Drones and Support for the Use of Force

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Published by University of Michigan Press

Schulzke, Marcus and James Igoe Walsh.
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The central questions we address in this book are: how do armed drones influence support for the use of military force among citizens? To what extent are the factors that have previously been identified as influences on public approval for war salient in an era when the costs of conflict appear to have been radically disrupted by drones? Our goal is to better comprehend how drones alter the American public’s support for military operations, and to use this as the basis for understanding American foreign policy as this type of weapons platform plays an increasingly important role.

This chapter focuses on the first question, seeking to determine if and how much drones alter support for the use of force. We begin by assessing arguments about how the availability of combat drones reduces the domestic political costs of conflict. Lower costs for conflict could lead the United States to engage in wars that are counterproductive or that have a questionable moral and ethical basis. While these arguments make plausible inferences about how drones could influence support for the use of force, they have not been assessed in a rigorous way. There is a large and diverse literature on public opinion and foreign policy that includes analyses of previous American wars and experiments based on hypothetical conflicts. This work identifies a range of factors, such as the likelihood of military casualties and of success on the battlefield, that affect opinions about military operations. But because combat drones have only been used for about a decade, most of this rich body of work has not grappled with their implications.

This chapter brings together these two streams of work by comparing the effect of drones to these known influences on Americans’ attitudes, al-
lowing us to gauge the relative impact of this new military technology. To achieve this objective, we introduce our “attack type” survey experiment, variants of which are also employed in the next three chapters. In these experiments, respondents are presented with information about a planned use of military force, which is described as being carried out by a drone, a manned aircraft, or ground troops. The specific type of experiment we report in this chapter, known as a conjoint survey experiment, is ideally suited to comparing the effect of the attack type on support for the use of force with other, well-established influences on the public’s support for military action.

This experiment yields a number of findings that shed light on how drones influence attitudes toward war. Our first and most important finding is that attacks with drones receive more support than attacks with ground troops. Drones do increase citizens’ support for the use of force. Second, attacks from drones are only preferred to the use of ground troops. Respondents in our experiments expressed statistically indistinguishable levels of support for drone strikes and air strikes. Third, this relationship holds for both Democrats and Republicans. Previous research indicates that Republicans are generally more favorably disposed to military action. Consistent with this argument, our experiment finds that when asked to assess the desirability of any type of military action, Democrats provide lower levels of support than do Republicans. However, when asked to compare the desirability of drone strikes and the use of ground troops, both Democrats and Republicans prefer the former. This suggests that there is a cross-party consensus favoring the use of drones, unlike much of domestic and foreign policy in the contemporary United States, and that changes in the partisan makeup of Congress and the presidency are unlikely to restrain the use of this technology.

We also find that drones have a substantive effect on attitudes toward conflict that is of the same magnitude as other, well-established influences on support for the use of force. For example, attacks carried out by drones increase support over those conducted with ground troops by about as much as do attacks that are likely to succeed or that are unlikely to cause civilian casualties. Drones, then, noticeably increase support for the use of force. In this and the next chapter, we suggest that it is pilot invulnerability, rather than selectivity, that has the most substantial influence on public opinion about using drones. Respondents in our survey experiments fore-
see a far lower risk of military casualties when drones are employed than they do when attacks are carried out by strike aircraft or by ground troops.

The following chapters build on these findings. In the next chapter, we explore the role of invulnerability and casualty aversion in more detail. Subsequent chapters analyze how drone technology relates to other influences on public opinion. We ask, for example, do drone strikes receive greater support across the range of objectives that can be achieved with military force? Do the lower costs of drones make individuals more willing to endorse risky military missions (chapter 4)? Do they alter how people think about civilian casualties (chapter 5)? The combination of a comparative perspective in this chapter, along with analysis in later chapters of how drones may modify other influences on support for the use of force, allows a thorough assessment of the political consequences of this new military technology.

Drones and Support for Military Action

There are two reasons to think that attacks by drones could receive more support than attacks with manned aircraft or ground combat personnel. The first is the invulnerability that drones provide to their operators. One of the most widely recognized constraints limiting the United States’ exercise of its military strength are political leaders’ concerns about the public’s aversion to casualties. By some accounts, Americans are highly sensitive to military casualties and quickly become disillusioned with a war as casualties mount.¹ Similarly, many commentators attribute American reluctance to deploy its full might in small wars to a fear that the American public is unwilling to bear the costs of these conflicts.² The extent of casualty aversion is debatable, with some studies finding that it has a small effect, that it influences elites more than the general public, or that it only operates in conjunction with other factors.³ Nevertheless, even those who doubt that casualty aversion is a decisive factor typically credit it with having some role in dampening support for war. Without operators aboard, drones could decisively alter calculations about when to fight, making it easier for the United States to support its allies, deter rivals, and participate in humanitarian interventions.

Second, drones may be preferred over other types of military force if
they are perceived as being more likely to achieve military objectives. Armed drones have only recently entered the American military’s arsenal and have been deployed primarily to counter terrorist and insurgent groups. As we saw in chapter 1, a key problem in this type of attack is distinguishing combatants from noncombatants. The selectivity of drones should reduce the chance that military force will miss its target or harm noncombatants, both of which dampen support for engaging in military action. Drones may even make it possible to avoid harming low-ranking enemy personnel who may be ineffective or unwilling combatants once their leaders are killed. The technical capabilities of drones may make them particularly effective in solving this problem of target selection, leading them to take on the image of high-tech super-weapons, much as precision-guided munitions did following the First Gulf War.

Politicians, members of the military, and media commentators have encouraged this perception by making lofty promises about what drones are able to accomplish. The Obama administration regularly publicized the results of strikes that killed key terrorist leaders and credited these with crippling organizations that were determined to attack the United States. If members of the public see drones as being more selective than manned aircraft and ground forces, then they may be more willing to support drone strikes. Drones may therefore offer the attractive promise of war that satisfies the *jus in bello* principles of discrimination and proportionality more effectively than ever before. This is particularly true when drones are compared to manned aircraft, which were used in some of the clearest violations of those norms throughout twentieth-century wars.

By reducing public concern about, or attention to, the costs of conflict, drone warfare could have dangerous consequences. Protecting American soldiers from enemy fire by physically removing them from the battlefield and replacing them with drones could make it easier for the United States to use military force when it is justified. But it could also facilitate aggressive or unjustified wars. Lowering this cost of war could remove an invaluable political constraint on reckless and unnecessary conflicts, making it possible for leaders to initiate wars more easily and to avoid being removed from office if the wars go badly. Some opponents of unmanned weapons platforms even go so far as to argue that the ability to fight without suffering casualties will dramatically lower the threshold for initiating wars and promote public disengagement from use of force decisions.

Even if drones are more effective than other weapons systems for cer-
tain missions, confidence in their selectivity may lead to a dangerous over-reliance on these weapon systems. Of particular concern is the possibility that they could create a “moral hazard” by lowering the costs of fighting to such an extent that the American public may be enthusiastic about using force even when victory is unlikely.9 The ultimate risk here is that drones could cause a surge in the incidence of unnecessary wars of choice that would kill people and destroy infrastructure while delivering few strategic benefits to the United States.

Critics contend that improvements in selectivity highlighted by drone proponents are largely illusory. Selectivity is gauged within a margin of error that is always fallible, especially given the chances of drones’ malfunctioning, launching attacks against misidentified targets, or striking innocent bystanders in the process of killing terrorist leaders.10 Worse still, portraying drones as being more selective and precise may paradoxically pave the way for increased violence against civilians by making it easier to build support for attacks that are carried out in populated areas. Whereas the American public may believe that massive aerial bombardments against cities would have unconscionable effects on civilians, people could arguably be lulled into a false sense of security that a series of precise attacks directed at a city would have little or no adverse effects. Added to this, there is uncertainty about the extent to which Americans care about foreign civilian casualties at all, especially if the absence of American losses make the costs of war virtually imperceptible.11

In much of the literature on drones, both the appealing characteristics and the potential dangers are presented with compelling theoretical explanations. But drones’ influence on support for war in the United States has not been systematically tested in most of this work. With sweeping predictions of rising American military aggression, an escalation of violence around the world, and increasing civilian casualties on the one hand, or promises of more restrained, ethically sensitive, and precise attacks on the other, it is vital to have a clearer sense of whether these expectations stand up to scrutiny, a task we tackle in this chapter.

What Shapes Opinions Regarding Military Action?

One goal of this chapter is to determine whether drones influence support for the use of force. A second goal is to estimate the size of this influence.
A difficulty here is that we do not have obvious benchmarks for what constitutes a large or small effect of drone technology. Theories suggesting, for example, that drones will lead to more support for military action do not make precise predictions of the size of this effect among members of the public. Those making these claims likewise tend to treat the public as a homogeneous group that will respond to drones in fairly uniform ways, without considering the extent to which demographic characteristics and party affiliations may shape preferences. Our solution to these problems is to compare the effects of drones to other, well-established influences on public opinion.

Previous research finds that perceptions of military success, the political goals of military action, the likelihood of civilian casualties, and the opinions of allies, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations all exercise consistent influences on attitudes toward conflict. Kreps’ study of public support for drones, which is one of the few studies that analyzes these weapons platforms in particular, shows that variations in how survey questions characterize drones’ effectiveness and their status under international law influence support for strikes. Although she only focuses on the effect of these two considerations, the framing effects she finds demonstrate the value of developing experiments that incorporate more variables that could potentially shape public opinion. The experiment we report in this chapter is designed to compare the substantive effect of drones to these known influences. This not only builds a more comprehensive picture of the factors shaping public opinion about drones, but also helps to link our findings to public opinion research on foreign policy more broadly. Here we briefly summarize each of these. Subsequent chapters analyze how the availability of drones interacts with these factors to determine if drones alter the manner in which these factors influence public opinion. In this chapter, though, our aim is to simply compare the size of the effects for these four factors to that of drones.

Consider first how the likelihood that a military mission will achieve its goals influences attitudes regarding war. From this perspective, individuals are more apt to support the use of force when they believe it will achieve important political or military objectives. The reasoning here is straightforward: when the United States is likely to prevail in conflicts, the public concludes that the net costs of using military force—military casualties, expenditures, the risk of a long war, and so on—are modest compared to the benefits of success on the battlefield. Early work in this vein identifies
the likelihood of success, along with the clarity of the mission’s objectives and its stakes for the United States, as important influences on how the public evaluates war. Subsequent work has extended this line of inquiry, using public opinion surveys as well as experiments to conclude that conflicts with a high chance of success are more popular and that setbacks or advances during the course of conflict exercise a negative or positive influence on public attitudes toward war. Debate continues about if and how large an effect perceptions of success have on attitudes. Some suggest that such perceptions are, in large measure, either driven by respondents’ political predispositions, such as their partisan identification, or are simply a substitute for the expectation that military casualties and other costs of the conflict will be low. Nonetheless, there is considerable evidence that perceptions of success continue to matter even when such factors are taken into account.

Less work has looked at how civilian deaths caused by American military action alter support for the use of force. Some analysis of polling data and other sources from the Second World War onwards suggest that noncombatant deaths have at most a modest influence on American citizens’ calculations. More recent research has found that civilian casualties influence public attitudes, particularly since the 1970s. One study, for example, finds that survey questions that mention the possibility of civilian casualties reduce support for military action, and that the size of this effect was of the same magnitude as for questions that mention American military casualties. A survey experiment that compares the effects of military and civilian casualties in a hypothetical war reached similar conclusions, although most respondents, when asked, responded that avoiding military casualties was more important than avoiding casualties among noncombatants. There is reason to believe, then, that the risk of civilian harm can lead to meaningful reductions in Americans’ willingness to endorse military action.

Another factor influencing support for the use of force are the goals, or “principal policy objectives” (PPO) that military force is intended to achieve. Work in this vein has distinguished between four distinct goals: foreign policy restraint, which aims to deter or restrain another state from taking threatening actions; internal political change, in which force is used to assist an ally facing rebellion or other threats to its hold on power; humanitarian intervention to prevent or stop conflicts inflicting large-scale harm on noncombatants; and counterterrorism, such as
using force to attack terrorist bases overseas. Initial work found that foreign policy restraint receives much higher levels of support than does internal political change. Subsequent studies found that support for humanitarian interventions tends to fall somewhere between foreign policy restraint and internal political change. Humanitarian interventions have lower levels of support than the former because they are not seen as being as necessary for the protection of national security, but they are more popular than internal political change missions that lack the moral status of humanitarian operations.

After the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the United States’ involvement in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, other researchers gauged support for counterterrorism missions, which received the broadest level of support. As with other findings on public opinion and foreign policy, these have not gone unchallenged. Some research suggests that how conflicts are framed as PPOs is flexible and, to some degree, under the control of political leaders. Individuals who lack information about foreign policy, in particular, may be susceptible to such framing and follow the judgments of leaders with interests and ideologies similar to their own. Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence that PPOs are important to the public, even if some individuals are influenced by how the conflicts are cast by political leaders rather than by the reality on the ground.

Finally, we compare the effect of drones on public attitudes to the effect of opinions of international actors including allies of the United States, international organizations, and nongovernment organizations like transnational human rights groups. Recent research suggests that these actors can influence Americans’ attitudes under certain conditions. The starting point for this approach is that many individuals have general preferences or pre-dispositions for the goals and means of American foreign policy, but lack the detailed knowledge of the international environment that would allow them to translate these into support for or opposition to specific policy measures, including drone strikes. These individuals can use the opinions of international actors with expertise in such policies as a signal for how to translate their general preferences into positions on particular policies. In doing so, individuals compare their general predispositions to those of the international actors. If these are in broad agreement, the individual can adopt the specific policy preference of the better-informed international actor. Disagreement between the two is also informative; in such cases, the individual can oppose policies that are supported by the international actor.
Comparing Influences on Support for the Use of Force

In this chapter we report the results from an experiment designed to provide a comparative perspective on attitudes about the use of force, before turning to the more specific issues later in the book. We developed a fully randomized choice-based conjoint experiment, designed specifically to assess the influence of many factors simultaneously and to compare their relative impact on attitudes about military action. Respondents were a representative sample of 1,000 adults in the United States recruited by the survey research firm YouGov. Each respondent first read the following introduction to the experiment, placing them in the role of evaluating two attacks by American forces:

For the next few minutes, imagine you are the Secretary of Defense of the United States. Military officials have provided you with intelligence assessments about two attacks that the United States might carry out in the near future. For each pair of proposed attacks, indicate which you personally would prefer to authorize. In making your choices, remember that military resources are limited, and the United States can only carry out some attacks that are proposed by military planners. Even if you are not entirely sure, please indicate which of the two you prefer.

Respondents were then presented with six attributes of each attack, each of which can be described in multiple ways. Table 2.1 lists the levels of the attributes included in the experiment; those in bold serve as the baseline treatments in the statistical analysis reported below. The levels of each attribute were randomly selected for each of the two attacks that respondents were asked to compare. This allows us to estimate the effect of each attribute value on support for the attack. In the analysis below, each value is measured on the same scale, allowing direct comparison of their causal effect on the dependent variable. Each respondent makes five comparisons of two attack plans, each on a separate screen, resulting in 10 responses for each variable and a total of 10,000 observations. Table 2.2 depicts one such comparison between two attacks.

As can be seen in table 2.1, this conjoint experiment allows for the simultaneous inclusion of many attributes. We did not include military casualties as an attribute in this experiment. One reason for this is that drone strikes would produce no military casualties. To account for this,
the experiment would need to constrain the value of the military casualties attribute to equal zero in all cases where the attack type was described as a drone strike. This means that the assignment of attribute values would not be fully random, potentially weakening the experimental design. While there are statistical techniques that account for such deviations from a truly random design, our decision to forgo including this attribute was motivated by a more fundamental consideration. Had we not done so, every attack described as a drone strike would be accompanied by information that this would produce zero military casualties, while the other attack types—air strikes and ground troops—would always describe the expected number of military casualties as zero or greater. We worried that always comparing drones with no casualties against air strikes or attacks by ground troops with the possibility of casualties would lead some respondents to draw close attention to this pattern, and base a disproportionate share of their choices on the presence or absence of military casualties rather than on other factors.

Nonetheless, we are interested in how perceptions of military casualties shape attitudes. To address this, we followed up the conjoint experiment with questions that asked respondents to estimate the likelihood of military casualties resulting from a drone strike, a strike with manned aircraft, and the use of ground troops. Based on the literature on military casualty aversion, we expect that the likelihood of military casualties foreseen by our respondents would be lower when the attack is described as coming from a drone than from aircraft or ground troops.

One difference from the experiments discussed in subsequent chapters is that the descriptions of the attributes are shorter in this conjoint experiment. Short attribute levels should reduce the chance that respondents might become confused or fatigued and stop the survey before completing it. They also allow us to assess the degree to which small changes in how an attack is described influence respondents’ attitudes. In the next chapter, experimental conditions for attacks carried out by drones and by aircraft included information that these attacks would have a low risk of military casualties. This information about military casualties is not included in the conjoint experiment, allowing us to assess whether this leads to substantive changes in how attack type influences support for the use of force.

To analyze the data, we first generated indicator variables for each level of each attribute. We then set one level as the baseline for each attribute. The effect of each attribute is measured as the change in the probability of
preferring an attack compared to this baseline. For example, the baseline for the attack type attribute is an attack described as a drone strike. The effect of attacks described as air strikes and ground troops is the difference in the probability of preferring these attacks from those described as drone strikes. These estimates are calculated as average marginal component effects (AMCEs), which identifies the average differences of being preferred when comparing two attribute values over all of the possible combinations of other attribute values, with standard errors clustered on respondents.31

Figure 2.1 summarizes the results of this exercise. We have omitted information about international opinion to make the figure easier to interpret; full statistical results are presented in the chapter appendix. The levels in bold with dots at zero on the vertical line are the baseline levels for each attribute. The horizontal axis indicates how treatment by each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of attack</td>
<td><strong>Missiles fired from unmanned drone aircraft</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missiles fired from military aircraft with a crew of two officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ground troops in armored vehicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target of attack</td>
<td><strong>Group of low-level enemy forces</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commander of enemy forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood that attack will achieve its objective</td>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of civilian casualties</td>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective of attack</td>
<td><strong>Prevent a foreign country from providing safe haven to al Qaeda terrorist bases</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prevent a foreign country from engaging in genocide and ethnic cleansing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prevent a foreign country from disrupting oil shipments from the Persian Gulf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International opinion</td>
<td><strong>Supported by NATO allies in Europe</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposed by NATO allies in Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supported by the United Nations Security Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposed by the United Nations Security Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supported by international human rights groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposed by international human rights groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Baseline attribute values are indicated in bold.
attribute level reduces or increases support for an attack compared to the baseline level. Dots indicate point estimates, and horizontal lines identify the 95 percent confidence intervals for the ACME of each attribute level. For example, attacks with air strikes receive only slightly less support than drone strikes, and the difference between these two estimates is not statistically significant. But when the attack is carried out by ground troops, the probability of preferring the attack declines compared to drone strike. Here it seems that the greater risk of losing American soldiers in ground combat operations encourages respondents to become more cautious about endorsing military action, a point we return to below and in chapter 3. The most likely explanation is that respondents see aircraft as having a decisive effect on protecting American military personnel, such that the presence or absence of an onboard crew matters little when it comes to trigger-

**TABLE 2.2. Comparison of Two Attacks**

Please carefully review the information about two attacks detailed below, then answer the questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attack 1</th>
<th>Attack 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood that attack will</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achieve its objective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Nations Security Council</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
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<td>Prevent a foreign country</td>
<td>Prevent a foreign country</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from engaging in genocide</td>
<td>from providing safe haven to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and ethnic cleansing</td>
<td>al Qaeda terrorist bases</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vehicles</td>
<td>aircraft with a crew of two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of civilian</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>casualties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: Which attack do you prefer?

☐ Attack 1
☐ Attack 2

Question: On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates that the United States should definitely not carry out the attack and 7 indicates that the United States definitely should carry out the attack, how would you rate attack 1?

Question: On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates that the United States should definitely not carry out the attack and 7 indicates that the United States definitely should carry out the attack, how would you rate attack 2?
ing risk aversion. This attitude reflects the country’s ongoing participation in asymmetric wars against enemies that have little anti-aircraft capacity. One potential concern is that this perception of pilot invulnerability may persist into conventional wars to create false expectations of low casualties regardless of the type of aircraft involved and the enemy’s capacities.

Considerable evidence suggests that Republicans are more likely to endorse the use of military force than are Democrats.\textsuperscript{33} This is the case in our conjoint experiment. Recall that in addition to asking respondents to indicate which of two attacks they prefer, we also asked them to rate their support for each attack. This seven-point rating ranges from 1 to 7, with higher values indicating the respondent expressed a greater willingness to authorize the attack. Figure 2.2 summarizes the distribution of these ratings for all the attack plans presented in the experiment for Democratic and Republican respondents. Compared to the ratings of Democratic re-
spondents, those of Republicans are skewed to the right, with over half of the ratings in the three highest values for this variable. While the average rating by Democratic respondents was 3.9 on the seven-point scale, the average for Republicans was 4.7, and this difference between partisans is statistically significant ($p < .01$). Our Democratic respondents, then, were less willing to authorize attacks.$^{34}$

However, these differences in willingness to endorse the use of force in general disappear when we consider specific attack types. We twice repeated the conjoint analysis used to create figure 2.2 but limited the sample to Democrats and Republicans. The results of this exercise are depicted in figure 2.3, which shows the effect of each attack type for supporters of each party on their willingness to prefer one attack over the other. (To simplify the display of information, this figure omits the other attributes; details can be found in models 3 and 4 of table A2.1 in the chapter appendix.) Democrats and Republicans evaluate attacks in similar ways. Both prefer drone strikes to the use of ground troops. Republicans also prefer drone strikes to air strikes, although this difference does not meet the conventional threshold for statistical significance.

The absence of partisan differences in support for drone strikes over the use of ground troops explains, in part, the continuity in the use of drones. Drone strikes against militants outside of traditional combat zones began under Republican president George W. Bush. President Bush accelerated the pace of drone strikes significantly in early 2008 and loosened the conditions under which they could be used to target militants. Early drone strikes were authorized when a target was positively identified as a militant. Beginning in 2008, drone strikes also targeted individuals or groups that
exhibited the “signature” of militants, such as a group of armed men traveling in a convoy or residing in a building that had been used by militants in the past. Barack Obama was elected on a promise to extract American troops from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But this aversion to large-scale combat did not lead his administration to curtail drone strikes; instead, the number of strikes expanded dramatically during his first term in office. Furthermore, the use of drones by both Presidents Bush and Obama evinced little criticism or even public oversight by members of Congress, even when the opposing party controlled the legislature. At both the mass and elite level, then, there is a consensus across party lines favoring drone strikes.35

Attacks in which the chance of civilian casualties were moderate or high receive less support than those with a low likelihood of civilian harm. Concern about inflicting civilian casualties does limit support for the use of force. The same pattern exists for mission success; attacks described as
having a moderate or high chance of achieving their objectives are more likely to be preferred. This coincides with Kreps’ study of the influence of question framing on responses to opinion polls about drones, as her findings show a drop in support when questions indicated a high likelihood of harming civilians or inflicting disproportionate damage.36

At first glance, this may appear to be an obvious result. After all, it is clearly more advantageous to launch attacks that are apt to succeed than those that are less likely to succeed, and previous research has found that anticipations of success play a central role in determining overall levels of support for war.37 However, this result takes on special significance when drones are involved because of the debate over how the costs of fighting may be displaced onto civilians. Critics of drones have worried that the low costs of launching strikes could induce the United States to wage wars even when the chances of winning are low. This might result in greater willingness to escalate a conflict, less patience with diplomatic alternatives to fighting, and a proliferation of wars that are unlikely to yield any redeeming benefits—all while placing civilians at greater risk than if there were stronger inhibitions against fighting. Kreps says that her findings support these fears, as she concludes that most polls downplay the potential consequences of drone warfare to create a misleadingly optimistic perspective on the strikes. This is an issue we explore in greater depth in chapter 5, with additional testing and a discussion of the various causal mechanisms that might arguably create such a moral hazard.

Compared to attacks with the objective of countering terrorism, those with the goal of restraining a foreign state’s aggression receive less support, while those with the objective of stopping genocide receive more support (although this difference from counterterrorism missions is not statistically significant). We will revisit this ranking of preferences in chapter 4, where we find that counterterrorism operations receive more support than alternative mission types. We also explore some of the possible reasons for this variance in mission preferences across attack types. For now, it is important to bear in mind that preferences here are not as consistent as some of the other patterns we identify, which is likely due to changes in what threats seem most urgent when the experiments are conducted and how each type of mission is framed when it is described in a hypothetical attack scenario. The high support for counterterrorism compared to restraining foreign aggression probably has much to do with how threats have been framed since 9/11. Political and media
elites have consistently emphasized the threat that terrorism poses and used this as a rationale for launching drone strikes. This means that it is a pattern that will change along with shifts in the security landscape and elites’ framing of threats.

Although the relative importance of counterterrorism is likely temporary, it does raise some concerns for the country’s ability to respond to security threats. By many accounts, politicians and members of the media dramatically overstate the threat of terrorism. The comparatively high support for drones may be a consequence of this threat inflation, which calls the value of these preferences into question. Preoccupation with counterterrorism could present difficulties for leaders seeking to reorient drone operations to contend with conventional military threats, though as we pointed out in the previous chapter, drones may be less effective in conventional operations. Similarly, it is possible that support for drones in any context will decline if terrorism is framed as a less urgent threat. Experimental designs cannot account for these long-term trends in attitudes toward drone use, so it will be important to revisit this problem if perceived national security priorities change.

Attacks that target commanders of enemy forces receive more support than those against low-level fighters. This is consistent with what we should expect from how drone strikes and other forms of military action have been framed throughout the War on Terror. Attacks are typically described as being made against high-ranking terrorist leaders who are uncompromising enemies determined to kill innocent people.

The most puzzling pattern concerns the influence of preferences of the international community. Predictably, attacks opposed by the United States’ NATO allies are less likely to be preferred than those in which NATO allies support the attack, the baseline category for this attribute. But support or opposition to the attack by either the United Nations Security Council or by human rights nongovernmental organizations are less likely to receive support. This is surprising, as existing research would suggest that these factors should have opposite effects. Kreps finds that references to international humanitarian law (IHL) can influence support for drone strikes in public opinion polls, with support declining as questions are framed to suggest that attacks may be legally problematic. Although she focuses on IHL, rather than on international organizations, her results suggest that the pressure of norms coming from the international community should have some constraining influence on public opinion.
Separate analyses of Democrats and Republicans shed some light on this paradoxical pattern of support for attacks. Among Democrats, the opinions of international actors has a consistent effect on support for the use of force. Opposition to an attack by NATO allies, human rights groups, and the United Nations Security Council all lead to less support for an attack among Democratic respondents in our experiment. Republicans were less likely to support an attack if it was opposed by NATO allies or endorsed or opposed by the Security Council or by human rights nongovernmental organizations. This result indicates that Republicans in particular are wary of international organizations, especially those that are not dominated by the United States as thoroughly as NATO or that have previously acted as checks on US military operations (as the Security Council has). This aligns with previous findings that have shown that Republicans tend to dislike multilateralism except when it is clearly in American interests and that Democrats are more inclined to see an inherent value in fostering international cooperation. It also coincides with the parties’ traditional strategies, as leading Republicans are more inclined to denigrate multilateralism and assert American independence in foreign policy matters.

Figure 2.1 also allows comparison of the relative size of the influence of drone strikes to the other factors that influence support for the use of force. The difference between the effect of an attack carried out by ground troops compared to a drone strike is of roughly the same magnitude as the difference between attacks with the objectives of counterterrorism and foreign policy restraint, and it is smaller than attacks with a high probability of leading to civilian casualties and those with a moderate and high chance of success. This is borne out by our findings in chapters 3 and 4, where we also conclude that while the availability of combat drones does increase the public’s willingness to condone military action, the substantive effect is relatively modest in size. Other factors, especially the political objective and chance of success and civilian harm, continue to exert sizable effects on respondents’ calculations even when accounting for drone technology. This comparative perspective on the magnitude of influence is one reason why it is helpful to start with this experiment before delving into the more focused analysis of specific variables.

Another way of thinking about this is in terms of whether using drones rather than ground forces would realistically cause a decisive shift in opinion toward war. When judged by this standard, the effect of using drones is not large. Policymakers may be able to increase support for military ven-
tures if they use drones or piloted aircraft rather than ground forces, but the difference between the aerial and ground-based approaches shows that this change in the type of military force involved will only tip the balance for or against wars in instances if opinion is closely divided. When a clear majority favors or opposes fighting, the choice of means may not matter a great deal. Despite being extremely controversial, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was consistently favored by more than 70 percent of the population. With such enthusiasm, the Bush administration faced no need to make more extensive use of drones to lower the costs of fighting. The war was much less popular in the United Kingdom, but even there polls found support exceeding 50 percent. Here again it was not necessary to increase reliance on drones even when there was a much clearer division between the pro- and antiwar camps.

Recall that this experiment did not include military casualties as an attribute so as not to suggest too strongly to respondents that concern about such casualties should drive their evaluations of the attack. As we will discuss in more detail in chapter 3, there is good reason to believe that avoiding casualties is an important reason for preferring drone strikes to other attack types. To determine if respondents in this experiment viewed drones as reducing the risk of military casualties, we asked them to estimate the likelihood of harm to military personnel from attacks carried out by drone strikes, air strikes, and ground troops. Responses were on a seven-point scale, ranging from estimates that casualties would be extremely unlikely to extremely likely, which we collapse into three categories: likely, neither likely nor unlikely, and unlikely. This question was posed to respondents after they had completed rating the ten attack plans in the conjoint experiment. Results are summarized in figure 2.4. Air strikes and ground troops were viewed as placing military personnel markedly more at risk of harm than were drone strikes. This is consistent with the idea that an important advantage of drones is that they minimize the risk to American soldiers.

It is worth noting that although respondents rated the chance of American military casualties following from drone strikes much less likely than sustaining casualties in ground operations or strikes from manned aircraft, some indicated casualties were possible. If one of the foremost advantages and potential dangers of employing drones is that they can circumvent sensitivity to military casualties, then these effects will only be realized if the general public anticipates drones will lead to casualty-free wars. However, the findings presented in figure 2.4 indicate that respondents are not
willing to entirely discount the chance of military casualties, even when they read vignettes that describe an attack being conducted exclusively with drones and are not given any indication that enemies have a chance to retaliate.

Conclusion

Many of the findings we discussed in this chapter are probed further with the experiments we present later in the book. The level of agreement between multiple experiments using different designs, involving different respondent pools, and with representative and nonrepresentative samples helps to increase confidence that any particular finding is not an aberration and shows the experiments can be taken as revealing the underlying forces driving attitudes toward drone strikes.

Aside from those we have already mentioned, one of the most important points of agreement across these experiments is that air strikes receive nearly the same levels of support as drones. The narrow gap between these two options for using military force indicates that the presence or absence of a pilot onboard an aircraft makes relatively little difference in determin-
ing whether the American public will support military operations. The fact that the difference between manned aircraft and drones was not statistically significant in the conjoint experiment is especially important because this is a more representative sample of the population. In later chapters we will employ respondents recruited from Mechanical Turk. In some of these experiments we find a larger gap between support for manned aircraft and drones, though it still remains small when judged in terms of whether this difference could influence policy choices. But a consistent finding across all our experiments is that attacks with ground troops receive less support than those carried out by drones.

These results help us to better understand how drone technology could alter the domestic politics of conflict. They are consistent with the idea that policymakers will be able to maintain higher levels of support for conflicts when they avoid committing ground forces. The choice between drones and manned aircraft is more ambiguous. Leaders could be able to achieve slightly higher levels of support for missions by employing drones, especially because this could eliminate the chance of American soldiers being injured or killed. But using drones does come at a potential cost of fueling the ongoing debate about what many see as an excessive reliance on these weapons platforms. The results also show that the mission type is an important determinant of an attack’s popularity. Counterterrorism operations were more popular than humanitarian interventions or attacks against foreign states—an understandable response given that terrorism is often presented as the most serious threat to American national security and that the other missions could result in much longer deployments of American forces overseas.

Nevertheless, the levels of approval for various mission types needs more attention for several reasons. First, in this chapter we have only tested three different principal policy objectives. The available literature has identified as many as four and has framed these in varying ways. In chapter 4 we consider some of the alternative formulations of the PPOs and include internal political change to those we investigate. Second, and even more importantly, PPOs only refer to the general type of operation and may take countless different forms depending on what is at stake under particular circumstances. Even though counterterrorism operations receive support in the scenario we described in this experiment, it is possible that counterterrorism may be less appealing when the attack conditions are changed. The same is true for each of the other PPOs. By testing our results with a
different experiment in chapter 4 we can develop a clearer picture of the ranking of PPOs and confirm the perceived importance of counterterrorism operations by showing that these are consistently more popular than other mission types.

Our conjoint experiment informs respondents of the likelihood of success, characterizing it as high, moderate, or low. In some instances, this reflects the way information is presented prior to an attack. Political leaders, military elites, and media commentators frequently make promises about the likelihood of a good outcome when resorting to military force. However, there are times when these people either refrain from making any clear promises or issue contradictory claims. Disagreements between political parties are especially likely to result in divergent assessments of whether victory is possible.46 Audiences may also be skeptical about these claims because promises of quick and easy wars so often turn out to be wrong. The information landscape in the lead-up to war is therefore usually more complex than the tripartite success prompt we include in the conjoint experiment. Even more importantly, the attack type could alter the anticipated outcome. Respondents may expect that drone strikes will be better at accomplishing the missions they read about if they see these machines as being more precise and efficient than other attack types. Alternatively, they could fear that drones are potentially counterproductive because of the controversy surrounding these weapons platforms and the risk of provoking harsh reactions from foreign populations. With these challenges in mind, we introduce another experiment in chapter 5 that asks respondents to form their own opinions about the likelihood of success. Here respondents draw inferences about the possible outcome from the details of the operation and the means of attack selected.

Another important point to consider is how preferences for attack may change depending on the presence or absence of peaceful alternatives. Like most survey experiments about use of force decisions, our conjoint experiment does not give respondents clues about whether the attack described is truly necessary. It may therefore predispose respondents to see violence as being justified or accepting the available response. A charge that is often directed against drones is that they lower the threshold for using military force, and it is impossible to determine whether this is the case if experiments push respondents to authorize some type of attack.47 We therefore add in chapter 5 further nuance to our account of how drones influence valuations of success by considering how responses change when the ex-
periment gives respondents details about whether nonviolent options are available. If drones really do make it easier to wage wars, then we should expect to see a preference for drones over other types of force when there are promising nonviolent alternatives.

The conjoint experiment showed that support for an attack declines as the likelihood of civilian casualties increases, but the considerations influencing civilian casualty sensitivity are potentially more complex than this direct relationship. Concern for civilians may not be a fixed characteristic. It is possible that using drones to reduce the harm to civilians could inspire heightened sensitivity to civilian casualties, thereby making the public less likely to support subsequent operations. If this is the case, then reliance on drones may be cyclical, with each attack that avoids harming civilians increasing the demand for other attacks to do likewise. Alternatively, some commentators have argued that drones might cause a decline in sensitivity to civilian casualties over time. They raise the possibility that drones may cause public disengagement, encouraging audiences at home to pay less attention to the costs of war, including the suffering of foreign civilians. We explore these issues in more detail in chapter 6.