ELITE MISPERCEPTIONS AND THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF CONFLICT

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Abstract: For public opinion to shape foreign policy, the public must be aware of foreign policy, and policymakers must be aware of public opinion. While IR scholars have probed the accuracy of the first assumption, they have tended to ignore the second, assuming that leaders correctly perceive public preferences. We argue that misperceptions can occur in the domestic side of foreign policy-making rather than just the international side, with important implications for a range of models of domestic politics in IR. We test our theory in the context of the domestic politics of international institutions, fielding a paired experiment on a nationally representative sample of American adults and an elite sample of American foreign policy opinion leaders, showing that IO endorsements exert powerful effects on both elite and mass opinion in the United States alike, but that leaders’ stereotypes of the public mean they systematically underestimate the extent to which Americans are swayed by IO cues. These results have important implications for the study of political elites, public opinion about foreign policy, and efforts to either establish or falsify theoretical models of domestic politics in IR with reference to public opinion data alone.

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1 Introduction

The linkage between public opinion and policy is a basic principle of democratic government (Pitkin, 1967). It is also central to many of our models of the domestic politics of international relations, which argue that democratic states conduct themselves fundamentally differently in both conflict and cooperation precisely because their leaders can be held accountable by the public at large (Fearon, 1994; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999; Mansfield, Milner and Rosendorff, 2000; Reiter and Stam, 2002, though see Weeks, 2014). There are a variety of mechanisms through which public opinion can shape foreign policy (Foyle, 1999; Kertzer, 2016, 50; Payne, 2019; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020), ranging from the direct effect of the ballot box (Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida, 1989), to indirect effects channeled through legislators (Gelpi and Grieco, 2015) and the media (Baum and Potter, 2015). In some of these models, strategic leaders take public opinion into account ex ante, while in others retrospective publics sanction leaders for their misbehavior ex post. Yet almost all of these models rest on two assumptions about information. First, the public must be aware of foreign policy; we can’t hold leaders accountable if we aren’t paying attention. Second, policymakers must be aware of public opinion; they can’t accurately take cues if they’re misreading the room.

While International Relations (IR) scholars have thoroughly investigated the accuracy of the first assumption (e.g. Holsti, 2004; Guisinger, 2009; Saunders, 2015), the plausibility of the second assumption — that leaders accurately perceive what the public thinks – has largely been left unexplored. Public opinion scholars thus tend to focus on the first phase of the public opinion-foreign policy nexus, examining what the public thinks about foreign policy, rather than what leaders think the public thinks, even though the accuracy of these second-order beliefs are crucial for translating public opinion into public policy.

One prominent body of scholarship implicated by this decision concerns the domestic politics of multilateralism. In rationalist models, multilateralism involves a tradeoff between the gains incurred by burden sharing, on the one hand, and the loss of control, on the other (Milner and Tingley, 2013). These burden sharing gains explain why smaller states should prefer multilateralism, but not why larger powers like the United States do (Thompson, 2009), frequently intervening through international institutions even though doing so involves fighting “war by committee” (Schmitt, 2019, 70), with many of the junior partners bringing little to the table or invoking national caveats that significantly constrain the scope of their contributions (Auerswald and Saideman, 2014). One set of
explanations for this multilateral push has to do with domestic politics: democratic leaders prefer to intervene multilaterally because multilateral interventions are more popular among the public as a whole (Thompson, 2009). As a result of these important insights, a flood of research has emerged, using public opinion data and survey experiments to show that interventions conducted with the blessing of an international institution are indeed more popular than those without, and offering a range of potential explanations – from instrumental arguments about burden sharing, to normative arguments about morality — about why this might be the case (Chapman, 2011; Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Tago and Ikeda, 2015; Chu, 2017; Busby et al., 2020; Mikulaschek, 2019; Wallace, 2019; Chapman and Chaudoin, 2020). Yet like the study of domestic politics in IR more broadly, this work tends to focus on the first phase of the causal pathway, rather than the second: it measures actual public attitudes and treats those as leaders’ incentives, rather than measuring what leaders think their incentives are.

In this article, we argue that misperceptions can occur in the domestic side of foreign policymaking, rather than just the international side (Jervis, 1976; Levy, 1983; Jervis, Lebow and Stein, 1985): leaders don’t just misread adversaries abroad, but often get public opinion wrong at home, which has important implications for everything from our theoretical models of the domestic politics of conflict, to the empirical strategies we use to test microfoundations in IR. The discussion below proceeds as follows. We begin by showing how much of the literature on the domestic politics of conflict takes for granted the assumption that leaders understand the preferences of their domestic audiences, even as a range of literature in both psychology and political behavior suggests systematic misperceptions of public opinion should be relatively common. While we believe this intuition has important implications for any study of domestic politics in foreign policy that tests microfoundations by measuring the content of public preferences without also assessing leaders’ expectations about how publics will react — from audience cost models (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007), to the nuclear taboo (Tannenwald, 1999; Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013), to the domestic politics of international law (Simmons, 2009; Wallace, 2013) — the primary case we focus on concerns the domestic politics of international institutions. Teaming up with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, we fielded a survey on a nationally representative sample of the American public, as well as an elite sample of foreign policy opinion leaders in the summer of 2018. We embedded an experiment in each survey, in which respondents are presented with a foreign policy intervention scenario, and randomly assigned whether NATO endorses the intervention or not, enabling us to compare the
causal effect of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force with elites’ assessments of the public’s reactions. These experiments broaden our evidentiary basis for the conditions in which the endorsement of international institutions affects domestic support for the use of force, and allow us to compare whether the two groups respond to NATO differently, while also suggesting important scope conditions for theories of elite misperceptions of public opinion in American politics more generally.

Our results suggest three important findings. First, despite Donald Trump’s frequent attacks on the organization as obsolete and of limited value to the United States,\(^1\) we show not only that a NATO endorsement significantly bolsters support for the use of force, but that there is a striking degree of consensus about NATO among our respondents: the magnitude of the endorsement effect doesn’t vary between elites and the public, nor between Republicans and Democrats, nor even between Americans who want to withdraw from NATO, versus those who want to increase America’s contribution. Second, elites systematically underestimate the extent to which the public responds to NATO endorsements. While the effect of these endorsements on the public is large, because of stereotypes of the public as less internationalist than it actually is, both elites and publics assume it to be small, only one-fifth of its actual size. Going beyond our experiments, we turn to observational data from 2004-2020, showing that elites’ isolationist stereotype of the American public replicates across multiple issue areas, and long predates the Trump administration. Third, causal mediation analyses show this underestimation is politically consequential, since elites are more supportive of interventions when they think domestic audiences are more on board. In showing that the basis of support for multilateralism is thus far higher than either elites or publics assume, these findings have important implications for the domestic politics of multilateralism; in encouraging IR scholars to study elite perceptions of public opinion, rather than just focusing on public opinion itself, these findings also raise questions about attempts to either establish or falsify theoretical models of domestic politics in IR with reference to public opinion data alone.

2 Public opinion, foreign policy, and elite misperceptions

Many of our models of domestic politics in international relations argue that one reason why democracies behave fundamentally differently in foreign policy than their non-democratic counterparts has

\(^1\)See https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/02/donald-trump-tells-crowd-hed-be-fine-if-nato-broke-up/.
to do with the constraining effects of public opinion, which occupies a prominent place in everything from audience cost models (Fearon, 1994; Smith, 1998), to selectorate theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999; see also Croco, 2011). For public opinion to constrain foreign policy, however, at least two key informational assumptions have to be met, illustrated in the stylized triadic model in Figure 1. First, the public must be aware of foreign policy (pathway $a$); foreign policy can’t reflect public opinion if the public isn’t paying attention. Second, policymakers must be aware of public opinion (pathway $b$); foreign policy can’t reflect public opinion if policymakers don’t know what the public wants.

Figure 1: Stylized triadic model of public opinion in foreign policy

A large literature has probed the accuracy of this first informational assumption, testing the extent to which the public responds to events on the ground (Mueller, 1973; Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida, 1989; Page and Shapiro, 1992). In response, critics have pointed to the public’s low levels of knowledge about international politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), the low salience of foreign policy issues (Guisinger, 2009), and the ways in which leaders can conduct foreign policy outside of the public’s view by co-opting key elite cue-givers (Saunders, 2015). If the public only thinks what elites tell them to think (Berinsky, 2009), or if it lacks a robust media to inform it about foreign policy (Baum and Potter, 2015), its ability to constrain policymakers will be markedly limited.

In contrast, the plausibility of the second informational assumption — that leaders accurately perceive what the public thinks — has barely been explored in foreign policy, despite its centrality to questions of representation more generally (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Clausen, 1977; Converse and Pierce, 1986). Importantly, the question of whether leaders accurately perceive public opinion in foreign policy is distinct from the question of whether leaders care what the public thinks about foreign policy issues (Foyle, 1999; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020), since leaders can believe that
public opinion should shape foreign policy, but misperceive the state of public opinion. As Geer (1996, 7) argues, political elites need to be able to accurately read the room regardless of whether they think of themselves as delegates or trustees: delegates need to read the public mood in order to translate it into policy, but even trustees need to gauge the state of public opinion in order to determine how to lead it.

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

As a result, the public opinion on foreign policy literature tends to focus on the first phase of the public opinion-foreign policy nexus, examining what the public thinks (Mueller, 1973; Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Holsti, 2004), and leaving leaders’ expectations uninvestigated. The formal literature makes a similar analytic move. Models of crisis bargaining frequently assume the other side’s resolve is private information, but one’s own resolve is not (Kertzer, 2016, 148). Many formal models of domestic politics allow publics to be uncertain about their leader’s type (e.g. Smith, 1998; Canes-Wrone, Herron and Shotts, 2001; Tarar, 2006), but few permit leaders to be uncertain about their public’s.²

Yet there are a number of reasons why we may wish to subject these assumptions about the accuracy of leaders’ perceptions of public opinion in foreign policy to empirical testing. A series of studies in American politics finds that the public tends to misperceive public opinion, assuming the degree of partisan polarization is greater than it actually is (Ahler, 2014; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016). Rational leaders presumably have an incentive to more accurately perceive public opinion than the mass public does, but a growing literature in American and comparative politics suggests that political elites consistently and systematically misperceive public opinion (Broockman and

²For an exception, see Debs 2021.
Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019; Pereira, 2021) — and these are in
domestic political issues where the electoral implications of being on the wrong side are presumably
high. It therefore seems plausible that these systematic biases in perception apply to foreign policy
issues as well (Jervis, 1976; Mildenberger and Tingley, 2019).

Indeed, it is striking that much of the research on public opinion in foreign policy seeks to push
back against conventional wisdom about what and how the public thinks: the notion that the public
is casualty-phobic (Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler, 2009), allergic to realism (Drezner, 2008), imprudent
(Jentleson, 1992), views nuclear weapons use as taboo (Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013), and so
on. If our conventional wisdom about what the public thinks is indeed riddled with inaccuracies, it
is reasonable to ask whether foreign policy leaders also suffer from such misperceptions.

We are aware of a handful of existing studies that have broached related questions. Some of
them have studied the public’s misperceptions of public opinion in foreign policy: in the aftermath of
the Iraq War, Todorov and Mandisodza (2004) found that the American public underestimated the
popularity of multilateralism, and Mildenberger and Tingley (2019) found that Americans underes-
timate the popularity of taking action against climate change, among both American and foreign
publics; Kim (2019) finds similar crossnational misperceptions about compliance with international
humanitarian law between the American and Korean publics. Others have studied elite misper-
ceptions of public opinion, using a range of methods. Two decades ago, Kull and Destler (1999)
compared surveys of the mass public with focus groups of elites to suggest that the public was
much less supportive of isolationism than discussions in Washington at the time suggested. It is
possible that this disconnect is merely an artifact of the 1990s, or of the divergent methods used to
study each population, but it is also possible that leaders may be prone to misreading the public
more generally. More recently, using a paired survey approach, Reifler and Thomson (2019) find
that British security officials misperceive the foreign policy preferences of the British public. Taken
together, then, these studies suggest that the study of misperceptions of public opinion in foreign
policy merits a closer investigation.

2.1 Implications of elite misperceptions for domestic models of IR

The potential existence of systematic elite misperceptions of public opinion in foreign policy have
important implications for a host of questions in IR, particularly those that have turned to surveys
and experiments to explore microfoundations of our theoretical models.
2.1.1 Audience cost theory

One area concerns audience cost theory, which argues that the existence of a domestic audience willing to punish leaders for issuing empty threats means that leaders are able to credibly signal their resolve in crises by making threats in public (Fearon, 1994). Traditionally, efforts to validate audience cost models using experimental data have focused on testing whether publics punish empty threats, as operationalized by whether public approval is lower when leaders back down on threats to use force than when they stay out of conflicts in the first place (Tomz, 2007; Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012; Kertzer and Brutger, 2016). Yet the domestic audience is not actually a strategic actor in the classic audience cost framework: even if domestic audiences won’t actually punish empty threats, public threats can still be credible in the model as long as the leader believes that the audience has these preferences, and the foreign leader also believes that the leader believes this (Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer and Renshon, 2018).3 Crucially, then, the potential for systematic misperceptions of public preferences has implications both for audience cost theory’s supporters and critics: showing that publics dislike inconsistency becomes insufficient to validate the theoretical model, while showing that publics are willing to let leaders talk themselves out of audience costs (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012) becomes insufficient to invalidate it.

2.1.2 The nuclear taboo

Another concerns the nuclear taboo, the argument that nuclear weapons have not been utilized in war since 1945 because of the existence of a normative prohibition against their use (Tannenwald, 1999). As Tannenwald (1999, 440) notes in her pathbreaking article, this norm can manifest itself in a variety of ways, from leaders believing nuclear use is wrong, to decision-makers feeling constrained by perceived public opposition to nuclear use. In an innovative survey experiment on the American public, Press, Sagan and Valentino (2013) show that a sizable proportion of Americans are willing to consider using nuclear weapons if they offer tactical advantages over their conventional counterparts, which they treat as evidence against the existence of a nuclear taboo (see also Rathbun and Stein, Forthcoming). Yet in the original case studies tracing its development, the nuclear taboo often manifests itself not in actual levels of public support, but “perceived public opprobrium” (p. 445): foreign policy leaders’ beliefs about the public’s preferences. If taboos are norms, and norms are

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3 This emphasis on shared beliefs is why Fearon (1994, 581) notes that “audience costs have a strongly conventional aspect; how they are felt and implemented depends on shared perceptions and expectations in a society.”
defined based on intersubjective understandings rather than subjective perceptions (Searle, 1995), the relevant empirical test may be less what the public thinks about nuclear weapons use, than what decision-makers think the public thinks.

2.1.3 Multilateralism and military intervention

The third area where the prospects for misperceptions of public opinion have important implications for our theories of foreign policy, and our focus here, concerns the domestic politics of multilateralism and decisions to go to war. Over the past two decades, a large literature has found that multilateral support makes citizens more supportive of military intervention, and has used experiments and other data to investigate why citizens value multilateral backing for the use of force (Voeten, 2005; Fang, 2008; Thompson, 2009; Chapman, 2011; Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Tago and Ikeda, 2015; Chu, 2017; Mikulaschek, 2019; Wallace, 2019; Busby et al., 2020).

Scholars have developed and found support for several sets of explanations for why approval from an international institution increases public support for the use of force. One set of explanations is grounded in the perspective that international organizations (IOs) possess legitimacy or moral authority that individual national governments lack (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Coleman, 2007; Hurd, 2007). Consistent with this view, some experimental studies have found that multilateral support increases public support for military action by conferring more legitimacy on intervention decisions (Tago and Ikeda, 2015; Wallace, 2019).

A second family of explanations centers on the perceived material benefits of multilateral backing. In this view, support from an IO is associated with expectations of greater burden sharing and lower costs and risks (Drezner, 2008; Recchia, 2016). A recent experimental study in this vein finds that unanimous backing from an IO has a large effect on public support for intervention because citizens assume that it will translate into more contributions from other countries (Mikulaschek, 2019).

A third set of arguments emphasizes how multilateral support can transmit valuable information about the merits or consequences of a potential intervention. Drawing on both experimental and observational data, these accounts highlight how approval of intervention by a politically diverse international body can signal to the public that the use of force is justified, sensible, likely to succeed, or unlikely to be challenged by other countries (Voeten, 2005; Fang, 2008; Thompson, 2009; Chapman, 2011; Grieco et al., 2011).
Importantly, much of the literature on the influence of multilateralism on attitudes toward the use of force is premised in part on a key assumption: the idea that decisions by leaders regarding military action are informed by their understanding of how the public would view potential interventions. But if leaders systematically misperceive public attitudes regarding multilateralism and the use of force, then measures of public opinion concerning these issues will not provide accurate information about how leaders actually perceive public attitudes on them. It is therefore critical to investigate both how leaders perceive public views on multilateralism and intervention, and how these perceptions compare to the public’s actual preferences.

2.2 Explaining misperceptions

Perhaps because political scientists were traditionally skeptical that elite misperceptions exist, much of the extant literature on the topic has tended to be descriptive in its focus, documenting the existence of these misperceptions rather than testing different theoretical accounts of their origin (e.g. Kull and Destler, 1999). Of the more theoretically-motivated work, the most common explanation offered has to do with whom elites come into contact. Broockman and Skovron (2018) and Pereira (2021) attribute partisan asymmetries in politicians’ misperceptions of their constituents’ opinion to Republican voters being more likely to contact politicians in general, and Republican politicians in particular, while Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes (2019) trace legislative staffers’ misperceptions to increased contact with corporate interest groups, thereby distorting their view of constituency preferences.

Yet there are reasons why these explanations, compelling as they are in the context of elite misperceptions of domestic politics, may be incomplete or less applicable to the foreign policy context, raising interesting theoretical questions about the scope conditions of our understanding of elite misperceptions of public opinion. As Milner and Tingley (2015) note, many foreign policy issues in the security domain (should we send troops to another country? Should we work through international organizations?) tend to feature relatively diffuse rather than concentrated distributional impact, thereby rendering corporate lobbying less central than in many domestic political issues. And, in IR we are often interested in a broader set of political elites than elected officials: the notion of a “foreign policy establishment” (sometimes pejoratively referred to as “the blob”) (Busby and Monten, 2008) stretching far beyond Capitol Hill, to Foggy Bottom, defense intellectuals, foreign policy think tanks, and so on. In this sense, the determinants of constituency-level dyadic representation
may not necessarily translate to broader questions of what foreign policy elites writ large think the
public wants.

To explain the nature of elite perceptions of public opinion in foreign policy, we turn to the
psychological literature on social perceptions (Nisbett and Kunda, 1985). Perceiving the views of
others requires observers to engage in perspective-taking, an activity we know many of us perform
quite poorly (Pronin, 2008), replete with an assortment of biases ranging from false consensus
effects where we incorrectly project our own views onto others (Fields and Schuman, 1976; Marks
and Miller, 1987), to pluralistic ignorance effects where we incorrectly assume others don’t share
our views (Miller and McFarland, 1987; Shamir and Shamir, 1997). The theoretically interesting
question is when each inferential strategy is more likely to be used. The similarity contingency
model of social inference (Ames, 2004) argues the answer lies in the perceived similarity of the
target: when observers perceive a target group as more similar to themselves, they’ll be more likely
to engage in projection and attribute their own views to the target — which is why people assume
their friends are more likely to share their political views than they actually do (Goel, Mason and
Watts, 2010), and tend to make more egocentric errors when thinking about their friends than
thinking about strangers (Clement and Krueger, 2002). In contrast, when observers perceive a
target group as being dissimilar, they’ll be more likely to rely on stereotypes to infer the group’s
views.4 Although stereotypes may contain a “kernel of truth”, they also tend to be more extreme,
exaggerating differences between groups, known as the “contrast effect” in social judgment (Hovland,
Harvey and Sherif, 1957) — which may explain why partisans tend to perceive outpartisans as more
extreme in their views (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016) and demographic composition (Ahler and
Sood, 2018) than they actually are.

This theoretical framework suggest a series of implications. First, given the non-random selection
process through which individuals become political elites (Dal Bó et al., 2017), the extent to which
elites tend to perceive the public as unsophisticated on foreign policy issues (Powlick, 1991), and the
widespread perception of a gulf between elites and masses on foreign policy issues more generally
(Kertzer, 2022), we expect that most elites’ perceptions of public opinion on foreign policy issues will
be characterized by a reliance on stereotypes. If stereotypes tend toward extremity — magnifying
differences and exaggerating them — this implies elites are likely to misperceive public opinion in

4Crucial here is that perceptions of similarity are prior to the act of projection, rather than a consequence of it. I
perceive myself as being similar to other political scientists, which makes me likely to project my taste in TV shows
onto them, whereas I’m less likely to project my taste in TV shows onto economists. Ames (2004, 574-75).
foreign policy.

Second, while the content of elites’ stereotypes about the public may vary across issue areas, in foreign policy a widespread perception exists of the American public as being more inward-looking than elites: nationalists rather than cosmopolitans, skeptical of international engagement and international institutions, and more focused on problems at home (Kull and Destler, 1999). This image of the American public as isolationist or inward looking is a longstanding one, dating back to the interwar period, the League of Nations, the Neutrality Acts, and the America First Committee: organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations were formed precisely to counteract the American public’s isolationist tendencies (Parmar, 1999), and political cartoons from the early 1940s frequently depicted Americans as an ostrich with their head in the sand (Minear, 1999). This narrative about the public is still salient today: pollsters and pundits routinely publish analyses warning of an “isolationist backlash” in the wake of the drawn out war in Afghanistan and failed intervention in Iraq, or warning of “a strong isolationist streak” in the public’s mood. Political memoirs are littered with similar inward-looking imagery about the public. Obama (2020, 656) recalls his chief of staff opposing a possible U.S. intervention in Libya on the grounds that “I don’t think we got clobbered in the midterms because voters don’t think you’re doing in enough in the Middle East.” Bolton (2020, 216) quotes President Trump as routinely referring to his base’s aversion to foreign interventions. The current Secretary of State has made similar comments about the public’s skepticism as well (Blinken, 2021).

Third, if political elites have an image of the public as inward-looking or skeptical of overseas involvement, they are likely to underestimate the effects of IO cues on public opinion. As discussed, the endorsement of a multilateral organization may increase support for the use of force among elites because elites believe that it increases the perceived international legitimacy of the operation, or because elites believe that multilateral participation spreads the costs and risks of using military force. However, if elites hold stereotypes of the public as more nationalist and skeptical of international institutions than elites themselves are, they may also assume that the public is not aware of the legitimacy or burden-sharing benefits that follow from multilateral approval, because they assume the public does not recognize these benefits or does not possess the specialized knowledge necessary to understand how the actions of an IO affect the actions of foreign governments and audiences.

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Fourth, because elites will vary in the strength and content of their stereotypes about the public (Kertzer, Brooks and Brooks, 2021), the more isolationist a stereotype elites have of the public, the more they’ll underestimate the impact of IO cues on public opinion. Altogether, these implications produce two testable hypotheses:

H1: Foreign policy opinion leaders will underestimate the effect of IO cues on public support for the use of force

H2: Foreign policy opinion leaders with stronger isolationist stereotypes will underestimate the effect of IO cues on public support for the use of force to a greater degree

3 Methods

In partnership with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, we embedded a survey experiment in two surveys, one of foreign policy opinion leaders and another of the mass public. The elite survey was conducted August 2 to October 16, 2018, and consists of 588 foreign policy opinion leaders, including members of executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups (including business leaders, labor leaders, and religious groups) and NGOs. It is therefore similar in its sample composition to the other foreign policy opinion leader surveys the Chicago Council has fielded since the 1970s. The mass public opinion survey was fielded via YouGov between July 24 and August 1, 2018 on a nationally representative sample of 1000 American adults. A full description of the sample composition, sampling strategy, and sample representativeness is discussed in Appendix §1.

In both studies, we embedded a NATO endorsement experiment, whose general structure is summarized in Figure 2. In it, respondents were told they would be presented with a hypothetical scenario, using language modified from Tomz and Weeks (2013):

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

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

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

Figure 2: Paired experimental design

The scenario was designed both to avoid priming respondents to think about a specific recent military intervention, and to generate disagreement among our respondents: it implicates both humanitarian concerns and concerns about political instability and terrorism, for example (offering both moral and strategic rationales for intervening), but also locates the conflict in an area many Americans do not perceive as paramount to US security interests. It also deliberately controls for a number of contextual factors that might cause “information leakage” as would be the case if the
experimental treatment also affects beliefs about unintended features of the scenario (Tomz and Weeks, 2013; Dafoe, Zhang and Caughey, 2018).

Building off of prior experimental research on the effects of cues from international organizations on support for the use of force (Grieco et al., 2011; Tingley and Tomz, 2012; Chu, 2017; Mikulaschek, 2019; Wallace, 2019; Busby et al., 2020), we also randomize whether respondents are told that the mission has received the blessing of an international organization — in our case, NATO, whose stance on military intervention, Chu (2017) shows, has historically been associated with higher levels of support for the use of force. Military interventions endorsed by NATO have been significantly more popular among the American public than interventions without any IO endorsement, and no less popular than military interventions endorsed by both NATO and the UN.6 Half of respondents were told that “The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supports taking military action to push out the invading army”; the other half were told that “The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) opposes taking military action to push out the invading army”. Respondents were then asked the extent to which they support or oppose the U.S. sending its military to push out the invading army, on a six-point Likert scale ranging from “Support a great deal” to “Oppose a great deal”.7

Our initial quantity of interest is the standard one in experiments on IO cues: to what extent does an IO endorsement bolster support for the use of force? What’s unique about our study, however, is that in each treatment condition, we also asked respondents in both samples to estimate the proportion of the American public that would support the mission, along with the percent of “foreign policy decision-makers and experts” that would do the same. In this manner, we can assess the accuracy of each group’s second-order beliefs, comparing the estimated and actual popularity of the intervention across each sample.

6Of course, as Chu (2017) notes, the prospect of strategic selection means this type of observational data has its limits, hence the value of the experiment we employ here.
7Regardless of treatment condition, following Chu (2017), and to ensure respondents understood the treatment, all respondents were given some brief context about NATO, namely that “NATO members include the U.S., Canada, and several European countries like the United Kingdom and France.” Unlike in experiments on the effect of the UN Security Council on public opinion, NATO operates via consensus and thus doesn’t formally vote; thus, the treatment language emphasized NATO support or opposition more generally, rather than providing vote tallies. We also deliberately use NATO opposition as a control condition to maximize internal validity, since in a control condition without an explicit NATO cue, many respondents may inadvertently assume NATO support or opposition.
4 Results

We present the results in four stages. We begin by showing that NATO endorsements bolster support for the use of force, with strikingly similar results for both the public and elites. Next, we show that despite these similarities, elites systematically underestimate the popularity of NATO endorsements, which we suggest are due to isolationist stereotypes about the public. We present a variety of alternative explanations, showing that these results are not limited to particular types of foreign policy elites, that elites misperceive public opinion more than the public misperceives elite opinion, and that these isolationist stereotypes replicate across a wide range of other foreign policy issues in elite surveys from 2004-2020. Finally, we estimate a series of nonparametric mediation models, which suggest that these misperceptions can be politically consequential, in that elites are less supportive of military interventions when they believe the public is not supportive.

4.1 The effect of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force

Figure 3 presents the cell means of the NATO endorsement experiment. Although elites are less supportive than the public when NATO opposes the intervention, a NATO endorsement brings both groups on the same page, and the magnitude of the treatment effect does not significantly differ by sample. These results are broadly consistent with the magnitude of the NATO endorsement effects estimated in Chu (2017), who varies the instrumentation a number of ways (including altering the target of the intervention, the NATO endorsement language, and whether the names of NATO member countries are mentioned), suggesting these findings are also unlikely to be an artifact of our question wording. They are also consistent with a recent meta-analysis suggesting that elite-public gaps may be smaller than political scientists often assume (Kertzer, 2022).

Supplementary analyses in Tables 3-4 in Appendix §2.1 reveal a striking degree of consensus about NATO among our respondents. Figure 1 in Appendix §2.1 shows that the effect of a NATO endorsement doesn’t significantly differ between Democrats and Republicans, Figure 2 in Appendix §2.1 shows that Trump supporters respond to the NATO endorsement to the same extent as non-Trump supporters do, and as Figure 3 in Appendix §2.1 shows, even individuals who want to withdraw from NATO nonetheless are more likely to support an intervention if it has NATO’s seal of approval! The only heterogeneous effects evident in our results are in the first two columns of Table

*This provides one reason why our findings differ from an innovative study by Dellmuth et al. (2021), who compare observational data from elites and publics to show that citizens express less confidence in IOs than political elites do.
We refer not to the content of respondents’ partisan or foreign policy preferences, but their level of political interest and knowledge: more politically sophisticated members of the public respond more to the NATO endorsement than do less politically sophisticated members of the public. Additional analyses also confirm that our elite results are robust to the composition of the elite sample. In Figure 4(a) in Appendix §2.1, we drop each elite subsample at a time, and show that the ATE of the NATO endorsement remains the same, suggesting our results aren’t being skewed by the inclusion of a particular type of foreign policy elite; Figure 4(b) does the same for different types of elite experience.

On the whole then, our results replicate earlier findings about the positive effect of IO endorsements on support for the use of force, echoing Chu (2017) in showing that these findings extend to the case of NATO, and Busby et al. (2020) in showing that they also hold with respect to foreign policy elites.

Figure 3: Effect of NATO endorsement on support for the intervention

Plot shows cell means and 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals for support for the intervention, showing that the NATO endorsement effect does not significantly differ between the mass public and foreign policy elites.

Our experiment suggests that even respondents who have less confidence in IOs are nonetheless no less sensitive to IO cues. See also Appendix §2.4, which presents supplementary results on perceptions of legitimacy.
4.2 Elite misperceptions of public opinion

The above results would suggest that decision-makers should therefore have a strong incentive to pursue the blessing of NATO when conducting military interventions abroad, since both publics and the elite foreign policy community more broadly are significantly more supportive of the use of force when a mission has the endorsement of NATO members than when NATO members oppose the mission. Yet if elites misperceive public opinion, or rely on inaccurate stereotypes about the public, they may not realize these incentives exist. And, public opinion experiments about support for the use of force will be only telling half of the story.

As Figure 2 shows, in addition to asking respondents for their own levels of support for the proposed military intervention, we also asked them to estimate the proportion of the public, and the proportion of foreign policy elites, that support the mission. In this way, we can test i) whether elites underestimate the effect of NATO on support for the use of force; ii) which types of elites assess this more accurately; iii) and whether the level of elite misperceptions of public opinion are greater or lower than the level of elite misperceptions of elite opinion (or public misperceptions of public opinion), providing a comparative perspective that is often missing in studies of elite misperceptions of public opinion.

Figure 4 presents a set of density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects. The distributions in red denote the average treatment effect of NATO endorsements on the public’s support for the use of force, while the distributions in yellow indicate the average treatment effect of NATO endorsements on elites’ estimates of the public’s support for the use of force. The arrow in each panel thus denotes the degree of misperception; the fact that the arrow points to the left in each panel shows that all of our elite subsamples underestimate the effect of NATO on support for the use of force; in the full elite sample, for example, the effect of a NATO endorsement on estimates of the public’s support for the use of force is only 4 percentage points, 15 percentage points lower than the actual level.\(^9\) As the figure shows, the results are also largely consistent across different types of elites. It is not the case, for example, that elites more directly connected to electoral pressures more accurately perceive public opinion. If we view the decision to pursue multilateralism as a cost-benefit calculation in which decision-makers weigh the loss of control against the benefits of burden sharing and higher domestic support, it appears elites underestimate the domestic benefits by a factor of

\[^9\text{In Appendix §2.5, we replicate these results raising our threshold for defining support from “support a little” and up to “support a moderate amount” and up, and find the same pattern of results obtain.}\]
Figure 4: Elites underestimate the power of NATO endorsements

Figure 4 presents density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on the public’s support for the use of force (in red), along with density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on elites’ estimates of the public’s support for the use of force (in yellow). The arrow in each panel therefore indicates the difference between the actual NATO endorsement effect, and the estimated NATO endorsement effect. The plot shows that although NATO bolsters support for the use of force in the public by an average of 19 percentage points, elites generally assume NATO has a much more modest (4 percentage point) effect on public support, and that these misperceptions are of similar magnitude for all elite subsamples.
five.

There are three potential interpretations of these results. The first is that elites underestimate how supportive of interventions the public is in general, although this is more likely to affect elites’ assessment of the popularity of the mission within each treatment condition, rather than between them. The second is that elites underestimate the unpopularity of unilateral interventions specifically: in this case, the difference between the actual and estimated treatment effects would be caused by differences in the NATO oppose condition. The third is that elites particularly underestimate the popularity of multilateral interventions; in this case, the difference between the actual and estimated treatment effects would be caused by differences in the NATO endorse condition.

To differentiate between these competing accounts, Figure 5 replicates Figure 4, but this time presenting cell means rather than average treatment effects: the top half of each panel shows results for the NATO endorse condition, and the bottom half of each panel for the NATO oppose condition; the average level of the public’s support in a given condition is once again displayed in red, and elites’ estimate of the level of public support in a given condition is shown in light yellow. Beginning with the full sample results in the top-left panel, the plot shows that elites significantly underestimate the popularity of the intervention in both the NATO Endorse and NATO Oppose conditions (consistent with elites underestimating how interventionist the public is in general), but that the degree of misperception is larger in the NATO Endorse condition than the NATO Oppose. On average, elites underestimate the popularity of an intervention with NATO’s blessing by 43 percentage points, while underestimating the popularity of an intervention without NATO’s blessing by 28 percentage points.

4.3 Explaining variation in misperceptions

There are at least three potential sets of explanations why we might see these results. The first has to do with the low salience of NATO and military interventions as an electoral issue. The second has to do with the hypotheticality of the intervention scenario or artifacts of question wording. We find little support for either of these explanations. The third, for which we find more support, has to do with political elites having stereotypes of the mass public as preferring to avoid international engagements, which we show replicates across a host of other foreign policy issues as well.
Figure 5 presents split-density distributions of the average actual level of public support for the intervention (in red), and elites’ estimated level of public support for the intervention (in yellow). The distributions in the top half of each panel depict results from the NATO Endorse condition, and the distributions in the bottom half of each panel depict results in the NATO Oppose condition. The arrows indicate the difference between the actual level of public support in a given condition, and elites’ estimated level of public support. The results show that across all subsamples of elites, elites significantly underestimate the popularity of the intervention within both treatment conditions, but the degree of misperception is larger in the NATO Endorse condition, suggesting elites particularly underestimate the popularity of NATO endorsements.
4.3.1 Salience and electoral incentives

The first potential explanation why these stark misperceptions exist is that foreign policy elites vary in their incentives to accurately perceive public opinion; by this account, these misperceptions should decrease among elites who are more likely to be subject to electoral pressures. Yet Figure 4 shows that we see similar patterns at work with all of our elite subsamples: foreign policy elites in congress and the executive branch fare no better than elite respondents in think tanks or academia. And, Appendix §2.3.3 shows that this pattern also holds in a multivariate context when other elite characteristics are being controlled for as well.

A related argument might be that these results simply reflect the low salience of military interventions or NATO in electoral politics. Yet Broockman and Skovron (2018) finds similar misperceptions on domestic political issues that have high electoral salience; in their survey of legislative staffers, Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes (2019) find no evidence that staffers in offices facing more competitive races more accurately perceive the public’s preferences. A better interpretation, then, might be that the same misperception we know exists in domestic politics also occurs in foreign policy – and, if the degree of misperception were in fact correlated with electoral salience, that might imply misperceptions should be larger in the foreign policy domain than the domestic one, making elite perceptions of public opinion in foreign policy all the more important to study in their own right. An alternate interpretation might be that elites estimating public opinion are thinking not about the public as a whole, but the most vocal or politically engaged subset of the public (Pereira, 2021). Yet Figure 6 shows, the effect of a NATO endorsement is even stronger among individuals who are more politically engaged or politically sophisticated, suggesting the degree of misperception would actually be larger rather than smaller. In fact, Figure 6 shows more generally that there there are no subgroups of the public whose distributions of support even remotely match those estimated by foreign policy elites.

4.3.2 Hypotheticality and question wording

Another interpretation of the results might be that these systematic misperceptions about public opinion are simply an artifact of question wording. Although it presumably applies less to elites, individuals vary in their numeracy (Mérola and Hitt, 2016), and we know individuals often aren’t very good at estimating numeric properties of groups more generally (Ahler and Sood, 2018). If
Are elites thinking of specific subgroups of the public when they estimate public opinion? Figure 6 shows that elites’ estimates are inaccurate compared to the actual levels of public support expressed by any subgroup of the public; it is not the case that elites’ perceptions of public opinion better correspond with the views of more politically engaged or politically sophisticated members, for example.
everyone gets these kinds of questions wrong, then these results tell us less something systematic about foreign policy elites misreading the public, and more about how difficult assessing second-order beliefs are more generally. Importantly, however, our study also asked i) the public to estimate public support for the intervention, and ii) both elites and the public to estimate elites’ support for the intervention. As the right-hand column in Figure 7 shows, foreign policy elites misperceive public opinion to a significantly greater extent than the public itself does; in each treatment condition, elites underestimate public support by about 15 percentage points more than the public does, although because these misperceptions are split evenly between the treatment and control conditions, the ATE is of a similar size in both groups. Moreover, both elites and the public have strikingly similar perceptions about elite opinion. The misperceptions therefore appear to be asymmetric, with elites misperceiving public opinion to a greater extent than the public misperceives elite opinion. These findings are particularly important because they provide a counterfactual missing from some of the existing studies of elite misperceptions of the public (e.g. Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019), which show that elites misread the public, but leave open the possibility that everyone does; we show this not to be the case.

A related interpretation might attribute these misperceptions to features of the scenario respondents were presented with. Most notably, the military intervention here is hypothetical rather than real, such that respondents had less information here to rely on than they would in the real world. In real interventions, for example, elites can turn to public opinion polls for a more informed read of the public’s mood, giving them data that are unavailable to them in the context of our study. Yet as we suggest below, the fact that all types of foreign policy elites share a common misperception suggests the existence of a broader stereotype or narrative about the public. If we think of elites as equally likely to engage in motivated reasoning as ordinary citizens — and prior research suggests that motivated reasoning actually increases, rather than decreases, with political sophistication (Baekgaard et al., 2019) — then these images elites have about the public will affect both the information they seek out about the public (the phenomenon of selective attention — Yarhi-Milo, 2014), and how much they update based on the information they receive (Kertzer, Rathbun and Rathbun, 2020). Foyle (1999), for example, argues that President Bill Clinton withdrew US troops from Somalia not because public opinion had turned against the mission, but because his prior image of the public meant that he assumed they would turn in the future, such that he discounted the information he had available. A recent pair of field experiments by Kalla and Porter (2021) reaches a similar con-
clusion, showing that political elites’ misperceptions of public opinion on domestic political issues are resistant to updating: not only do political elites choose not to access information about citizens’ preferences made available to them, but those that do fail to update their priors. This interpretation, then, also showcases the importance of studying elite perceptions about public opinion in foreign policy.¹⁰

Table 1: Elite misperceptions about public opinion consistent across issues and time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pr(Underestimate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Make decisions through UN</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Participate in Kyoto agreement</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Participate in ICC</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Comply with WTO ruling</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Scenario: UN Peacekeeping</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Scenario: Stop genocide</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Scenario: Protect oil</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Support UN tax</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Active role</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>0.748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Active role</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Active role</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>0.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 International trade</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>0.998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Active role</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>0.843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Decrease Immigration</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Decrease NATO commitment</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 International trade</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>0.952</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows elites consistently underestimate the public’s level of support for internationalist policies. See Appendix §2.2 for more extensive analysis.

To test whether our findings are the artifact of particular question wording in a hypothetical experimental scenario, we turned to observational data, collecting survey questions studying elite perceptions of public opinion on foreign policy issues from other editions of the Chicago Council surveys. Table 1 measures elite misperceptions of the public’s preferences across 11 distinct foreign policy issues, in 16 different survey questions, from 2004-2020. Whether gauging real world policy questions (e.g. should the United States participate in the Kyoto agreement to fight climate change? Should we decrease the amount of immigration to the United States?) or alternative hypothetical interventions (for either humanitarian goals or material security interests), and whether under Democratic administrations or Republican ones, foreign policy elites systematically misperceive public opinion about foreign affairs. And, even more importantly, the misperceptions are

¹⁰See also a discussion of analogical reasoning, and whether the parameters of the vignette resemble the Libya intervention, in Appendix §2.6.
remarkably consistent in direction: elites consistently underestimate the public’s internationalism. In 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020, between 75-93% of elites underestimate the extent to which the public wants the US to play an active role in the world; in 2004, 75-76% of elites underestimated the extent to which the public is interested in participating in the International Criminal Court, or complying with rulings from the World Trade Organization. In 2018 and 2020, 95-99% of elites underestimated the extent to which the public is supportive of international trade. Importantly, the only policies where elites overestimated public support involved the US looking inward: in 2020, 95% of elites overestimated the extent to which the public wanted to decrease immigration, and 91% of elites overestimated the extent to which the public wanted to decrease America’s NATO commitment. Altogether, these findings suggest elites have an overarching isolationist stereotype of the public. As we suggest below, this stereotype can help explain the results obtained in our experiment.

4.3.3 Stereotypes

As Table 1 shows, foreign policy elites have an image of the public as preferring non-engagement, or “introverted” foreign policies, rather than internationalist, or “extroverted” ones (Klingberg, 1952). This is an image of a public that is nationalist rather than cosmopolitan, scoring low in what the public opinion about foreign policy literature calls cooperative internationalism (Wittkopf, 1990). According to this stereotype, the American public is deeply skeptical about the United States playing active roles in global politics in general, but particularly while working with other countries or through international institutions to solve global problems (Kull and Destler, 1999; Todorov and Mandisodza, 2004).

To capture these images, we take advantage of two of the above questions that were fielded in the same 2018 wave of the elite survey as our experiment. The first asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who agree that the United States should play an active role in the world; the second asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who agree that international trade is good for the United States. In each case, low estimates indicate the presence of an isolationist image of the public, skeptical about the benefits of international engagement. As Appendix §2.3.1 shows, foreign policy elites vastly underestimate the proportion of Americans who agree with each statement, but importantly, these estimates are correlated with one another ($r = 0.44$), suggesting they tap into the same latent construct — elites’ beliefs about the extent to which the public is internationalist in orientation. We therefore take the mean of these two items to create a respondent-
level measure of how internationalist each elite respondent perceives the American public to be.

We then estimate a series of regression models in Appendix §2.3.3 to study the determinants of elite misperception of public opinion in a multivariate context. Neither the type of foreign policy elite sampled, elites’ types of experience (e.g. experience in the civil service, versus being a political appointee), nor elites’ information environments as measured by their media consumption patterns consistently predict their levels of misperception of public opinion. In fact, a series of Wald tests suggest there is little evidence that elite type, or experience, significantly improve model fit at all. Importantly, however, our stereotype measure has a substantively large and statistically significant effect. Changing a respondent’s internationalism stereotype from one standard deviation below the mean, to one standard deviation above the mean, is associated with an 8 percentage point decrease in misperceptions in the NATO oppose condition, and a 12 percentage point decrease in misperceptions in the NATO endorse condition. In each experimental condition, then, this two-standard deviation shift in the stereotype score is associated with a 28% decrease in the size of the misperception. The less elites cling to an isolationist stereotype of the public more generally, the more accurate their estimates of public opinion are in the experiment. The other covariate significantly and substantively associated with the size of misperception is education: the most educated respondents (who are most likely to be exposed to narratives about the public’s isolationist tendencies) display the largest misperceptions.

4.4 Causal mediation analysis

We have thus far shown that foreign policy elites underestimate the effects of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force: although Republicans and Democrats alike are significantly more supportive of an international intervention that has received NATO’s blessing, elites presume the endorsement effect is relatively weak, due to the isolationist stereotype many foreign policy leaders have about the public. From a theoretical perspective the results are noteworthy because although IR scholars have paid considerable attention to how misperceptions complicate the international side of the two-level game that leaders play in foreign policy, they have thus far neglected to appreciate the potential for misperceptions to complicate our models of the domestic politics in IR as well.

Yet these findings can also be consequential for another reason. If foreign policy leaders care about public opinion in foreign policy (Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020), it implies that the more supportive of the intervention elites perceive the public to be, the more they themselves
The split-density plots in Figure 7 compare elite and public misperceptions of public opinion. The top-right hand panel replicates the results from the main text, showing that elites greatly misperceive NATO’s effect on the public, and that this misperception is largely driven by underestimating the popularity of the intervention when NATO endorses it. However, the other three panels let us put this misperception in comparative context. They show two interesting findings: first, as a comparison of the top and bottom panels in the right-hand column show, elites misperceive public opinion to a greater extent than the public itself does (the public’s perceptions of public opinion are 15 percentage points closer in each treatment condition than elites’ perceptions are). It is therefore unlikely to be the case that our elite results are simply an artifact of second-order beliefs being difficult to accurately estimate, but reflect a broader disconnect. Second, both elites and the public share strikingly similar perceptions about elite opinion; they both underestimate the popularity of the mission in the NATO endorse condition among elites, but not by as much as they misperceive public opinion.
will support it. This is consistent with Thompson’s (2009) argument that leaders will choose to intervene multilaterally because of its presumed effects on domestic support. We can test this proposition empirically in two different ways. First, we simply regress foreign policy leaders’ level of support for the intervention on their perceived level of public support for the intervention, controlling for a range of demographic factors: a 10 percentage point increase in perceived public support is associated with a 4.6 percentage point increase in elites’ support for the intervention. Second, and more formally, we can turn to nonparametric causal mediation analyses, testing whether the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force is mediated by perceptions of domestic support for the intervention more broadly. As with all mediation analyses, this analysis rests on a sequential ignorability assumption (Imai et al., 2011), so caution should be taken in the interpretation of the results below, but controlling for a wide range of demographic covariates, the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) of perceived public support remains statistically significant ($p < 0.03$). At the same time, however, the proportion of the total effect mediated by perceived public support is relatively modest (6.5%), suggesting that much of the effect of NATO endorsements on elites’ support for the use of force is channeled through other pathways. Supplementary analysis in Appendix §2.4 confirms this point, suggesting that although perceived domestic support is indeed a significant mediator of NATO endorsements, its effects are smaller than those of a range of other considerations (most notably the perceived reactions of the international community).

Yet these modest effects of the domestic support mechanism are partially a function of elites’ isolationist stereotypes about the public. As Figure 8 shows, the magnitude of the ACME depends on how isolationist elites perceive the public to be more generally (as noted by a formal test of moderated mediation: $p < 0.023$). For those foreign policy leaders who have the isolationist stereotypes about the public, the ACME is not statistically significant; the less isolationist an image foreign policy leaders have of the public, the larger the ACME of perceived public support, and the larger the proportion of the total effect the mediator explains: for respondents with an internationalism stereotype score of 0.5, 6.8% of the total effect is channeled through perceived public support; for respondents with an internationalism stereotype score of 0.7, 20.1% of the total effect is channeled through perceived public support. This analysis suggests that if the foreign policy establishment were to shed their isolationist image of the public, the perceived domestic support mechanism would increase in importance. Elites’ stereotypes about the public therefore not only affect how they anticipate the public will react to IO cues, but also shape how much elites weigh these domestic political
considerations: leaders with isolationist stereotypes of the public prefer NATO endorsements *in spite* of the negligible effect they anticipate NATO cues will have on public opinion, while leaders with internationalist stereotypes of the public prefer NATO endorsements *because* of the effects they anticipate it will have on public opinion.

Figure 8: Perceptions of public support mediate the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the intervention

![Figure 8](image)

Figure 8 presents the average causal mediation effects (with 95% quasi-Bayesian confidence intervals) from a set of nonparametric causal mediation models, in which the effect of a NATO endorsement on support for the intervention is mediated by perceived levels of public support, based on elites’ stereotypes of the public. A moderated mediation model shows that the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the intervention through perceived levels of public support is significantly larger for those foreign policy leaders with less isolationist stereotypes about the public ($p < 0.023$). See Appendix §2.4 for additional mediation analyses using a broader set of causal mechanisms.

5 Conclusion

The goal of this article is to encourage IR scholars who study public opinion to consider an untraditional quantity of interest: not just what the public thinks about foreign policy, but *what leaders think the public thinks*. We seek to illustrate the payoffs of this broader focus through an examination of the case of the domestic politics of multilateralism. Fielding a paired experiment on a nationally representative sample of the American public and a sample of foreign policy opinion leaders, we show that U.S. elites greatly misperceive public attitudes in a key area of foreign policy,
and that these misperceptions in turn are consequential in influencing the foreign policy positions of elites themselves. In particular, elites greatly underestimate how much importance the American public accords to the stance of NATO regarding the prospective use of force, leading elites to be less affected by NATO’s stance when formulating their own positions on intervention than they would be if they perceived public attitudes more accurately. We supplement the experiment with an analysis of observational data from elite and mass surveys from 2004-20, which points to the existence of a broader elite stereotype that envisions the public as more isolationist and less supportive of international engagement than it actually is.

Our findings suggest that theories of domestic politics in IR that link the behavior of leaders to the attitudes of citizens should give greater attention to elite perceptions of public opinion, rather than just public opinion itself. The implications here go beyond the study of IOs: if leaders misperceive what the public thinks about foreign policy issues, survey and experimental data on public attitudes cannot serve as the only basis for studying microfoundations in IR. When considering the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy decisions, IR scholars therefore need to investigate what leaders think the public thinks. Surveys and experiments in which political elites represent the respondents provide one, but not the only, avenue for doing this. IR scholars can also gain insight into how leaders perceive public attitudes by interviewing policy makers, analyzing the public and private statements of decision makers, and drawing on the contemporaneous reporting of well-informed journalists about internal government deliberations.

While our main focus in this article concerns the domestic politics of conflict, the other results we present across 11 different foreign policy issues in Table 1 shows that elite misperception of public opinion in foreign policy is neither limited to the case of NATO or military interventions, nor is merely an artifact of the Trump administration, but rather reflects a more systematic isolationist stereotype that holds both across time and across a wide range of foreign policy domains. These results also have important implications for the study of elite misperceptions in public opinion more broadly, since the traditional explanations offered by this literature — such as the distorting role of corporate interest groups, or partisan asymmetries in the rate at which constituents contact their legislators (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019; Pereira, 2021) — are unable to explain the patterns we see here. Elite misperceptions in domestic politics appear to be a function of social projection in which elites exaggerate how much the public shares their views (Pereira, 2021), while elite misperceptions in foreign policy demonstrate pluralistic ignorance,
in which elites exaggerate how much the public disagrees with them. These findings therefore raise important questions about structural differences between elite misperceptions in domestic and foreign policy realms that are a promising avenue for future research not just in IR, but in American and Comparative politics as well.

There is, of course, an alternative interpretation of our results, which argues that rather than elites misperceiving public support, the public is exaggerating how supportive it really is. Rally effects are often short-lived; public support eventually falls, especially as the costs of war mount (Mueller, 1973). If the public is providing its instantaneous reaction, and elites are thinking about the public’s long-term reactions — perhaps also assuming that a relatively small proportion of the public is likely to be aware of the intervention in the first place — then this could explain the results we see here — though it cannot explain why elites also display similar misperceptions across the broader range of foreign policy issues in Table 1. Yet this possibility also enhances the importance of our findings. Whether using real-world or hypothetical scenarios, almost all experimental studies of public opinion in IR that we are aware of operationalize public opinion as instantaneous reactions to information they are being presented with (e.g. Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020). If it is the case that elites have a different time horizon or quantity of interest in mind when they think about public opinion than the one political scientists have been analyzing, this makes elite perceptions of public opinion an even more important topic of study, especially for those scholars interested in testing microfoundations for theoretical frameworks in IR. Another implication of these findings is that just as there are important political benefits to shaping the public’s perceptions of public opinion (Mutz, 1998; Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017), the ability to shape elites’ perceptions of public opinion is an enormously valuable resource. Future research should therefore seek to explore domestic actors’ incentives and abilities to cultivate and contour elites’ stereotypes about the public in foreign policy.

There remains much more to learn about the nature, drivers, and effects of elite misperceptions of public attitudes. Where do elites’ stereotypes about public preferences in foreign policy come from, and how do these stereotypes change over time? (Kertzer, Brooks and Brooks, 2021). As

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11 This difference also offers an interesting inversion of Saunders’s (2022, p. 14) discussion of how measuring misperceptions of public opinion might be made more difficult by elite cues, in that “what the public “wants” may end up looking more like what elites think after a concerted political campaign to shape public opinion”: our results suggest that in foreign policy, unlike in domestic politics, elites may not need to resort to opinion leadership to bring the public on board, since public preferences are closer to elite preferences than elites realize!

12 It also showcases another avenue in which elite perceptions of public opinion can be shaped by stereotypes, as if elites presume that they themselves would receive the treatment in a real-world scenario, but assume the public wouldn’t.
Saunders (2011) shows, one way that leaders matter in foreign policy is by varying in their belief systems. If leaders vary systematically in the stereotypes they have about public opinion — or, the extent to which they perceive the public as dissimilar to themselves, and thus, the extent to which they rely on stereotypes in the first place — this suggests additional pathways through which leaders affect foreign policy behavior. Similarly, how do elite misperceptions of foreign policy preferences vary across countries? Although we show here that foreign policy elites have isolationist stereotypes about the mass public in the United States, it is likely that foreign policy elites will subscribe to different stereotypes on other contexts, particularly given variation in each country’s national narratives (Subotić, 2016). Better understanding elites’ second-order beliefs about public preferences is thus a crucial avenue for future research in IR.
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1 Sample information

1.1 Description of the CCGA Elite Survey Methodology

We compiled the CCGA leadership survey distribution list using a variety of sources. We relied heavily on Leadership Library (LL), a subscription-based online database, which includes contact information for elites in various sectors, including businesses, Congress, the executive branch, interest groups, labor unions, the media, non-governmental organizations, and think tanks. We supplemented the information from LL with information from several other sources, since LL has limited information for elites in some sectors and does not cover other sectors we wished to survey, particularly academics, military officers, and religious leaders. In what follows, we provide more detail on how we compiled the distribution list using these sources.

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

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

**Executive branch officials:** Using LL, we obtained contact information for the following sets of people in the database: employees of the Defense Department, Homeland Security Department, or State Department who hold the position of special assistant, deputy assistant secretary, assistant secretary, undersecretary, or deputy secretary, or have the word “senior” in their title; employees of any other federal department who hold the position of deputy assistant secretary, assistant secretary, undersecretary, or deputy secretary and also are listed as having a job function that is classified as “international;” members of the White House National Security Staff who hold the position of assistant to the president, special assistant to the president, senior director, or director; and U.S. Ambassadors. This resulted in a list of 595 executive branch officials.

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

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

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

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

Finally, the religious leader list is based on CCGA’s original 2004 list of religious leaders in the United States, with contacts updated to account for changes in positions in the intervening period. This was supplemented with a list provided by Valerie Nash of Religions for Peace, as well as names from Time’s 2013 list of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America. We judged the representativeness of this list based on the broader patterns of American religious life, as reported by Pew’s Religious Landscape Survey, part of the Pew Religion and Public Life Project. As the original combination of lists under-represented Catholic leaders, we manually added the heads of archdiocese within the United States. This brought the sample list into balance with Pew’s Religious Landscape Survey data.

*Think tank experts:* Using LL, we obtained contact information for people in the database who are employed by think tanks and are classified as having the expertise of “international affairs/foreign affairs” or “defense.”
This think tank list was supplemented with a targeted strategy based on the University of Pennsylvania’s 2017 Think Tank Rankings, selecting for top US think tanks in Defense and National Security, Foreign Policy, International Development, and International Economics. This produced a list of 37 institutions. Of these, four were excluded.\(^1\) We included in our list the fellows, vice-presidents, and presidents of these think tanks. Vice-presidents for administration or fundraising were excluded, as were fellows whose research was primarily focused on domestic policy. These methods resulted in a list of 1363 think tank experts.

Survey solicitations came from Ivo Daalder, President of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and William H. McRaven, Chancellor of the University of Texas System. To avoid requesting the participation of those who had already completed the survey, each successive email excluded those recipients who had been recorded as clicking on the link contained within the email.

1.2 Fielding the elite survey

As in previous surveys of foreign policy elites conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, nine categories of foreign policy elites were targeted using lists developed from Leadership Library and building on previous years’ survey lists. Those nine categories included leaders from business, congress, the executive branch, labor, media, NGOs, religious groups, scholars, and think tank experts. For purposes of our analysis in the main text, we have consolidated business, labor, NGO, and religious groups in a single interest group category.

The fielding period for the elite survey opened on August 3, 2018. During the fielding period, four reminder emails were sent, and the survey request email was resent to some individuals by request. The final fielding email was sent on September 26, 2018. The survey was closed one month later on October 23, 2018. See Table 1 for a list of the numbers of emails sent per group per wave, and Table 2 for a complete listing of email dates and delivery rates. Survey solicitations came from Ivo Daalder, President of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. To avoid further burdening respondents who had already completed the survey, each successive email excluded those recipients who had been recorded as clicking on the link contained within the email.

1.3 Sample representativeness

“Eliteness” in political science is usually conceptualized in terms of possessing domain-specific expertise and experience (Hafner-Burton, Hughes and Victor, 2013; Kertzer, 2022), and is operationalized through

\(^1\) The excluded institutions were the Atlas Network, the Berkeley Roundtable on the International Economy (BRIE), and the National Bureau for Economic Research (NBER). Atlas and NBER are networks, rather than think-tanks; BRIE is a research project, but not a research institution.
sample selection in elite experiments a wide number of ways, including samples of state legislators (Butler and Kousser, 2015), bureaucrats (Slough, 2018), military officers (Mintz, Redd and Vedlitz, 2006), and academics (Fatas, Neugebauer and Tamborero, 2007). Our elite sample of foreign policy opinion leaders, however, is a broader and more heterogeneous group, seeking to capture a “foreign policy establishment” (sometimes referred to colloquially as “the blob”) stretching from Capitol Hill to Foggy Bottom, the Ivory Tower to Wall Street (Busby and Monten, 2008).

We therefore adopt the sampling strategy as previous Chicago Council studies of foreign policy elites,\(^2\), obtaining a heterogeneous elite sample that encompasses multiple types of foreign policy elites, rather than just focusing on a single segment of the foreign policy establishment. The downside of this breadth, however, is the absence of a well-defined population to serve as a benchmark, which precludes the possibility of assessing the representativeness of the elite sample. Following best practices with elite experiments (Kertzer and Renshon, 2022), to assuage potential concerns about self-selection effects (as might be the case if the types of foreign policy elites most likely to participate in our study were also the types of foreign policy elites less likely to accurately perceive public opinion), in both the main paper and the appendix we show that our results are robust to the composition of the elite sample: it is not the case, for example, that certain types of elites are systematically less likely to misperceive public opinion than others, or have systematically different stereotypes about the public.

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

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

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

2 Supplementary results

2.1 NATO bolsters support for the use of force
Figure 1: Effect of NATO endorsement by partisanship

Plot shows cell means and 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals for support for the intervention, showing that the NATO endorsement effect does not significantly differ between Republicans and Democrats.

Figure 2: Effect of NATO endorsement by respondents’ level of favorability towards Donald Trump

Plot shows cell means and 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals for support for the intervention, for the public sample. Respondents with favorable views of Donald Trump respond identically to NATO endorsements as those with unfavorable views.
Figure 3: Effect of NATO endorsement by respondents’ level of commitment to NATO

Plot shows cell means and 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals for support for the intervention, for the public sample. While individuals more supportive of NATO are more supportive of intervening in general, the NATO endorsement effect does not significantly differ based on respondents’ support for NATO: those who want to withdraw from NATO respond no less to the NATO endorsement than those who want the United States to increase its NATO commitment.

Figure 4: Elite results robust to composition of elite sample

Panel (a) shows the average treatment effect of a NATO endorsement for the full elite sample, along with the average treatment effect when a given subsample of elites (e.g. academics, business leaders, etc.) are dropped from the analysis, showing the results are highly stable. Panel (b) presents a similar analysis, but this time dropping elites with particular types of experiences (e.g. those who served in the civil service, those who served as political appointees, etc.) from the analysis, once again showing the stability of the results. The two analyses differ in that the elite subsamples listed in panel a are mutually exclusive categories (because of the CCGA sampling strategy), whereas the elite experiences listed in panel b are not, such that some elites have experience in multiple categories. All estimates shown with 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals.
Table 3: Heterogeneous treatment effects: public sample

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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump favorability</td>
<td>0.009</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump favorability x NATO+</td>
<td>−0.012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.119)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td>0.391***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MI x NATO+</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.106)</td>
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<td>−0.038</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Executive x NATO+</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.246***</td>
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<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(0.090)</td>
<td>(0.189)</td>
<td>(0.304)</td>
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<td>0.094</td>
<td>0.203</td>
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*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01
2.2 Elite misperceptions extend to a range of other foreign policy issues

One potential concern about the experimental results reported in the main text is that although we find evidence of elite misperceptions in foreign policy, our main analysis focuses on only a single issue at a single point in time, as studied by a hypothetical scenario. Do the misperceptions we detect hold beyond the specific question of the effect of NATO cues on support for the use of force, to a range of other foreign policy issues? Do they travel outside of the experimental context to non-hypothetical scenarios? And do they travel beyond 2018?

The answer to all three questions is yes. In addition to identifying elite misperceptions experimentally about NATO, we also find evidence of elite misperceptions on a wide range of foreign policy issues using observational data. Below we present the results from 16 different survey items capturing elite perceptions of public opinion, covering 11 distinct foreign policy issues, fielded in 5 different waves of CCGA elite surveys from 2004-2020. Across all items, we find again that elites systematically misperceive public opinion about foreign affairs, that these misperceptions are robust across types of elites, and are always consistent with viewing the public as more isolationist or inward-looking than it actually is.

We start with eight items measuring foreign policy leaders' perceptions of public opinion from a 2004 Chicago Council on Global Affairs paired survey of foreign policy leaders and the mass public; as with the analysis in the main text, a nationally representative sample of the American public was asked to indicate their views on a range of foreign policy issues, and a sample of foreign policy opinion leaders was asked to estimate the public’s views. The items in the 2004 study cover a wide range of issues: elite respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of the American public who want the United States to participate in the International Criminal Court, comply with the decisions of the World Trade Organization, adopt the Kyoto protocol fighting climate change, make decisions within the United Nations, and let the UN levy taxes; respondents were also asked to estimate the level of public support for three military interventions: one to protect oil supplies, another to stop genocide, and a third working under the auspices of the UN. These items thus vary in terms of their substantive topic, salience, and their partisan hue.

Figure 5 shows that across all eight items, foreign policy leaders demonstrate systematic misperceptions: 83% of foreign policy leaders underestimate how popular working within the auspices of the United Nations is, 67% underestimate how popular the Kyoto protocol is, 76% underestimate how popular the International Criminal Court is, 75% underestimate how popular the World Trade Organization is, and so on. Crucially, these misperceptions appear to be systematic, in the sense that the errors tend to point in the same direction: foreign policy elites consistently underestimate the popularity of US involvement abroad, whether in terms of being involved in the world through international institutions, or through military means. In this sense, it
The histograms display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for eight different foreign policy questions (from accepting the United Nations, to deploying troops to stop a government from committing genocide, to giving the UN the power to fund its activities by imposing a tax on international arms or oil sales). Thus, the middle bar in each panel indicates the number of respondents who thought the public was evenly divided on a policy, the far right bar indicates the number of respondents who thought that over 60% of the public was supportive of a policy, and the far left bar indicates the number of respondents who thought that over 60% of the public was opposed to a policy. The cyan bar indicates the true level of public support for the policy recorded in the 2004 CCGA public survey, and the number in each panel denotes the proportion of elite respondents who underestimated the policy’s popularity. The plot thus shows: i) that elite misperceptions exist across a range of foreign policy questions, and ii) the degree of misperception varies across issues, with elites generally being the least accurate for issues associated with cooperative internationalism.
is not that that the elites have a dovish stereotype of the public, since they also underestimate how popular going to war to protect strategic oil supplies would be. These results not only suggest our argument about elite isolationist stereotypes of the public generalizes to 2004, but also replicates across a range of specific foreign policy issues.

Next we turn to a wave of items explicitly capturing internationalism. Readers may recall from the main text (see also Appendix §2.3.1) that our 2018 study included an item asking respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who believe the United States should play an active role in world politics. Figure 6 shows that foreign policy elites in our sample significantly underestimate just how internationalist the public is more generally, with over 93% of our elite sample as a whole assuming the public is less supportive of internationalism than our data suggests; less than half (48.7%) of elites in our sample correctly perceive that a majority of the public is internationalist. Since elites are heavily supportive of internationalism — 96% of our foreign policy opinion leaders favor the US playing an active role in the world — we therefore find evidence of a strong pluralistic ignorance effect (Miller and McFarland, 1987; Shamir and Shamir, 1997). We find similar results within each of our elite subsamples: 94% of our executive branch sample, 93% of our congress sample, and 94% of our media sample, for example, underestimate the public’s level of support for internationalism. It is therefore not the case that elites who are incentivized to more accurately perceive public opinion have more accurate assessments of it than those who don’t.

Importantly, though, we fielded the same item in 2014, 2016, and 2020, the results of which we depict in Figures 7, 8 and 9. Whether in the midst of the Obama administration, the lead-up to the 2016 election, or the lead-up to the 2020 election, we find a strikingly similar pattern: foreign policy elites presume Americans are far more isolationist than they actually are. And, we find similarly stark misperceptions across each of our elite subsamples, whether in Congress or NGOs, the military or the media.

Readers may also recall from the main text that our main study in 2018 also included an item capturing elites’ perceptions of the public’s level of support for international trade. Figure 10 shows that foreign policy elites in our sample also significantly underestimate just how supportive Americans are of international trade, with over 99% of our elite sample as a whole assuming the public is less supportive of trade than our data suggests; only 44% of elites in our sample correctly perceive that a majority of the public sees trade as benefiting the U.S. economy. As before, since elites are heavily supportive of trade (99% of our foreign policy opinion leaders agree trade helps the economy as a whole), we once again find evidence of a strong pluralistic ignorance effect.

We also field the same item in our 2020 study. Figure 12 shows that two years later, foreign policy elites continue to significantly underestimate the proportion of Americans who say that trade is good for the US economy, with 95% of our elite sample as a whole assuming the public is less supportive of trade than our
Figure 6: Elites underestimate the public’s support for the US playing an active role (2018)

The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for internationalism; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that underestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas nearly three-quarters of the public in our survey are internationalists who believe the United States should play an active role in global politics, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly lower than it actually is, with over 93% of elites (shaded in grey) underestimating the extent of the public’s support for internationalism. We find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.
The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for internationalism; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that underestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas nearly three-fifths of the public in our survey are internationalists who believe the United States should play an active role in global politics, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly lower than it actually is, with 75% of elites (shaded in grey) underestimating the extent of the public’s support for internationalism. We find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.
The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for internationalism; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that underestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas nearly two thirds of the public in our survey are internationalists who believe the United States should play an active role in global politics, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly lower than it actually is, with 87% of elites (shaded in grey) underestimating the extent of the public’s support for internationalism. We find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.
Figure 9: Elites underestimate the public’s support for the US playing an active role (2020)

The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for internationalism; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that underestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas nearly three quarters of the public in our survey are internationalists who believe the United States should play an active role in global politics, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly lower than it actually is, with 84% of elites (shaded in grey) underestimating the extent of the public’s support for internationalism. We find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.
Figure 10: Elites underestimate the public’s support for international trade (2018)

The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for international trade; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that underestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas nearly five-sixths of the public in our survey believe international trade is good for the U.S. economy, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly lower than it actually is, with over 99% of elites (shaded in grey) underestimating the extent of the public’s support for trade. As before, we find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.
The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for international trade; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that underestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas nearly two thirds of the public in our survey believe international trade is good for the U.S. economy, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly lower than it actually is, with 95% of elites (shaded in grey) underestimating the extent of the public’s support for trade. As before, we find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.
data suggests.

Our 2020 study also included an item measuring foreign policy elites’ perceptions of public support for immigration: respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of the public that favored decreasing legal immigration to the United States. As with all our other issues, we find evidence of elite misperceptions here, with 95% of elites overestimating how popular decreasing immigration is among Americans, and as before, these misperceptions are stable across all our subgroups of elites.

Figure 12: Elites overestimate the public’s support for decreasing immigration (2020)

The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for decreasing immigration; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that overestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas less than a third of public in our survey want immigration levels to be cut, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly higher than it actually is, with 95% of elites (shaded in grey) underestimating the extent of the public’s support for internationalism. As before, we find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.

Finally, our 2020 study also included an issue that directly speaks to our 2018 experiment: support for NATO. Our foreign policy elites were asked to estimate the proportion of the public that favors decreasing America’s commitment to NATO. Consistent with all of our other results showing that foreign policy elites have an isolationist stereotype of the public, Figure 13 shows that our foreign policy elites systematically overestimated the proportion of Americans who wanted to decrease the country’s NATO commitment; only a quarter of Americans in our national public sample wanted America’s commitment to NATO to be decreased, such that 91% of foreign policy elites underestimate NATO’s popularity in the public.

Thus, across 16 survey items, covering 11 distinct foreign policy issues from 2004-2020 (which vary in
The density plots display the distribution of each type of elites’ estimates of the public’s support for decreasing America’s commitment to NATO; the shaded area in grey denotes the proportion of each sample that overestimates the public’s level of support. Thus, whereas less than a third of public in our survey want immigration levels to be cut, our foreign policy elite sample as a whole (the top-left panel) assume the public’s level of support is significantly higher than it actually is, with 91% of elites (shaded in grey) overestimating the extent of the public’s support decreasing American NATO commitments. As before, we find similarly stark misperceptions within each of our elite subsamples; it is not the case that respondents from our congressional or executive branch samples more accurately read the public’s mood than other types of elites, for example.
salience, the degree of partisan polarization, and substantive domain), we show that elites systematically misperceive public opinion about foreign affairs. Across all issues, these misperceptions are robust across types of elites, and are always characterized by elites viewing the public as more isolationist or inward-looking than it actually is, consistent with our stereotype-based argument.

2.3 Misperceptions supplementary results
Figure 14: Elite misperceptions of elite opinion

Figure 14 presents splint-density distributions of the average actual level of elite support for the intervention (in red), and elites’ estimated level of elite support for the intervention (in turquoise), calculated using $B = 1500$ bootstraps. The distributions in the top half of each panel depict results from the NATO Endorse condition, and the distributions in the bottom half of each panel depict results in the NATO Oppose condition. The arrows indicate the difference between the actual level of elite support in a given condition, and elites’ estimated level of elite support. The results show that across all subsamples of elites, elites estimate the level of elite support in the NATO Oppose condition fairly accurately, but underestimate the level of elite support in the NATO Endorse condition. As a result, because elites misperceive public opinion in both the treatment and control conditions, and misperceive elite opinion only in the treatment condition, the ATE on elite misperceptions for elites is actually larger than for the public, even though the absolute level of misperception within each treatment condition is larger in the public samples.
2.3.1 Generating the stereotype measure

We generate our stereotype measure using two items from the 2018 elite survey, also described in Appendix §2.2. The first asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who believe the United States should play an active role in world politics. Figure 6 shows that foreign policy elites in our sample significantly underestimate just how internationalist the public is more generally, with over 93% of our elite sample as a whole assuming the public is less supportive of internationalism than our data suggests; less than half (48.7%) of elites in our sample correctly perceive that a majority of the public is internationalist. Since elites are heavily supportive of internationalism – 96% of our foreign policy opinion leaders favor the US playing an active role in the world — we therefore find evidence of a strong pluralistic ignorance effect (Miller and McFarland, 1987; Shamir and Shamir, 1997). We find similar results within each of our elite subsamples: 94% of our executive branch sample, 93% of our congress sample, and 94% of our media sample, for example, underestimate the public’s level of support for internationalism. It is therefore not the case that elites who are incentivized to more accurately perceive public opinion have more accurate assessments of it than those who don’t.

If we assume political elites are more likely to interact with more politically engaged or affluent members of the public — consistent with many theories of political representation — it is notable that elites’ misperceptions of public opinion further decrease in accuracy if we use engaged public opinion as a reference point instead: whereas 73.8% of the public expresses support for internationalism, 76.3% of registered voters are internationalist; 82.2% of those respondents with the highest levels of self-reported political interest are internationalist; 78.6% of respondents in the top income decile are internationalist, and so on. It is thus not clear that when elites think of public opinion, that they have the engaged and affluent members of the public in mind.

The second item asks respondents to estimate the proportion of Americans who agree that international trade is good for the United States. Figure 10 shows that foreign policy elites in our sample also significantly underestimate just how supportive Americans are of international trade, with over 99% of our elite sample as a whole assuming the public is less supportive of trade than our data suggests; only 44% of elites in our sample correctly perceive that a majority of the public sees trade as benefiting the U.S. economy. As before, since elites are heavily supportive of trade (99% of our foreign policy opinion leaders agree trade helps the economy as a whole), we once again find evidence of a strong pluralistic ignorance effect.

To produce our internationalist stereotype measure for the analyses below, we simply calculate the mean of each of these two proportion estimates. The two estimates are moderately correlated with one another ($r = 0.44$), and thus appear to tap into the same latent construct; if we re-estimate the models in Appendix
2.3.2 below, but using just the active role estimate, or just the international trade estimate, as our proxy for elites’ stereotypes, the model fit is inferior to when the additive scale is used, suggesting that the results are not being driven by one of these items rather than the other.

2.3.2 Do misperception measures capture stereotypes, or response bias?

One potential methodological concern is that both of the indicator measures used to generate the stereotype variable are scaled in the same direction and structured similarly as the misperception measure in the main analysis: all three items use response scales asking respondents to estimate the proportion of the public that supports a given policy, in which higher levels of estimated support for the policy indicate higher levels of support for the US playing an active role in the world. It is thus possible that the results described in the main text and presented in greater detail in Table 7 are due not to foreign policy elites possessing stereotypes of the public’s level of internationalism, but to a form of survey response bias similar to acquiescence bias, in which respondents who tend to choose high (or low) answers to one question also tend to choose high (or low) answers to another, regardless of the items’ content. This raises questions about whether the stereotype measure is truly capturing respondents’ stereotypes about the public’s level of internationalism, or is simply capturing respondents’ survey response styles instead.

To adjudicate between these two possibilities, we turn to the data described above from the 2004 study. The 2004 survey is useful because it contains a number of additional items measuring foreign policy leaders’ perceptions of public opinion. As noted previously, some of these items implicate leaders’ beliefs about the public’s level of what the public opinion about foreign policy literature refers to as cooperative internationalism (e.g. Wittkopf, 1990; Holsti, 2004; Rathbun, 2007; Kertzer et al., 2014): the belief that the United States should work with other members of the international community, and through international institutions, to address global problems. For example, respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of Americans who want the United States to participate in the International Criminal Court, comply with the decisions of the World Trade Organization, adopt the Kyoto protocol fighting climate change, or make decision within the United Nations. Other items ask leaders to assess the public’s interest in the use of force, which the public opinion about foreign policy literature tells us loads on a separate dimension of militant internationalism: respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of Americans who supported the US sending troops to stop genocide or protect oil supplies, for example.

If these misperception items reflect elites’ stereotypes about the public’s preferences, these items should altogether load on two different factors in a factor analysis, because they reflect beliefs about the public’s

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3The 2004 study asked foreign policy leaders to estimate the level of public support for eleven different policies, but because three of the items use response options that cannot be arranged on an ordinal scale, we focus on the remaining eight items in the analysis below.
tendencies along two different dimensions. If instead the items fits a one-factor solution, with the factor loadings all pointing in the same direction, this would be consistent with a response style story instead, in which respondents do not meaningfully differentiate between different types of foreign policies when estimating their popularity among the public.

Figure 5 presents the raw distributions of elite perceptions’ of public support for each of these eight foreign policy issues, with the cyan bar denoting the actual level of public support for a given policy, and the number in each panel depicting the proportion of foreign policy elites in the sample who underestimated the policy’s popularity. The plot thus shows that elite misperceptions exist across a range of foreign policy questions, but that the degree of misperception varies across issues: elites tend to especially underestimate the level of support for policies that involve the United States working through international institutions, whether the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, or the World Trade Organization.

Importantly for our purposes, principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation confirms that a two-factor solution fits the data well (RMSEA = 0.027, TLI=0.97) while suggesting that a one-factor solution does not (RMSEA=0.06, TLI=0.83). An inspection of the factor loadings in Table 5 largely comports with the intuitions above: items on policy areas traditionally considered part of cooperative internationalism load together on the first factor, while items more closely related to the use of force tend to load on the second factor, although the item about using force to protect oil has a negative loading on the first factor instead — likely reflecting the politics of the time at which the survey was fielded, in 2004.\footnote{Indeed, it is striking that the less popular respondents imagined traditional CI policies to be in the public, the more popular they imagined war for oil would be!} Altogether, this suggests that elites’ perceptions of public opinion have structure: it is not that elites presume all policies are unpopular, but that they see certain types of policies as more popular than others. This suggests that the misperception measures used in the main text are likely capturing more than just response styles.

Table 5: Factor loadings for misperception items

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2.3.3 Studying elite misperceptions in a multivariate context

To study elite misperceptions in a multivariate context, we therefore estimate a series of linear regression models, estimating the individual-level correlates of elite misperceptions of public support for the intervention. Since misperception can occur both because of misperceptions in the NATO endorse condition, and misperceptions in the NATO oppose condition, we estimate separate models within each treatment condition, in Tables 6-7; the dependent variable in each model is the degree of misperception, calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference between the average level of public support in each treatment condition, and elites’ estimates of the level of public support in each treatment condition. Although misperceptions here are calculated using the absolute value (such that they can refer to both over- and under-estimates), as Figure 4 in the main text shows, for most of our respondents it refers to underestimates.

Models 1 and 4 in Table 6 present the effects of basic demographic characteristics. It shows that more educated elites tend to misperceive public opinion to a greater degree; because of the skewed distribution of education in our elite sample, education is operationalized here using a system of dummy variables, where the reference category are elites who had some college or less. Respondents with university degrees significantly misperceive the level of public support in the NATO oppose condition, and respondents with graduate degrees significantly misperceive the level of public support in both treatment conditions. Men slightly more accurately perceive public opinion in the NATO Endorse condition than women do, and our dummy variable shows that White respondents tend to be relatively more accurate in the NATO Oppose condition and relatively less accurate in the NATO Endorse condition. Models 2 and 5 add the effects of a series of theoretically relevant individual differences, capturing respondents’ preferred level of US commitment to NATO, their level of militant internationalism (MI), their level of cooperative internationalism (CI), and their attitudes towards Donald Trump.\footnote{Militant internationalism (MI) is calculated here using factor scores from an Item Response Theory (IRT) model capturing respondents’ expressed willingness to send US troops across a range of eight intervention scenarios, and cooperative internationalism (CI) from an item asking respondents whether it’s more effective for the US to work with other countries and agreements when trying to its achieve foreign policy goals, rather than tackling them on its own.} There’s some evidence that respondents who want the US to be more committed to NATO more accurately estimate the popularity of the intervention under a NATO endorsement, but the effect is substantively small. More hawkish respondents, who are higher in MI, similarly more accurately estimate the popularity of the mission in the control. Models 3 and 6 add a series of dichotomous variables for each elite subsample (using the executive branch subsample as the reference category), reconfirming the analyses from the main text showing all of the elite subsamples misperceive public opinion at a similar rate. A Wald test confirms that the inclusion of these elite subsample covariates does not significantly improve model fit ($F = 0.972, p < 0.44$ in NATO oppose condition; $F = 0.247, p < 0.94$ in NATO endorse condition).
Turning to Table 7, rather than comparing different subsamples of elites, Models 1 and 3 turn to the effects of different types of elite experience instead, testing with elites with more government experience perceive public opinion more accurately. None of the government experience variables are significant; elites with military service tend to misperceive public opinion in the NATO endorsement condition at a slightly higher rate. As before, a Wald test suggests these elite experience variables do not significantly improve model fit ($F = 0.894, p < 0.50$ in the NATO oppose condition; $F = 1.206, p < 0.306$ in the NATO endorse condition). Models 2 and 4 look at the effect of respondents’ information sources. Respondents who report reading the Wall Street Journal opinion pages more accurately perceive public opinion in the NATO endorsement condition, but otherwise these news variables have no significant effect. Wald tests here are mixed: including these information source covariates do not significantly improve model fit in the NATO oppose condition ($F = 0.854, p < 0.49$), but improve model fit in the NATO endorse condition ($F = 2.441, p < 0.05$). Models 3 and 6 include covariates for respondents’ stereotypes about the overall level of internationalism of the public, calculated by creating an average of the proportion of each respondent’s estimates for the proportion of the public that agrees it’s best if the United States plays an active part in world affairs, and the proportion of the public that agrees that international trade is good for the US economy. The coefficient estimate is statistically significant, and substantively large: the more internationalist the stereotype respondents have about the public, the lower their levels of misperceptions, in both treatment conditions.

Two points here are important to note. First, Wald tests confirm the importance of this variable ($F = 18.789, p < 0.01$ in the NATO oppose condition; $F = 38.621, p < 0.001$ in the NATO endorse condition). Second, an alternate Bayesian-inspired theoretical model from Chaudoin (2014) argues that IO cues should have the greatest effect among individuals with the weakest priors: individuals who are strong internationalists will want to intervene even without an IO cue, and individuals who are strong isolationists won’t want to intervene even with an IO cue, whereas individuals in the middle will be the most likely to be moved. To test whether this alternative framework about the public’s first-order preferences also applies here with respect to elites’ second-order beliefs, we replicate models 3 and 6 but adding a quadratic term for elites’ stereotypes, since elites’ images of the public’s general orientation towards internationalism or isolationism can be thought of as equivalent to elites’ priors about the public’s preferences. The quadratic terms are not statistically significant, suggesting that this alternative framework does not apply to elites’ second-order beliefs — perhaps consistent with arguments by Mercer (2012) about the cognitive challenges of higher-order beliefs.
Table 6: Correlates of elite misperception of public support for the intervention (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NATO Oppose</th>
<th>NATO Endorse</th>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>(5.064)</td>
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<td>Age 45-59</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(5.042)</td>
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<td>Age 60-74</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(5.040)</td>
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<td>Trump favorability</td>
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*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01. Positive values = greater misperceptions.
Reference categories: some college or less, executive branch sample
Table 7: Correlates of elite misperception of public support for the intervention (2)

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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>NATO Oppose (3)</th>
<th>NATO Oppose (4)</th>
<th>NATO Oppose (5)</th>
<th>NATO Oppose (6)</th>
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<td>(5.094)</td>
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<td>Internationalist stereotype</td>
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<td>Intercept</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
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<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>0.149</td>
<td>0.283</td>
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</table>

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01. Positive values = greater misperceptions.
2.4 Causal mediation results

The analysis in the main paper notes that although perceived public support is one mechanism that can explain why NATO endorsements bolster support for the use of force, it is not the only one. In addition to measuring perceived public and elite support for the intervention, we also administered an additional set of mechanism questions, capturing a wide range of other reasons why NATO endorsements might increase support for the use of force. These range from normative considerations (perhaps respondents perceived interventions blessed by NATO as more morally right, or having more salutary effects on America’s reputation in the eyes of the international community), to material considerations (perhaps respondents perceived interventions blessed by NATO as having a higher likelihood of success, or better serving America’s national interests). Figure 15 below presents the effect of NATO endorsements on each of these potential mechanisms, in turn, for both the public sample (in red) and sample of foreign policy leaders (in green). This plot shows that interventions endorsed by NATO are indeed perceived as more moral, as having more positive reputational consequences, as more legitimate, as better serving American national interests, as more likely to be successful, as more likely to produce burden sharing, and as more popular at home. In general, we see similar patterns for the elite and mass sample, although NATO endorsements appear to exert more powerful effects on perceived likelihood of success among elites than among masses.

To provide a sense of the substantive roles of each of these potential mechanisms on support for the intervention, we therefore estimate a series of nonparametric causal mediation analyses (Imai et al., 2011), similar to that estimated in the main paper for perceived public support. There are several reasons why we should be cautious in our interpretation of causal mediation results here. Most importantly, the sequential ignorability assumption implies that the mediators must be independent from one another; this is unlikely in this case given the overlap between the litany of interrelated mechanisms discussed here. We therefore employ a data reduction approach, which does not obviate concerns about non-independence altogether, but improves the credibility of the analysis. Parallel analysis suggests a four factor solution for these mechanisms in the public data, and a three factor solution in the elite data; exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring and oblimin rotation suggests these respective models fit well (for the public sample: RMSEA: 0.011, RMSEA.LB: 0.000, TLI: 0.999, BIC: -34.76; for the elite sample RMSEA: 0.047, RMSEA.LB: 0.024, TLI: 0.969, BIC: -49.1). Based on the loadings from these factor analyses, and to balance parsimony and interpretability, we generate a set of additive scales, pooling together mechanisms relating to the reactions of the international community (burden sharing, and legitimacy), mechanisms relating to domestic support (public support, and elite support), mechanisms relating to normative considerations (morality, and reputation), and mechanisms relating to instrumental considerations (success, and national...
Figure 15 presents the effects of NATO endorsements on a range of causal mechanisms, ranging from normative considerations, to instrumental ones, alongside the domestic support mechanisms that are the subject of the analysis in the main paper.
interests); due to the results of the factor analysis models, we retain fatalities as a separate item.\(^6\) We therefore estimate a series of nonparametric causal mediation models, controlling for a battery of demographic variables, the results of which are displayed in Figure 16 below.

Figure 16: Causal mediation analysis

Figure 16 presents the Average Causal Mediation Effects (ACMEs) from a series of nonparametric causal mediation models.

As noted in public support mediation results in the main text, although domestic support significantly mediates the effect of NATO endorsements on support for the use of force for both the mass public and political elites alike, its substantive effect size is smaller than that of at least two of the other families of mediators: the reactions of the international community, and normative considerations. Instrumental considerations display a significantly larger mediation effect for elites than the mass public (confirmed formally by a moderated mediation analysis: \(p < 0.004\)), while fatalities do not exert a significant mediation effect in either sample. This is to say, then, that although the salutary effects of IO endorsements on domestic support may be one reason why foreign policy leaders pursue multilateralism, these results suggest it is neither the only nor the most important reason. Indeed, the moderated mediation analysis in the main text suggests that if elites were to shed their isolationist stereotypes of the public, the perceived domestic support mechanism would increase in importance.

2.5 Alternative misperception threshold

The analysis in the main text studies misperceptions by comparing respondents’ estimates for the percentage of respondents who support the mission, with the actual percentage of respondents who indicated they supported the mission. Because the dependent variable measuring support is a six-point Likert scale ranging

\(^6\)Note that the different factor solutions for the two samples makes the direct use of factor scores problematic in this context.
from “Oppose a great deal” to “Support a great deal”, any respondent who indicated they supported the mission either a great deal, a moderate amount, or a little, is coded as supporting, and any respondent who indicated they opposed the mission either a great deal, a moderate amount, or a little, is coded as opposing. Below we replicate the misperception analyses, but raising the threshold for what counts as “support” to those respondents who indicated they supported the intervention at least a moderate amount (thereby coding the weakest supporters as de facto opponents). Figure 17 and Figures 18 replicate Figures 3-4 in the main text, showing that although the cell means change (once you raise the threshold of what counts as support, elites no longer significantly underestimate public support in the NATO oppose condition), the average treatment effects remain strikingly similar: although NATO bolsters support for the use of force in the public by an average of 20 percentage points, elites generally assume NATO has no significant effect on public support, and these misperceptions are of similar magnitude for all elite subsamples.

Figure 17: Elites underestimate the power of NATO endorsements (higher support threshold)

Figure 17 presents density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on the public’s support for the use of force (in red), along with density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on elites’ estimates of the public’s support for the use of force (in turquoise). The analysis here replicates Figure 3 in the main text, but raising the threshold for what counts as a sufficient level of “support”, from “support a little”, to “support a moderate amount.” As before, the arrow in each panel indicates the difference between the actual NATO endorsement effect, and the estimated NATO endorsement effect, showing very similar results as that in the main text. The plot shows that although NATO bolsters support for the use of force in the public by an average of nearly 20 percentage points, elites generally assume NATO has no significant effect on public support, and that these misperceptions are of similar magnitude for all elite subsamples.
Figure 18: Elites underestimate the power of NATO endorsements more than the popularity of NATO opposition (higher support threshold)

Figure 18 presents density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on the public’s support for the use of force (in red), along with density distributions of bootstrapped average treatment effects of NATO endorsements on elites’ estimates of the public’s support for the use of force (in turquoise). The analysis here replicates Figure 4 in the main text, but raising the threshold for what counts as a sufficient level of “support”, from “support a little”, to “support a moderate amount.” As before, the arrow in each panel indicates the difference between the actual NATO endorsement effect, and the estimated NATO endorsement effect. Here, the results differ from those reported in the main text — once you count weak supporters as de facto opponents, elites no longer consistently underestimate public support in the NATO oppose condition — but as before, the general conclusion remains the same, in that elite misperceptions are largely concentrated in the NATO endorse condition.
2.6 Analogical reasoning: the Libya intervention?

Given the volume of work on analogical reasoning in foreign policy decision-making (e.g. Khong, 1992; Houghton, 1996) an alternative interpretation of our results is that elites are estimating public support for the intervention by anchoring on the public’s level of support for similar recent military interventions. In this case, one relevant recent military intervention respondents might be thinking of is the Libya intervention in 2011, in which the US joined with its NATO allies in an operation that was successful in deterring Muammar Gaddafi’s threats to civilian populations but also led to regime change as the country subsequently devolved into violence. Three points here are thus worth noting. First, even if our elite respondents have Libya in mind when completing the study, a comparison of public opinion data from the beginning of the intervention with the experimental results here suggest that elites are nonetheless underestimating the baseline level of support: in March 2011, just days after the US joined the military campaign against Gaddafi, Gallup found that 47% of the public supported the strikes compared to 37% opposed and another 16% with no opinion; in the NATO support condition in our experiment, leaders estimated only 39% of the public would be on board. Second, one way to reconcile this disconnect might be to, as we argue in the conclusion of the main text, explore the extent to which elites think about public opinion not in terms of instantaneous reactions, but long-term reactions. Indeed, the following Gallup poll conducted in June 2011 found that public support had dropped from 47% to 39%, consistent with our experimental findings. Yet as we note in the main text, all of the experimental studies of public opinion in IR that we are aware of operationalizes public opinion as instantaneous reactions to information (e.g. Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020). If it is the case that elites have a different time horizon or quantity of interest in mind when they think about public opinion than the one political scientists have been analyzing, this makes elite perceptions of public opinion an even more important topic of study.
References


URL: http://taraslough.com/assets/pdf/audit.pdf
