclear weapons use as taboo (Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013) may matter less than what leaders think the public thinks; whether the public is swayed by international law (Wallace, 2013) may matter less than what hold leaders think legal commitments have on the public, and so on. More generally, we should be cautious about equating the results of mass public survey experiments with leaders' perceptions of what their incentives are.

For IR theorists more broadly, our findings shed a new light on private information. Models of crisis bargaining frequently assume the other side's resolve is private information, but one's own resolve is not (Kertzer, 2016, 148). Many formal models of domestic politics allow publics to be uncertain about their leader's type (e.g. Smith, 1998; Canes-Wrone, Herron and Shotts, 2001), but few permit leaders to be uncertain about their public's. Our findings suggest these assumptions are worth revisiting. For political behavior scholars, our findings raise important questions about

structural differences between elite misperceptions in domestic and foreign policy realms that are a promising avenue for future research not just in IR, but in American and Comparative politics as well. And although our data predate the second Trump administration, our findings that the American public are consistently less isolationist than political elites expect helps contextualize a recurring pattern in polling data over the past few months that has found that the administration's inward-looking foreign policies (on trade, immigration, and foreign aid, for example) are markedly out of step with public opinion (e.g. **?**).

There remains much more to learn about the nature, drivers, and effects of elite misperceptions of public attitudes. Where do elites' stereotypes about public preferences in foreign policy come from, and how do these stereotypes change over time? (Kertzer, Brooks and Brooks, 2021). As Saunders (2011) shows, one way that leaders matter in foreign policy is by varying in their belief systems. If leaders vary systematically in the stereotypes they have about public opinion – or, the extent to which they perceive the public as dissimilar to themselves, and thus, the extent to which they rely on stereotypes in the first place – this suggests additional pathways through which leaders affect foreign policy behavior. Similarly, how do elite misperceptions of foreign policy preferences vary across countries? Although we show here that foreign policy elites have isolationist stereotypes about the mass public in the United States, it is likely that foreign policy elites will subscribe to different stereotypes in other contexts, particularly given variation in each country's national narratives. Better understanding elites' second-order beliefs about public preferences in foreign policy is thus a crucial avenue for future research in both IR and political behavior alike.

## Data availability statement

Replication data for this paper will be made available on the BJPOLS dataverse.

## Competing interests

None.

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# Elite Misperceptions in Foreign Policy
*Supplementary Appendix*

July 10, 2025

## Contents

# 1 Sample information

Note: given the length of the appendix, we focus below on a detailed description of the sampling strategy and fielding for the 2018 study (the most central wave in the paper, since it included the paired experiment), but we used similar methodologies to field the 2014, 2016, 2020, 2022 and 2024 studies and are happy to provide additional details if reviewers are interested.

## 1.1 Description of the elite survey methodology

We compiled the Chicago Council of Global Affairs leadership survey distribution list using a variety of sources. We relied heavily on Leadership Library (LL), a subscription-based online database, which includes contact information for elites in various sectors, including businesses, Congress, the executive branch, interest groups, labor unions, the media, non-governmental organizations, and think tanks. We supplemented the information from LL with information from several other sources, since LL has limited information for elites in some sectors and does not cover other sectors we wished to survey, particularly academics, military officers, and religious leaders. In what follows, we provide more detail on how we compiled the distribution list using these sources. Given appendix page limits, we describe the 2018 data collection effort here in detail (the most central wave in the paper, since it features in both the observational and the experimental analysis), but information about all waves of the survey are available online at the CCGA website.

*Academics*: A list of academics from 35 institutions in the United States was compiled and shared with us by the Teaching, Research & International Policy (TRIP) project at the College of William and Mary. The list included scholars from the top 25 US-based International Relations PhD programs from the 2018 Foreign Policy list and all US-based Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) Schools. It contains 918 individuals, consisting of both scholar-practitioners and tenure-track academics.

*Congressional aides*: Using LL, we obtained contact information for congressional employees in the database who are classified as having the expertise of "international affairs/foreign affairs" or "defense," and who have one of the following job titles: Chief Counsel, Chief of Staff, Clerk, Committee Staff Member, Deputy Chief of Staff, Legislative Assistant, Legislative Director, or Professional Staff Member. This resulted in a list of 1575 congressional aides.

*Executive branch officials*: Using LL, we obtained contact information for the following sets of people in the database: employees of the Defense Department, Homeland Security Department, or State Department who hold the position of special assistant, deputy assistant secretary, assistant secretary, undersecretary, or deputy secretary, or have the word "senior" in their title; employees of any other federal department who hold the position of deputy assistant secretary, assistant secretary, undersecretary, or deputy secretary and

also are listed as having a job function that is classified as "international;" members of the White House National Security Staff who hold the position of assistant to the president, special assistant to the president, senior director, or director; and U.S. Ambassadors. This resulted in a list of 595 executive branch officials.

*Members of the media*: Using LL, we obtained contact information for people in the database who are employed by news media organizations and are classified as having the expertise of "international affairs/foreign affairs" or "defense." We then supplemented that list with a similar search of CISION, a media database containing contact information and areas of focus for media personnel around the world. Media personnel sourced from CISION were listed as working on international issues and/or foreign policy. This resulted in a list of 786 members of the media.

*Interest group leaders*: We used several sources to compile a list of interest group leaders, including leaders in business associations, labor unions, NGOs, and religious groups whose responsibilities include international matters. Collectively, this generated a list of 1098 leaders from these sectors.

For business leaders, we used LL to obtain contact information for individuals employed by one of the 1000 largest U.S. companies, who have a position of vice president, president, or CEO, and who have a job function that is classified as "international." To supplement the labor list generated by LL, we used the Department of Labor's list of labor unions in the United States with more than 100,000 members and added the presidents, vice-presidents, legislative affairs, governmental affairs, policy or political directors, chiefs of staff, advocacy, and general counsels of each union meeting these criteria and for whom contact information was available.

For leaders of NGOs and other interest groups, we obtained contact information for individuals holding the position of vice president or president at an organization classified by LL as an "international affairs/foreign affairs" or "defense" NGO or interest group, as well as for any NGO or interest group employee whose job function is listed as "international" or whose expertise is classified as "international affairs/foreign affairs" or "defense." To supplement this list, we used the online Charity Navigator database to develop a list of leading nonprofit organizations focused on international issues with a budget above $13.5 million. We identified organizations in the categories of international peace, security and affairs, development and relief services, and humanitarian relief supplies. A number of these organizations from international peace and security were already represented on the think tank list and were removed. Presidents and vice-presidents at these organizations were targeted for inclusion in the survey list, though vice-presidents for administration, fundraising, and other non-policy fields were excluded.

Finally, the religious leader list is based on the CCGA's original 2004 list of religious leaders in the United States, with contacts updated to account for changes in positions in the intervening period. This was supplemented with a list provided by Valerie Nash of Religions for Peace, as well as names from Time's 2013

list of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America. We judged the representativeness of this list based on the broader patterns of American religious life, as reported by Pew's Religious Landscape Survey, part of the Pew Religion and Public Life Project. As the original combination of lists under-represented Catholic leaders, we manually added the heads of archdiocese within the United States. This brought the sample list into balance with Pew's Religious Landscape Survey data.

*Think tank experts*: Using LL, we obtained contact information for people in the database who are employed by think tanks and are classified as having the expertise of "international affairs/foreign affairs" or "defense."

This think tank list was supplemented with a targeted strategy based on the University of Pennsylvania's 2017 Think Tank Rankings, selecting for top US think tanks in Defense and National Security, Foreign Policy, International Development, and International Economics. This produced a list of 37 institutions. Of these, four were excluded.[1] We included in our list the fellows, vice-presidents, and presidents of these think tanks. Vice-presidents for administration or fundraising were excluded, as were fellows whose research was primarily focused on domestic policy. These methods resulted in a list of 1363 think tank experts.

## 1.2 Fielding the elite surveys

As in previous surveys of foreign policy elites conducted by the organization, nine categories of foreign policy elites were targeted using lists developed from Leadership Library and building on previous years' survey lists. Those nine categories included leaders from business, congress, the executive branch, labor, media, NGOs, religious groups, scholars, and think tank experts. In the elite subgroup analysis from the paired experiment in the main text, we have consolidated business, labor, NGO, and religious groups in a single interest group category.

The fielding period for the 2018 elite survey opened on August 3, 2018. During the fielding period, four reminder emails were sent, and the survey request email was resent to some individuals by request. The final fielding email was sent on September 26, 2018. The survey was closed one month later on October 23, 2018. See Table A1 for a list of the numbers of emails sent per group per wave, and Table A2 for a complete listing of email dates and delivery rates.

[1] The excluded institutions were the Atlas Network, the Berkeley Roundtable on the International Economy (BRIE), and the National Bureau for Economic Research (NBER). Atlas and NBER are networks, rather than think-tanks; BRIE is a research project, but not a research institution.

Table A1: Email recruitment by group

| Group | Wave 1 | Wave 2 | Wave 3 | Wave 4 | Wave 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Business | 456 | 384 | 370 | 364 | 356 |
| Congress | 1575 | 1,536 | 1,508 | 1,493 | 1,480 |
| Executive Branch | 595 | 523 | 508 | 493 | 481 |
| Labor | 239 | 214 | 206 | 198 | 191 |
| Media | 786 | 696 | 664 | 629 | 614 |
| NGO | 176 | 126 | 118 | 109 | 104 |
| Religious | 227 | 179 | 171 | 167 | 163 |
| Scholars | 918 | 742 | 683 | 645 | 620 |
| Think Tanks | 1363 | 1,130 | 1,073 | 1,028 | 990 |

Table A2: Email delivery rates by wave

| Date | Groups | Recipients | Bounces | Delivery Rate | Opens | Clicks |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| August 3, 2018 | All | 6335 | 510 | 91.95% | 1540 | 278 |
| August 20, 2018 | All | 5530 | 65 | 98.82% | 1523 | 177 |
| August 29, 2018 | All | 5301 | 39 | 99.26% | 1442 | 150 |
| September 12, 2018 | All | 5126 | 40 | 99.22% | 1073 | 87 |
| September 26, 2018 | All | 4999 | 75 | 98.50% | 999 | 64 |

### 1.3 Sample representativeness

"Eliteness" in political science is usually conceptualized in terms of possessing domain-specific expertise and experience (Hafner-Burton, Hughes and Victor, 2013; Kertzer and Renshon, 2022), and is operationalized through sample selection in elite experiments a wide number of ways, including samples of state legislators (Butler and Kousser, 2015), bureaucrats (Slough, 2018), military officers (Mintz, Redd and Vedlitz, 2006), and academics (Fatas, Neugebauer and Tamborero, 2007). Our elite sample of foreign policy opinion leaders, however, is a broader and more heterogeneous group, seeking to capture a "foreign policy establishment" (sometimes referred to colloquially as "the blob") stretching from Capitol Hill to Foggy Bottom, the Ivory Tower to Wall Street (Busby and Monten, 2008). In this sense, our study is similar to other recent articles studying perceptions of, or responsiveness to, public opinion by unelected political elites (Lin-Greenberg, 2021; Furnas and LaPira, 2024).

We therefore adopt the same sampling strategy as previous Chicago Council studies of foreign policy elites,[2] obtaining a heterogeneous elite sample that encompasses multiple types of foreign policy elites, rather than just focusing on a single segment of the foreign policy establishment. The downside of this breadth, however, is the absence of a well-defined population to serve as a benchmark, which precludes the possibility of assessing the representativeness of the elite sample. Following best practices with elite experiments (Kertzer and Renshon, 2022), to assuage potential concerns about self-selection effects (as might be the case if the

[2]There have been two major longitudinal studies of foreign policy opinion leaders in the United States: the Foreign Policy Leadership Project (1976-1996) led by Holsti and Rosenau, and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (now Chicago Council on Global Affairs) studies (1975 to the present), which this study is a part of.

types of foreign policy elites most likely to participate in our study were also the types less likely to accurately perceive public opinion), in both the main paper and the appendix we show that our results are robust to the composition of the elite sample: it is not the case, for example, that certain types of elites are systematically less likely to misperceive public opinion than others, or have systematically different stereotypes about the public.

### 1.4 Fielding the public surveys

From July 24, 2018 to August 1, 2018, the authors fielded a nationally representative survey with the market research firm YouGov. YouGov interviewed 1,153 respondents who were matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political affiliation. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). The margin of error is 3.73%. As is standard in contemporary survey research, respondents in the mass public sample were compensated for their time. Both the mass public and elite study were declared exempt by our Institutional Review Board (IRB). The same fielding approach was used in the other waves of the public survey, except the 2004 survey, which utilized Knowledge Networks as the provider. More information about the public surveys are available on the CCGA website.

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, geographic region, voter registration status, and ideology. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were post-stratified on a 4-way stratification of gender, four-category age, four-category race, and four-category education, to produce the final weights. Consistent with best practices in survey experimental research (e.g. Franco et al., 2017), the observational results for the public data reported in the paper use survey weights, while the experimental results are unweighted, although the results are unchanged if survey weights are added.

## 2 Observational data supplementary information

In the observational data portion of the main text, we measure elite misperceptions in a three step process consistent with the existing literature, in which we i) measure the public's level of agreement with a given policy statement; ii) measure elites' estimates of the public's level of support towards that policy, and then

iii) examine how closely the latter tracks the former using a variety of different estimands. Below are the policy statements, sorted chronologically:

- *UN Peacekeeping*: In general, when the United States is asked to be part of a United Nations international peacekeeping force in a troubled part of the world, do you think we should take part, or should we leave this job to other countries? [Should take part / Should leave this job to other countries] (2004)

- *Support UN tax*: Thinking about specific steps that could be taken to strengthen the UN (United Nations), here are some options that have been proposed. For each one, tell me if you would favor or oppose this step: Giving the UN the power to fund its activities by imposing a small tax on such things as the international sale of arms or oil. [Favor / Oppose] (2004)

- *Scenario: Stop genocide*: There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using U.S. troops in other parts of the world. I'd like to ask your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops: to stop a government from committing genocide and killing large numbers of its own people [Favor / Oppose] (2004)

- *Scenario: Protect oil:* Would you favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops: To ensure the oil supply [Favor / Oppose] (2004)

- *Participate in Kyoto agreement*: Based on what you know, do you think the U.S. should or should not participate in the following treaties and agreements? The Kyoto agreement to reduce global warming [Should / Should not] (2004)

- *Participate in ICC* : Based on what you know, do you think the U.S. should or should not participate in the following treaties and agreements? The agreement on the International Criminal Court that can try individuals for war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity if their own country won't try them. [Should / Should not] (2004)

- *Make decisions through UN*: When dealing with international problems, the U.S. should be more willing to make decisions within the United Nations even if this means that the United States will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice. [Agree / Disagree] (2004)

- *Comply with WTO ruling*: The World Trade Organization was established to rule on disputes over trade treaties. If another country files a complaint with the World Trade Organization and it rules against the U.S., as a general rule, should the U.S. (United States) comply with that decision or not? [Yes / No] (2004)

- *Active role*: Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? [Active part / Stay out] (2014)
- *Active role*: Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? [Active part / Stay out] (2016)
- *International trade* Overall, do you think international trade is good or bad for the US economy? [Good / Bad] (2018)
- *Active role*: Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? [Active part / Stay out] (2018)
- *International trade*: Overall, do you think international trade is good or bad for the US economy? [Good / Bad] (2020)
- *Decrease NATO commitment*: Do you feel we should increase our commitment to NATO, keep our commitment what it is now, decrease our commitment to NATO, or withdraw from NATO entirely? [Increase commitment / Keep commitment same / Decrease commitment / Withdraw entirely] (2020)
- *Decrease immigration*: Should legal immigration into the United States be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased? [Kept at present level / Increased / Decreased] (2020)
- *Active role*: Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? [Active part / Stay out] (2020)
- *Weapons to Ukraine*: In response to the situation involving Russia and Ukraine, would you support or oppose the United States: Sending additional arms and military supplies to the Ukrainian government [Support / Oppose] (2022)
- *Decrease immigration*: Should legal immigration into the United States be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased? [Kept at present level / Increased / Decreased] (2022)
- *Anti-friendshoring*: Which is the bigger priority for the United States when it comes to international supply chains, meaning the network between suppliers and companies to produce and distribute goods to consumers: [Ensuring that supply chains run through countries that are friendly toward the United States, even if this means higher prices for goods at home / Keeping prices as low as possible, even if this means that supply chains run through countries that are unfriendly toward the United States] (2022)

- *Active role*: Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? [Active part / Stay out] (2022)

In the elite surveys, we measure respondents' estimates of the public's agreement as follows:

- *UN Peacekeeping*: Do you think that more Americans would say that in general, when the United States is asked to be part of a United Nations international peacekeeping force in a troubled part of the world, the U.S. should take part, or that we should leave this job to other countries? Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Agree - more than 60% / Agree - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Disagree - not more than 60% / Disagree - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Support UN tax*: Thinking about specific steps that could be taken to strengthen the UN do you think more Americans would favor or oppose giving the UN the power to fund its activities by imposing a small tax on such things as the international sale of arms or oil? Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Favor - more than 60% / Favor - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Oppose - not more than 60% / Oppose - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Scenario: Stop genocide*: Do you think that more Americans would favor the use of U.S. troops to stop a government from committing genocide and killing large numbers of its own people? Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Favor - more than 60% / Favor - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Oppose - not more than 60% / Oppose - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Scenario: Protect oil*: Do you think that more Americans would favor the use of U.S. troops to ensure the supply of oil? Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Favor - more than 60% / Favor - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Oppose - not more than 60% / Oppose - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Participate in Kyoto agreement*: Do you think more Americans would say that the U.S. should or should not participate in the Kyoto agreement to reduce global warming? Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Agree - more than 60% / Agree - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Disagree - not more than 60% / Disagree - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Participate in ICC*: Do you think more Americans would say that the U.S. should or should not participate in the International Criminal Court that can try individuals for war crimes, genocide, or

crimes against humanity if their own country won't try them? Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Agree - more than 60% / Agree - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Disagree - not more than 60% / Disagree - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Make decisions through UN*: Do you think that more Americans would agree or disagree that: When dealing with international problems, the U.S. should be more willing to make decisions within the United Nations even if this means that the United States will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice. Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Agree - more than 60% / Agree - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Disagree - not more than 60% / Disagree - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Comply with WTO ruling*: Do you think more Americans would say that if another country files a complaint with the World Trade Organization and it rules against the U.S., as a general rule, the U.S. should comply with that decision or not? Do you think that more than 60% would feel that way? Or do you think views would be about evenly divided? [Agree - more than 60% / Agree - not more than 60% / About evenly divided / Disagree - not more than 60% / Disagree - more than 60%] (2004)

- *Active role*: What percentage of the public do you think favors taking an active part in world affairs? [Open-ended text box] (2014)

- *Active role*: What percentage of the public do you think favors taking an active part in world affairs? [Open-ended text box] (2016)

- *International trade*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people think international trade is good for the U.S. economy? [Slider from 0-100] (2018)

- *Active role*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people do you think want to take an active part in world affairs? [Slider from 0-100] (2018)

- *International trade*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people think international trade is *good* for the U.S. economy? [Slider from 0-100] (2020)

- *Decrease NATO commitment*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people do you think want our commitment to NATO to be *decreased*? [Slider from 0-100] (2020)

- *Decrease immigration*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people do you think want legal immigration into the United States to be *decreased*? [Slider from 0-100] (2020)

- *Active role* If you had to guess, what percent of the American people do you think want to take an *active part* in world affairs? [Slider from 0-100] (2020)
- *Weapons to Ukraine*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people do you think support sending additional arms and military supplies to the Ukrainian government? [Slider from 0-100] (2022)
- *Decrease immigration*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people do you think want legal immigration into the United States to be *decreased*? [Slider from 0-100] (2022)
- *Anti-friendshoring*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people prefer to keep prices as low as possible, even if this means that supply chains run through countries that are unfriendly toward the United States? [Slider from 0-100] (2022)
- *Active role*: If you had to guess, what percent of the American people do you think want to take an *active part* in world affairs? [Slider from 0-100] (2022)

We then calculate misperceptions by calculating the congruence between the public's level of support for each issue, versus elites' estimates of the public's support, using three estimands: the *average* estimated percentage of public support for each issue provided by the elite respondents, alongside the mean percentage of public support for that issue provided by the mass public respondents (weighted based on survey weights); the proportion of elite respondents who *underestimate* the level of public support for each issue, and in supplementary analysis, the *absolute mean error*, which assesses the overall accuracy of the elite perception without taking into account whether elite respondents were under- or -over-estimating.

In most cases, these calculations are relatively straightforward. There are three exceptions. First, in 2004, respondents in the mass public survey were also allowed to indicate they were "Not sure". For those items, consistent with other studies of elite misperception (e.g. Pilet et al., 2023), we omit these responses from the denominator when estimating the proportion of public support, although the proportion of respondents who selected those answers is relatively small and their inclusion does not substantively affect our results. Second, for the Decrease NATO commitment item in 2020, we calculate the proportion of respondents in the public sample who indicated they either wanted to decrease commitment, or to withdraw entirely. This offers a more conservative test for detecting elite misperceptions. Third, in 2004, rather than being asked to provide a direct estimate of the public's level of support for each statement, respondents in the elite survey were given an ordinal scale, with each response option referring to a different range of percentages (e.g. "Agree - more than 60%"). This means that for two of our estimands (the average, and absolute mean error), we convert these elite responses to percentage form by imputing the midpoint percentage within each estimated range of support. Thus, for example, an elite respondent who indicated that the American public would agree with

a statement but "not more than 60%", would have their estimate translated to a 55% (since the theoretical range varies from 50%-60%). Crucially though, our findings are similar regardless of whether these items are included. For our third estimand (pr(Underestimate)), we simply utilize the thresholds provided by the response scale itself. This results in a more conservative test for elite misperceptions, since if the true level of public support for a policy is, e.g. 75%, any elite respondent who selected the "Agree - more than 60%" category would be coded as providing an accurate estimate.[3]

## 2.1 Meta-analysis of existing studies of elite misperception

To compare our results in the foreign policy domain with those of other recent studies documenting elite misperceptions of public opinion, we conduct an informal meta-analysis using data from Broockman and Skovron (2018), Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes (2019), the POLPOP project (Pilet et al., 2023; Sevenans et al., 2023; Walgrave et al., 2023), and Furnas and LaPira (2024). While differing in terms of the issues they study, the types of elites they sample, and the countries they collect data from, the studies are useful for our purposes because like our studies, they: i) include measures of elites' perceptions of national-level public opinion (rather than just constituency-level opinion), ii) measure elite perceptions using a percentage estimate.[4] Figure A1, like Figure 2 in the main text, presents the actual level of public support for each policy statement on the x axis, and elites' estimated level of public support for each policy statement on the y axis, with a linear smoother superimposed in blue.[5]

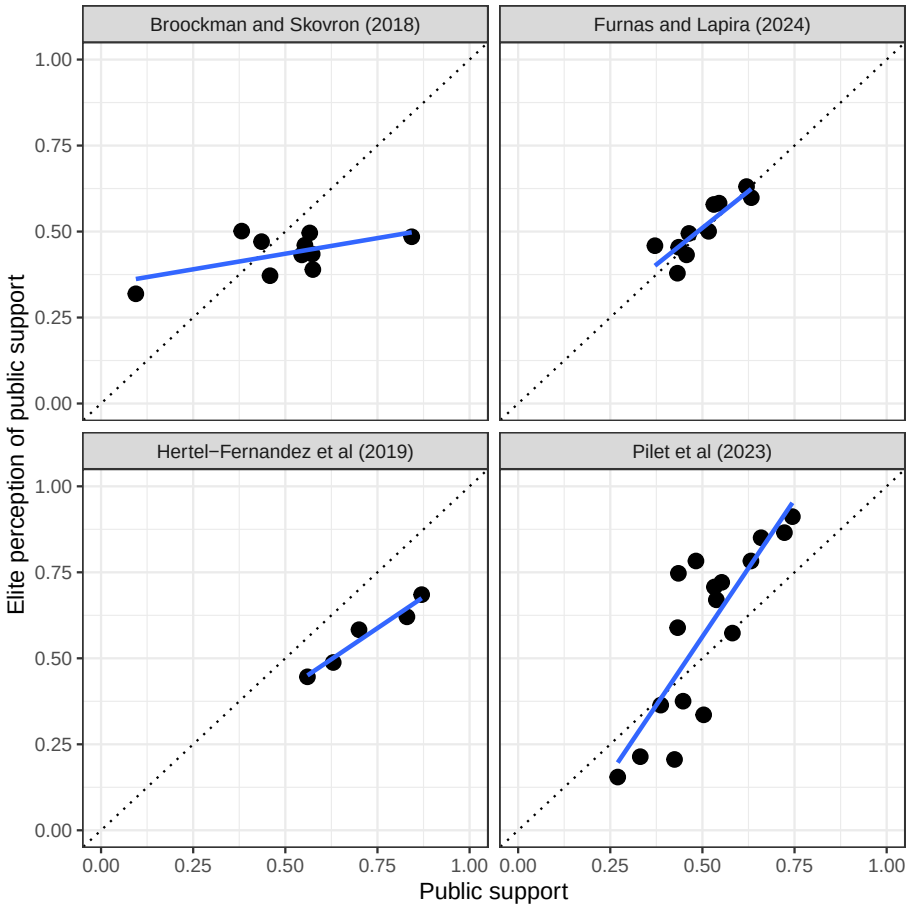
Figure A1 shows that the scope and nature of the misperceptions varies across studies. In Furnas and LaPira (2024), for example, the degree of misperception at the aggregate level appears to be relatively modest, with the items clustered around the dashed diagonal line. In Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes (2019), the items are further away from the diagonal, but relatively consistently so, suggesting that respondents tended to underestimate national-level public opinion in their study by a fairly similar amount. Yet in comparison to the data presented in the main text, the slopes of the linear fits are steeper here, and the correlations between actual public opinion and estimated elite opinion in these four studies are significantly stronger ($r = 0.575$ for Broockman and Skovron (2018), $r = 0.868$ for Furnas and LaPira (2024), $r = 0.974$ for Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes (2019), and $r = 0.824$ for Pilet et al. (2023)). This analysis suggests that while political elites misperceive public opinion in foreign policy just as they do in domestic political issues, the dynamics of the misperceptions are somewhat different — differences we explore in the

[3]Note that in 2004, as Figure 2 in the main text shows, the average level of support was above the 60% level for 6 of the 8 items, and never dropped below 50%, making pr(Underestimate) a conservative estimate of the magnitude of misperception.

[4]See, e.g. Pereira (2021) for a different measurement strategy, which asks elite respondents to identify whether an issue is supported by a majority of the public or not.

[5]We focus our analysis on national-level public support (and elites' estimates thereof), to facilitate direct comparability with our study.

Figure A1: Comparison of the relationship between public opinion and elite perceptions of public opinion in existing studies



main text.

## 2.2 Disentangling stereotyping from projection

### 2.2.1 Formalization of the theory

Drawing on the similarity contingency model of from social psychology (Ames, 2004), we argue misperceptions in public opinion can be attributed to two different strategies of social inference: projection (in which observers presume targets share their views), and stereotyping (in which observers anchor their estimates on prior beliefs about the characteristics or attributes of the group). Which strategy dominates depends on the observer's perceived distance from the target: projection should dominate when observers perceive targets as being similar to themselves, and stereotyping should dominate when observers perceive targets as being different from themselves.

We can formalize the theory as $Y_{it} = D_t \times E_i + (1 - D_t) \times S_{It} + \epsilon_i$, where:

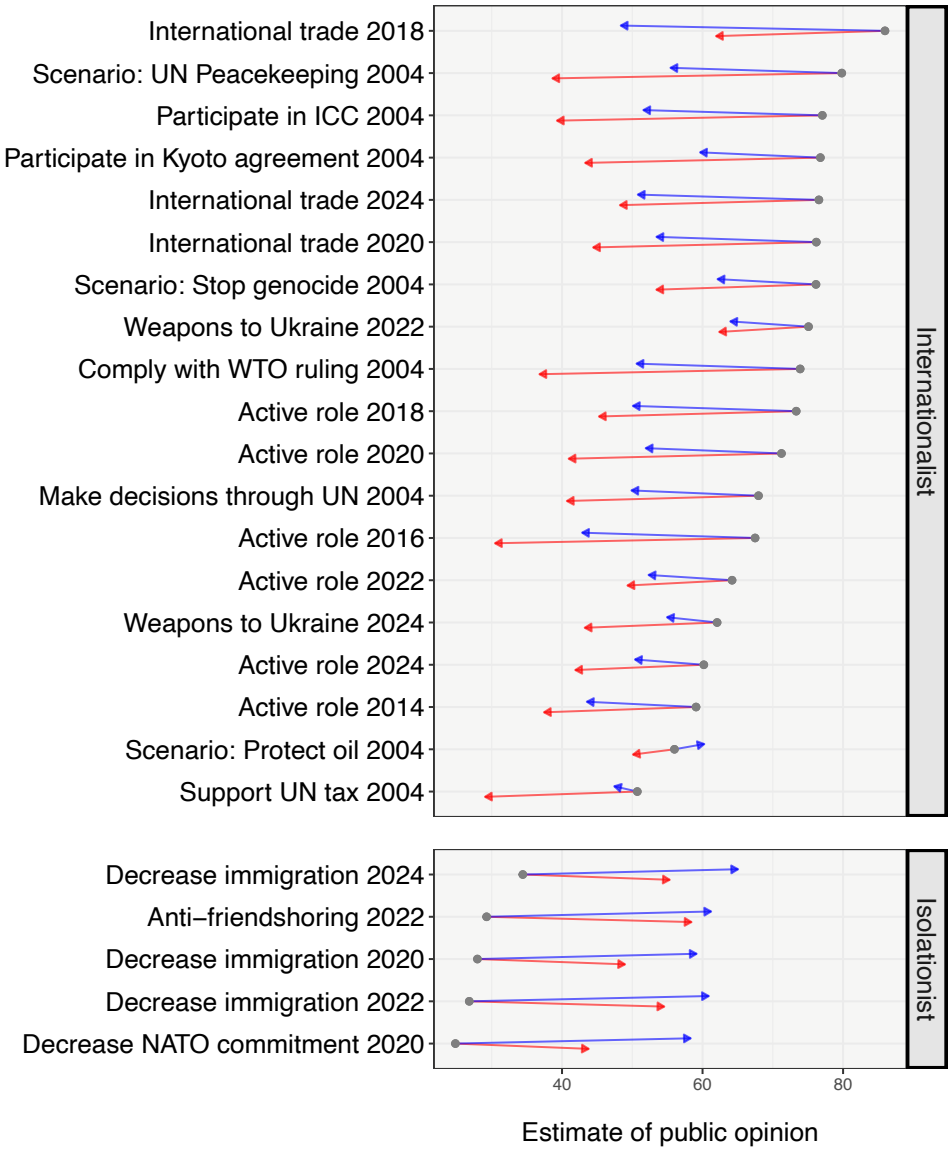
- $Y_{it}$: observed estimate of target $t$'s preference, by individual $i$
- $E_i$: observer $i$'s own preference ( support: $E_i = 1$, oppose: $E_i = 0$)
- $P_t$: true level of support by the target
- $D_t$: perceived similarity between the estimator and target groups, where $D \in [0, 1]$
- $S_{It}$: shared stereotype about the target group's preference, which depends on the policy type ($I$):
  - $S_{1t}$: Stereotype about the target's preference for internationalist policies ($I = 1$)
  - $S_{0t}$: Stereotype about the target's preference for isolationist policies ($I = 0$)
- $\epsilon_i \sim N(0, \sigma^2)$: random error

To apply the framework to the study of misperceptions, the dependent variable changes to $M_{it}$, equivalent to $Y_{it} - P_t$: if $M_{it} > 0$, it indicates overestimating the target's support; if $M_{it} < 0$, it indicates underestimating the target's support. Our theory presumes that $D_t < 0.5$, whereupon stereotyping will dominate projection.

### 2.2.2 Hierarchical modeling approach

This formalization suggests two limitations to the analysis in the main text. First, it is largely at the aggregate level, whereas many of the core assumptions of the theory itself are at the individual-level. Second, although the analysis in the main text focuses on a unidimensional internationalism-isolationism axis, when the public opinion literature in foreign policy raises the prospect of a more nuanced and multidimensional

Figure A2: Phase plot comparing misperceptions between supporters and opponents




Note: Figure A2 replicates the radar plots in Figure 3 in the main text as a phase plot instead; actual public opinion is represented by the grey dots, with the blue and red arrows illustrating the average estimates of public opinion provided by elite supporters (in blue) and opponents (in red). The longer the arrows, the greater the misperception. The figure shows that although supporters generally perceive higher levels of public support than opponents do, even supporters underestimate support for internationalist policies, and even opponents overestimate support for isolationist policies, suggesting that stereotyping is also in play.

analysis that looks not just at internationalism-isolationism, but specific types of internationalism: militant internationalism (involving the United States engaging with the world through military means) and cooperative internationalism (involving the United States working with allies and through international institutions to solve global problems) (Wittkopf, 1990; Holsti, 2004).

We thus study the relative prevalence of projection versus stereotyping at the individual-level in our data by estimating a multilevel model, taking into account the fact that we have respondents providing estimates about multiple issues, nested in multiple years. Formally, we can estimate a set of hierarchical models of the form $M_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 E_{ij} + \beta_2 S_{I[j]} + u_{individual[i]} + v_{policy[j]} + w_{year[j]} + \epsilon_{ij}$, with $\beta_1$ capturing the weight of projection, and $\beta_2$ capturing the weight of stereotyping, and $u_{individual[i]}$, $v_{policy[j]}$, and $w_{year[j]}$ denoting individual-specific, policy-specific, and year-specific random effects, respectively.

We already have measures of $M_{ij}$ (misperception) and $E_{ij}$ (the elite observer's own preference). To generate $S_{I[j]}$, we code each of the 24 policies along three dimensions, consistent with the three dimensions of foreign policy attitudes in the classic Holsti and Wittkopf framework, The first is *internationalism*, defined as policies in which the United States is globally engaged — using the same codings as in Figure 2 in the main text. The second is *militant internationalism*, referring to policies in which the United States is engaged militarily, either by using force or by sending weapons. The third is *cooperative internationalism*, referring to policies in which the United States is working with partners or through international institutions to solve global problems. Coding policies along all three dimensions allows us to determine whether elites are relying on general stereotypes about the public along an internationalism-isolationism continuum, versus more nuanced stereotypes relating to internationalism's specific "faces" (Wittkopf, 1990).

Table A3 presents the results. Model 1 presents the results from a simple one-way ANOVA (e.g. $M_{ij} = \beta_0 + u_{individual[i]} + v_{policy[j]} + w_{year[j]} + \epsilon_{ij}$), to simply partition the variation in misperception between individuals, policies, and years. Estimating intraclass correlations on the model parameters suggests that 3.8% of the variation in misperception is at the respondent level, 44.1% from the issue level, and 7.9% from the year-level; in other words, there is 11.6 times more variation in misperception across issues than across respondents. This speaks to the merit of including issue-specific covariates, which we introduce in Model 2; as a result, the remaining variation in misperception at the issue level drops to 11.1%, which is a sign these covariates do a good (although not exhaustive) job of capturing issue-specific characteristics. We see statistically significant negative coefficients for multilateral and internationalist policies, with a substantial effect size for internationalist policies in particular. Since positive values of $M_{ij}$ correspond to overestimates, this implies that respondents underestimate public support for internationalist policies by 41 percentage points compared to isolationist ones. Model 2 thus finds strong evidence in favor of stereotyping. Model 3 tests if this evidence holds when we add our projection measure. The projection

Table A3: Multilevel models: determinants of misperception ($M_{ij}$)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elite support | | | 9.705*** | 6.017*** | 9.898*** |
| | | | (0.534) | (1.179) | (1.166) |
| Internationalist | | −40.640*** | −48.009*** | −49.245*** | −48.227*** |
| | | (5.059) | (5.957) | (6.072) | (5.389) |
| MI | | 4.064 | 4.543 | 4.434 | 3.097 |
| | | (3.709) | (4.430) | (4.515) | (4.168) |
| CI | | −8.791** | −8.196* | −8.283* | −16.148*** |
| | | (4.172) | (4.902) | (4.988) | (4.596) |
| Support x Intl | | | | 4.673*** | |
| | | | | (1.331) | |
| Intercept | −7.838 | 21.787*** | 20.671*** | 21.132*** | 26.133*** |
| | (5.730) | (5.021) | (5.792) | (5.888) | (5.275) |
| N | 13,758 | 13,758 | 13,535 | 13,535 | 13,535 |
| Respondents | 4755 | 4755 | 4735 | 4735 | 4735 |
| Policies | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 |
| Years | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| Log Likelihood | −58,732.51 | −58,711.66 | −57,571.78 | −57,564.42 | −57,555.63 |
| AIC | 117,475.0 | 117,439.3 | 115,161.6 | 115,148.8 | 115,133.3 |
| BIC | 117,512.7 | 117,499.6 | 115,229.2 | 115,224.0 | 115,215.9 |
| Model type | One-way ANOVA | Random Intercept | Random Intercept | Random Intercept | Random Slope |

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

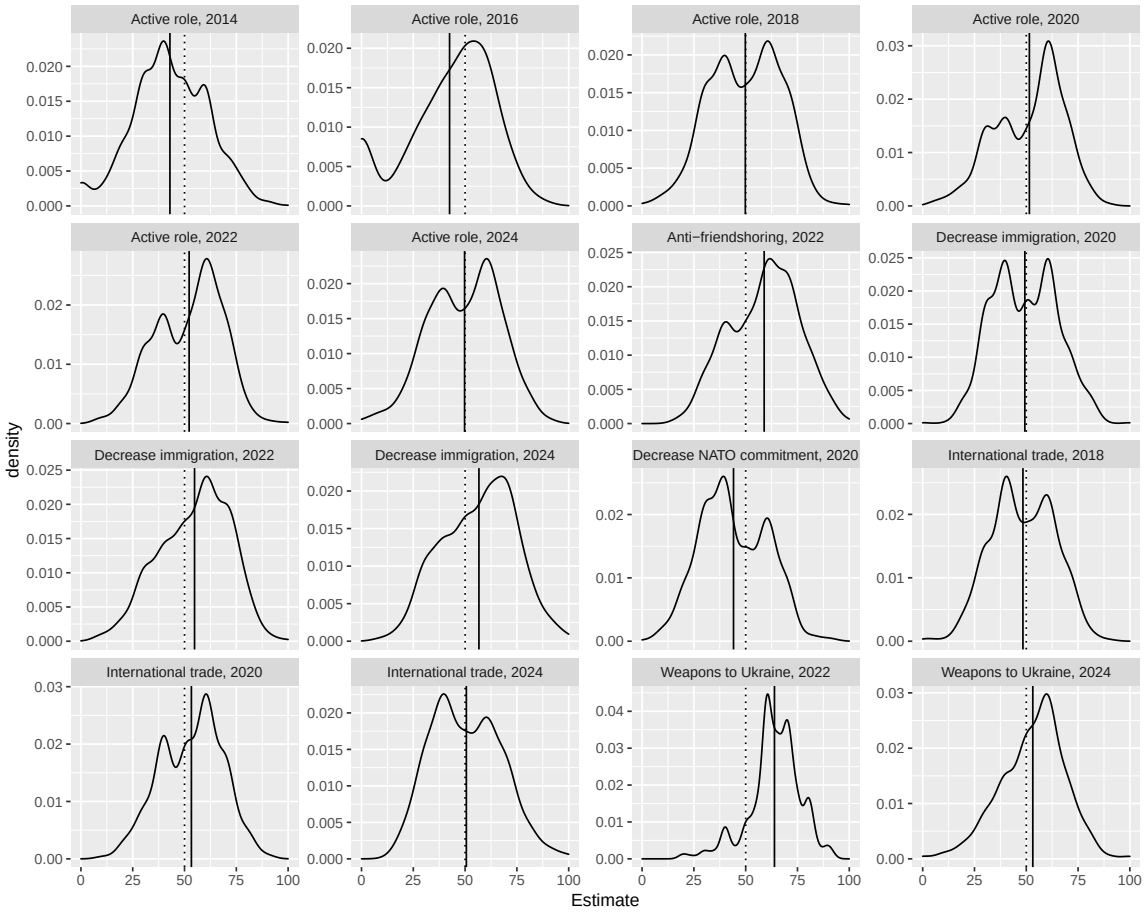
measure is statistically significant and positive: supporters overestimate by 9.7 percentage points compared to opponents. Yet the internationalism coefficient remains significant as well, and increases in size: respondents underestimate public support for internationalist policies by 48 percentage points compared to isolationist ones. Thus, although respondents appear to be utilizing both stereotyping and projection strategies, the effects of stereotyping swamp that of projection. Models 4 and 5 complicate the analysis (with model 4 adding an interaction between projection and our internationalist issue type, and model 5 letting the effects of projection vary across policies by adding a random slope on $E_ij$), but the central intuition remains the same.

## 2.3 Results not due to satisficing

Figure 2 shows that elite estimates of public opinion are less extreme than actual levels of public support, with elites overestimating support for isolationist policies and understimating support for internationalist ones. One alternative interpretation of these results are that elite respondents don't actually have an isolationist stereotype of the public, but rather, simply perceive the public as being split down the middle. A related interpretation is that our elite respondents are not taking the study seriously and are simply satisficing, such

that their estimates are peaking around 50% (which would be functionally equivalent to a "Don't Know" response).

Figure A3: Elite estimates of public opinion are not peaked at 50%




Note: the dotted vertical line denotes estimates of 50%; the solid vertical line denotes the mean estimate

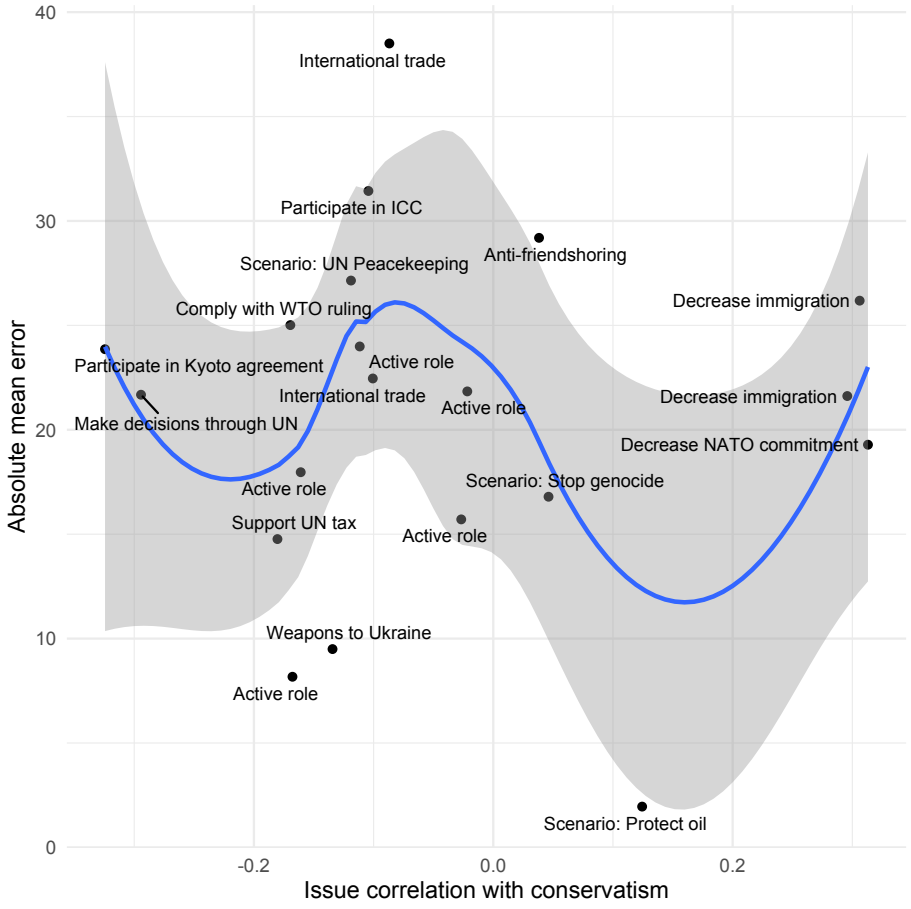
An examination of the actual distributions of elite estimates for the continuous items in Figure A3, however, reveals that the distributions are not peaked at 50%. In fact, many of the distributions of estimates appear to be multimodal. More formally, we can use Shapiro-Wilks tests to formally reject the null hypothesis of normality for each of the items, and Silverman's test for multimodality rejects the null hypothesis of 1 or fewer modes at the 95% level for 6 of the 16 items, and at the 90% level for 9 of the 16. This multimodality showcases the value of the individual-level stereotype measure in the experiment: although elites tend to overestimate support for isolationist policies and underestimate support for internationalist policies, elites vary in this regard, and the analysis in the experiment uses this individual-variation in elites' stereotypes of the public to explain variation in the accuracy of elite perceptions of public opinion.

Finally, it does not appear that these patterns are the result of satisficing, in which 50% estimates are a simply "Don't Know" answer in disguise. Respondents were allowed to skip questions, which we can treat

as a proxy for a Don't Know response. On average, the proportion of respondents who skipped questions is quite low (mean: 6.0%), and the answers shown here are from the respondents who did answer. This, it does not appear that elites consistently see the public as being split down the middle in foreign policy, or are simply engaging in satisficing.

## 2.4 Misperceptions in foreign policy are not biased in a conservative direction

Figure A4: No significant association between prediction accuracy and issue conservatism




The analysis in the main text interprets these results as evidence of elites holding an isolationist stereotype about the public. Another potential interpretation is that elites perceive the public as more conservative than it actually is, much as previous studies have found that elites hold a conservative view of the American public in domestic politics. While it is true that three of the questions where elites overestimate public support the most are policies associated with Donald Trump, there are some limits to that interpretation here. For each of the twenty questions about which we have measures of elite estimates of public opinion, we estimate $cor(X_{m,i}, Ideology_m)$, the correlation between the public's views about issue $i$, and the public's

self-identified political ideology, coded such that higher values indicate more conservative views. Consistent with foreign policy being less ideologically sorted than domestic policy, must of the questions here display relatively modest correlations with ideology: nearly three-quarters of the items have ideological correlations $-0.2 < r < 0.2$. In contrast, of the items Broockman and Skovron (2018) study in the 2014 CCES, none display ideological correlations this weak, and the median correlation is three times stronger ($r = -0.4$). The issues we study here therefore do not fall as cleanly on ideological lines as the domestic social issues showcased in prior work. Moreover, Figure A4 plots issue correlations with political ideology on the x-axis, and the absolute mean error on the y-axis.[6]Interestingly, there appears to be no clear association between the correlation coefficients and the absolute mean error: it is not the case that elite perceptions become more accurate on conservative policies and less accurate on liberal ones, for example.

## 3 Survey experiment supplementary results

Supplementary analysis in Tables A4-A5 reveal a striking degree of consensus about NATO among our respondents, showing that the effect of a NATO endorsement doesn't significantly differ between Trump supporters and non-Trump supporters; even individuals who want to withdraw from NATO are nonetheless more likely to support an intervention if it receives NATO's seal of approval![7] The only heterogeneous effects evident in our results are in the first two columns of Table A4, and refer not to the content of respondents' partisan or foreign policy preferences, but their level of political interest and knowledge: more politically sophisticated members of the public respond more to the NATO endorsement than do less politically sophisticated members of the public.

[6]More formally, the y-axis captures the overall level of accuracy of the elite perception without taking its directionality into account ($|\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} Y_{e,i,j}}{N} - 100\frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} w_j X_{m,i,j}}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} w_j}|$).

[7]This provides one reason why our findings differ from an innovative study by Dellmuth et al. (2022), who compare observational data from elites and publics to show that citizens express less confidence in IOs than political elites do. Our experiment suggests that even respondents who have less confidence in IOs are nonetheless no less sensitive to IO cues. See also Appendix §3.4, which presents supplementary results on perceptions of legitimacy.

Table A4: Heterogeneous treatment effects: public sample

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NATO Endorsement | 0.033 | 0.054 | 0.133*** | 0.133*** | 0.105*** | 0.068 | 0.079 |
| | (0.049) | (0.041) | (0.031) | (0.026) | (0.036) | (0.052) | (0.063) |
| Age 30-44 | 0.044 | 0.035 | 0.046 | 0.031 | 0.042 | 0.034 | 0.027 |
| | (0.030) | (0.029) | (0.030) | (0.029) | (0.028) | (0.029) | (0.028) |
| Age 45-59 | 0.030 | 0.053* | 0.047 | 0.044 | 0.040 | 0.043 | 0.053* |
| | (0.030) | (0.029) | (0.030) | (0.030) | (0.028) | (0.029) | (0.029) |
| Age 60-74 | 0.030 | 0.044 | 0.049 | 0.039 | 0.014 | 0.043 | 0.045 |
| | (0.032) | (0.030) | (0.031) | (0.031) | (0.029) | (0.030) | (0.030) |
| Age 75+ | 0.064 | 0.100** | 0.099** | 0.089** | 0.040 | 0.082** | 0.109*** |
| | (0.041) | (0.040) | (0.041) | (0.041) | (0.038) | (0.040) | (0.039) |
| Some college | 0.012 | 0.018 | 0.024 | 0.012 | 0.005 | 0.022 | 0.012 |
| | (0.026) | (0.025) | (0.026) | (0.025) | (0.024) | (0.025) | (0.025) |
| College/university | −0.050** | −0.031 | −0.036 | −0.034 | −0.041* | −0.035 | −0.051** |
| | (0.024) | (0.023) | (0.024) | (0.023) | (0.022) | (0.023) | (0.022) |
| Postgraduate | −0.011 | 0.003 | 0.016 | 0.004 | −0.009 | 0.012 | −0.004 |
| | (0.032) | (0.032) | (0.032) | (0.032) | (0.029) | (0.031) | (0.030) |
| Male | 0.004 | 0.020 | 0.025 | 0.028 | −0.010 | 0.018 | 0.037** |
| | (0.019) | (0.019) | (0.019) | (0.019) | (0.018) | (0.018) | (0.018) |
| White | −0.059*** | −0.050** | −0.047** | −0.054*** | −0.060*** | −0.058*** | −0.051*** |
| | (0.021) | (0.020) | (0.021) | (0.021) | (0.019) | (0.020) | (0.020) |
| Political interest | −0.012 | | | | | | |
| | (0.045) | | | | | | |
| Political interest x NATO+ | 0.158*** | | | | | | |
| | (0.060) | | | | | | |
| Political knowledge | | −0.013 | | | | | |
| | | (0.037) | | | | | |
| Political knowledge x NATO+ | | 0.113** | | | | | |
| | | (0.051) | | | | | |
| Party ID | | | −0.026 | | | | |
| | | | (0.038) | | | | |
| Party ID x NATO+ | | | 0.024 | | | | |
| | | | (0.053) | | | | |
| Trump favorability | | | | −0.006 | | | |
| | | | | (0.031) | | | |
| Trump favorability x NATO+ | | | | 0.012 | | | |
| | | | | (0.043) | | | |
| MI | | | | | 0.286*** | | |
| | | | | | (0.042) | | |
| MI x NATO+ | | | | | 0.052 | | |
| | | | | | (0.057) | | |
| CI | | | | | | 0.068* | |
| | | | | | | (0.040) | |
| CI x NATO+ | | | | | | 0.079 | |
| | | | | | | (0.056) | |
| NATO support | | | | | | | 0.072*** |
| | | | | | | | (0.016) |
| NATO support x NATO+ | | | | | | | 0.022 |
| | | | | | | | (0.021) |
| Intercept | 0.586*** | 0.550*** | 0.546*** | 0.554*** | 0.432*** | 0.494*** | 0.341*** |
| | (0.041) | (0.037) | (0.035) | (0.033) | (0.035) | (0.045) | (0.055) |
| N | 925 | 996 | 943 | 967 | 968 | 973 | 976 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.089 | 0.068 | 0.069 | 0.063 | 0.167 | 0.077 | 0.117 |

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

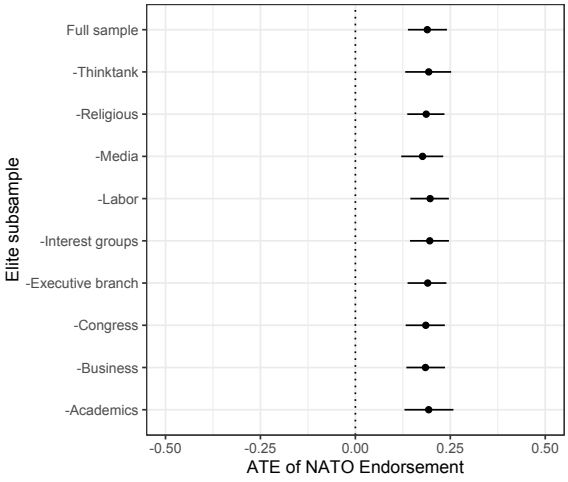
Table A5: Heterogeneous treatment effects: elite sample

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NATO Endorsement | 0.211*** | 0.193*** | 0.132* | 0.335 | 0.162*** |
| | (0.038) | (0.030) | (0.067) | (0.207) | (0.033) |
| Age 30-44 | 0.041 | 0.074 | 0.066 | 0.078 | 0.091 |
| | (0.081) | (0.077) | (0.073) | (0.077) | (0.078) |
| Age 45-59 | 0.066 | 0.077 | 0.061 | 0.082 | 0.091 |
| | (0.080) | (0.077) | (0.072) | (0.076) | (0.077) |
| Age 60-74 | 0.033 | 0.023 | 0.019 | 0.034 | 0.039 |
| | (0.080) | (0.077) | (0.072) | (0.077) | (0.078) |
| Age 75+ | −0.009 | −0.005 | −0.010 | −0.005 | 0.019 |
| | (0.095) | (0.091) | (0.086) | (0.091) | (0.092) |
| Some college | | | | | 0.178 |
| | | | | | (0.316) |
| College/university | | | | | −0.061 |
| | | | | | (0.296) |
| Postgraduate | | | | | −0.116 |
| | | | | | (0.295) |
| Male | 0.013 | 0.021 | −0.019 | 0.018 | 0.012 |
| | (0.033) | (0.031) | (0.029) | (0.030) | (0.030) |
| White | −0.041 | −0.039 | −0.035 | −0.028 | −0.025 |
| | (0.045) | (0.042) | (0.039) | (0.042) | (0.042) |
| Party ID | −0.014 | | | | |
| | (0.064) | | | | |
| Party ID x NATO+ | −0.095 | | | | |
| | (0.093) | | | | |
| Trump favorability | | 0.009 | | | |
| | | (0.092) | | | |
| Trump favorability x NATO+ | | −0.012 | | | |
| | | (0.119) | | | |
| MI | | | 0.391*** | | |
| | | | (0.071) | | |
| MI x NATO+ | | | 0.086 | | |
| | | | (0.106) | | |
| CI | | | | 0.259 | |
| | | | | (0.169) | |
| CI x Endorsement | | | | −0.142 | |
| | | | | (0.209) | |
| NATO+ | | | | | −0.038 |
| | | | | | (0.038) |
| Executive x NATO+ | | | | | 0.071 |
| | | | | | (0.058) |
| Intercept | 0.458*** | 0.431*** | 0.246*** | 0.166 | 0.535* |
| | (0.091) | (0.085) | (0.090) | (0.189) | (0.304) |
| N | 420 | 472 | 475 | 477 | 479 |
| $R^2$ | 0.101 | 0.111 | 0.218 | 0.116 | 0.123 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.081 | 0.094 | 0.203 | 0.099 | 0.101 |

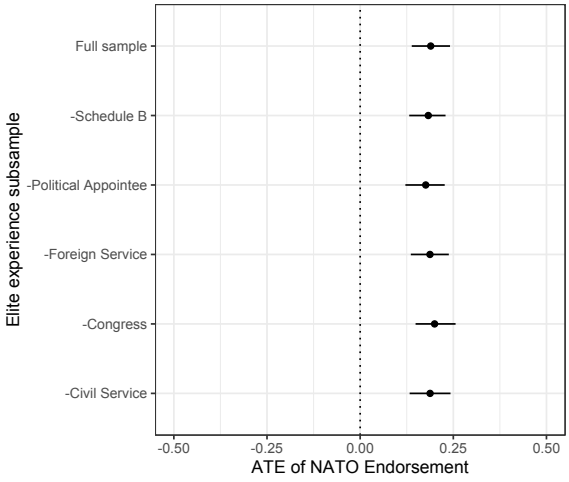
*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Figure A5: Elite results robust to composition of elite sample

(a) Dropping one elite subsample at a time




(b) Dropping one set of elite experience at a time




Panel (a) shows the average treatment effect of a NATO endorsement for the full elite sample, along with the average treatment effect when a given subsample of elites (e.g. academics, business leaders, etc.) are dropped from the analysis, showing the results are highly stable. Panel (b) presents a similar analysis, but this time dropping elites with particular types of experiences (e.g. those who served in the civil service, those who served as political appointees, etc.) from the analysis, once again showing the stability of the results. The two analyses differ in that the elite subsamples listed in panel a are mutually exclusive categories (because of the sampling strategy described above), whereas the elite experiences listed in panel b are not, such that some elites have experience in multiple categories. All estimates shown with 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.

Figure A6: Elite misperceptions of elite opinion

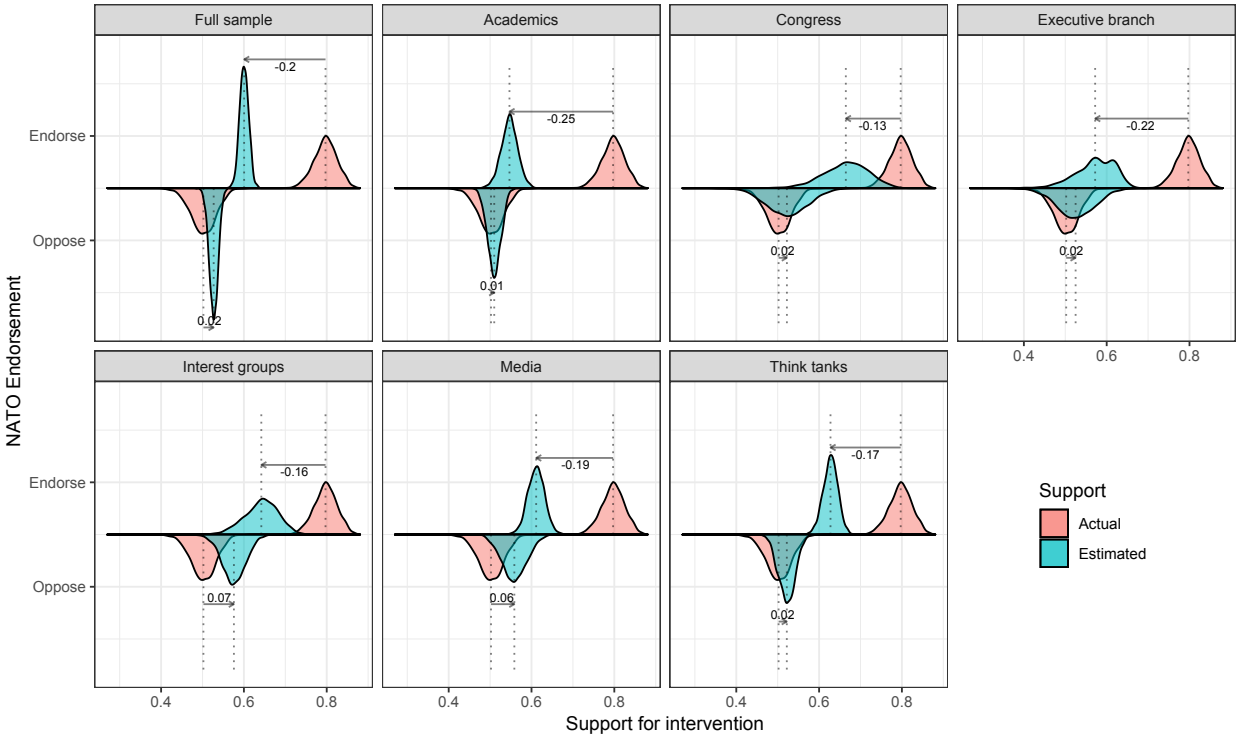
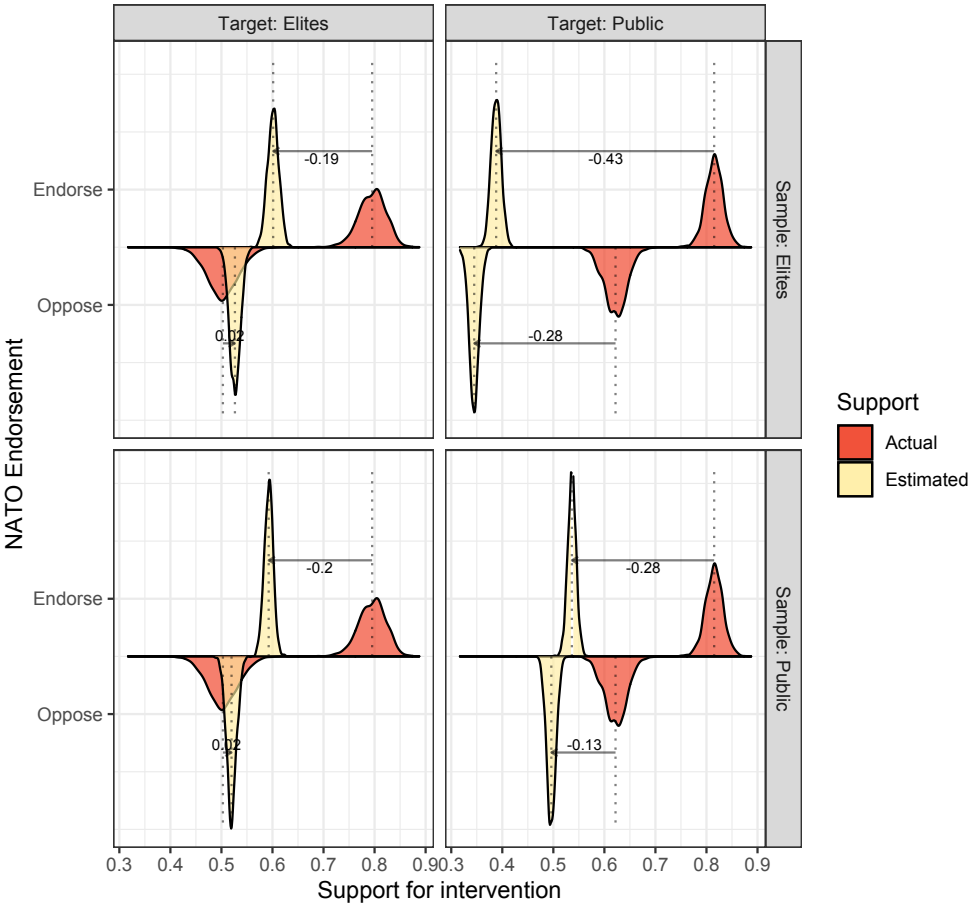



Figure A6 presents split-density distributions of the average actual level of elite support for the intervention (in red), and elites' estimated level of elite support for the intervention (in turquoise), calculated using $B = 1500$ bootstraps. The distributions in the top half of each panel depict results from the NATO Endorse condition, and the distributions in the bottom half of each panel depict results in the NATO Oppose condition. The arrows indicate the difference between the actual level of elite support in a given condition, and elites' estimated level of elite support. The results show that across all subsamples of elites, elites estimate the level of elite support in the NATO Oppose condition fairly accurately, but underestimate the level of elite support in the NATO Endorse condition. As a result, because elites misperceive public opinion in both the treatment *and* control conditions, and misperceive elite opinion only in the treatment condition, the ATE on elite misperceptions for elites is actually larger than for the public, even though the absolute level of misperception within each treatment condition is larger in the public samples.

Figure A7: Elites misperceive public opinion more than the public itself does




The split-density plots in Figure A7 compare elite and public misperceptions of public opinion. The top-right hand panel replicates the results from the main text, showing that elites greatly misperceive NATO's effect on the public, and that this misperception is largely driven by underestimating the popularity of the intervention when NATO endorses it. However, the other three panels let us put this misperception in comparative context. They show two interesting findings: first, as a comparison of the top and bottom panels in the right-hand column show, elites misperceive public opinion to a greater extent than the public itself does (the public's perceptions of public opinion are 15 percentage points closer in each treatment condition than elites' perceptions are). It is therefore unlikely to be the case that our elite results are simply an artifact of second-order beliefs being difficult to accurately estimate, but reflect a broader disconnect. Second, both elites and the public share strikingly similar perceptions about elite opinion; they both underestimate the popularity of the mission in the NATO endorse condition among elites, but not by as much as they misperceive public opinion.

Figure A8 replicates the results from the main text, but this time presenting cell means rather than average treatment effects: the top half of each panel shows results for the NATO endorse condition, and the bottom half of each panel for the NATO oppose condition; the average level of the public's support in a given condition is once again displayed in red, and elites' estimate of the level of public support in a given condition is shown in light yellow. Beginning with the full sample results in the top-left panel, the plot shows that elites significantly underestimate the popularity of the intervention in both the NATO Endorse and NATO Oppose conditions (consistent with elites underestimating how interventionist the public is in general), but that the degree of misperception is larger in the NATO Endorse condition than the NATO

Oppose. On average, elites underestimate the popularity of an intervention with NATO's blessing by 43 percentage points, while underestimating the popularity of an intervention without NATO's blessing by 28 percentage points.

## 3.1 Generating the stereotype measure

As discussed in the text, we generate our stereotype measure using two items from the 2018 elite survey. The first asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who believe the United States should play an active role in world politics. Foreign policy elites in our sample significantly underestimate just how internationalist the public is more generally, with over 93% of our elite sample as a whole assuming the public is less supportive of internationalism than our data suggests; less than half (48.7%) of elites in our sample correctly perceive that a majority of the public is internationalist. We find similar results within each of our elite subsamples: 94% of our executive branch sample, 93% of our congress sample, and 94% of our media sample, for example, underestimate the public's level of support for internationalism. It is therefore not the case that elites who are incentivized to more accurately perceive public opinion have more accurate assessments of it than those who don't.

The second item asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who agree that international trade is good for the United States. Foreign policy elites in our sample also significantly underestimate just how supportive Americans are of international trade, with over 99% of our elite sample as a whole assuming the public is less supportive of trade than our data suggests; only 44% of elites in our sample correctly perceive that a majority of the public sees trade as benefiting the U.S. economy. As before, since elites are heavily supportive of trade (99% of our foreign policy opinion leaders agree trade helps the economy as a whole), we once again find evidence of a strong pluralistic ignorance effect. To produce our internationalist stereotype measure for the analyses below, we simply calculate the mean of each of these two proportion estimates. The two estimates are moderately correlated with one another ($r = 0.44$), and thus appear to tap into the same latent construct; if we re-estimate the models in Appendix §2.3.2 below, but using just the active role estimate, or just the international trade estimate, as our proxy for elites' stereotypes, the model fit is inferior to when the additive scale is used, suggesting that the results are not being driven by one of these items rather than the other. Although both indicator measures used to generate the stereotype variable are scaled in same direction, the results are unlikely to simply be an artifact of acquiescence bias or survey response styles, given that we obtain similar findings in the observational data analysis in the main text that also includes items scaled in the opposite direction.

Figure A8: Elites underestimate the power of NATO endorsements more than the power of NATO opposition

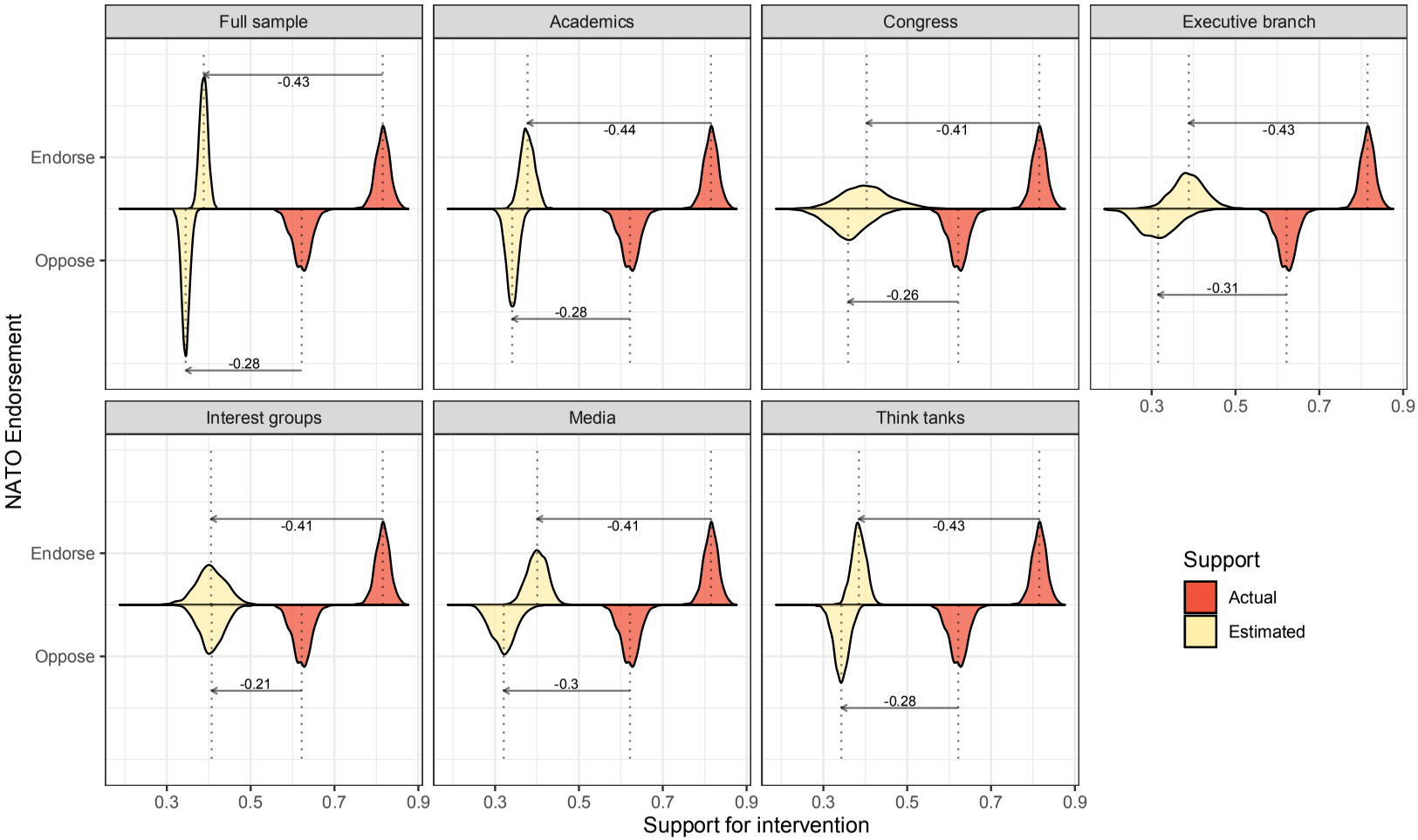



Figure ?? presents splint-density distributions of the average actual level of public support for the intervention (in red), and elites' estimated level of public support for the intervention (in yellow). The results show that across all subsamples of elites, elites significantly underestimate the popularity of the intervention within both treatment conditions, but the degree of misperception is larger in the NATO Endorse condition, suggesting elites particularly underestimate the popularity of NATO endorsements.

### 3.2 Studying elite misperceptions in a multivariate context

To study elite misperceptions in a multivariate context, we therefore estimate a series of linear regression models, estimating the individual-level correlates of elite misperceptions of public support for the intervention. Since misperception can occur both because of misperceptions in the NATO endorse condition, and misperceptions in the NATO oppose condition, we estimate separate models within each treatment condition, in Table A6; the dependent variable in each model is the degree of misperception, calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference between the average level of public support in each treatment condition, and elites' estimates of the level of public support in each treatment condition. Although misperceptions here are calculated using the absolute value (such that they can refer to both over- and under-estimates), as Figure 4 in the main text shows, for most of our respondents it refers to underestimates.

Models 1 and 4 in Table A6 present the effects of basic demographic characteristics. It shows that more educated elites tend to misperceive public opinion to a greater degree; because of the skewed distribution of education in our elite sample, education is operationalized here using a system of dummy variables, where the reference category are elites who had some college or less. Respondents with university degrees significantly misperceive the level of public support in the NATO oppose condition, and respondents with graduate degrees significantly misperceive the level of public support in both treatment conditions. Men slightly more accurately perceive public opinion in the NATO Endorse condition than women do, and our dummy variable shows that White respondents tend to be relatively more accurate in the NATO Oppose condition and relatively less accurate in the NATO Endorse condition. Models 2 and 5 add the effects of a series of theoretically relevant individual differences, capturing respondents' preferred level of US commitment to NATO, their level of militant internationalism (MI), their level of cooperative internationalism (CI), and their attitudes towards Donald Trump.[8] There's some evidence that respondents who want the US to be more committed to NATO more accurately estimate the popularity of the intervention under a NATO endorsement, but the effect is substantively small. More hawkish respondents, who are higher in MI, similarly more accurately estimate the popularity of the mission in the control. Models 3 and 6 add a series of dichotomous variables for each elite subsample (using the executive branch subsample as the reference category), reconfirming the analyses from the main text showing all of the elite subsamples misperceive public opinion at a similar rate. A Wald test confirms that the inclusion of these elite subsample covariates does not significantly improve model fit ($F = 0.972$, $p < 0.44$ in NATO oppose condition; $F = 0.247$, $p < 0.94$ in NATO endorse condition).

[8] Militant internationalism (MI) is calculated here using factor scores from an Item Response Theory (IRT) model capturing respondents' expressed willingness to send US troops across a range of eight intervention scenarios, and cooperative internationalism (CI) from an item asking respondents whether it's more effective for the US to work with other countries and agreements when trying to its achieve foreign policy goals, rather than tackling them on its own.

In main text, we conduct a similar analysis, but including an isolationist stereotype measure. Two points here are important to note. First, Wald tests confirm the importance of this variable ($F = 18.789$, $p < 0.01$ in the NATO oppose condition; $F = 38.621$, $p < 0.001$ in the NATO endorse condition). Second, an alternate Bayesian-inspired theoretical model from Chaudoin (2014) argues that IO cues should have the greatest effect among individuals with the weakest priors: individuals who are strong internationalists will want to intervene even without an IO cue, and individuals who are strong isolationists won't want to intervene even with an IO cue, whereas individuals in the middle will be the most likely to be moved. To test whether this alternative framework about the public's first-order preferences also applies here with respect to elites' second-order beliefs, we replicate models 3 and 6 but adding a quadratic term for elites' stereotypes, since elites' images of the public's general orientation towards internationalism or isolationism can be thought of as equivalent to elites' priors about the public's preferences. The quadratic terms are not statistically significant, suggesting that this alternative framework does not apply to elites' second-order beliefs – perhaps consistent with arguments by Mercer (2012) about the cognitive challenges of higher-order beliefs.

### 3.3 Stereotype dominates projection in the experiment

The analysis in Table 1 finds strong individual-level evidence in favor of our proposed stereotyping mechanism: the more an isolationist stereotype of the public that elite respondents have, the more they misperceive public opinion in the experiment. We can also test for projection effects. Table A7 regresses elites' degree of misperception of public opinion on a set of demographic controls, as well as two key focal variables: our isolationist stereotype measure (i.e. $S_{it}$ from our earlier formalization), and whether respondents themselves supported the intervention or not (i.e. $E_i$). The first two columns operationalize misperception as we do in Table A6 and Table 1: as an absolute value, such that larger values indicate greater errors. To render the projection results more interpretable, the last two columns operationalize misperception directionally as the extent to which respondents underestimate public support, such that larger values indicate greater levels of underestimation, and negative values indicate lower levels. The results in Table A7 show that although our respondents display projection effects (supporters make more accurate estimates of public opinion than opponents do, because they underestimate public support to a lesser degree), the effects of projection are swamped by that of the isolationism stereotype – consistent with our findings from the observational analysis in the main text.

Table A6: Correlates of elite misperception of public support for the intervention

| | NATO Oppose | | | NATO Endorse | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Age 30-44 | 0.140 | −0.109 | −0.132 | −5.463 | −3.303 | −5.853 |
| | (5.065) | (5.064) | (5.118) | (5.904) | (6.003) | (6.172) |
| Age 45-59 | 0.411 | −0.970 | 0.961 | 1.637 | 2.317 | 0.934 |
| | (5.022) | (5.042) | (5.187) | (5.866) | (5.862) | (6.319) |
| Age 60-74 | 6.341 | 5.975 | 6.440 | −2.830 | −0.861 | −3.596 |
| | (5.035) | (5.040) | (5.169) | (5.869) | (5.870) | (6.349) |
| Age 75+ | 3.610 | 3.754 | 3.094 | 1.062 | 1.171 | 0.470 |
| | (6.020) | (6.032) | (6.156) | (7.038) | (6.973) | (7.466) |
| College/university | 35.793*** | 32.719*** | 35.552*** | 11.972 | 14.610* | 12.448 |
| | (10.608) | (10.664) | (10.702) | (8.437) | (8.376) | (8.587) |
| Postgraduate | 33.232*** | 30.849*** | 31.666*** | 16.493** | 16.620** | 17.478** |
| | (10.282) | (10.302) | (10.360) | (7.913) | (7.821) | (8.315) |
| Male | −1.846 | −0.932 | −2.339 | −6.952*** | −6.926*** | −7.163*** |
| | (2.173) | (2.229) | (2.192) | (2.384) | (2.486) | (2.440) |
| White | −6.573** | −6.076* | −6.827** | 9.415*** | 9.312*** | 9.514*** |
| | (3.167) | (3.246) | (3.194) | (2.976) | (3.056) | (3.035) |
| Party ID | 1.422 | 2.366 | 2.193 | 1.347 | 4.956 | 1.185 |
| | (3.194) | (4.144) | (3.320) | (3.219) | (4.233) | (3.369) |
| NATO commitment | | 1.612 | | | −3.452* | |
| | | (1.703) | | | (1.951) | |
| MI | | −8.579** | | | −1.520 | |
| | | (4.249) | | | (4.669) | |
| CI | | −3.111 | | | 9.657 | |
| | | (8.343) | | | (5.923) | |
| Trump favorability | | 2.351 | | | −2.470 | |
| | | (5.877) | | | (5.334) | |
| Academic | | | −0.425 | | | 2.546 |
| | | | (4.363) | | | (5.185) |
| Congress | | | −2.572 | | | 1.693 |
| | | | (5.907) | | | (6.518) |
| Interest groups | | | −7.378 | | | 5.817 |
| | | | (4.927) | | | (6.054) |
| Media | | | −1.827 | | | 3.285 |
| | | | (5.019) | | | (5.523) |
| Think Tanks | | | −2.998 | | | 3.601 |
| | | | (4.438) | | | (5.212) |
| Intercept | 0.570 | 4.685 | 4.307 | 26.506** | 26.809* | 23.250* |
| | (11.222) | (14.829) | (12.158) | (10.606) | (13.731) | (12.304) |
| N | 242 | 236 | 242 | 175 | 170 | 175 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.047 | 0.048 | 0.046 | 0.119 | 0.105 | 0.099 |

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01. Positive values = greater misperceptions.
Reference categories: some college or less, executive branch sample

Table A7: Comparing stereotyping and projection effects

| | Abs. Misperception | | Underestimation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Age 30-44 | 1.937 | −10.211* | 1.766 | −10.300* |
| | (4.763) | (5.319) | (5.126) | (5.328) |
| Age 45-59 | 1.912 | −2.003 | 1.259 | −2.022 |
| | (4.719) | (5.275) | (5.079) | (5.284) |
| Age 60-74 | 6.777 | −5.857 | 6.519 | −5.899 |
| | (4.724) | (5.249) | (5.085) | (5.258) |
| Age 75+ | 6.766 | −1.529 | 6.445 | −1.576 |
| | (5.680) | (6.282) | (6.113) | (6.293) |
| College/university | 29.960*** | 11.146 | 29.253*** | 11.062 |
| | (10.004) | (7.491) | (10.766) | (7.504) |
| Postgraduate | 27.743*** | 14.841** | 26.840** | 14.864** |
| | (9.697) | (7.040) | (10.437) | (7.053) |
| Male | −1.791 | −5.359** | −0.670 | −5.368** |
| | (2.042) | (2.129) | (2.198) | (2.133) |
| White | −7.153** | 7.241*** | −7.685** | 7.319*** |
| | (2.980) | (2.675) | (3.207) | (2.680) |
| Party ID | 0.059 | −0.263 | 0.798 | −0.291 |
| | (3.006) | (2.909) | (3.235) | (2.914) |
| Isolationist stereotype | 27.078*** | 46.368*** | 26.886*** | 46.559*** |
| | (6.279) | (7.139) | (6.758) | (7.152) |
| Elite supporter | −6.390*** | −5.912*** | −6.254*** | −5.927*** |
| | (1.723) | (2.242) | (1.854) | (2.246) |
| Intercept | −4.893 | 14.382 | −4.603 | 14.269 |
| | (11.087) | (9.909) | (11.932) | (9.927) |
| N | 242 | 174 | 242 | 174 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.161 | 0.310 | 0.138 | 0.312 |
| NATO Condition | Oppose | Endorse | Oppose | Endorse |

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

## 3.4 Causal mediation results

### 3.4.1 Causal mediation analysis

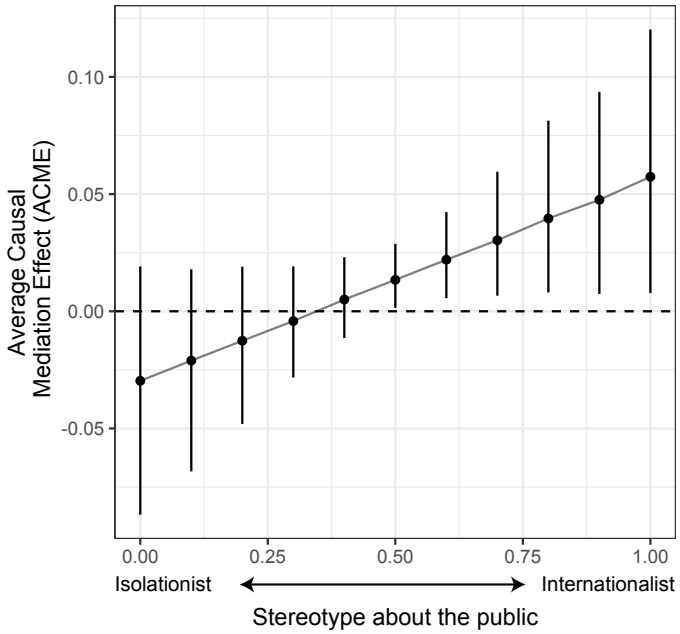
The analysis in the main text shows that foreign policy elites effectively underestimate the effects of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force in our experiment, just as they underestimated the popularity of global engagement more broadly in our observational data. From a theoretical perspective the results are noteworthy because although IR scholars have paid considerable attention to how misperceptions complicate the international side of the two-level game that leaders play in foreign policy, they have thus far neglected to appreciate the potential for misperceptions to complicate our models of the domestic politics in IR as well.

Yet these findings can also be consequential for another reason. If foreign policy leaders care about public opinion in foreign policy (Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020), it implies that the more supportive of the intervention elites perceive the public to be, the more they themselves will support it. This is consistent with Thompson's (2009) argument that leaders will choose to intervene multilaterally *because* of its presumed effects on domestic support. We can test this proposition by turning to nonparametric causal mediation analyses, testing whether the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force is mediated by perceptions of domestic support for the intervention more broadly. As with all mediation analyses, this analysis rests on a sequential ignorability assumption (Imai et al., 2011), so caution should be taken in the interpretation of the results below, but controlling for a wide range of demographic covariates, the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) of perceived public support remains statistically significant ($p < 0.03$). At the same time, however, the proportion of the total effect mediated by perceived public support is relatively modest (6.5%), suggesting that much of the effect of NATO endorsements on elites' support for the use of force is channeled through other pathways.

Yet these modest effects of the domestic support mechanism are partially a function of elites' isolationist stereotypes about the public. As Figure A9 shows, the magnitude of the ACME depends on how isolationist elites perceive the public to be more generally (as noted by a formal test of moderated mediation: $p < 0.023$). For those foreign policy leaders who have isolationist stereotypes about the public, the ACME is not statistically significant; the less isolationist an image foreign policy leaders have of the public, the larger the ACME of perceived public support, and the larger the proportion of the total effect the mediator explains: for respondents with an internationalism stereotype score of 0.5, 6.8% of the total effect is channeled through perceived public support; for respondents with an internationalism stereotype score of 0.7, 20.1% of the total effect is channeled through perceived public support. This analysis suggests that if the foreign policy establishment were to shed their isolationist image of the public, the perceived domestic support

mechanism would increase in importance. Elites' stereotypes about the public therefore not only affect how they anticipate the public will react to IO cues, but also shape how much elites weigh domestic political considerations: leaders with isolationist stereotypes of the public prefer NATO endorsements *in spite* of the negligible effect they anticipate NATO cues will have on public opinion, while leaders with internationalist stereotypes of the public prefer NATO endorsements *because* of the effects they anticipate it will have on public opinion. Much like how the postwar realists argued foreign policy should be insulated from public opinion because they assumed the public was hostile to their views (Kennan, 1951), we see here that foreign policy elites attend to public opinion more when they believe the public shares their own views more generally.

Figure A9: Perceptions of public support mediate the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the intervention




A moderated mediation model shows that the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the intervention through perceived levels of public support is significantly larger for those foreign policy leaders with less isolationist stereotypes about the public ($p < 0.023$). See Appendix §3.4 for additional mediation analyses using a broader set of causal mechanisms.

However, although perceived public support is one mechanism that can explain why NATO endorsements bolster support for the use of force, it is not the only one. In addition to measuring perceived public and elite support for the intervention, we also administered an additional set of mechanism questions, capturing a wide range of other reasons why NATO endorsements might increase support for the use of force. These range from normative considerations (perhaps respondents perceived interventions blessed by NATO as more morally right, or having more salutary effects on America's reputation in the eyes of the international community), to material considerations (perhaps respondents perceived interventions blessed by NATO as having a higher likelihood of success, or better serving America's national interests). Figure A10 below presents the effect of

NATO endorsements on each of these potential mechanisms, in turn, for both the public sample (in red) and sample of foreign policy leaders (in green). This plot shows that interventions endorsed by NATO are indeed perceived as more moral, as having more positive reputational consequences, as more legitimate, as better serving American national interests, as more likely to be successful, as more likely to produce burden sharing, and as more popular at home. In general, we see similar patterns for the elite and mass sample, although NATO endorsements appear to exert more powerful effects on perceived likelihood of success among elites than among masses.

Figure A10: Effect of NATO endorsements on causal mechanisms

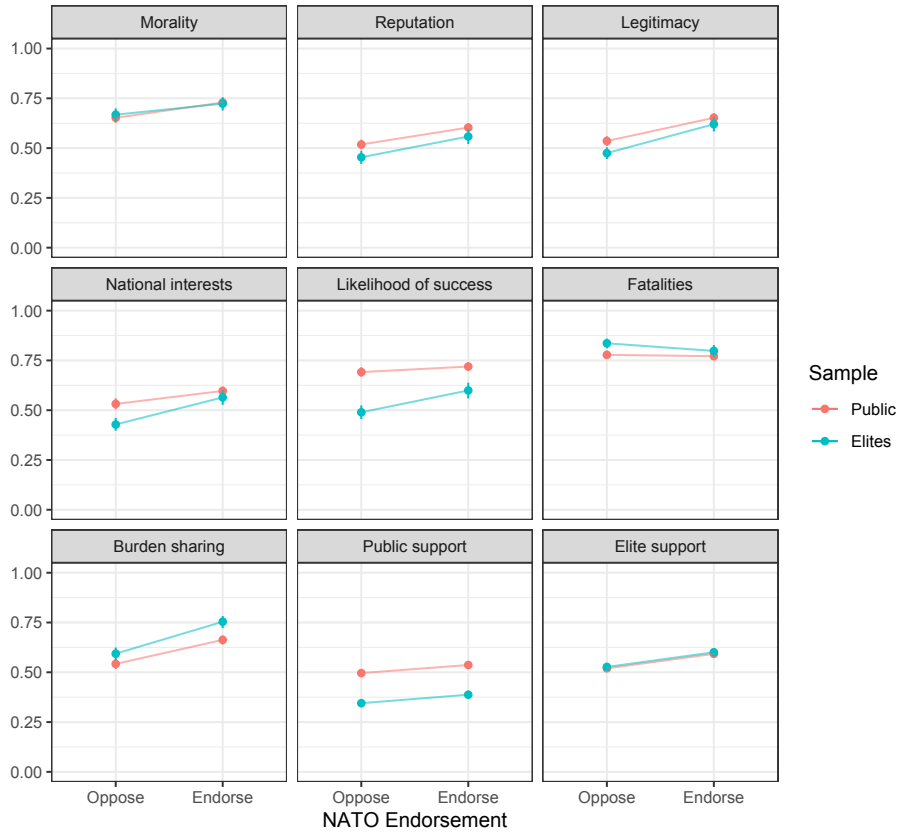



Figure A10 presents the effects of NATO endorsements on a range of causal mechanisms, ranging from normative considerations, to instrumental ones, alongside the domestic support mechanisms that are the subject of the analysis in the main paper.

To provide a sense of the substantive roles of each of these potential mechanisms on support for the intervention, we therefore estimate a series of nonparametric causal mediation analyses (Imai et al., 2011), similar to that estimated in the main paper for perceived public support. There are several reasons why we should be cautious in our interpretation of causal mediation results here. Most importantly, the sequential ignorability assumption implies that the mediators must be independent from one another; this is unlikely in this case given the overlap between the litany of interrelated mechanisms discussed here. We therefore

employ a data reduction approach, which does not obviate concerns about non-independence altogether, but improves the credibility of the analysis. Parallel analysis suggests a four factor solution for these mechanisms in the public data, and a three factor solution in the elite data; exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring and oblimin rotation suggests these respective models fit well (for the public sample: RMSEA: 0.011, RMSEA.LB: 0.000, TLI: 0.999, BIC:−34.76; for the elite sample RMSEA: 0.047, RMSEA.LB: 0.024, TLI: 0.969, BIC: −49.1). Based on the loadings from these factor analyses, and to balance parsimony and interpretability, we generate a set of additive scales, pooling together mechanisms relating to the reactions of the *international community* (burden sharing, and legitimacy), mechanisms relating to *domestic support* (public support, and elite support), mechanisms relating to *normative considerations* (morality, and reputation), and mechanisms relating to *instrumental considerations* (success, and national interests); due to the results of the factor analysis models, we retain *fatalities* as a separate item.[9] We therefore estimate a series of nonparametric causal mediation models, controlling for a battery of demographic variables, the results of which are displayed in Figure A11 below.

Figure A11: Causal mediation analysis, multiple mediators

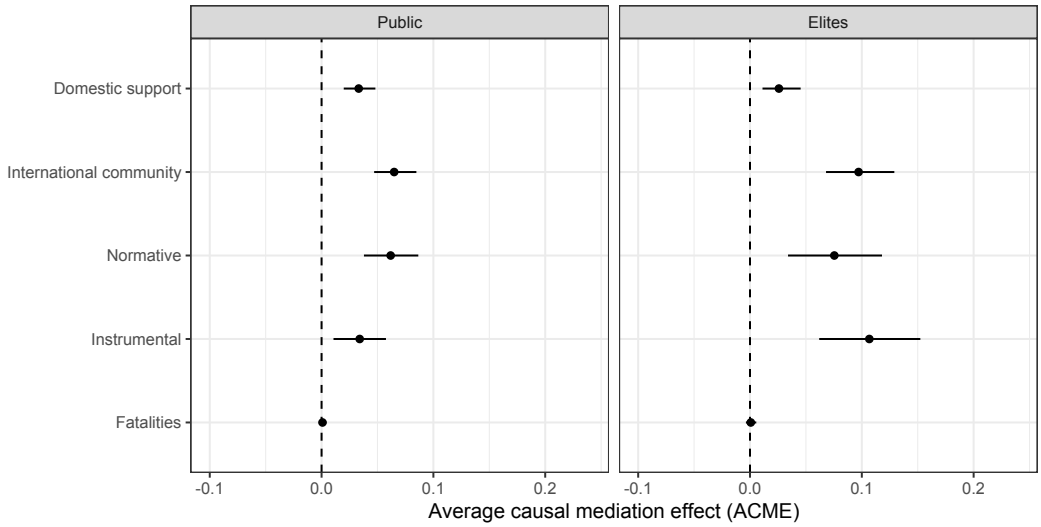



Figure A11 presents the Average Causal Mediation Effects (ACMEs) from a series of nonparametric causal mediation models.

As noted in public support mediation results in the main text, although domestic support significantly mediates the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force for both the mass public and political elites alike, its substantive effect size is smaller than that of at least two of the other families of mediators: the reactions of the international community, and normative considerations. Instrumental considerations display a significantly larger mediation effect for elites than the mass public (confirmed formally by a moderated mediation analysis: $p < 0.004$), while fatalities do not exert a significant mediation effect

[9]Note that the different factor solutions for the two samples makes the direct use of factor scores problematic in this context.

in either sample. This is to say, then, that although the salutary effects of IO endorsements on domestic support may be one reason why foreign policy leaders pursue multilateralism, these results suggest it is neither the only nor the most important reason. Indeed, the moderated mediation analysis in the main text suggests that if elites were to shed their isolationist stereotypes of the public, the perceived domestic support mechanism would increase in importance.

### 3.5 Alternative misperception threshold

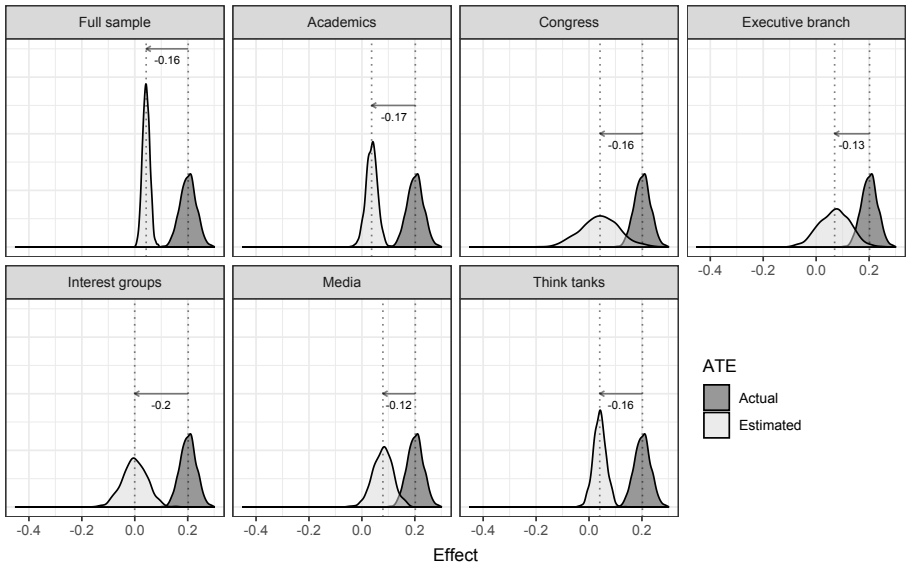
The analysis in the main text studies misperceptions by comparing respondents' estimates for the percentage of respondents who support the mission, with the actual percentage of respondents who indicated they supported the mission. Because the dependent variable measuring support is a six-point Likert scale ranging from "Oppose a great deal" to "Support a great deal", any respondent who indicated they supported the mission either a great deal, a moderate amount, or a little, is coded as supporting, and any respondent who indicated they opposed the mission either a great deal, a moderate amount, or a little, is coded as opposing. As a robustness check, we replicate the misperception analyses, but raising the threshold for what counts as "support" to those respondents who indicated they supported the intervention at least a moderate amount (thereby coding the weakest supporters as de facto opponents). Figure A12 replicates Figures 3-4 in the main text, showing that although the cell means change (once you raise the threshold of what counts as support, elites no longer significantly underestimate public support in the NATO oppose condition), the average treatment effects remain strikingly similar: although NATO bolsters support for the use of force in the public by an average of 20 percentage points, elites generally assume NATO has no significant effect on public support, and these misperceptions are of similar magnitude for all elite subsamples.

### 3.6 Analogical reasoning: the Libya intervention?

Given the volume of work on analogical reasoning in foreign policy decision-making (e.g. Khong, 1992; Houghton, 1996) an alternative interpretation of our results is that elites are estimating public support for the intervention by anchoring on the public's level of support for similar recent military interventions. In this case, one relevant recent military intervention respondents might be thinking of is the Libya intervention in 2011, in which the US joined with its NATO allies in an operation that was successful in deterring Muammar Gaddafi's threats to civilian populations but also led to regime change as the country subsequently devolved into violence. Three points here are thus worth noting. First, even if our elite respondents have Libya in mind when completing the study, a comparison of public opinion data from the beginning of the intervention with the experimental results here suggest that elites are nonetheless underestimating the baseline level of

Figure A12: Elite misperceptions robust to alternative support thresholds

(a) ATEs




(b) Cell means

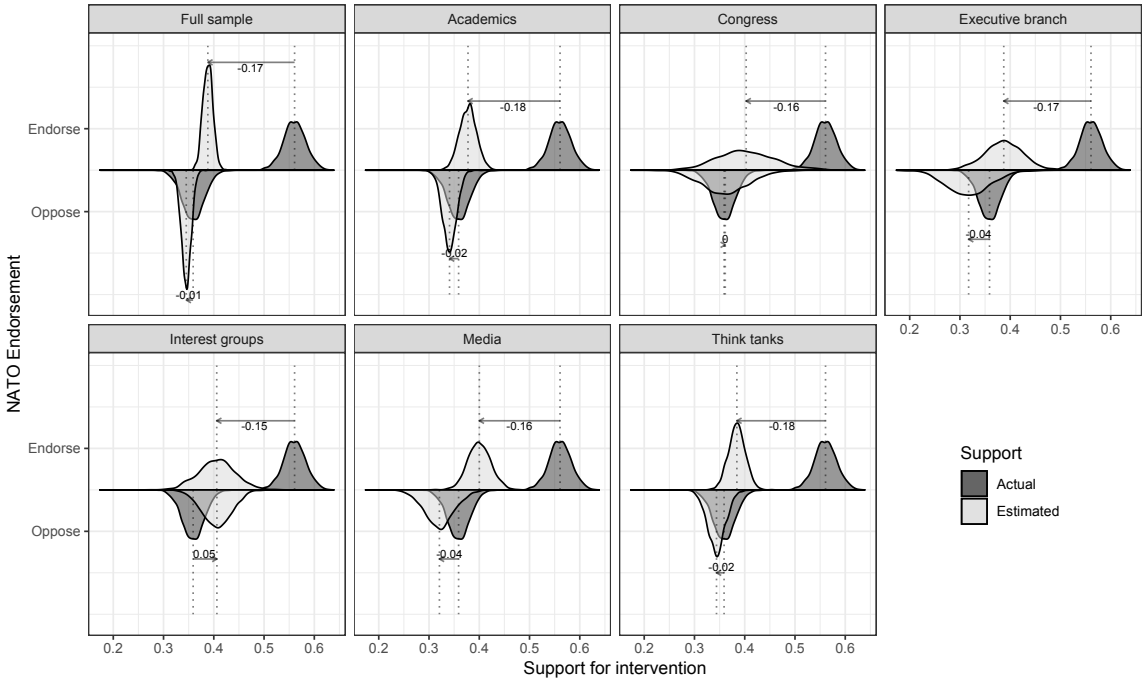



Figure A12(a) presents density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on the public's support for the use of force (in dark grey), along with density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on elites' estimates of the public's support for the use of force (in light grey), replicating Figure 3 in the main text, but raising the threshold for what counts as a sufficient level of "support", from "support a little", to "support a moderate amount." Figure A12(b) does the same, but for cell means instead, replicating Figure 4 in the main text utilizing the higher threshold for support described above. As before, the arrow in each panel indicates the difference between the actual NATO endorsement effect, and the estimated NATO endorsement effect. Panel a shows similar results as that in the main text: although NATO bolsters support for the use of force in the public by an average of nearly 20 percentage points, elites generally assume NATO has no significant effect on public support, and that these misperceptions are of similar magnitude for all elite subsamples. Panel b shows slightly different results: once you count weak supporters as de facto opponents, elites no longer consistently underestimate public support in the NATO oppose condition. As before, however, the general conclusion remains the same: elite misperceptions are largely concentrated in the NATO endorse condition.

support: in March 2011, just days after the US joined the military campaign against Gaddafi, Gallup found that 47% of the public supported the strikes compared to 37% opposed and another 16% with no opinion; in the NATO support condition in our experiment, leaders estimated only 39% of the public would be on board. Second, one way to reconcile this disconnect might be to explore the extent to which elites think about public opinion not in terms of instantaneous reactions, but long-term reactions. Indeed, the following Gallup poll conducted in June 2011 found that public support had dropped from 47% to 39%, consistent with our experimental findings. Yet all of the experimental studies of public opinion in IR that we are aware of operationalizes public opinion as instantaneous reactions to information (e.g. Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020). If it is the case that elites have a different time horizon or quantity of interest in mind when they think about public opinion than the one political scientists have been analyzing, this makes elite perceptions of public opinion an even more important topic of study. This is also striking because our results show that elites do not misperceive elite opinion to the same extent as they do public opinion: if elites think about public opinion in terms of long-term reactions rather than instantaneous ones, it raises questions about why they do not employ a similar time horizon when estimating elite opinion.

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