Democratic leaders are not free to make war whenever and however they choose. They respond in part to citizens’ wishes, or they risk the consequences of a public backlash when enacting new policies or running for election. American citizens have played an important role in constraining executive power by protesting wars, refusing to fight them, and attempting to remove leaders from office. Citizens are equally important when giving a mandate for their leaders to wage wars without fear of electoral punishment, or even rewarding violence with higher approval ratings. Existing research on public opinion during war helps to identify the causes for antiwar and prowar sentiments, but advancements in military technology and possible shifts in citizens’ values over time make it vital to continually reassess the influences on support for war. The twenty-first century has thus far been marked by a seemingly unending string of American conflicts, from major operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to smaller interventions in Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, and Pakistan. These raise legitimate concerns that changes in the conduct of war or in civic engagement with military affairs could fundamentally alter the conditions under which politicians may initiate wars.

Drones stand at the forefront of the debate over whether wars are becoming dangerously risk-free for the United States. They are the latest phase of a revolution in military affairs that put greater emphasis on air power, increased selectivity, and on preventing harm to American soldiers. Drones take the United States’ search for “useable weapons” that allow it to project power at relatively low cost to its most extreme conclusion by making it possible to launch strikes while keeping pilots so far away
from the battlefield that they are invulnerable from enemy fire. For the first time in history, a machine can act as a reliable proxy for a human soldier or manned vehicle, rather than as a single-use weapon that detonates on impact. This raises legitimate fears of wars becoming so easy that the public—and maybe even soldiers themselves—will lose any sense of the costs of violence and become less restrained.

Drones’ selectivity is equally revolutionary. Although the United States has pursued precision warfare for decades and uses other weapons, such as laser- and GPS-guided munitions, to achieve accurate strikes, drones mark another step forward by making it possible to launch much quicker attacks using real-time surveillance. Greater selectivity provides the technical capacity for waging wars more effectively, but it also risks incentivizing war by making drone strikes seem like the ideal tool for killing opponents even when this is not essential to national security.

Thus far, the debate over whether drones create unique dangers that would make them morally questionable, or whether they are just another type of military hardware that will fit into established patterns of fighting, has been primarily conducted in moral and legal terms. There is little empirical research to substantiate the claims offered by either side, especially when it comes to their predictions about how public opinion will change. To some extent, this framing is appropriate. It is impossible to test claims about issues like whether the extreme asymmetry of drone warfare is inherently immoral or whether drone strikes contravene martial virtues that militaries depend on for normative orientation. These types of issues are best approached with moral and legal analysis. However, many of the claims being made by those on both sides of the debate rely on empirical assumptions, and throughout the book we have sought to advance this debate by describing the most compelling versions of these arguments and testing them with survey experiments.

Perhaps the most common worry coming from critics is that drones will lower inhibitions against fighting and lead to a proliferation of violence. Those who support the use of drones contend that this fear is overstated and that drones are employed in much the same way as manned aircraft or cruise missiles. Our results show that both sides are partially right and partially wrong: the availability of drones does sway public opinion, but not as much as many critics have said and with significant influence from other variables. Everything else being equal, the American public is more willing to fight a war with drones than with soldiers who are physically present on
the battlefield. Attacks involving manned aircraft were also more popular than ground forces but less popular than drones.

This pattern of ranking the three options holds several important insights. First, it shows that the American public is sensitive to military casualties and that this influences attitudes toward military action. Politicians hoping to mobilize support for fighting could therefore benefit from not committing ground forces and employing drones instead. Second, because the pattern is consistent across missions designed to achieve different principal policy objectives, our results suggest that the preference for drones will persist even as the strategic context and reasons for fighting change.

Determining whether the increased support for war substantiates claims that drones make it easier to fight raises the issue of their substantive effects size that we have addressed throughout the book. Drones can be said to have a large or small substantive influence on support for war depending on one’s prior beliefs and what background literature is used to contextualize the findings. The effect of using drones is about as large as other factors that are known to influence attitudes toward war, such as the prospect of success or the likelihood of civilian casualties. These comparable substantive effects demonstrate the importance of including drones in public opinion research that gauges attitudes toward war.

The substantive consequences of drone technology look much smaller when interpreted in light of fears that drones will dramatically lower the threshold for fighting, cause a rapid increase in American militancy, or undermine democratic accountability. No single variable that we tested could be said to have such a strong effect on support for war—even drones. It is more accurate to say that drones can play a part in building the overall case for war, but that they lack the power to independently cause major shifts in American foreign policy or in the public’s ability to hold leaders responsible for how military force is used. For certain individuals, drones clearly lower inhibitions against using force, and it is possible to imagine a situation in which choosing drones over competing methods could tip the balance of public opinion when the electorate is sharply divided, or a situation in which drones could form part of a broader effort to build public support for fighting that includes manipulating other variables (such as framing a conflict in terms of counterterrorism or showing that there is a high likelihood of success). Those who defend drones would be wrong to argue that having these weapons platforms available makes no difference to the United States’ propensity to fight, yet they are correct in saying that
the degree of increased support is probably too low for drones to cause a major shift in the incidence of wars.

Public opinion does not directly influence policy, and leaders may to some extent ignore public opinion when declaring wars if they think they will be vindicated in the long run. The primary threat from low approval ratings is losing the next election, and this is generally a more distant concern that can in principle be countered by quickly achieving a good outcome, shifting the electorate’s attention onto other issues, or evading blame for the decision. Even at the lowest moments during the occupation of Iraq, President Bush was steadfast in asserting that his decision to invade the country would be vindicated in the long term by a successful outcome. It is easy to imagine other leaders embracing short-term risks in the same hope of being ultimately proven right. When applying our findings in practice, it is essential to be aware of the relative autonomy politicians have to make unpopular decisions and the electorate’s inability to directly control use of force decisions. This explains why states that have drones continue to rely on other means of attack in some instances, even when these are apt to be less popular. Politicians may simply decide that it is strategically and politically preferable to risk some small losses of support when prioritizing other goals.

It is also important to look at partisan identities when interpreting our results. We found in chapter 2 that while Republicans were more willing to endorse the use of force in general, members of both parties preferred attacks by drones to the use of ground troops. This contrasts with other findings about the polarization of support for American military interventions over the past two decades. Support for drone strikes over ground troops exhibits fewer partisan differences. As we suggested in chapter 2, this may explain why President Obama, elected in 2008 on a platform that emphasized winding down the large-scale American troop presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, continued and even expanded his predecessor’s use of drone strikes against militants in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Our experiment involving principal policy objectives (PPOs) showed that members of the American public make prudential calculations when it comes to judging when and how to launch military interventions. Variations in the PPO led to significant divergences in enthusiasm for fighting regardless of the type of attack that was chosen. Counterterrorism was seen as being far more important than the other three PPOs that we tested, and it received more support than alternative PPOs regardless of the attack
method. Foreign policy restraint came next, followed by internal political change—a sign that respondents were less concerned about threats from conventional militaries and more inclined to stay out of conflicts that do not seem to pose an immediate threat to US national security. Humanitarian interventions received the least support. When this is compared against previous research on PPOs, it seems that the preferences for certain PPOs over others changes over time based on the perceived salience of the PPO for the current national security context. Terrorism was clearly seen as the biggest threat, as it was easier to build a case for fighting terrorists than other enemies. As security priorities change, the relative attractiveness of the PPOs may do the same.

For some PPOs, drones were consistently more popular than attacks involving ground forces and air strikes, while air strikes were more popular than ground attacks. This produced a step pattern for each means of attack across the PPOs that suggests a consistent ranking of preferences, which further reinforces the sense of a public making reasoned calculations based on the costs and benefits of military action in each scenario. Thus, our findings not only support the “prudential public” thesis by replicating some previous findings of work on PPOs but also identify another dimension of the public’s strategic calculus. This demonstrates the importance of recognizing the public’s competence and ability to make decisions when it comes to foreign policy issues, and it indicates that any theory of public opinion will need to start by recognizing that the public is not always easily swayed by elites or who have no sense of what is at stake in America’s wars.

It is difficult to predict how successful drones are in actually achieving the objectives set out in the PPOs. Proponents of drone use contend that their ability to kill senior figures in terrorist organizations and militant groups with selective attacks will make them more effective than alternatives, while their critics argue that drones create resentment that will intensify hostilities and encourage enemies to deviate from the norms of war—especially by terrorizing civilians with constant surveillance. At present, we lack clear evidence to show which side is right, especially when drones have only been employed in the kinds of counterterrorism operations that are notoriously difficult to win regardless of how they are conducted. However, it is possible to test whether the public thinks that the chances of winning depend on how an attack is carried out.

Looking at the anticipated success of drone strikes compared to other attack types is vital for situating these weapons platforms in the context
of existing public opinion literature. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler have done some of the most influential and rigorous research on public support for war and find that anticipated success plays the decisive role in determining the overall level of support. If drones caused a major change in the predicted outcome of a conflict, then they could likewise cause a major shift in levels of support for fighting. We found that drones were not seen as being any more effective than air strikes or ground forces. The attack types were almost interchangeable when it came to predicted success, which means that drones will not have a strong influence on this variable that was so important in previous efforts to account for Americans’ evaluations of wars.

The concern over drones making war easier and thereby tempting the public into supporting more wars or treating war as a quick fix is understandable. After all, moral hazard is a well-documented phenomenon, and the underlying reasoning fits with the finding that choosing drones over other means of attack leads to an increased willingness to fight. This concept is also important for evaluating drones through the lens of just war theory. The principle of last resort requires that belligerents pursue all available means of peaceful conflict resolution before they fight. One reason why moral hazard is threatening is that it would be immoral based on just war theory for a belligerent to rush into a war when promising alternatives exist. Our experiment testing the effects of moral hazard looked at whether drones would be more popular than other means of attack when military ventures were risky and nonviolent options were available. We found that in this context the effects of moral hazard did not appear and that respondents consistently wanted to take a nonviolent approach before resorting to drones or other weapons. This further indicates that support for drones, or for any types of military force for that matter, coheres with the principle of last resort and that public opinion will urge politicians to explore nonviolent means of conflict resolution when these are available.

Our experiments involving expectations of military casualties showed the extent to which pilot invulnerability alters attitudes toward prospective attacks, but these do not directly address the effects of increased precision. To evaluate this other defining characteristic of drones we looked more closely at how respondents felt about the civilian casualties that are supposed to be reduced as weapons become more precise. The experiment involving counterfactual thinking showed that predictions about weapons being precise or imprecise prime responses to the attack outcomes. Those who read stories promising low numbers of civilian casualties reacted more
negatively to the results than those who were primed to expect high casualties, even though both groups read the same story about the results of the attack. Here we see that the American public is sensitive to foreign civilian losses and that overall judgments about the permissibility of attacks will be framed with these in mind.

The experiment comparing high- and low-distinction attacks provided additional support for this finding. In that case we found that respondents were less supportive of drone strikes when there was a higher likelihood of harming innocent people and that this had a greater influence on their judgments than the level of threat posed by the target. Even more importantly, that experiment showed that concern over civilian welfare was higher when there was no risk to American soldiers. One upside of using drones and eliminating the risk to soldiers is therefore that the public will give more attention to civilian suffering and formulate judgments about attacks with that in mind.

Policy Implications

Even though the increased support for military operations involving drones compared to those involving ground forces likely has a modest influence on building enthusiasm for fighting, the prospect of drones increasing aggression is a potential danger that should be taken seriously. One response to this would be to impose stricter regulations that can restrain aggression. Buchanan and Keohane propose an international drone regulatory regime to “enhance accountability through transparency and publicity and, in countries where this is feasible, to mobilize domestic constituencies to support compliance with the regime.” According to this proposal, states that use drones would create their own supervisory agencies. Each state would likewise monitor the others to ensure that drones were used in accordance with the established provisions, and in particular that prospective strikes were discussed and agreed on before being launched. In the event that attacks have to be carried out quickly, Buchanan and Keohane say that states would need to follow procedures for gaining post facto authorization. This concession to practical necessities would allow states to protect vital national security interests while still promoting transparency by forcing states to explain the rationale for attacks and publicize the outcomes.

Other commentators likewise advocate more regulation and oversight
of drone strikes, though usually without going into as much detail about how these would work. For example, Boyle argues that the United Nations should form an investigatory body to monitor drone use and sales. This would lack the power of the regulatory regime Buchanan and Keohane advance, but might be a more realistic proposal and would certainly help to generate greater attention to drones from the international community. At the very least, such a body could call attention to when drones are being misused and attempt to mobilize international public opinion against the offending belligerent.

One point of agreement between the various regulatory proposals is that the United States needs to take a leading role in implementation. They contend that it must act quickly while it is in a position of strength—because it will soon lose its monopoly over drones and the leverage that goes along with that special status. In other words, they argue that it is in the United States’ long-term interest to introduce some regulatory framework for drones and that failure to do this in the near future could reduce the chances of ever developing effective regulations. The question now is whether the United States would actually support regulating drone strikes at this time. Our experiments did not inquire into respondents’ feelings about regulation, yet our results do shed some light on Americans’ attitudes toward drones. The greater popularity of drones compared to ground forces and aircraft indicates that Americans see these weapons platforms as being attractive, which casts doubt on whether they would want to relinquish the ability to employ drones unilaterally and without seeking approval. Respondents’ low confidence in international organizations, aside from NATO, is further reason to doubt that the American public would support a regulatory regime grounded in some international body.

Whether an increase in the public’s willingness to assent to wars is a good or a bad outcome is a matter of debate. For pacifists, anything that facilitates war, even slightly, is dangerous and objectionable. Many commentators who criticize drones likewise imply that any increased freedom to initiate wars is a bad outcome. As we pointed out in chapter 3, Beauchamp and Savulescu raise the possibility that drones could make it easier to initiate benevolent humanitarian interventions in which the intervener may be unwilling to provide assistance unless it can be done cheaply. From this perspective, drones could make atrocity prevention more politically palatable to the American public. Along the same lines, many commentators who decry the public’s casualty aversion or America’s ability to
credibly deter rivals when so many citizens oppose fighting may welcome drones. From their perspective, drones may have strategic benefits, such as their ability to maintain a balance of power or to punish rogue states, that might help to maintain security by preventing the outbreak of large wars.

New regulations may also be adopted unilaterally by the United States with the goal of promoting accountability to the American public. One of the most urgent concerns is that drones have been used to kill American citizens without trial. The killing of Anwar al Awlaki marked a critical turning point in the history of drone warfare. He was not the first American killed by a drone—that distinction belongs to Kemal Darwish, a suspected al Qaeda recruiter who was inadvertently killed in Yemen in 2002—but he was the first American citizen to be targeted. The attack against al Awlaki, which came on September 30, 2011, while he was living in Yemen, marked an important shift in the War on Terror. Selecting him for attack set a precedent of treating American citizens involved in terrorism as legitimate targets for extrajudicial killings.

Samir Khan, the editor of al Qaeda’s Inspire magazine and an American citizen, was killed alongside al Awlaki, though he was reportedly not the target. Al Awlaki’s son Abdulrahman was killed two weeks later during a strike that Obama administration officials said was directed against Ibrahim ad-Banna, a senior al Qaeda commander from Egypt. Four more Americans were killed over the following years: Jude Kenan Mohammad, Ahmed Farouq, and Adam Gadahn each had links to al Qaeda. Warren Weinstein, a 73-year-old US Agency for International Development contractor, was killed inadvertently when he was being held hostage.

The Justice Department ruled that targeting American citizens like al Awlaki without a trial is legitimate because their involvement in terrorist plots constitutes a threat to national security. However, critics have argued that extrajudicial attacks violate Americans’ right to due process, especially when they take place in areas where the United States was not actively waging wars, as was the case in Yemen. An urgent concern for bringing greater normative clarity to the strikes against Americans is establishing clearer guidelines about when the norms relating to war pertain and when the much different norms relating to law enforcement pertain. Throughout the War on Terror the US government has shifted opportunistically between employing war and law enforcement paradigms, causing confusion about how to evaluate drone strikes.

Another important issue when it comes to promoting the responsible
use of drones is ensuring that citizens and legislators have the information they need to make prudential calculations. Unfortunately, this information is often unavailable, especially with covert strikes carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). Reports on the drone program suggest that these organizations are much less open about when and how their drones are employed than is the US Air Force. The Obama administration took some steps toward increasing transparency by transferring control of drone operations away from the Central Intelligence Agency to the military, yet this has led to more operations being carried out by JSOC without any discernible improvements in terms of public oversight. For citizens to make the kinds of use of force decisions we have discussed throughout the book, it is vital for the government to provide citizens with more information about prospective attack plans as well as to give more accurate reports about the consequences of attacks so these can be weighed in future decisions. Increasing the information available about drone strikes may be the easiest route to restricting the use of drones, as this would make it possible to activate public opinion as a more effective constraint.

Our experiments not only hold lessons for policymakers who are attempting to manage public opinion as they employ military force but also for those opponents of drone warfare that hope to build a consensus against them. Arguments against drones that are rooted in the logic of moral hazard would be difficult to substantiate empirically. Arguing that drones might increase support for fighting might also not be an effective argument because of the public’s preference for not placing American military personnel at risk. Anti-drone activists’ efforts would be best served by emphasizing the extent to which promises of low civilian casualties are not borne out in practice and by challenging the lack of transparency surrounding these casualties. These approaches provide a better opportunity for provoking outrage.

One of the core lessons for proponents and opponents of drones alike is the importance of transparency about drones and how they are used. In each experiment we imagine the choice to use drones as a fairly straightforward selection between several competing options in which respondents had a clear sense of what the objectives were and even some clues about the possible outcome of attacking. Citizens are never given such a clear choice about how and when to fight, but the experiments do mirror the way politicians and journalists discuss various attack options when debat-
ing whether to launch an attack. The ongoing discussion about how to respond to the war in Syria provides ample evidence of this. Proponents of intervention have unveiled dozens of different plans for resolving the conflict with a minimal loss of American lives, and these options have gravitated toward deploying a small contingent of American forces, attacking with manned aircraft, attacking with drones, or relying on a combination of these attack types.

Our experiments show that the public is prudent in its judgment about when wars are justified and what means of attack to employ when they have a fairly clear menu of options, yet our experiments assume that the public has all the relevant information to make informed decisions about initiating violence. Unfortunately, we cannot assume that this level of openness will exist in practice. The United States government has been reticent about revealing the number of drone strikes it launches or giving casualty estimates. The lack of transparency interferes with the public’s ability to monitor the effects of drone warfare and to make informed decisions between the policy choices available.

Clearer civilian casualty estimates would impose constraints on how politicians actually use drones by offering evidence that can inform judgments of whether promises of low civilian casualty rates are being met. Most independent estimates of the civilian casualties resulting from American drone strikes put these figures at less than a thousand throughout the Obama and Bush administrations. Any amount of civilian suffering is tragic and regrettable, but these numbers are much lower than those associated with major ground combat operations, as evidenced by the casualty figures from Afghanistan and Iraq. Drones may even inflict fewer civilian casualties per attack than special operations forces and cruise missiles. But senior figures in the Obama administration, including the president himself, as well as other high-ranking figures in Congress, the military, and intelligence services, made lofty promises about drones only killing a few civilians. Our results suggest that most Americans would be inclined to support drone strikes against terrorists, but that hiding the civilian costs of attacks is setting them up for much greater disappointment than if these costs had been acknowledged at the outset. That is to say, misleading promises of perfect precision could be counterproductive simply because these are misleading. Our counterfactual experiment demonstrates that more honest and realistic predictions about attack outcomes will be a more enduring strategy for maintaining public support.
Another implication when it comes to changing how the United States conducts wars is that respondents supported giving relatively large amounts of financial compensation to civilian victims. This is evidence that there is not only concern for civilian welfare but also a fairly widespread desire to repair harms inflicted on the innocent. These amounts were influenced by anchoring the value at $20,000, rather than at the $2,500 limit on payment amounts that was imposed throughout the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet respondents were willing to go even higher than this and therefore showed that they genuinely wanted to help victims of misdirected violence. This suggests that the American public would be receptive to the higher levels of compensation that some critics of the existing compensatory payments have called for.24

Looking beyond payment specifically, the conjoint experiment in chapter 2 and the experiments we discussed in chapter 6 show that the American public has a complicated relationship with international organizations and the norms that are supposed to inform the conduct of wars. The conjoint experiment in chapter 2 found that Americans were less likely to support attacks when they were opposed by NATO and that they were also less likely to support attacks when the United Nations Security Council or human rights nongovernmental organizations expressed an opinion toward them, regardless of whether the opinion was positive or negative. This level of mistrust for international organizations, except for NATO, seems to indicates that Americans wish to act unilaterally. However, the experiments in chapter 6 showed that Americans respect the principle of distinction and that they were concerned about whether the attacks they authorized were in accordance with international law. From this we can surmise that Americans respect international norms even though they are suspicious of the organizations that are charged with upholding them.

The Future of Drone Innovation

Throughout the book we followed the common practice of using the term “drone” to refer to unmanned aerial vehicles like the Predator and Reaper, but really our experiments have focused on one of the many different types of weapons platforms that may be described as drones. UAVs are currently at the forefront of military innovation, but as we pointed out in the first chapter, armed forces around the world are creating dozens of drone vari-
ants, including machines that can operate on land and at sea. Future research will need to take up the challenge of gauging public opinion related to other types of drones, especially machines that operate in different terrains or with less human control. It is impossible to reach definitive conclusions about these until the machines are capable of being deployed in combat, at which point they will enter into the calculations relating to the use of force. However, it is possible to extrapolate some predictions based on our study of public support for current-generation UAVs.

We expect future UAVs to fit into roughly the same patterns we have described throughout the book. The close parallels between support for piloted aircraft and UAVs across most experiments indicates that public support for their use only varies slightly, despite major technical differences. Future UAVs are likely to be faster and better protected from enemy fire and perhaps more capable of operating in conventional combat roles. But if such a radical step as removing pilots from the aircraft only produces a slight effect on public opinion, it seems unlikely that improvements to drone design will have much impact. Our results indicate that any public opinion advantage drones may secure comes from pilot invulnerability and greater precision—characteristics that help to define drones as a class of weapons platforms and that will therefore persist across the many different models that may be introduced. So long as pilot invulnerability and selectivity remain the guiding themes of drone innovation, public opinion should continue along the patterns we have identified.

Most of the naval drones in development are designed for fleet security and other roles that would have them more removed from daily life for most civilians. Except for people employed in maritime industries, naval drones would be just as distant from public view as are UAVs. Those machines could also maintain a high degree of selectivity, or at least perceived selectivity, by operating away from populated areas where civilian casualties are likely. For these reasons, we would expect limited public opposition to naval drones and also little risk they will alter the public’s calculations when it comes to initiating conflict.

We expect more variation in support when drones that would operate on land are introduced. These machines could appear to be more intimidating than UAVs because of their proximity to civilians. Daily contact with ground-based drones would certainly have a profound effect on people in contested areas where the machines would be used. However, their influence on public opinion within the United States will depend on how
the machines look from a distance. Those with animal and humanoid appearances may be anthropomorphized, which could produce a sense of loss when they are damaged or destroyed, but this is unlikely to match sensitivity to human losses. For this reason, ground-based drones will maintain the theme of pilot invulnerability and offer the same benefits as UAVs when it comes to protecting American soldiers. The larger question will be whether these machines will be perceived as instruments of precision warfare. This will depend on how the machines are armed, how they are framed by the media and government officials, when they are deployed, and, most importantly of all, the track record they establish in combat.

The pattern of increasing support for drones over ground forces shows the extent to which reducing the risks to military personnel can elevate approval for wars. Other means of attack that we have not tested probably fall along this same continuum, depending on the extent to which they put Americans at risk. Deploying regular infantry units is probably less popular than the elite ground forces we discussed in our experiments, while cruise missiles are apt to have approval ratings that are much closer to those of drones. Although each attack type may have a slightly different position along the continuum, we expect that drones show the furthest extent to which approval for war can be increased by removing military personnel from danger. Because drones guarantee complete pilot invulnerability, it is impossible for any weapons platform to make American soldiers safer and thus reap additional public opinion benefits of preventing harm to military personnel.

Each of our experiments tests the use of drones in military contexts. Even the counterterrorism and humanitarian PPOs we discussed in chapter 4, which sit at the border between warfare and policing, were described in terms of an armed military intervention in a foreign country. One important question for future research will be determining what influences support for drones in domestic contexts. Since 2004 the United States Customs and Border Patrol has employed unarmed Predator B drones. These aircraft have been lent to law enforcement agencies within the United States, and many are attempting to acquire their own drones.25 There has even been some speculation about arming drones with nonlethal weapons, though it seems unlikely that this possibility will be realized for some time.26

Drones in domestic law enforcement raise many unique concerns, such as whether these are consistent with privacy rights and whether they should
be armed. It is vital to gauge public opinion regarding these drones as they are introduced, especially when so many are dual-use machines that can be employed in international and domestic conflicts. Such drones highlight a contrast between war and law enforcement and a confusion of the respective normative and legal paradigms that has also been characteristic of the covert targeted killing missions drones have been involved in throughout the War on Terror.27 It will be important to see whether the public uses different criteria to evaluate drones in domestic settings, how comfortable they are with dual-use technologies, and whether drones could lead to more aggressive law enforcement tactics that mirror how drones have been used internationally.

Autonomous drones that are capable of selecting and engaging targets without direct human involvement present an especially important research challenge and are apt to generate a stronger reaction from the public than remotely piloted machines operating in new terrains or in different security contexts. Autonomous drones provide the same pilot invulnerability and selectivity that is characteristic of UAVs, but they also allow artificial intelligence systems to make, or at least contribute to, the decision of whether to kill. Much of the debate over the implications of drone warfare is directed at autonomous drones specifically,28 and here there is a concerted effort to shape public opinion before these machines can be developed. Prominent scientists and inventors including Stephen Hawking, Steve Wozniak, and Elon Musk have spoken out against autonomous drones, while organizations like the Future of Life Institute, the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, and the International Committee for Robot Arms Control campaign raise public awareness about autonomous drones and urge politicians to ban them. Popular culture also supplies an endless stream of movies, videogames, and television shows about autonomous robots threatening their creators and even precipitating the collapse of human civilization.

Removing or weakening human control over the use of lethal force would mark a radical change in how drones operate and would require careful analysis of resulting shifts in public opinion. We avoided taking on autonomous drones in this book because these are largely speculative at the moment, and the general public lacks any experience with what effects they would have in practice. Some work has been done to see whether members of the public are able to determine which human actors are responsible for the use of autonomous drones,29 but more will have to be done to see
whether these machines disrupt the influences on public opinion we have described. Given the substantial opposition to autonomous drones already evident and countless popular narratives involving killer machines, we predict that decisions to create or deploy autonomous drones would generate considerable public outcry. Such machines would almost certainly be less popular than remotely operated drones and would therefore undercut any public opinion benefits that UAVs might yield. This would make reliance on these machines a risky venture for democratic leaders.

Drone Proliferation

Drones are spreading far beyond the United States. It is difficult to say precisely how many countries are developing UAVs, as such information is often carefully guarded. However, estimates suggest that as of 2012 at least 11 countries had developed UAVs that were capable of lethal attacks. Aside from the United States, Israel and the United Kingdom are the only countries that have made extensive use of UAVs in combat. Israel used aerial drones at least as early as 1982, when they were sent over the Bekaa Valley as decoys during the Lebanese Civil War. Operations in the urban environments of Gaza and the West Bank prompted Israel to use drone surveillance as a means of acquiring targets that could be attacked by manned aircraft or ground forces. As in the United States, reconnaissance gave way to offensive missions, and drones were soon being used to locate and attack suspected terrorists. Between 2000 and 2014 Israel conducted around 270 targeted killings in the Palestinian territories, killing around 455 people. Its IAI Heron and IAI Eitan UAVs are similar to the American Predators and Reapers and are used for the same kinds of missions to monitor and kill suspected terrorists, as well as for reconnaissance flights over neighboring states.

British involvement with drones developed through joint operations with the United States. These began in Iraq, with the first reported attack by an RAF pilot taking place in 2004. In some instances American and British pilots have collaborated to attack specific targets. For example, two British citizens working with Islamic State in Syria were killed by a combined team of American- and British-controlled Reaper drones in 2015. The United States is reluctant to give armed drones to its other allies, but it has provided unarmed Predator drones and helped to train pilots for other
NATO member states, thereby giving them some capacity for operating these machines independently. And soon foreign support may be unnecessary, as members of the European Union have begun collaborative work to produce their own UAVs that would not be dependent on American patronage.35

Our focus is on how the American public responds to drone warfare, yet our study can inform research on other states. First, it provides a methodological model for studying attitudes toward drones. Future cross-national research may be able to ascertain the extent to which our findings reflect uniquely American concerns or whether citizens in democracies evaluate drones according to similar criteria. Second, our results suggest some of the general mechanisms that may affect attitudes toward drones in other democratic states that employ these weapons platforms. This permits some tentative generalizations in the absence of in-depth studies of other countries that use drones. To draw these generalizations we must consider how attractive pilot invulnerability and precision will be in other countries, differing levels of support for military intervention in general, and whether there are prominent strategic challenges that can serve as credible principal policy objectives.

Many of the arguments raised against drones are described as general flaws that hold true when these weapons platforms are used by any democracy. For example, Sauer and Schörnig contend that drones are attractive to democratic leaders because they make it possible to fight while minimizing financial, material, and human costs. They describe casualty aversion as “democracy-specific casualty-sensitivity” to indicate that this is a universal concern that holds true across states with this regime type and is not a unique feature of American politics.36 The appeal of increasing selectivity with the aim of reducing civilian casualties is likewise explained as following from a general democratic appreciation of the value of life.

Horowitz and Fuhrmann offer a similar explanation of how regime type influences the decision to develop and use drones, though they show that the benefits are not unique to democracies.37 They find a U-curve with democracies and autocracies that are on opposing ends of the spectrum of public accountability both wanting to build their drone capacities. Mixed regimes, by contrast, see little benefit in unmanned systems. Although democracies and autocracies may share an interest in drones, their incentives differ. For autocracies, drones are a means of covertly repressing domestic populations and minimizing the regime’s dependence on military forces
that could potentially launch a coup. Drones facilitate secrecy and the centralization of power, which are key objectives of many autocratic leaders. It is important to note that these regimes may have more accountability constraints coming from foreign countries than they do from the domestic population because of their capacity to control the flow of information internally. For democracies, the benefit of drone warfare comes chiefly from the prospect of waging foreign wars with a lower risk of upsetting public opinion and suffering electoral reversals.

We expect that democracies armed with drones will find it easier to mobilize the public in favor of military interventions, but that the overall effect of drones will have to be situated alongside other explanatory variables and that drones will probably not have a decisive influence. There are variations in countries’ propensities for war. Some, like the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, and France, routinely fight small wars, while countries like Germany, Spain, and Japan tend to avoid international conflicts, despite having the ability to fight them. It is no accident that countries that fight more often and that have clearer threats have made larger investments in drone technology. The divergent attitudes seem to be relatively stable over time, reflecting the same kinds of deeper attitudes toward war that we attempted to operationalize with our military assertiveness and party affiliation variables. These variables had a consistent influence on attitudes toward war among respondents in the United States and will probably have a similar effect on citizens of other countries.

We can reach a rough estimate of how citizens in other democracies would feel about drone use by looking at a country’s existing levels of support for conflicts. Opposition to war is apt to remain consistent regardless of whether drones are available. Those who offer conditional support for fighting may be swayed when drones lower the costs and raise expectations of precision. The presence of perceived threats comparable to the counterterrorism PPOs in our experiments will also be a vital consideration, with countries lacking a clear threat being less likely to pursue drones and other attack types. With this in mind, we expect that the appeal of drones will not be consistent across democracies, as other authors have predicted. Rather, the public opinion benefits should be restricted to countries with more militant publics and more plausible threats.

Nondemocracies may also find drones attractive, but they do not have the same incentives for using them as a way of escaping the constraining effects of public opinion. Sauer and Schörnig predict that nondemocracies
are not as strongly affected by these considerations not only because their governments are not accountable to public opinion but also because they think that nondemocracies will generally show lower respect for human life. This seems implausible when Russia, China, and Iran are among the countries that seem to be most enthusiastic about developing their own drone forces. Sauer and Schörnig are correct in arguing that dictators may not have to worry as much about public opinion as elected officials do, but we agree with Horowitz and Fuhrmann’s contention that autocracies have other incentives for developing and using drones. In particular, they need military force that can be centralized under their control and used with limited international oversight. The different incentive structure means that predicting drone use by autocracies will require a different research approach that does not rely on gauging domestic opinion. It would be more instructive to consider how much these countries depend on maintaining a good image internationally and the extent to which these leaders can entrust drone operations to reliable commanders.

Whatever their regime type, most countries will have more constraints on their use of drones than the United States will. Despite their long flight times, drones cannot operate at long ranges. They must be launched from bases that are relatively close to the target, especially if the attacker hopes to take advantage of their long loiter time. The United States has a substantial advantage over other countries with its network of military outposts around the world. Existing drones are also poorly suited to combat against other conventional militaries because they are slow and do not have good defensive systems. Finally, drone technology is imperfect. The United States has lost control of aircraft and had dozens crash because of mechanical faults. Other countries may lack the resources to use such unreliable aircraft. These kinds of structural constraints are apt to limit the extent to which countries can employ drones and act as an additional constraint to prevent them from causing an increase in the incidence of wars.

Of course, there is also the question of how people view drone operations that are carried out by allied and opposing regimes. Here the goal would not be to anticipate the influence of domestic opinion on policy choices but rather to see the interaction between drone warfare and foreign perceptions. Drones could potentially strengthen or weaken relations with allied and neutral states depending on whether foreign publics see drones as being legitimate. Drones could also be used to deflect some of the costs of military intervention in terms of international public opinion.
One plausible reason why nondemocracies are interested in drones is that they will help them more effectively manage international opinion. Again, more research is needed but will only become possible over time as we gain a stronger sense of how drones are proliferating and as civilian publics learn more about how these weapons platforms are being used.

When they are positioned in the broader literature on public opinion and war, our findings show the extent to which the concerns that were previously identified as shaping attitudes toward the use of force remain salient now that drones are disrupting many of the costs and benefits identified in existing studies. Much of this work predicts that some of the most important explanations for opinions about wars—such as casualty aversion, mission objectives, and the number of civilian casualties—will be rendered largely irrelevant by these revolutionary weapons platforms. Our results reveal that many previous findings are still relevant and that drones have not influenced perceptions of conflicts enough to fundamentally alter public opinion. Instead, they show that drones (and potentially other new technologies that alter the costs of war) change the overall configuration of the factors shaping public opinion and that they are an important influence in their own right, but that the overall explanation cannot be reduced to a particular weapons system.