

Folk Realism: Testing the Microfoundations of Realism in Ordinary Citizens¹

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International Relations scholars have long debated whether the American public is allergic to realism, which raises the question of how they would “contract” it in the first place. We argue that realism isn’t just an IR paradigm, but a belief system, whose relationship with other ideological systems in public opinion has rarely been fully examined. Operationalizing this disposition in ordinary citizens as “folk realism,” we investigate its relationship with a variety of personality traits, foreign policy orientations, and political knowledge. We then present the results of a laboratory experiment probing psychological microfoundations for realist theory, manipulating the amount of information subjects have about a foreign policy conflict to determine whether uncertainty leads individuals to adopt more realist views, and whether realists and idealists respond to uncertainty and fear differently. We find that many of realism’s causal mechanisms are *conditional* on whether subjects already hold realist views, and suggest that emotions like fear may play a larger role in realist theory than many realists have assumed.

IR scholars have long concerned themselves with questions of whether the American public is opposed to political realism, with many scholars arguing that the public is allergic to realism altogether (Mearsheimer 2001; Holsti 2004; Sterling-Folker 2006) and others positing it to be more sympathetic than previously thought (Drezner 2008). This question has real political implications, since if American national interests are indeed best served by the very *Realpolitik* that ordinary citizens find abhorrent, policymakers need to either brace themselves for political backlash, or camouflage their policies in anti-realist rhetoric. Answering this question, however, assumes we know what to look for, which is more difficult than one might think, not just because of the immense variety of realist thought (Legro and Moravcsik 1999), but because given everything we know about the public’s political sophistication (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), whatever realism we would find would most likely be a simplified “folk realism” rather than its academic counterpart; even if realist precepts have trickled down from the ivory tower, it is unclear what form

they would take by the time they reached the public at large.

The possibility of a “folk realism” existing in the general public is important for two reasons, the first of interest for scholars of public opinion on foreign policy, and the second for IR theorists. First, analysts examining the structure of the public’s foreign policy attitudes have tended to focus on foreign policy orientations like isolationism, interventionism, and militarism (Holsti 1979; Wittkopf 1986; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987), but have rarely looked at realism, which is curious both because of the paradigm’s ubiquity in IR, but also because, as Gilpin reminds us, realism is “best viewed as an *attitude* regarding the human condition” (Gilpin 1986:304, emphasis added), which should place it squarely in the company of other belief systems regularly studied in public opinion and political psychology.

Second, if some people do indeed “carry an international relations paradigm in their minds” (Rathbun 2009:347), we have an opportunity to probe psychological *microfoundations* for realist theory, both dispositionally and situationally. Among the many mechanisms realists invoke to justify their pessimistic view of world politics, two concepts loom especially large: uncertainty (Edelstein 2002; Rathbun 2007) and fear (Crawford 2000; Mercer 2006; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Mercer 2010), both of whose conflict-inducing effects are typically taken for granted by IR scholars. If there indeed exists a folk realism within ordinary people, not only can we test whether uncertainty and fear prompts individuals to respond in accordance with realist predictions, but

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we can also see whether our “folk realists” respond differently than their idealist counterparts.

Accordingly, the discussion below proceeds in four sections. We begin by reviewing realism in the context of IR theory and debates about the foreign policy preferences of the American public, arguing that realism isn’t just a paradigm, but an ideological system, whose relationship with other belief systems in public opinion has rarely been fully examined. Second, we operationalize this belief system in ordinary citizens as “folk realism,” and present the results from a laboratory study that investigates folk realism’s relationship with a variety of personality traits, foreign policy orientations, and political knowledge, to shed light on what our folk realists look like. Third, we report the results of a laboratory experiment that manipulates the amount of information actors have about a foreign policy conflict to determine whether uncertainty leads individuals to adopt more realist views, and whether realists respond to uncertainty differently than idealists do. Instead, we find that uncertainty’s belligerent effects don’t materialize, but that fear has strong—but *conditional*—realist consequences. Finally, we conclude by examining the implications of our findings for both IR theorists and public opinion scholars, suggesting that the realist understanding of fear as uncertainty or a lack of information may be fundamentally misspecified.

A Brief History of Realism

Despite the tendency for realists to portray their body of work as the descendants of an unbroken tradition stretching back through Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes (though see Walker 1993; Schmidt 2002), contemporary realism comes in so many variations that some critics have questioned whether it still makes sense to use the term (Legro and Moravcsik 1999). The realist family contains classical realists (Carr 1939; Morgenthau 1985), neorealists (Waltz 1979), neoclassical realists (Rose 1998; Schweller 2003; Taliaferro 2006), defensive realists (Jervis 1978; Glaser 1997), offensive realists (Mearsheimer 2001), as well as the relatively idiosyncratic contingent realism (Glaser 1994–1995), Bayesian realism (Kydd 2005), postclassical realism (Brooks 1997), reflexive realism (Steele 2007), and perhaps even liberal realism (Ikenberry and Kupchan 2004) and realist constructivism (Barkin 2003). Given the wide range of self-described realists, it should not be surprising that the core tenets of realism tend to vary according to the realist offering them, but Gilpin’s (1986:304–305) classic discussion of the three central realist assumptions holds true for nearly all of the factions listed above. First, realists are pessimists: describing the world as it is rather than as we might like it to be requires recognizing its inherently conflict-ridden nature. Second, international politics is the study of “conflict groups,” a generic term Gilpin uses so as to adorn thinkers like Thucydides and Machiavelli with the realist moniker, since both theo-

rists pre-date the formation of the modern state system. For most modern-day realists, however, states are viewed as the central actor in world politics (Waltz 1979; Morgenthau 1985). Third, since world politics is characterized by a struggle for power, actors must provide for their own security. Some critics claim that realists view states as rational actors (Keohane 1984:67), while others disagree (Waltz 1986), but all emphasize the importance of prudent self-interest over moral high-mindedness, even though single-minded security seeking at the expense of common interests means that the international system is an inherently tragic place.

Despite realism’s ostensible dominance in American IR theory (Forde 1995:141), realists have long assumed that the American public is either incapable of supporting realist foreign policies, or inherently opposed to them. In the former line of argument, most forcibly presented in the postwar writings of Walter Lippmann, Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Gabriel Almond, among others, mass public opinion was seen as volatile, ill-structured, and incoherent, suffering from “formless and plastic moods” that impairs prudent and focused policymaking (Almond 1950:53–65). In the latter approach, the problem is not that the American public lacks stable belief systems, but that it lacks sufficiently realist belief systems. These two critiques are related to one another, since many of the early postwar critics of the instability of American public opinion were themselves realists, concerned that the American public was prone to supporting ideological crusades rather than exhibiting prudent realist caution (Knopf 1998; Holsti 2004). Despite subsequent evidence to the contrary (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Drezner 2008), the anti-realist assumption remains one of the most pervasive components of American foreign policy discourse. A half century after Louis Hartz (1957) proclaimed that liberalism is “the American Way of Life,” Gilpin’s (1996) lament that “no one loves a political realist” largely rings true: realists routinely claim that the public is allergic to realist rhetoric (Mearsheimer 2001; Hulsman and Lieven 2005), and one prominent diplomatic historian praises the absence of what he disparagingly dubs “continental realism” from the pantheon of American foreign policy dispositions (Mead 2002:34–41). Indeed, even the scholarship claiming that the American public is more hospitable to realist views than previously thought is intended more to address the normative concern of whether the public can be trusted to oversee democratic policy, and less to prove the existence of a sterling realist temperament. Although Jentleson’s “pretty prudent public” studies find that the public prefers to see force being used to restrain aggressive behavior against American interests rather than to promote internal political change—the preference ordering of a true realist—they also find that Americans prefer humanitarian interventions to an even greater degree, and always want force to be used as a last resort.

Furthermore, even scholars who see the public as sympathetic toward realist foreign policies tend to use terminology other than realism to describe these preferences. The revisionists who challenged the postwar realists' claims about the incoherence and instability of foreign policy attitudes mapped belief systems along a string of axes that did not clearly map onto than a realist-idealist continuum: Holsti (1979) argued that beliefs were clustered into a "three-headed eagle" of Cold War internationalism, post-Cold War internationalism, and isolationism, to which Wittkopf (1986) added a fourth head several years later by reconceptualizing the classification system along two different internationalist axes: a militant internationalist axis and a cooperative internationalist one. The relative popularity of this two-dimensional scheme has meant that while some work has been done on the covariates of each of these four ideal types, most of these studies tell us little about the determinants of realism. After all, both isolationists and interventionists can be conceived of as either realist or liberal, depending on the types of issues at stake: on issues of human rights or preventing ethnic conflict, liberals are more likely to be seen as interventionist and realists as isolationist, whereas realists are more likely to advocate engagement when security interests are threatened. Our interest in this study is to rectify this neglect.

Part 1: Realism as Generalized Belief System

The Microfoundations of Folk Realism

The premise of our study, that realism can be understood as a generalized belief system, is one that many realists might find unusual.² After all, realism has traditionally been cast as a "science" of international politics, presenting the world analytically rather than aspirationally, rooted in the study of objective laws of human behavior (Carr 1939; Morgenthau 1985). Apart from Johnston's (1995) work on Chinese strategic culture, there has been relatively little work on realism's microfoundations, and the work that has taken place has primarily sought to find evidence for realist claims in other disciplines (for example, Mercer 1995; Thayer 2000), rather than investigate the situational or dispositional factors that prompt individuals to advocate on behalf of realist views.

A recent exception can be found in a recent critique of the anti-realist assumption in American foreign policy by Drezner (2008). Drezner posits the existence of a "folk realism" in the mass public, and suggests that Americans' low levels of political knowl-

edge, particularly about world politics, promote worldviews similar to those advocated by realists (Drezner 2008:62). The folk realist hypothesis is a type of "people are states, too!" (Wendt 2004) argument: just as realists emphasize that states in conditions of uncertainty—defined as a lack of information about others' intentions (Rathbun 2007)—pursue policies of prudent self-interest in order to survive, individuals suffering from a lack of information should be uncertain and so tend to favor similarly cautious foreign policies. The clear prediction derived from Drezner's folk realism hypothesis is that low levels of political knowledge, or situations characterized by a lack of information, should tend to produce realist views. In contrast, when more information is available, less realist (more idealistic) views should result. In the first part of our study, we operationalize this information-based hypothesis by examining the relationship between individual levels of political knowledge and realist views; in the second, we operationalize it by manipulating the amount of information available in the situation instead.

Additionally, we can envision a number of alternatives. For example, realism may be part of a larger cluster of foreign policy or political orientations, simply another bird in the flock of four-headed eagles, hawks, and doves that public opinion and foreign policy scholars have studied for decades. Relatedly, although scholars originally turned to foreign policy orientations during the Cold War because foreign policy differences did not cleanly fall into liberal and conservative camps (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007), recent work suggests that political ideology has become an increasingly strong predictor of foreign policy views (Holsti 2004). Rathbun (2008) claims that realism is in fact a particular type of conservatism, therefore suggesting another potential habitat in which realism may nest. These relationships may be consistent across different scenarios—so much so that it may not make sense to speak of realism as distinct from militant assertiveness, or conservative ideology, say, in the mass public—or the correlates may be context-specific, such that realism is in fact *rara avis* after all.

Finally, realism may be linked to the more basic personality orientations studied by social and political psychologists. Morgenthau rooted his theory of realism in the *animus dominandi*, a lust for power he understood to be an indelible feature of human nature (Morgenthau 1946:192). Increasingly, research has demonstrated that a wide range of political beliefs and opinions are rooted in individuals' psychological needs, fears, and views about human nature (for example, Sidanius and Pratto 2001; Brewer and Steenbergen 2002; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway 2003; Stenner 2005; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). Realism may be no different. If this is the case and realism is in fact related to personality traits, realist views will be relatively stable, rooted in individuals' dispositions rather than in features of the situation.

² As Oren (2003:172) has noted, although political scientists study ideology, they "almost never apply this concept to their own discipline" in a reflexive manner. While his observation is intended as a general comment about the field, it is especially applicable to realists, who given realism's opposition to ideological thinking, rarely consider realism as an ideology itself. For ideological critiques of realism, see Bell (2002); Behr and Health (2009).

Two caveats about folk realism are in order. First, regardless of whether realism is understood as a function of political knowledge, foreign policy orientations, or personality traits, we presume that the realism detected in the mass public will be a simpler “folk realism” rather than its more sophisticated academic counterpart, just as “liberal society” theorists like Alexis de Tocqueville, Gunnar Myrdal, and Louis Hartz presumed that the American people spoke an intuitive liberalism rather than a scholastic one. Thus, although folk realism shares academic realism’s fundamental pessimism about the prospects of change in the international system and tolerance about the use of force when national interests are at stake, it is indifferent toward the technical questions studied by academic realists: relative versus absolute gains (Grieco 1993), bandwagoning versus balancing (Walt 1985; Schweller 1994), and so on. Second, although realism’s relationship with other IR theories is more complex than the realist-idealist dichotomy of the “first great debate” would suggest (Williams 2004), we nevertheless conceive of folk realism as the polar opposite of what we might call “folk idealism”: interested in upholding human rights and international law, skeptical about the use of force but eager to intervene for humanitarian reasons, and generally more optimistic about the prospects for cooperation in the international system.³

Method

We conducted a laboratory study in the winter of 2008 and fall of 2009 to examine whether we could find evidence of a set of beliefs similar to political realism in a non-elite sample, and investigate its relationship with political knowledge, foreign policy orientations, and personality traits. The sample consisted of 243 college students recruited from undergraduate political science classes to participate in the study in exchange for extra course credit.⁴ Participants—56% of whom identified as men, and 76% as white/Caucasian, with ages ranging from 18 to 48 (median: 21)—completed four sets of electronic questionnaires. The first questionnaire, a modification and extension of a realism-liberalism index used by Rousseau (2006), measured our key variable of interest, “folk realism”—a set of propositions derived from simplified versions of realist precepts: a pessimistic view of the international system, a veneration of material self-interest, an acceptance of the use of force, and so on. The chief impediment to studying realism in public opinion is that a

³ Of course, given that the idealist straw man pilloried in the “first great debate” bears such little resemblance to the more nuanced arguments of actual liberal thinkers (Schmidt 2002), folk idealism is not all that different from the brand of idealism taught in introductory IR classes.

⁴ We retained response latency data for our key variables. Inspection of those response latencies revealed that five of the participants responded to these questions much too quickly to have even read them (that is, in <300 ms). Because these participants did not take the study seriously, we dropped them from all of the analyses we report below.

TABLE 1. Questions Measuring Folk Realism

<i>What’s more important to you?</i>	
Promoting human rights abroad/improving security at home (58.8%)	
Upholding international law/protecting American corporations (33.9%)	
Opening up trade with foreign countries/increasing American military might (19.4%)	
Encouraging the spread of democracy abroad/restricting the flow of weapons of mass destruction (61.8%)	
<i>In your opinion, countries...</i>	
Are inherently cooperative/are inherently aggressive (41.2%)	
Can often be persuaded by international organizations like the United Nations/can only be persuaded by the use of force (26.1%)	
Should be able to trust other states/should never trust other states (13.9%)	
Should only use military force for defensive purposes/should be prepared to use military force for any purpose (33.3%)	
Should pay less attention to power and arms races/should pay less attention to treaties and institutions (15.2%)	
<i>In your opinion, war...</i>	
Usually occurs because different countries have different values/occurs because different countries have conflicting interests (76.4%)	
Can usually be avoided/is usually unavoidable (18.2%)	
Tends to make problems worse/often fulfills a useful purpose (34.5%)	
Should always be of last resort/is a legitimate way to settle disputes (6.1%)	

(Notes. The values in parentheses are the percentage of participants who chose the realist response, which is the second option in each pair.)

standardized measure of realism as a generalized predisposition does not exist, as Drezner notes while lamenting “the dearth of survey questions and results that directly address whether Americans think like realists or liberal internationalists” (Drezner 2008:62). Accordingly, one of our goals was to develop such a measure. For measurement purposes, we relied on the dichotomous forced-choice questions shown in Table 1, where respondents had to choose between a folk realist response and an idealist alternative.⁵ While many of these questions are blunter than the more nuanced argumentation found in seminal realist texts, this simplification is intentional: given the absence of realist “cue-givers” in the general public, it is unrealistic to expect that if realist precepts were to have trickled down from the ivory tower, they would look exactly like they do in the pages of *Power Among Nations* or *Theory of International Politics*.

Second, we measured participants’ levels of political knowledge using an 11-item knowledge test, including the five questions recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993), and supplemented by six additional questions, including four on international

⁵ This technique is popular in the values literature (for example, Jacoby 2006) because it forces a choice between two items that may both be positively valued (for example, liberty and equality), inducing a trade-off in order to see which side respondents take.

TABLE 2. Correlates of Folk Realism

Militant assertiveness	0.64***
Ideology (liberal)	-0.53***
National chauvinism	0.47***
National attachment	0.43***
Social dominance	0.43***
Isolationism	0.43***
Machiavellianism	0.34***
Social trust	-0.32***
International trust	-0.32***
Authoritarianism	0.26***
Need for closure	0.17
Just world	0.13
Entity theorists	0.11
Political knowledge	-0.08
Trust in government	0.02
Postmaterialism	0.01

(Notes. Coefficients are bivariate correlations. *** $p < .001$.)

political issues.⁶ Additionally, we asked respondents a battery of questions measuring demographic characteristics, personality traits commonly studied in social psychology, and foreign policy orientations popular in the public opinion literature—militant assertiveness, isolationism, national attachment, and national chauvinism. The questions and scale reliabilities for the political and personality variables are provided in Appendix S1 (Supporting information). Finally, subjects also participated in a laboratory experiment soliciting their views on a foreign policy conflict, which we discuss after presenting our results for this first set of analyses.

Results

Folk realism is a multifaceted belief system, and as is clear from Table 1, there is considerable variability in the prevalence of realist responses across the different items. However, a reliability analysis indicates that the 13 items form an internally consistent scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$), and a principal component factor analysis indicates that all of the items load positively on the first extracted factor. Consequently, we are comfortable in concluding that the 13 items can be combined into a single folk realist scale, which we did by summing the number of total realist

responses.⁷ On the whole, our sample was more idealist than realist ($M = 4.43$, $\sigma = 2.67$), but more important for our purposes are folk realism's political and personality correlates, summarized in Table 2, organized according to the magnitude of the first-order correlation. Several substantial, and theoretically meaningful, relationships emerged. First, it is clear that our measure of folk realism is linked to a host of other politically relevant orientations. Folk realists are more likely to be politically conservative rather than liberal; they prefer more militant and assertive strategies, as opposed to cooperative approaches, and they tend to be isolationists rather than favor international involvement (the measures of militant assertiveness and isolationism were modified from Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999). National identity also plays a role: folk realists tend to be higher in national attachment (that is, their identity as an American defines in an important way who they are) and higher in national chauvinism (that is, they feel that America is vastly superior to other nations; the attachment and chauvinism measures were taken from Herrmann, Isernia, and Segatti 2009).

Folk realism also has links to more general beliefs about human nature, especially trust. Not surprisingly, folk realists are less trusting (see Rathbun 2009): they have lower levels of social trust (that is, a generalized belief that others can be trusted; see Uslaner 2002), and lower levels of international trust (that is, they don't believe the United States can trust other nations; see Brewer, Gross, Aday, and Willnat 2004). Trust in the American government, in contrast, has no relationship to realist tendencies. Machiavellianism, or the belief that others can be deceived or manipulated for personal gain (Christie and Geis 1970), has often been linked to trust,⁸ and not surprisingly given the realist appropriation of Machiavelli (Carr 1939: chapter 5; Walker 1993: chapter 2), realists tend to be higher in Machiavellianism. Additionally, folk realists display linkages to two of the primary determinants of prejudice and ethnocentrism (Duckitt 2003). Realists tend to be higher in authoritarianism (as measured by the ANES child-rearing values), and in social dominance orientation, a measure of preferences for group-based hierarchies and inequalities in social systems (Sidanius and Pratto 2001). Taken together, these two results suggest that folk realists have a preference for conformity, social order, and social inequality.

⁶ The additional questions were: "Who is the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives?"; "Who is the current majority leader of the U.S. Senate?"; "Who is the Secretary General of the United Nations?"; "What does NAFTA stand for?"; "What country did the Taliban control until the U.S. intervened in 2002?"; "Which five countries are permanent members of the U.N. Security Council?" We included the last four questions, which are indicators of knowledge about international affairs, to allow us to consider the possibility that a domain-specific measure of sophistication might be critical for understanding realist tendencies (McGraw and Pinney 1990; Gilens 2001). However, in exploratory analyses we found no evidence to support the domain-specific hypothesis, and so we limit the analyses we present in this paper to the broader total political knowledge variable. The resulting political knowledge scale, based on the sum of correct responses, is reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$).

⁷ To test whether our measure of realism reflects a generalized belief system rather than a set of context-dependent responses, we administered the questionnaire to half of the subjects at the beginning of the study, and to the other half of the subjects after receiving the two treatments discussed in detail in Part 2, below. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA finds that none of our manipulations (nor any of their interaction effects) have any significant impact on participants' levels of folk realism, providing support for our assumption that folk realism exists as a generalized disposition.

⁸ As Wrightsman (1991:374) writes: "The person high in Machiavellianism reflects a rather perverse type of trust; that is, a confidence that others can be influenced or changed by a combination of techniques employed by the manipulator."

TABLE 3. Determinants of Folk Realism

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Political knowledge	0.004	(0.056)
International trust	-0.155***	(0.047)
Social trust	-0.074	(0.052)
Militant assertiveness	0.391***	(0.079)
Isolationism	0.278***	(0.061)
National attachment	0.176***	(0.058)
National chauvinism	-0.065	(0.090)
Ideology	-0.125**	(0.049)
Social dominance	0.026	(0.054)
Machiavellianism	0.176***	(0.061)
Authoritarianism	0.026	(0.034)
Male	0.023	(0.020)
White	0.022	(0.023)
Constant	0.280**	(0.117)
<i>N</i>	237	
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.567	

(Notes. OLS coefficients. ****p* < .01, ***p* < .05, **p* < .1.)

Several nonsignificant relationships are also evident. Realists and idealists do not differ in their belief in a just world (the belief that the world is just and people get what they deserve; see Rubin and Peplau 1975); in need for closure (preferring order and predictability, as well as close-mindedness; see Jost et al. 2003); in their implicit theories about the extent to which personalities are malleable or fixed (Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck 1998); or in postmaterialism (Inglehart 1977). Finally, against Drezner (2008), we find that folk realism and political knowledge are independent.⁹

Of course, many of the variables demonstrating significant correlations with the realist predisposition are highly correlated with each other. In order to determine their independent impact, we estimated a multiple regression model, including all ten of the political and personality orientations that exhibited significant bivariate correlations in Table 2, as well as political knowledge because of its theoretical relevance (all variables recoded to a 0–01 scale). Finally, we also included dummy variables to capture the effects of sex and race. The results—as reported in Table 3—suggest that folk realism has no significant relationship with the race or sex of the participant, but six of the political and personality predictors emerge as significant in the multivariate analysis. Folk realism is significantly associated with a conservative ideology, isolationism and militant assertiveness, national attachment, a lack of international trust, and high levels of Machiavellianism. We therefore see the effects of anarchy—our folk realists distinguish between domestic and international affairs, believing you can trust in the former, but not in the

⁹ Given our argument that folk realism exists even among individuals who have never been exposed to its academic counterpart, it is worth noting that subjects who are political science majors are no more likely to be folk realists than non-majors ($r = 0.009$), and students who reported taking IR theory classes are also no more likely to be folk realists than their counterparts ($r = -0.104$); the folk realism scale is also equally reliable among political science majors and non-majors, and students who have taken IR classes versus students who have not.

latter—and amorality—realists are attached to their country but do not view it as morally superior.¹⁰ All of these are consistent with theoretical understandings of realism as a belief system, and consistent with the implications of previous empirical work on mass public opinion about world affairs (Herrmann et al. 1999; Brewer et al. 2004; Herrmann et al. 2009). In this sense, our folk realism scale demonstrates considerable promise: it is internally consistent and exhibits convergent validity by correlating substantially with theoretically meaningful predictors, implying that we can think of folk realism dispositionally, as a belief system that some people share, and suggesting that some ordinary citizens do indeed “carry an international relations paradigm in their minds.” That said, when developing new measures, it is important to test their predictive validity to see how well they are able to predict responses in context; thus, in the next set of analyses, we examine realism situationally, examining whether folk realists respond to uncertainty and fear differently than idealists, and what this might tell us about IR theory more generally.

Part 2: Realist Responses to Specific Conflicts

Method

In addition to completing the questionnaires analyzed in the previous section, participants also participated in a laboratory experiment, testing whether uncertainty—operationalized as a lack of information (for example, Rathbun 2007)—made the participants more likely to espouse realist views in their reactions to an international ethnic conflict.¹¹ We manipulated information in two ways. First, we either provided, or did not provide, an informational briefing article about a specific international crisis relevant to American interests. Second, we varied the familiarity of the conflict, presenting either the relatively familiar conflict in Iraq, or the relatively unfamiliar conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (hence, NK; see Appendix S2, Supporting information, for more information about NK).¹² Additionally, as noted above, half of the subjects completed the folk realism questionnaire *before* they participated in the conflict experiment, and the other half *afterward*. The result is a 2 (Iraq versus NK) × 2 (article versus no

¹⁰ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

¹¹ The psychological literature tends to distinguish subjective uncertainty from the objective uncertainty implied by a lack of information, whereas IR theorists tend to conflate the two. In our study, we manipulate objective uncertainty—the amount of information available in a given situation—but also measure subjective uncertainty, which appears in our later analyses.

¹² These cases were chosen because of the realist disdain for getting involved in ethnic conflicts, a tendency featured prominently in Samantha Power’s (2002) account of how reticence toward getting involved in “ancient hatreds” curbed American intervention in Rwanda and Bosnia, and Desch’s (2003:422–423) discussion of 1990s opinion pieces written by Stephen Krasner, John Mearsheimer, Stephen van Evera and other realists, either making cases against intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo, or arguing in favor of more cautious alternatives than the policies pursued by the UN and NATO-backed missions.

article) \times 2 (folk realism measured first, or after) between-subjects experimental design.

In the high-information conditions, participants read a briefing article about an international conflict (see Appendix S2 for the articles). The article was preceded by the following instructions: “This next section of the study is concerned with participants’ views about conflicts in various parts of the world. Please read the following magazine article and then answer the questions that follow.” Half of those in the high-information conditions read an article about Iraq (the high familiarity conflict), whereas the other half read an article about NK (the low familiarity conflict). The articles were similar in length, composition, and content. The first paragraph described location and history; the second paragraph, the ethnic groups in conflict in each area; the third paragraph, the specifics of that conflict, including that the conflict had “resulted in untold thousands of casualties and created hundreds of thousands of refugees.” The final paragraph described the costs of the conflict for the countries and international affairs more generally; as can be seen in Appendix S2, this paragraph is virtually identical in the Iraq and NK articles. After reading the articles, the participants were asked a battery of questions designed to capture realist (or idealist) reactions to the conflict, shown in Table 4 below. The questions were identical for the two conflicts, and only the referent (that is, Iraq or NK) was changed. In both conditions, subjects were also asked about any emotional reactions they had about the conflict, as well as how certain they were about their opinions.

TABLE 4. Questions Measuring Responses to Ethnic Conflict

1. The Sunnis and Shi’as in Iraq (the Azeris and Armenians) have been fighting one another for many years. The United States should deploy more forces in Iraq (deploy forces) to help maintain a ceasefire between the two groups.
2. If Iraq becomes (Armenia and Azerbaijan become) more democratic, tensions between the Sunnis and Shi’as (Azeris and Armenians) will decrease.
3. The Kurds in the north of Iraq would like to declare independence from the rest of the country. (N/K declared independence from Azerbaijan in 1991, but has yet to have its independence recognized by any other state). The United States should take the first step in recognizing Kurdish (N/K’s) independence, even though other countries might see this as interfering in domestic affairs.
4. Because the Sunnis and Shi’as (Azeris and Armenians) have been fighting for so long, it isn’t worth it for the United States to pay such heavy costs to try to reach a settlement.
5. The conflict in Iraq (Azerbaijan) is likely to resolve itself over the next couple of years.
6. Because Iraqi oil (the oil that flows through Azerbaijani pipelines) is important to US interests, we should not risk angering the Iraqi (Azerbaijani) government by supporting independence for Iraqi Kurds (Nagorno-Karabakh).
7. It is unlikely that the dispute in Iraq (Nagorno-Karabakh) will ever be settled, because in every negotiation, one party will always end up being better off than the other.

Participants in the low-information conditions were not provided with any information about the two conflicts. Rather, they simply answered the same battery of questions, preceded by these instructions: “This next section of the study is concerned with participants’ views about conflicts in various parts of the world. Specifically, we’d like to know your views about the conflict in Iraq/Nagorno-Karabakh.” Following the conflict experiment, subjects completed the battery of political and personal orientation questions discussed in the previous section and were then debriefed and thanked.

Responses were provided on a five-point scale, with response options labeled “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” Because of realist hesitancy about involvement in long-standing ethnic conflict, we expect realists to disagree with question 1 and agree with question 4. Similarly, realist pessimism about prospects of cooperation should impel realists to disagree with questions 2 and 5, and agree with question 7. Questions 3 and 6 tap into the classic Wilsonian notion of national self-determination, a prospect realists should care less about than idealists, especially when presented as a trade-off against material American interests, as in question 6. Thus, we expect realists to disagree with question 3, and agree with question 6.¹³

Results

Manipulation Check

Since the validity of our conclusions about the impact of uncertainty depend on our manipulations working as intended, we begin our analysis with a manipulation check. We assumed that the participants would be more knowledgeable, and more certain, about the Iraq conflict (as opposed to NK), and that providing the briefing article would also enhance their certainty. The participants were asked, after answering a series of questions about the conflict, “How knowledgeable do you consider yourself to be about the conflict in Iraq/NK?” and “How certain are you of your opinions about the conflict in Iraq/NK?” The results of $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVAs support our assumptions. The participants reported higher levels of knowledge about Iraq than NK (means = 2.44 and 1.38, on a four-point scale; $F_{1,229} = 183.02$, $p < .001$), and expressed more certainty in the Iraq condition (mean = 2.54 as opposed to 1.81 for NK, $F_{1,229} = 45.97$, $p < .001$) and when they read an article (mean = 2.37 as opposed to 1.98 in the no article condition, $F_{1,229} = 2.69$,

¹³ We recognize that many of these questions are more complex than standard survey practices recommend (Krosnick and Presser 2010). However, as suggested above, the core tenets of realism are complex, consisting of more than preferred actions (for example, interventionism or isolationism) but also the types of issues at stake (for example, human rights versus security interests). While we believe, on the whole, that the questions capture realist (or idealist) preferences, ultimately the validity of these questions can only be evaluated empirically.

$p < .023$). In other words, the manipulations had the intended impact on both objective and subjective uncertainty.

Reliability Analyses

Our next step was to explore whether the seven conflict-specific items constitute an internally consistent scale. We find the reliability of the composite scale to be relatively low ($\alpha = 0.54$), no doubt reflecting the multidimensional nature of realist attitudes. Indeed, factor analyses suggest that the seven items include two subscales: one reflecting a realist pessimism about the likelihood of positive outcomes emerging from the conflict, and the latter reflecting an isolationist desire to limit the American role in the conflict. Since the results below are robust to the particular subscales used, the analyses below focus only on the seven-item conflict-specific measure.

Does Lack of Information Boost Realist Responses?

In order to estimate uncertainty's effects on realist views, we first estimate the impact of the experimental treatments on the composite seven-item scale with a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA. Although our manipulation check indicated that both treatments significantly raised participants' level of uncertainty, they do not have a significant direct effect on the realist views participants expressed in relation to the conflicts, with none of the main or interaction effects attaining significance.

To further explore the determinants of realist views in response to specific conflicts, we estimate a series of OLS regression models depicted in Table 5 conducting separate analyses for NK and Iraq. We include dummy variables for the other two experimental manipulations (that is, *Article* and *Realism 1st*), and the set of foreign policy orientations and demographic characteristics used in the previous

TABLE 5. Realist Views in Response to Specific Conflicts

	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	NK	Iraq	NK	Iraq	NK	Iraq	NK	Iraq
Article	0.100 (0.083)	0.020 (0.103)	0.088 (0.082)	0.013 (0.103)	0.100 (0.084)	0.042 (0.100)	0.095 (0.083)	0.054 (0.104)
Realism 1st	-0.020 (0.081)	-0.152 (0.102)	-0.006 (0.080)	-0.131 (0.105)	-0.020 (0.081)	-0.148 (0.099)	-0.023 (0.081)	-0.153 (0.102)
Folk Realism	0.694** (0.302)	0.361 (0.366)	-0.531 (0.788)	1.383 (1.103)	0.690** (0.322)	-0.599 (0.478)	0.735** (0.311)	0.782* (0.442)
Fear	-0.155 (0.117)	-0.135 (0.114)	-0.171 (0.116)	-0.129 (0.114)	-0.161 (0.201)	-0.665*** (0.209)	-0.156 (0.117)	-0.131 (0.113)
Certainty	0.008 (0.111)	0.003 (0.104)	-0.005 (0.110)	-0.005 (0.105)	0.008 (0.112)	0.015 (0.101)	0.129 (0.239)	0.277 (0.194)
Knowledge	0.178 (0.258)	-0.112 (0.303)	-0.512 (0.484)	0.372 (0.578)	0.177 (0.263)	-0.125 (0.293)	0.205 (0.263)	-0.179 (0.303)
Realism \times knowledge			1.772* (1.056)	-1.419 (1.444)				
Realism \times fear					0.017 (0.514)	1.518*** (0.509)		
Realism \times certainty							-0.288 (0.504)	-0.833* (0.499)
International trust	0.024 (0.211)	-0.075 (0.272)	0.065 (0.210)	-0.086 (0.272)	0.024 (0.212)	0.042 (0.266)	0.019 (0.212)	-0.094 (0.270)
Militant assertiveness	0.078 (0.429)	-1.482*** (0.412)	-0.028 (0.430)	-1.451*** (0.413)	0.079 (0.432)	-1.385*** (0.399)	0.081 (0.430)	-1.527*** (0.409)
Isolationism	0.814*** (0.269)	1.196*** (0.379)	0.756*** (0.269)	1.201*** (0.379)	0.814*** (0.271)	1.132*** (0.367)	0.818*** (0.270)	1.144*** (0.377)
National attachment	-0.467 (0.282)	-0.455 (0.324)	-0.464* (0.279)	-0.444 (0.325)	-0.467 (0.283)	-0.555* (0.315)	-0.466 (0.283)	-0.517 (0.324)
National chauvinism	0.196 (0.431)	0.013 (0.488)	0.241 (0.428)	-0.001 (0.488)	0.195 (0.436)	0.128 (0.473)	0.248 (0.442)	0.121 (0.489)
Ideology	0.561** (0.225)	0.390 (0.262)	0.564** (0.222)	0.376 (0.262)	0.562** (0.226)	0.362 (0.253)	0.565** (0.225)	0.338 (0.262)
Male	0.014 (0.096)	-0.015 (0.115)	0.028 (0.096)	-0.026 (0.115)	0.015 (0.099)	-0.010 (0.111)	0.005 (0.098)	-0.004 (0.114)
Constant	2.297*** (0.404)	3.659*** (0.516)	2.793*** (0.498)	3.307*** (0.628)	2.299*** (0.410)	3.936*** (0.507)	2.241*** (0.417)	3.621*** (0.512)
Obs.	112	125	112	125	112	125	112	125
Adj. R^2	0.171	0.220	0.186	0.220	0.162	0.272	0.165	0.232

(Notes. Main entries are OLS coefficients; standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.)

analyses in the first part of the study.¹⁴ To probe the pathways through which folk realism operates and determine whether our folk realists offered systematically different views from their idealist counterparts, we also include participants' folk realism scores, along with three psychological moderators. First, we examine whether political knowledge affects the likelihood of espousing realist views, both as a main effect—an additional test of the Drezner hypothesis—and as an interaction with individuals' levels of folk realism, since a substantial amount of public opinion research demonstrates that political sophistication strengthens the relationship between general principles and specific policy preferences (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; but see Goren 2004). Second, because of the central role that fear plays in the realist worldview, we asked whether the conflict made them feel "frightened" or "worried," and summed the "yes" responses to those questions to create a measure of fear. We investigate whether respondents who reported whether the conflict made them feel fear were more likely to advocate a realist outlook on the conflict. As with knowledge, we model fear with both a main effect and an interaction effect, as a considerable amount of recent research demonstrates that the experience of negative emotions can strengthen the impact of various considerations on political judgment and choices (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Brader 2006). Finally, we include another test of the relationship uncertainty has with realist foreign policy views, investigating it both as a main effect—whether participants who reported being uncertain about their opinions on the conflict were more likely to endorse realist preferences—and an interaction effect, that is, whether uncertainty exacerbated the realist tendencies of our folk realists.

The first model in Table 5 estimates the main effects of our predictors on views of the conflicts in NK and Iraq. Importantly, we find that folk realists offer consistently greater realist views about the conflict in NK; the relationship between folk realism and responses to the more familiar Iraq conflict is appropriately positive but nonsignificant, a finding that holds throughout the other model specifications depicted in the table. In other words, we find that participants are more reliant on realist predispositions when faced with an unfamiliar foreign policy situation than a familiar one, whereupon they have additional information and prior views to help structure their opinions. The same is true with political ideology: self-identified liberals tend to express a realist reticence about intervening in an ethnic conflict in the relatively unfamiliar NK case, but this

ideological gap shrinks when presented with the more familiar case of Iraq, where responses are dominated by more specific foreign policy orientations instead. These findings therefore coincide with work by Herrmann et al. (1999), who also found that specific foreign policy orientations more consistently constrain foreign policy preferences than does political ideology. Isolationism in particular is consistently significant across all of the model specifications presented in Table 5, which should not be surprising given that the conflict questionnaire included a number of isolationist/interventionist items gauging whether the United States should play a role in the conflicts. Finally, none of our three psychological main effects are significant: neither political knowledge nor self-reported measures of fear and uncertainty correspond with more frequent realist responses to the conflicts.

Just as important as how our folk realists respond to foreign policy conflicts is the question of the psychological mechanisms that moderate their responses, and thus the next three models include interaction terms between folk realism and knowledge (model 2), realism and fear (model 3), and realism and certainty (model 4), thereby providing greater insight into the mechanisms through which folk realism operates. Knowledge's interaction with folk realism is weakly significant in the case of NK; the simple slopes plotted in Figure 1(a) suggest that knowledge has a polarizing effect, with high-knowledge idealists espousing more idealistic views about the conflict than their low-knowledge counterparts, but the confidence regions in the accompanying graph in Figure 1(b) show that this effect is never statistically significant at the 95% level.¹⁵ Equally tentative is the interaction between folk realism and self-reported certainty in Iraq: as Figure 3 suggests, folk realists who reported being certain about their opinions of the conflict had indistinguishable views from their idealist counterparts, while those subjects who reported being less certain tended to show a stronger relationship between their folk realist predispositions and their conflict-specific attitudes, with uncertain folk idealists offering more idealist analyses of the situation than folk realists. Thus, although both of these interaction terms provide sensible results, their effects are only weakly statistically significant.

More important is the highly statistically significant interaction between folk realism and fear in the Iraq case, illustrated in Figure 2.¹⁶ Only subjects who

¹⁴ In preliminary analyses, we explored the impact of the personality variables that were linked to folk realism in the first part of the study. There was no evidence that any of those characteristics had an impact on responses to these conflicts, suggesting any impact they do have is indirect, mediated through folk realism.

¹⁵ The presentation of the conditional effects in panel (b) of Figures 1–3 is a visual equivalent of the Johnson–Neyman test, where the solid diagonal line represents the moderator's conditional effect on the impact of folk realism, while the curved dashed lines depict 95% confidence intervals. The vertical dotted lines illustrate the confidence regions—the values of folk realism for which the conditional effect is statistically distinguishable from 0 at a 95% level of certainty. Thus, in Figure 2(b), the conditional effect is significant for all values of folk realism below 0.57. For more, see Bauer and Curran (2005).

¹⁶ The interaction's lack of statistical significance for NK is not surprising given the very low levels of fear reported in that case and can thus be attributed to insufficient variance in the key predictor.

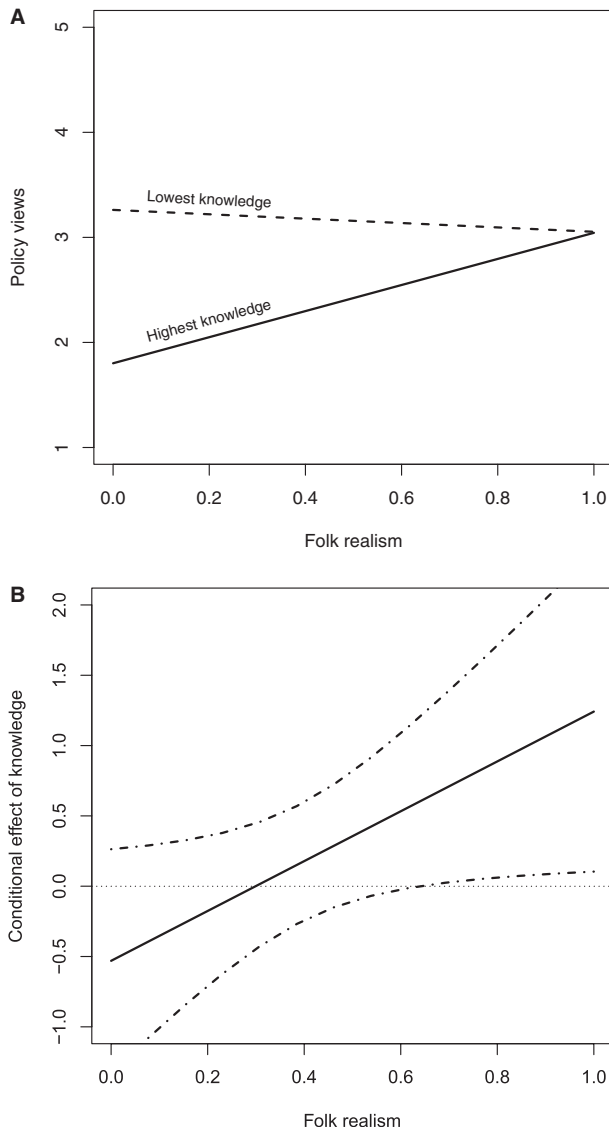


FIG. 1. Political Knowledge's Moderating Effect for NK. (a) Knowledge's Polarizing Effect ($p < .096$). (b) Conditional Effect with 95% CIs

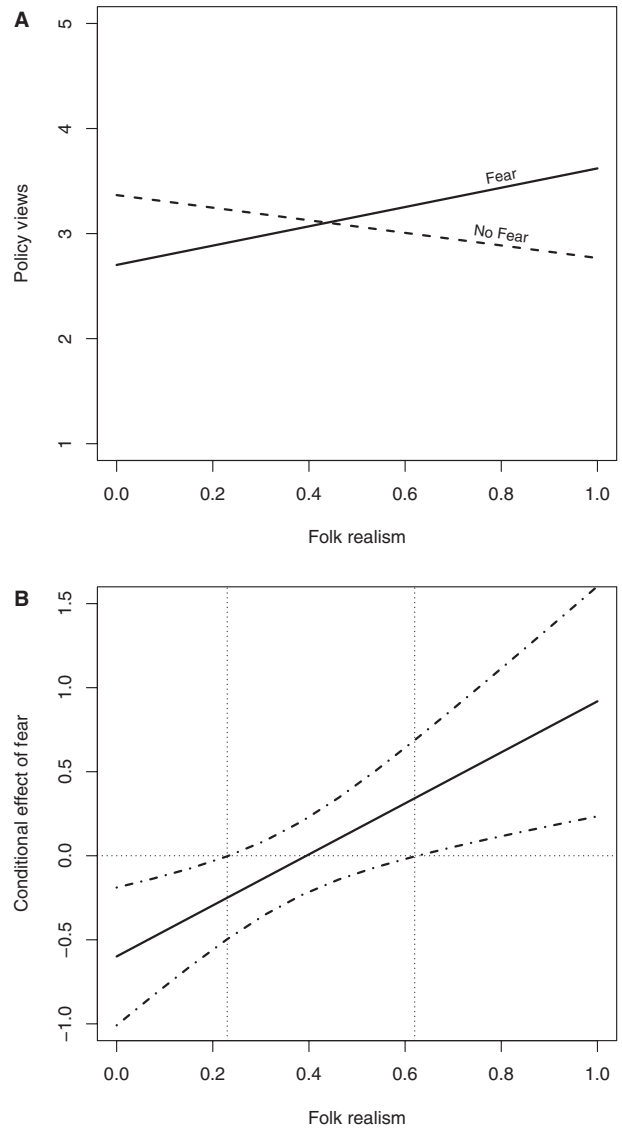


FIG. 2. Fear's Moderating Effect for Iraq. (a) Fear's Polarizing Effect ($p < .003$). (b) Conditional Effect with 95% CIs

reported experiencing fear about the Iraq case offered policy views consistent with their folk realist predisposition, a correlation that implies that in familiar situations, realism needs to be affectively activated in order for it to exert an impact. Indeed, it appears that folk realism's lack of statistical significance as a main effect for Iraq is partially due to heterogeneous affective responses: folk realists who reported no fear in the Iraq case offered *less* realist views of the conflict, while their fearful fellow realists offered *more* realist views.

Discussion

All told, our findings lead us to three conclusions, with implications for both scholars of public opinion in foreign policy and IR theorists more broadly.

First, we offer empirical evidence for Rathbun's (2009) argument that ordinary individuals "carry an international relations paradigm in their minds"; refined *Realpolitik* may be the province of IR theory seminars and Prussian military officers' quarters, but a simplified "folk realism" exists among ordinary citizens. Although our experimental analyses reveal that folk realist predispositions are more likely to translate into specific realist preferences in an unfamiliar foreign policy context than one about which individuals already have well-developed views, this tendency is true for many of the other dispositions in political behavior research—indeed, political ideology displays the same pattern in our experimental results as well. We therefore suggest that folk realism is yet another general posture with which regular citizens may structure their foreign policy beliefs (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Holsti 2004), and survey work should be conducted on a representative

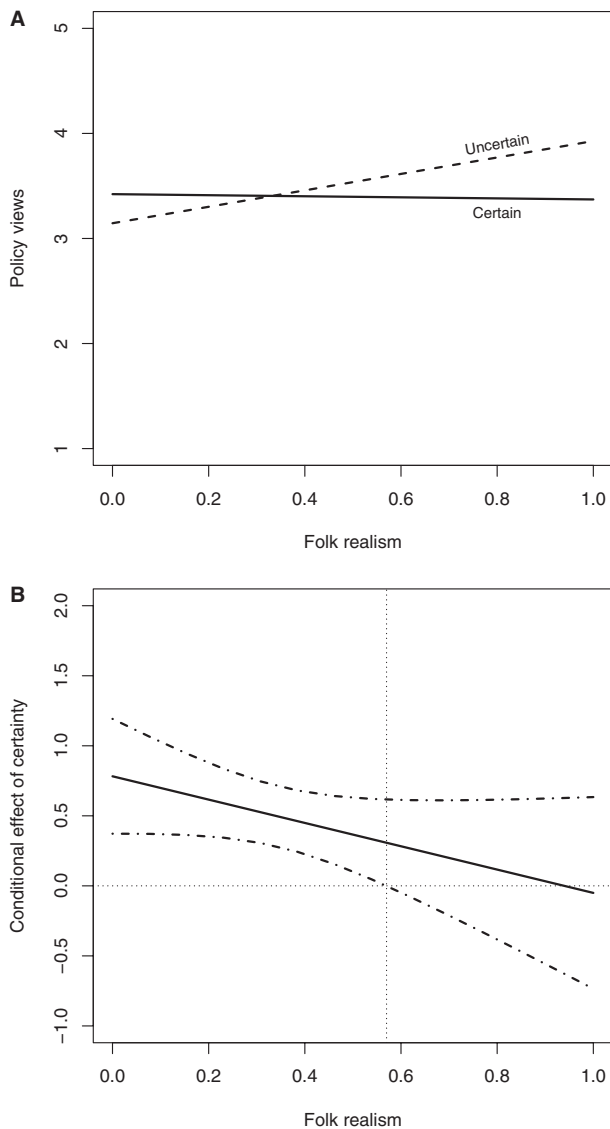


FIG. 3. Uncertainty's polarizing effect for Iraq. (a) Uncertainty's Polarizing Effect ($p < .098$). (b) Conditional Effect with 95% CIs

sample of the general public to determine just how prevalent this belief system is. After all, although we find folk realism is sensibly related to existing measures of isolationism, political ideology, and militant assertiveness, it is also conceptually distinct from them, capturing nuances lacking when scholars are forced to rely on existing measures to tap into an occasionally orthogonal construct. The anti-realist assumption that continues to haunt public opinion scholars can neither be embraced nor exorcised unless we test for folk realism itself.

Second, the presence of folk realists in our study allows us to probe some of the psychological mechanisms realist theorists have often used to account for the conflictual nature of the international system: fear, uncertainty, and a lack of knowledge or information. Contrary to realist doctrine in the realm of states, we find that none of these mechanisms have significant main effects when tested on individuals:

manipulating the amount of information participants have about a conflict does not cause them to be more likely to espouse realist views, for example, while those who reported being anxious about the conflict or uncertain about their opinions ended up offering no more realist diagnoses than their unafraid or certain counterparts. Instead, we find that many of their effects are *conditional*: these pathways have important realism-bolstering effects, but only for individuals with realist predispositions, whereas fear pushes idealists even further away from realism. To a certain extent, this finding should be reassuring to realists, since we find that many of the same pathways prescribed in realist doctrine also serve as psychological microfoundations for folk realist beliefs. In this respect, though, the fact that these mechanisms only exert conditional effects—fear, for example, doesn't make everyone a realist, it just exacerbates realists' realism—should be of concern. For example, contra Kagan's (2004) argument that Europeans have liberal foreign policy preferences because they are now liberated from fear due to the American leviathan patrolling outside the gates, our findings suggest that fear has polarizing effects: "freedom from fear" might steer individuals toward the center of the realist-idealist continuum, but it won't necessarily push them to one particular side. Given realists' positivist emphasis on formulating objective, value-neutral analyses of the world around them, it is ironic that realist theories seem to inadvertently describe realists themselves: fear affects realists just how realists argue it affects states.

Third, we experimentally corroborate an argument a number of IR theorists have recently made (Crawford 2000; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Mercer 2010) about how emotions play a more central role in the manifestation of realist principles than realist principals allege. The problem is not that emotions like fear go unmentioned: realist scholars frequently discuss the role that fear plays in driving the security dilemma, as states mistakenly assume the worst about each others' intentions, producing a cycle of fear and escalation that can result in war (Jervis 1976: chapter 3). For Hobbes ([1651], 1985:196), it is fear of violent death that prompts us to renounce our natural rights and submit ourselves to the Leviathan, while Mearsheimer (2001:42) notes that the fact that "great powers fear each other is a central aspect of life in the international system." However, realists usually drain fear of its emotional content: while classical realists like Morgenthau acknowledged the role that "the passions" played in their theories, most contemporary realists are rationalists through and through (Mercer 2005). For example, Tang (2008) argues that fear is a centerpiece not just of realist scholarship but IR theory in general, but views it as a cognitive, probabilistic calculation about the threat posed by others as a function of their capabilities, resolve, and intentions, rather than as an affective state. While they disagree on the details, Rathbun (2007:539 note 3) also defines fear as uncertainty (that is, a lack of information) about others'

intentions, and explicitly rejects claims that fear should be understood as an emotion in realist discussions of the term.

The lack of statistical significance of our information-based experimental manipulations, however, suggests that fear and a lack of information are very different phenomena. We not only found that manipulating the amount of information subjects have at their disposal failed to affect the realist level of their foreign policy preferences, but that realism is uncorrelated with political knowledge; how much individuals knew had little impact on whether they advocated for realist policies, contrary to Drezner's (2008) speculation. Fear, on the other hand, had a significant impact, forging more consistent realists (and more idealistic idealists). Thus, we agree with realists that fear plays a central role in international political life, but argue that fear isn't what realists think it is, and that realism can greatly benefit from moving beyond a rationalist framework and taking the psychological literature on emotions into account. Our findings also have implications for liberal theorists: although contemporary liberal IR theory has long ago replaced its "lurking normativity" with an emphasis on rational strategic interaction (Reus-Smit 2001), the manner in which fear activates folk idealism suggests that liberals also stand to gain from reflecting on the role of emotions, and the emotional nature of beliefs in general (Mercer 2010).

Finally, it is important to note that the generalizability of these findings depends on two interconnected assumptions. The first is that our conclusions about folk realism can also be applied to its academic counterpart; the second is that inferences about international relations more broadly can be drawn from the behavior of a non-elite sample in a laboratory experiment. These two challenges are interconnected, since it is precisely the non-elite nature of our sample that prompts us to test for a simplified folk realism rather than one of its more sophisticated academic counterparts. We nonetheless argue that the underlying themes evoked by our measure of folk realism—a combination of pessimism about the prospect for international cooperation, a veneration of material self-interest, and an acceptance of the use of force—are ones that most academic realists would also recognize.

Furthermore, although generalizing from laboratory experiments is not without its problems (Mintz, Redd, and Vedlitz 2006), it is worth noting that IR theory is rife with scaled-up analogies from the behavior of ordinary individuals in laboratory studies: for example, how cooperation between states under anarchy is made possible via the same sorts of mechanisms that facilitate individual cooperation in Prisoner's Dilemma tournaments (Oye 1985), or how studies of small group behavior offer concrete policy prescriptions about how the United States should interact with China and Russia (Larson and Shevchenko 2010). Even though states aren't *really* people (but see Wendt 2004), IR theorists consis-

tently refer to them *as if* they were because doing so allows us to analogize from individual behavior, intuitively using mechanisms familiar to us from one level to explain dynamics at another. The benefit of the above analyses is that they suggest that some of our intuitions about realist mechanisms are in need of revision and that fear and a lack of information have very different consequences, at least at the individual level. These pathways may operate differently for leaders or for states as a whole, but in this respect, our findings should encourage attentiveness to scope conditions, inviting further reflection on *why* and *how* these mechanisms within realist thought operate differently with actual decision makers or at higher levels of analysis. Our intention, then, was not to refute realism but to refine it, and we believe that experimental investigations of its theoretical microfoundations are one valuable way of going about this task.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix S1. Political and Personality Orientations.

Appendix S2. Text of Briefing Articles.

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