**Abstract:** A growing body of work suggests that international institutions and foreign elites can shape U.S. public opinion. But little work examines whether foreign influence persists when citizens are also exposed to domestic party cues, and the design of most studies makes it difficult to identify causal effects. We report the results of two survey-experiments about proposed military action against Iran that expand our theoretical and empirical understanding of the influence of foreign voices. We find that although party cues are powerful, many people resist signals from party leaders in favor of messages from United Nations officials that are consistent with their underlying predispositions. Our design allows us to draw a causal link between foreign voices and U.S. public opinion, even when citizens are exposed to messages from party leaders. The results highlight factors that limit the influence of party cues and suggest implications for media coverage of political debates.
Despite the long-held conventional wisdom that international institutions and foreign elites play little role in shaping U.S. public opinion, a growing body of work has begun to demonstrate that Americans do sometimes take cues from non-domestic actors. Much of this literature finds that United Nations Security Council actions or rhetoric from overseas officials can affect support for American military interventions (Chapman 2011; Chapman and Reiter 2004; Grieco et al. 2011; Hayes and Guardino 2013; Murray 2014). There is also evidence that the social policy choices of foreign nations and recommendations of international organizations can even influence public opinion about comparable domestic measures (Dragojlovic 2013; Linos 2011). In a globalizing world, foreign perspectives appear increasingly important for understanding mass attitudes in the United States.

But significant theoretical and empirical questions remain about the influence of foreign voices on U.S. public opinion. First, it is unclear whether Americans are willing to take cues from the international community when they are simultaneously exposed to messages from prominent domestic political leaders. This is a critical theoretical question, because messages from partisan elites—what are often called party cues—are a distinctly powerful influence on mass opinion (e.g., Berinsky 2009; Cohen 2003), suggesting that their presence could dampen the effect of foreign voices. Little work, however, has examined whether foreign influence is attenuated or persists when citizens also receive clear messages from partisan political officials. Second, much of the evidence for a relationship between foreign elite messages and U.S. public opinion is based on observational data, which limits the assurance scholars can have in attributing a causal effect to foreign voices. As a result, whether foreign elite voices do in fact influence Americans’ policy opinions, and the circumstances under which they are most likely to do so, are questions that are still unresolved.

In this paper, we report the results of two studies designed to expand our understanding of the influence of foreign voices. Our empirical evidence is drawn from survey-experiments about
possible U.S. air strikes on Iranian nuclear installations. Improving on previous work, participants in both studies were presented with combinations of messages from the United Nations as well as Republican and Democratic leaders. We find, not surprisingly, that party cues are influential, but we also show that many subjects resist signals from party leaders in favor of messages from U.N. officials that are more consistent with their underlying predispositions. Those patterns emerge even when people are presented with a domestic bipartisan consensus in favor of military action. Our experimental design gives us greater confidence in a firm causal interpretation: that foreign voices can indeed move U.S. public opinion, and they can do so even when citizens are exposed to messages from party leaders. Theoretically, our findings add to a body of work highlighting the factors that limit the influence of party cues. In addition, our results suggest major implications for mass media’s representation of political debates. When (and if) media consistently incorporate into policy debates messages from outside the two major parties (such as those from foreign voices), mass opinion will be less likely to reflect the positions of Republican and Democratic leaders.

Evidence for the Influence of Foreign Voices

For decades, scholars have argued that international institutions and foreign officials are largely irrelevant for shaping domestic public opinion (Entman 2004; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987; Jordan and Page 1992). Because the perspectives of foreign voices tend not to make their way into the American news media in significant numbers (e.g., Mermin 1999), and because of the powerful influence of domestic political elites on Americans’ attitudes (Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992), most research has ignored non-domestic actors as meaningful movers of mass opinion. But recent empirical work has begun to challenge these views.

Several studies have shown that the United Nations or other international organizations can shape U.S. public opinion related to proposed American military actions. Presidents appear to get a larger boost in approval ratings when the U.N. Security Council supports, rather than opposes, their
calls for military intervention (Chapman 2011; Chapman and Reiter 2004). Americans may look to the international community for a “second opinion” about military endeavors, making a U.N. or NATO endorsement (or lack thereof) a strong signal about the likelihood of success or the wisdom of a proposed intervention (Fang 2008; Grieco et al. 2011). This dynamic is especially likely when the mass media devote significant attention to foreign perspectives, as they have in the post-Cold War period (Althaus 2003; Hayes and Guardino 2010; Murray 2014). For instance, increases in media coverage of foreign elite opposition to the Iraq War were associated with decreases in support for military action in the months before the launch of the 2003 invasion (Hayes and Guardino 2013). Even opinion about domestic issues – such as family leave policies – can be affected when Americans learn that foreign countries have such policies or when those policies are endorsed by international institutions (Linos 2011; see also Dragojlovic 2013). Moreover, outside the United States, American political leaders and U.S. public diplomacy efforts can shape public opinion in foreign countries (Dragojlovic 2011; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Wood 2014; Schatz and Levine 2010). The sources of mass opinion, then, appear not to be entirely constrained by international borders.

Limitations of Existing Work: Party Cues and Causal Inference

While evidence for the influence of foreign voices is mounting, the existing work faces two important limitations. First, it has not been well-integrated with the public opinion literature on party cues. That (vast) body of work has shown that citizens often rely on signals from party leaders in processing information and making a wide variety of political judgments.¹ When party leaders endorse a proposed action, their co-partisans in the public are very likely to agree with it. Party cues, thus, serve as one of the most powerful drivers of public opinion, especially in the polarized

¹ Among the many relevant studies are Bartels 2002; Baum and Groeling 2010; Berinsky 2007; Cohen 2003; Druckman 2001a; Kam 2005; Hayes 2005; Nicholson 2012; Rahn 1993; Riggle et al. 1992; and Tomz and Van Houweling 2009.
landscape of contemporary American politics. This raises questions about whether foreign voices are likely to influence public opinion when Americans also have access to messages from party leaders, which are typically ubiquitous in the U.S. media (e.g., Bennett 1990).

One perspective suggests that party cues should largely eviscerate the influence of foreign voices. In a series of experiments, Cohen (2003) demonstrates that party endorsements of welfare policies dramatically affect party identifiers’ support for those proposals. The mere presence of a party endorsement is enough to virtually determine subjects’ policy positions. Similarly, Berinsky (2009) argues that partisan elite signals typically dominate the opinion-formation process even in the foreign policy realm. In a case study of the Iraq War, he explains substantial public opposition to the invasion among Democrats as the product of negative reactions to a proposal that was strongly associated with Republican President George W. Bush. In this model, partisan opinion polarization among the mass public is determined not by substantive policy debates, nor by the content of Americans’ pre-existing values and beliefs, but instead by simple signals from prominent partisan elites. In such a scenario, messages from foreign voices would likely play little role in shaping public opinion.

Other research suggests, however, that foreign elites may have the capacity to shape opinion under particular conditions, even in the presence of party cues. This expectation emerges from studies showing that pre-existing values, beliefs and perceived interests—in other words, people’s relatively enduring socio-political orientations (e.g. Feldman and Zaller 1992, Feldman 1988)—play an important role in shaping responsiveness to elite messages. In his pioneering work, Zaller (1992, 22-28) argues that “domain-specific” predispositions, or substantive values directly related to the policy area in question, determine in part whether people accept or reject elite messages. Sniderman and Theriault (2004) show that values like economic individualism and egalitarianism condition framing effects, indicating that people’s underlying predispositions impose significant limits on the
impact of elite political rhetoric (see also Druckman 2001b; Chong and Druckman 2007). People’s opinions appear not simply to be a response to party cues, but also depend on whether those messages are consistent with their basic beliefs about government and society. To the extent that partisan identifiers receive messages from their own party’s leaders that contravene their existing values, many of them may reject those messages. And when people have access to other policy-relevant information—such as the perspectives of foreign voices—the effects of party cues may be further attenuated (e.g., Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Nicholson 2011).

However, although several studies imply that the influence of foreign elite voices may persist even in the presence of partisan signals, we have little empirical evidence to evaluate this hypothesis. Virtually none of the existing work has simultaneously investigated the impact of both party cues and foreign voices. For instance, Grieco et al.’s (2011) innovative survey-experiment presented subjects with information about United Nations and NATO endorsement of or opposition to an American proposal to intervene in East Timor. But in terms of cues from domestic leaders, participants were simply told that “the president” supports the mission, and that “Republicans and Democrats in Congress” or “congressional leadership of both parties” either support or oppose it. Critically, the president was not assigned a partisan identity, and members of Congress were always in bipartisan agreement, making it impossible to determine how citizens respond to foreign voices when presented with clear messages from their own (and opposing) party elites. Hayes and Guardino’s (2013) analysis of pre-Iraq War opinion compared the effect of media coverage of foreign elite opposition to coverage of rhetoric from domestic political leaders. But because of data limitations, their study cannot determine whether Americans were responding specifically to party leaders, or how such partisan messages may have affected the influence of foreign officials. And

2 Studies show that deeply rooted, issue-relevant predispositions like ethnocentrism (Kinder and Kam 2010) and authoritarianism (Hetherington and Weiler 2009) can also shape opinion in particular political contexts.
none of the other related empirical work allows for a direct comparison of the effect of foreign voices and party leaders (e.g., Linos 2011).

The second limitation of the existing research is that studies are not well-suited to demonstrate a causal relationship between foreign voices and public opinion. Chapman (2011, 101-121; see also Chapman and Reiter 2004), for instance, examines survey data during debates over military interventions and finds a relationship between United Nations Security Council votes and presidential approval. But increases in approval ratings could stem not only from Security Council support of a president’s proposal, but also from shifts in domestic elite discourse, news coverage, or other factors. Although Hayes and Guardino’s (2013) analyses control for the presence of messages from domestic elites, there is no way to be sure that the citizens who moved in opposition to the war were those that were exposed to the messages from foreign elites. The well-known limits of observational data for causal inference thus reduce our ability to say with confidence that Americans respond to foreign voices. Grieco et al. (2011), Linos (2011), and Chapman’s (2011, 121-126) experiments offer more causal leverage, but the absence of party cues in the studies significantly limits both their theoretical utility and their external validity. In actual policy debates, citizens almost always have access to party cues, so experimental designs that leave those messages aside are limited in what they can tell us about how citizens process information in the context of these debates.

In summary, the existing research is short on compelling evidence that (1) foreign elite voices can move public opinion and (2) that they can do so even when citizens have access to domestic party cues, which is true in virtually every political debate. In the next section, we describe the basic logic of two experimental studies that move the research forward by improving our theoretical understanding of, and empirical confidence in, the influence of foreign voices.
Basic Experimental Designs and Empirical Expectations

To investigate the extent to which foreign voices can influence public opinion—and whether those effects persist even in the presence of party cues—we designed two experiments that center on the debate over whether the United States should undertake military action in response to Iran’s nuclear program.3 We study Americans’ support for military intervention because that has been the focus of most research on foreign actors and U.S. public opinion. In addition, debates over U.S. foreign policy are where foreign voices are most likely to be influential, in large part because the U.S. news media devote significant attention to international actors during these episodes (Althaus 2003; Hayes and Guardino 2013). At the same time, our methodological approach and the subsequent findings have implications for understanding how Americans form opinions in other policy areas in which the perspectives of the international community may become relevant (e.g., Linos 2011). Thus, we do not view our conclusions as limited exclusively to debates about military action.

Given the power of partisanship in American politics, we expect party cues to significantly affect support for military action against Iran. But we also expect that foreign voices will shape opinion, and do so even in the presence of party cues in some instances. In particular, research on the importance of substantive predispositions suggests that foreign voices will be most influential in two situations. First, foreign voices should affect an individual’s attitude when specific messages from her party leaders are not readily available in the information environment, and when the messages from foreign voices are consistent with her underlying values. In the context of our experiments, which deal with a hawkish foreign policy action, we expect that Democrats—who tend to hold general predispositions that favor diplomacy and international cooperation to resolve security disputes (Hayes and Guardino 2013, Ch. 4; Holsti 2004; Page and Bouton 2006)—will be responsive to foreign opposition to military action. Second, we expect that partisans who receive

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3 It is important to note that both experiments were conducted well before the United States in 2013 entered into negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program.
party cues that are at odds with their substantive predispositions will reject those cues in favor of messages from foreign voices that are consistent with their predispositions. Again, in the context of our experiments, this suggests that when Democrats receive cues from Democratic elites that support a strike against Iran, they will reject those cues in favor of messages from foreign elites opposed to military action. Thus, many Democrats will rely on their basic preferences for diplomacy and international cooperation to accept oppositional messages from foreign elites, when such messages are available to them. We focus primarily on Democrats because our experiments involve a policy proposal that contravenes many Democrats’ predispositions. But we also address opinion dynamics among GOP identifiers where they provide analytical leverage on the influence of foreign elite voices.

Before describing the studies, one final point deserves clarification. Our experiments examine how specific messages from foreign voices and partisan leaders shape opinion, in interaction with people’s general, policy-relevant predispositions. As an empirical matter, however, we use partisan self-identification as a proxy measure for substantive predispositions. For practical reasons, we did not include in our surveys an extensive battery of generalized, abstractly worded items that would allow us to gauge more directly our subjects’ predispositions. We rely on previous research indicating that Democrats and Republicans have long exhibited clear and significant differences in many general values and beliefs that are relevant to our policy case. Compared to Republicans, Democrats express stronger support for multilateralism, greater favorability toward international institutions (including the United Nations), and less enthusiasm for the build-up and use of U.S. military might for national security purposes (Hayes and Guardino 2013, Ch. 4; Holsti 2004; Page and Bouton 2006). These underlying orientations make people more or less receptive to messages that favor one or another position during particular policy debates (Zaller 1992). Thus, variations in how Democrats and Republicans respond to party cues and messages from foreign
voices should be consistent with these underlying differences in foreign policy-relevant predispositions. We set aside for future work a consideration of which predispositions most strongly moderate the effects of elite messages.

Study 1

Study 1 was conducted in June 2011. We recruited subjects through Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an Amazon.com service in which people receive small payments in return for participation in market research, academic surveys, and related work.4 While methodological concerns about online experiments remain, a recent analysis shows that MTurk samples are more demographically representative than are the convenience samples of undergraduate students that are typical for political science and related research (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). But because representativeness remains a concern, we conducted a second experiment (see Study 2 below) using a larger, nationally representative sample. Despite differences in sample size, sample composition, and design details (which we discuss below), results from the two studies are very similar, providing greater confidence that the use of MTurk in our initial study is not responsible for our results.

In Study 1, our 392 MTurk subjects initially completed a short survey, and then were randomly assigned to one of four treatments in which they were exposed to newspaper stories about proposed U.S. air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities.5 We wrote the articles to closely resemble the Internet edition of USA Today, and only at the end of the experiment were subjects told that the stories had been fabricated. (Details about the sample, the number of subjects in each treatment, and the text of the articles appear in the Supplementary Appendix.) In the lead of every story, it was reported that Republican House Speaker John Boehner was urging air strikes against Iran’s nuclear

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4 For more information on Mechanical Turk, go to: https://www.mturk.com/mturk/welcome. Consistent with similar studies (e.g., Arceneaux 2012; Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Huber, Hill, and Lenz 2012), we paid subjects $0.75 for their participation.
5 Participants from two conditions in which foreign voices were not relevant are not included in the analysis.
installations. The remainder of each article then varied the other sources who were cited and their positions on the strikes. Those other sources were President Barack Obama and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. Boehner and Obama’s statements represent domestic party cues, and Ban’s statements represent messages from foreign elite voices. The positions of these actors were also communicated in the headlines of the stories. Except for these key variations, the treatments were identical. Because of random assignment, we can be sure that any post-treatment differences in subjects’ attitudes are caused by exposure to different messages from party leaders and foreign elites.

We should note that our use of the U.N. secretary-general as a foreign cue-giver differs from other work that has conceptualized foreign influence as stemming from official U.N. Security Council, NATO, or other institutional actions (Chapman 2011; Grieco et al. 2011). But we focus on statements in the news because this is the way that most Americans actually learn about and understand the positions of any governmental institution—through messages from individual officials. To determine whether the U.N. secretary-general has different effects than the reported positions of institutional actors, our second study simply uses “U.N. Security Council members” as the foreign cue-giver. As is shown below, given the similarities in the results across experiments, it appears that mass opinion will respond to foreign messages delivered in either form.

In the first treatment in Study 1 (“Boehner Pro, Obama Pro”), the story reported that Obama agreed with Boehner’s argument that military action was needed; no opposition voices appeared. We used this treatment to establish a baseline of bipartisan domestic elite support for military action to which we could compare results in the other conditions. Here, both Republicans and Democrats receive a clear cue from a party leader in favor of intervention. In this treatment, participants were not exposed to a statement from Ban. We expect support for military action to be highest in this treatment, since the only elite cues are in favor of military action, and the parties are in bipartisan support. In the second condition (“Boehner Pro, Obama Con”), Boehner proposed air
strikes and Obama opposed them; here, subjects are exposed to competing cues from party leaders. We will compare this treatment to the first in order to examine the effect of changing the Democratic party cue from support for a strike to opposition.

The third and fourth treatments introduce foreign voices. In the third treatment ("Boehner Pro, UN Con"), Boehner proposes military action, and Ban Ki-Moon expresses opposition. Here, Obama does not appear in the story. We use this condition to determine whether Democrats are responsive to foreign voices when they are not provided a cue from their party. Finally, subjects in the fourth condition ("Boehner Pro, Obama Pro, UN Con") read a news story with Boehner and Obama both advocating military action and Ban opposing it. We can compare this treatment to the bipartisan support condition to determine whether information from a foreign cue-giver, such as the U.N. secretary-general, can affect public support even in the face of bipartisan domestic elite consensus. This is a particularly difficult test for the influence of foreign voices, as it represents a case in which both Democrats and Republicans receive clear party cues in favor of military action.

The design of Study 1 accomplishes two key goals. First, it provides an initial test of whether foreign elite voices can influence U.S. public opinion, and how that influence is affected by the presence of party cues. Second, it allows us to model conditions that are analogous to the communication environment during the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War (Hayes and Guardino 2013) using realistic media treatments. This is important, because the Iraq debate has been the major empirical case in recent work on U.S. public opinion and foreign policy (e.g., Berinsky 2009; Jacobson 2007; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Holsti 2011).6 In designing our study with these

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6 Specifically, the “Boehner Pro, UN Con” treatment enables us to investigate the effects of a mass communication environment in which elites from one major party support military action in the face of opposition from foreign officials, which is essentially what occurred in the months before the Iraq War. Republican elites—of course, led by the Bush administration—appeared frequently in the news advocating military action against Saddam Hussein’s regime, and faced their most consistent and vocal opposition from the leaders of foreign governments and officials at international organizations. Democratic elites rarely appeared in the mainstream media (Hayes and Guardino 2010). And by comparing the bipartisan support treatment to the “Boehner Pro, Obama Pro, UN Con” condition, we can gauge what happens when media coverage features only bipartisan domestic support for military action, compared to an
asymmetrical treatments, we chose to trade off a measure of analytic neatness for communicative realism and theoretical power. Our treatments (1) mimic actual patterns of media coverage in a key real-world foreign policy case, as well as expected patterns of mainstream news coverage in similar cases, and (2) isolate the effects of foreign voices and party cues simultaneously, allowing us to determine the circumstances under which non-domestic actors are most likely to influence public opinion. Since this somewhat unusual design has limitations, Study 2 employs a more traditional design that allows us examine the effects of a wider-ranging constellation of elite positions. The combination of the two designs gives us valuable leverage to determine various conditions under which foreign voices can influence opinion.

After reading the newspaper story, subjects answered the following question: “Would you say that you support or oppose U.S. military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities?” Subjects could answer that they “strongly” or “somewhat” supported or opposed action. We dichotomize responses into support or opposition, which eases interpretation of the treatment effects.7 For reference, we note that overall levels of support for attacking Iran are fairly low, ranging from 18% to 48%; in no treatment did a majority favor military action. Our primary focus, however, is differences in support across conditions.

Figure 1 plots the percentage-point difference in the level of support for military action between subjects in the bipartisan consensus condition, in which both Boehner and Obama were reported to support intervention, and the other treatments. Thus, the bipartisan consensus scenario is not displayed in the figure. Instead the graph displays the effects of the other three treatments, depicted as post-test opinion differences from the bipartisan consensus condition. In the consensus environment in which bipartisan support is paired with opposition from foreign voices. This is similar to certain moments during the Iraq debate, when the news showed prominent Democrats joining their colleagues across the aisle and officials in the Bush administration to either tacitly or explicitly support the invasion, while elites from abroad objected (Hayes and Guardino 2013, Ch. 2).

7 Our results are virtually identical if we convert responses into a 4-point scale and analyze the means. That is also the case in Study 2.
treatment, 48% supported air strikes. The top row shows that changing Obama’s position from supporting to opposing the strikes reduces support by 30 percentage points ($p<.05$), conferring an effect that is typical of party cue studies (see Bullock 2011, 509).

[Figure 1 here]

In the final two treatments we find that messages from foreign voices can, indeed, move public opinion. In the “Boehner Pro, UN Con” condition, support for an attack on Iran dropped 20 percentage points ($p<.05$) compared to the bipartisan consensus condition. In other words, Ban Ki-Moon’s opposition drove down support by about two-thirds of what Obama’s opposition did. Foreign voices are, not surprisingly, less powerful than the president. But when presented with opposition from abroad, Americans do respond to those cues. In the final row (“Boehner Pro, Obama Pro, UN Con”), support was reduced by 18 points ($p<.05$), despite subjects having read a news story that reported a bipartisan domestic elite consensus in favor of intervention.

The first column of Table 1 (“Baseline”) presents an individual-level model of support for military action and confirms that our findings are robust to the inclusion of controls. The dependent variable is coded 1 if a subject said she supported military action, 0 if she opposed it.\(^8\) We include dummies for the three treatments shown in Figure 1, with the bipartisan consensus condition as the reference category. Controlling for partisanship, education, sex, and race does nothing to change the results.\(^9\) Even with the United States’ most prominent partisan political leaders advocating air strikes, simply adding opposition from the U.N. secretary-general significantly reduces Americans’ willingness to endorse an attack on Iran. When messages from foreign elites are available in the information environment, the U.S. public appears willing to listen. This is true even when cues from the leaders of both parties are clearly in support of a strike.

\(^8\) The results are virtually identical in all of our models if we run an ordered logit model using the 4-category dependent variable in which subjects “strongly” or “somewhat” supported or opposed the air strikes.

\(^9\) The results are also the same if we include self-reported ideology. But because 11 subjects did not answer the ideology question, we exclude it from the model.
But who moves in response to these messages? That is the key theoretical question for the debate about the circumstances under which foreign voices shape opinion. Do citizens automatically follow their own partisan leaders, or might they be responsive to international elites who offer arguments that are in line with their basic predispositions? Figure 2 again presents differences in levels of support compared to the bipartisan elite consensus condition. Here, we break down the data by subjects’ party identification. Because of the small number of independents (57) in our sample, we restrict the analysis to partisans (see also Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Levendusky 2010). We categorize independent “leaners” as partisans for all the well-known reasons (e.g., Keith et al. 1992).

President Obama is clearly a powerful influence on Democrats’ opinions. Changing Obama’s position from support to opposition (“Boehner Pro, Obama Con”) reduces Democratic support by 30 percentage points ($p<.05$). There is also, however, strong evidence that foreign voices matter to Democrats. Replacing Obama’s endorsement of air strikes with U.N. opposition lowers support by 22 points ($p<.05$) compared to the bipartisan consensus condition. In the absence of messages from a Democratic president, Democratic identifiers respond to opposition from a non-domestic actor. Adding U.N. opposition to the bipartisan cue condition lowers Democratic support by 13 percentage points. While the upper bound of the confidence interval overlaps the zero-line slightly, the $p$-value is .07, which indicates a very low likelihood that the result is due to chance.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Democrats are open to messages from foreign voices, and that these voices are most influential when there is no clear signal from a party leader. Nonetheless, Democrats also responded to foreign elites when exposed to a hawkish cue from President Obama that is inconsistent with many Democrats’ more dovish predispositions.
Even in the presence of party cues, foreign voices can be influential. This result has important implications for real-world opinion formation processes, because leading theoretical frameworks and substantial empirical research indicate that U.S. mainstream news norms generally call for two-sided (or “balanced”) coverage of contending perspectives during policy debates (Hayes and Guardino 2013, Ch. 2). Thus, we should expect that citizens will in many circumstances be exposed to foreign voices if prominent elites from both major parties take the same position on an issue. Our results here suggest, therefore, that this common political communication scenario will facilitate foreign elite influence on American public opinion.

The situation facing Republican subjects in our experiment is different than the one for Democrats because there is no variation in the Republican elite message; Boehner’s statement is always consistent with GOP identifiers’ relatively hawkish general foreign policy predispositions. It is thus somewhat surprising that Obama’s opposition (“Boehner Pro, Obama Con”) results in a 26-percentage point reduction ($p < .05$) in Republican support as compared to the bipartisan consensus condition. This may suggest that the president, as a foreign policy actor who is seen as uniquely credible, can sometimes influence even out-partisans.

We do not, however, find significant movement among GOP identifiers when Boehner’s support is paired with U.N. opposition. Just as in the lead-up to the Iraq War, Republicans do not respond to messages from foreign officials who criticize U.S. military action that is supported by their own party leadership (Hayes and Guardino 2013, Ch. 4). This is consistent with a theoretical focus on the importance of substantive predispositions. Because the foreign policy predispositions of Republicans are both more hawkish and more favorable to unilateral action than are those of Democrats, opposition to a military strike from overseas is less likely to move GOP identifiers. Pairing bipartisan domestic support with opposition from Ban (the last treatment) does, however, move Republicans in an anti-strike direction, by a robust 28 percentage points ($p < .05$). Our
interpretation is that GOP identifiers, who generally have little love for Obama, are likely reacting against his position, a move that would be consistent with an out-party polarization effect. Even in the face of support from Boehner, Republicans may seize on the signal from the United Nations as a reason to oppose a strike supported by a disliked Democratic president. And because the president is generally understood to be the prime mover in the national security domain in contemporary American politics, it is plausible that Republicans are discounting Boehner’s pro-strike position in this condition and using U.N. opposition as a reason to move against a plan for military action that they attribute to a president whose policy judgments they distrust.

The second column in Table 1 confirms at the individual level the findings from Figure 2. As evidenced by the coefficient for the interaction on “Boehner Pro, UN Con X Democrat,” Democratic identifiers were more responsive to UN opposition than were their Republican counterparts. There was no difference, however, in the response of Democrats and Republicans to the other two treatments.

Our results from this experiment suggest two key take-aways. First, partisanship is clearly influential, as Democrats were more responsive to Obama than to any other cue-giver, and Republicans generally favored Boehner’s position. Second, and most importantly, however, foreign voices can shape opinion, even in the presence of party cues. In our experiment, Democrats were responsive to U.N. opposition to military action against Iran. That was true both when they did not receive a signal from Obama and, crucially, when the president explicitly argued for air strikes. In other words, Democrats likely relied on their substantive predispositions to accept a policy message from a foreign elite that contradicted a message from their own party leader. Republicans, on the other hand, did not respond to U.N. opposition when it was paired with support from Boehner. Non-domestic voices clearly can alter the way that Americans think about military interventions and respond to their partisan political leaders. It is worth noting that we find significant, substantively
large effects consistent with our theoretical expectations despite the relatively small sample size (around 100 subjects in each treatment, and even smaller sub-samples of Democrats and Republicans). These results suggest that our framework is capturing a meaningful phenomenon.

Questions remain, however. First, would the dynamics of cue-taking be different if, rather than responding to a GOP proposal (as our news stories indicated), Obama himself proposed military action? Perhaps that would send a stronger signal to Democratic identifiers, leading them to resist messages from foreign voices. Second, the design that we chose to mimic features of the pre-Iraq War political environment does not allow us to test the effects of certain potential elite alignments, such as when Republican leaders and U.N. officials agree, or when the United Nations endorses (instead of opposes) military action. Would a different design change our conclusions? And do Americans respond differently when exposed to opposition from U.N. Security Council members, as opposed to a specific individual, such as the U.N. secretary-general? To address these issues, we conducted a second study.

Study 2

Study 2 was part of [institution]’s module of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a nationally representative survey of Americans. In the post-election wave, 815 respondents were assigned to one of four treatments in which they were shown a brief vignette about the debate over the Iranian nuclear program. In every treatment, subjects were told that Obama suggested that the United States should consider launching air strikes. Obama has said multiple times that “all options are on the table” in dealing with Iran’s nuclear program (see http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/obama-to-iran-and-israel-as-president-of-the-united-states-i-dont-bluff/253875/), indicating a willingness to consider pre-emptive military action. Thus, his stated position in the experiment likely would not have seemed unrealistic to our subjects, all of whom were debriefed after the study.

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10 The CCES is a collaborative effort of dozens of universities led by Stephen Ansolabehere at Harvard University. The 2012 election survey was conducted by the research firm YouGov, which recruits samples to participate in online academic and marketing surveys. More information about the design and administration of the CCES is here: http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces.

11 Obama has said multiple times that “all options are on the table” in dealing with Iran’s nuclear program (see http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/obama-to-iran-and-israel-as-president-of-the-united-states-i-dont-bluff/253875/), indicating a willingness to consider pre-emptive military action. Thus, his stated position in the experiment likely would not have seemed unrealistic to our subjects, all of whom were debriefed after the study.
treatment—in which all elites, including members of the U.N. Security Council, were united in support—the vignette read:

There has been a lot of debate recently about Iran’s nuclear program. This month, President Obama suggested that the United States should consider launching air strikes against suspected Iranian weapons facilities. Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner has said he supports the air strikes. Members of the United Nations Security Council also have said they support the air strikes.

We refer to this as the elite consensus condition. The remaining three treatments (whose wording is shown in the Supplementary Appendix) varied whether Boehner and Security Council members supported or opposed military action. In the figures below, we refer to these as “Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Con”; “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Pro”; and “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Con.” After seeing the vignette, participants were asked whether they supported or opposed air strikes, just as in Study 1. Study 2, however, also included a “don’t know” option. Fourteen percent chose that option, and the likelihood of a “don’t know” was not different—substantively or statistically—across the treatment groups. Therefore, we dropped these cases from the analysis, leaving us with 695.

We first present the results as differences in the percentage of subjects supporting military action between the elite consensus condition—in which Obama, Boehner, and Security Council members supported air strikes—and the treatments in which Boehner or Security Council members (or both) were opposed. As in Study 1, absolute levels of support for military intervention, even with Obama endorsing it, were modest, ranging from 40% to 65%.

The top of Figure 3 confirms the crucial finding that emerged from Study 1: messages from foreign voices can move public opinion, even in the face of bipartisan domestic elite support for a policy proposal. Changing the vignette so that subjects are told that Security Council members oppose air strikes reduces support by a statistically significant 12 percentage points ($p<.05$). This effect is smaller than the corresponding shift in the previous experiment, but the presence of
movement at all underscores that messages from the international community can affect support for military intervention, even when domestic elites are united behind the proposal. Switching Boehner from pro to con (an admittedly unlikely scenario in the case of the Iranian nuclear program) reduces support a bit less (seven percentage points, $p=.10$) than does opposition from the United Nations. Turning to the bottom data point in the figure, we find more evidence consistent with a foreign voices effect. Opposition from Security Council members, paired with Boehner opposition, depresses public support by a very large 26 percentage points ($p<.05$). Again, this large, statistically significant movement takes place despite fewer than 200 participants populating each of the treatments.

[Figure 3 here]

The first column of Table 2 presents an individual-level model explaining support for air strikes (coded 1). The model includes dummies for the three treatments presented in Figure 3, with the elite consensus condition as the reference category. Once again, the inclusion of controls does nothing to change our results. Most importantly, a post-estimation test allows us to more precisely compare the magnitude of the effect of the treatments. Critically, we find that the “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Con” coefficient is significantly different ($p<.05$) from the “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Pro” coefficient. This provides more evidence that switching the Security Council members’ position has meaningful effects on public support.

[Table 2 here]

Taken together with the results from Study 1, these findings show that influence from foreign elites is not particularly sensitive to the identity of the U.N. actor. Opposition from either the secretary-general or from Security Council members is enough to move public opinion. This has significant implications for how opinion formation might operate outside the experimental setting. Political communication research indicates that mainstream media turn disproportionately to centers
of institutional power when allocating coverage to different sources during policy debates (Bennett 1990; Zaller 1999; Hayes and Guardino 2013, Ch. 2). Because the U.N. Security Council is the primary formal decision-making body when it comes to proposed military action, news outlets may be especially likely to include the perspectives of its member nations during such debates. Since our experiment shows that such Security Council messages can move U.S. public opinion, we can expect these effects to operate in many real-world policy cases.

In Figure 4, we break down the results by party identification. Lacking large numbers of independents (75) once more, we restrict the analysis to partisans (including “leaners”). We again find strong evidence that partisans will respond to foreign voices when presented with a message from a party leader that contravenes their substantive predispositions. In the top row, Democratic subjects who were told that U.N. Security Council members opposed air strikes against Iran were 24 percentage points less likely ($p<.05$) to support military action than were Democrats in the elite consensus condition. This suggests that if a president—even one basking in the glow of re-election—proposes a policy action at odds with fellow partisans’ underlying values, many of them will be reluctant to follow him when they are offered a message from the international community that is more resonant with their predispositions.

[Figure 4 here]

In the second row, the effect of Boehner opposition among Democrats is about one-third the size of the effect of U.N. opposition, and is not statistically different from zero. We also confirm in a post-estimation test from the model in the second column of Table 2 that the effect of U.N. opposition among Democrats is significantly stronger ($p<.05$) than the effect of Boehner’s opposition. This is consistent with the notion that cue-givers must meet some minimum credibility threshold (Petty, Priester, and Brinol 2002), and Boehner is unlikely to be viewed as a trusted voice by most Democrats. That interpretation is supported by the last treatment, in which Democratic
support for military action declines by about 19 points ($p<.05$), roughly the same as when only Security Council members were opposed. In our individual-level model, the coefficient for the treatment effect in the bottom row of Figure 2 is nearly significantly larger ($p=.11$) than the effect of the coefficient for the treatment represented in the middle row. GOP elite opposition to military action does not amplify Democratic opposition in the mass public, but a cue from foreign voices does. Altogether, these patterns provide additional evidence for the influence of policy messages from foreign elites as they interact with people’s substantive predispositions.

As we consider Republican opinion, it is important to note that the proposal by a Democratic president in this instance—an aggressive, national security-focused action—is consistent with most Republicans’ predispositions. It is no surprise, then, that U.N. opposition (in the first row) has no effect on GOP support, a finding confirmed by the model in the second column Table 2. The non-significant coefficient on “Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Con” represents the effect, or lack thereof, for Republican identifiers. Nor do we find that Republicans move against their predispositions when Boehner opposes intervention: here is yet more evidence for the limits of partisan heuristics. We do find, however, that Republican support decreases by 37 percentage points ($p<.05$) when U.N. opposition is paired with Boehner’s opposition. In this scenario, we would not have expected U.N. opposition to matter, since most Republicans do not think much of the organization and have generally hawkish national security predispositions. But it is plausible that this response does not reflect respect for the United Nations or substantive agreement with non-military options per se. Instead, it may be that this unusual Boehner-U.N. alliance merely confirms for GOP identifiers that what President Obama is proposing must be a bad idea. If even the U.N. Security Council is defying Obama and opposing military action against Iran, Republicans may be thinking, then it really must be foolhardy. We cannot say for sure what is happening here. But given the absence of any movement toward opposition among Republicans in the “Obama Pro, Boehner Pro,
UN Con” treatment, we are reluctant to attribute the effects in the final condition to GOP identifiers being won over by U.N. Security Council members’ substantive positions.

Altogether, our results from Study 2 confirm and extend the basic findings from Study 1. Many Americans will respond to policy messages from foreign elites, especially if those messages are consistent with their general predispositions. These influences are substantial even when people are exposed to a competing message from their own party leader. Moreover, the effects of foreign voices are similar whether they are delivered by the U.N. secretary-general or by U.N. Security Council members, and whether people receive policy messages embedded in realistic news stories or in simple vignettes. Finally, the Study 2 findings strongly suggest that these attitude-formation dynamics generalize to public opinion outside the experimental setting: we uncovered similar effects on a national probability sample of American adults as we did on a non-random (yet fairly demographically diverse) online sample. Taken as a whole, our experiments strongly suggest that foreign elites have substantial real-world causal effects on U.S. public opinion.

Conclusion

The role of foreign elites in shaping U.S. public opinion has increasingly been a major subject of scholarly interest and debate. But despite emerging evidence for the inclusion of these voices in media coverage and for their effects on public attitudes, scholars have not explicitly examined whether such influences can operate when paired with messages from domestic party elites, whose cues are often thought to dominate opinion formation. Existing studies also raise concerns about causal inference, since many of them are based on observational analyses, and those that do employ random assignment to experimental treatments do not directly test the relative effects of foreign elites and domestic party leaders. Our two studies of attitudes toward military action against Iranian nuclear facilities confirm and extend the findings from previous work in this area by addressing these theoretical and methodological limitations. Their results suggest two
primary conclusions about Americans’ responsiveness to messages from foreign officials and domestic partisan elites.

First, messages from foreign elites can move U.S. public opinion, even in some cases when domestic elites are unified. This is a major challenge to leading arguments in political communication and political behavior scholarship (e.g., Bennett 1990, Berinsky 2009). We found that Democrats responded to opposition from the United Nations when those messages were consistent with their substantive predispositions—that is, when U.N. actors opposed a pre-emptive strike against Iran. Remarkably, we found in both studies that this was true even when President Obama argued in favor of a strike. In some circumstances, Democrats are willing to reject foreign policy messages from popular Democratic elites in favor of cues from international actors. These findings highlight potentially important limits on domestic leaders’ ability to shape mass opinion, even among fellow partisans. Partisanship is a key dimension of American political discourse and behavior, but its effects are neither automatic nor wholly determinative.

Second, the news media’s construction of political debate is likely to play a powerful—and often overlooked—role in determining the relative influence of domestic partisan leaders, foreign elites and other voices. In previous research that has identified foreign influence on U.S. public opinion, international actors have been portrayed reasonably favorably, or at least without explicit prejudice. In the lead-up to the Iraq War, for instance, U.S. news organizations devoted significant attention to opposition to the war from overseas, and seemed to do so without constructing these elites and their policy positions as inherently negative (Hayes and Guardino 2010). In the existing experimental work—including the two studies we describe here—the positions of foreign actors are presented in ways that imbue them with legitimacy, at least implicitly. In such an environment, it should not be surprising that the public often takes international actors seriously.
But what about circumstances in which the media portrays foreign actors unfavorably, or even actively denigrates them as outside the “sphere of legitimate controversy” (Hallin 1986)? Or when news outlets simply ignore messages from abroad? Would these voices somehow remain influential? Such questions suggest that researchers should attend closely to the ways in which journalists construct the political world and the actors from whom citizens might take cues. The extent to which non-party actors such as foreign elites make their way to the public—and the particular ways in which those actors are portrayed—will likely condition their influence on public opinion. Without closer attention to the nature of the information the public has at its disposal, political scientists’ understanding of the sources of mass opinion will remain seriously deficient.

Our results are a strong foundation on which to build future studies of how non-U.S. elites influence American public opinion in additional policy cases. To what extent do the effects we identify in a case of proposed military action generalize to other foreign policy debates, and to issues like climate change that cut across the domestic-foreign policy divide? There is good reason to believe that our basic model is applicable to these other cases, given the significant attention the media is likely to give foreign elites in such episodes, and the varying substantive predispositions that citizens hold regarding these issues. However, characteristics peculiar to other policy domains might lessen or enhance the effects on public opinion that we show in the studies we report here. For instance, people might be less responsive to foreign elites in certain trade policy debates where the media portrays these actors as hostile to American economic interests, which may activate deeply rooted nationalistic predispositions. More generally, news outlets are likely to cover different kinds of policy issues differently, so we might imagine varying effects on public opinion based on different alignments of party and foreign elite voices, as well as differences in the specific identities of foreign officials (e.g., European Union bureaucrats or foreign heads of state). While studying additional policy cases would help to specify these potential variations in the effects of foreign voices, our
theoretical framework—grounded in the interaction of specific, substantive, policy-relevant
messages in the political environment and general, substantive, policy-relevant predispositions at the
individual level—should be applicable well beyond the case of the Iranian nuclear program.

Our findings are important from a broader political perspective because they illuminate
important aspects of high-stakes debates over military action. Even if many other domestic and
international factors exert more immediate causal influences on U.S. elites’ decisions about using
force against a nation like Iran (e.g., Oren 2011), there is little doubt that public sentiments can play
important constraining or enabling roles, shaping the political conditions under which military action
takes place, and affecting subsequent dynamics of elite accountability for policy outcomes. Thus, it is
important for scholars to have a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the sources of those
public attitudes. In particular, our results indicate that presidents have a strong political incentive to
win over U.S. allies and international organizations in an effort to build public support for military
action (Saunders 2013). And because the news media is the primary vehicle through which ordinary
Americans are exposed to the positions of foreign elites, our findings highlight the crucial role of
that institution in shaping the domestic political conditions under which policy debates with major
international implications will unfold.

From a normative standpoint, our studies suggest that the media powerfully influences the
extent to which the public can form policy opinions based on a robust and diverse debate that
reaches across national boundaries. Previous research indicates that U.S. mainstream news
organizations perform inconsistently on this key democratic standard (e.g. Hayes and Guardino
2013, Chs. 2, 5; Dorman and Livingston 1994; Entman and Page 1994). Even in the foreign policy
realm, people are not tightly bound to the positions of prominent partisan elites: many Americans
will respond to alternative messages—including those from abroad—when such messages are
available. But in an era of major economic and technological challenges for political communication,
how often will the news media provide opportunities for people to form the opinions congruent with their values and interests that they are capable of forming?
Works Cited


Table 1. Explaining Support for Air Strikes against Iran, Study 1

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Interaction with Partisanship (Partisans Only)</th>
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*p<.05. Entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the subject supported air strikes against Iran. The reference condition is the bipartisan consensus treatment ("Boehner Pro, Obama Pro"). Subjects were recruited through Mechanical Turk.
Table 2. Explaining Support for Air Strikes against Iran, Study 2

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*p<.05; ^p<.10. Entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the subject supported air strikes against Iran. The reference condition is the elite consensus treatment (“Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Pro”). Subjects were part of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.
Figure 1. Effect of Variations in Elite Support for Air Strikes against Iran, Study 1

Graph shows differences in the percentage of subjects supporting strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Negative scores indicate lower support than in the bipartisan consensus condition (“Boehner Pro, Obama Pro”). Lines around the point estimates are 95% confidence intervals. Subjects were recruited through Mechanical Turk.
Figure 2. Effect of Variations in Elite Support for Air Strikes against Iran, by Partisanship, Study 1

Graph shows differences in the percentage of subjects supporting strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Negative scores indicate lower support than in the bipartisan consensus condition (“Boehner Pro, Obama Pro”). Lines around the point estimates are 95% confidence intervals. Subjects were recruited through Mechanical Turk.
Figure 3. Effect of Variations in Elite Support for Air Strikes against Iran, Study 2

Graph shows differences in the percentage of subjects supporting strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Negative scores indicate lower support than in the elite consensus condition (“Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Pro”). Lines around the point estimates are 95% confidence intervals. Subjects were part of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.
Figure 4. Effect of Variations in Elite Support for Air Strikes against Iran, by Partisanship, Study 2

Graph shows differences in the percentage of subjects supporting strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Negative scores indicate lower support than in the elite consensus condition ("Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Pro"). Lines around the point estimates are 95% confidence intervals. Subjects were part of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.