

No Man Left Behind?
Explaining Public Support for Hostage Recovery

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Presented at the 2019 meeting of the Peace Science Society

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Abstract

Kidnapping of soldiers, journalists, and other civilians by armed groups is an understudied phenomenon in international relations. Policies for hostage recovery vary dramatically across countries as does public support for various actions governments can take to bring hostages home. We study the latter question developing a theory that focuses on circumstance of capture—particularly whether hostages are perceived to be responsible for their capture—as a key component to understanding variation in public support for hostage recovery. More generally, we examine whether the cost of recovery and characteristics of the hostage such as occupation and gender affect public support. We test the argument using an experiment embedded in a large, national survey of the American public. The results of the experiment demonstrate that public support for hostage recovery depends on the public’s perceptions of who’s to blame for the hostage’s capture. When hostages are described as not to blame for their capture, support for rescue is at its highest. However, when capture occurs under circumstances that suggest the hostage is to blame, support for rescue decreases even for U.S. soldiers. These findings suggest that certain segments of the public are out of step with U.S. military policy which dictates that circumstance of capture should be ignored and predicts potential pushback against rescue efforts for any kidnapping when the hostage is not the ideal type.

1 Introduction

On April 10, 2009, U.S. Navy SEAL Team 6 flew continuously for 16 hours from Virginia toward a new mission in East Africa. Their Air Force C-17 plane refueled three times in mid-air and did not stop until the SEALs could parachute under cover of night into the pirate-laden waters off the coast of Somalia, where the Navy destroyer *USS Bainbridge* was watching a hostage crisis unfold (McNight and Hirsh 2012). The SEALs’ mission was straightforward, but not easy: recover U.S. Merchant Marine Captain Richard Phillips, held hostage for four days in a small lifeboat by three Somali pirates. The lifeboat was running out of fuel, and Phillips was running out of time—the young and increasingly agitated captors held an AK-47 to the captain’s back. Under direct orders from the President of the United States, the SEALs took simultaneous shots at the pirates from the back of the *Bainbridge*, immediately killing all three and ending Phillips’s ordeal (Discovery 2009). Phillips was hailed as a hero; President Obama said shortly after the operation, “I share the country’s admiration for the bravery of Captain Phillips and his selfless concern for his crew. His courage is a model for all Americans” (Discovery 2009). Four years later, Captain Phillips’s saga was dramatized in the eponymous Oscar-nominated film, in which the merchant marine was played by Tom Hanks.

This daring rescue of a ship captain epitomizes the kind of “ideal” victim easy to defend in the public eye—an upstanding professional, whose job responsibilities put him in the line of danger.¹ Not all captured Americans garner this level of public support. Several months later, in June 2009, recently deployed Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl walked off his base in Paktika

¹Left out of the film were the accounts from the crew of the *Maersk Alabama*, who sued their employer in a complaint against their captain’s negligence and abandonment of protocol. Captain Phillips may not have been a “perfect” victim, but he was heralded as a hero.

province, Afghanistan. Ostensibly hoping his desertion would provide the opportunity to report perceived unit management problems to more senior leadership, Bergdahl was instead captured by the Taliban, and held by the Haqqani Network for five years (Rubin 2019). When Bergdahl went missing, the military immediately launched around-the-clock search and rescue teams to recover Bergdahl, including an unsuccessful Navy SEAL mission in which one SEAL lost part of his leg, and a service dog was killed. Years after the unsuccessful rescue attempts, President Obama authorized a prisoner exchange, trading Bergdahl for the release of five Taliban detainees held at Guantanamo. The resulting uproar reflected both that the Obama Administration had failed to notify Congress of the exchange, and that Bergdahl was a deeply unpopular victim. The U.S. military had charged Bergdahl with “desertion with intent to shirk important or hazardous duty,” as well as “misbehavior before the enemy by endangering the safety of a command, unit, or place.” During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump called Bergdahl a “no-good traitor who should have been executed”; he later described the decision not to give Bergdahl the death penalty as “a complete and total disgrace to our Country and to our Military” (Diaz 2017).

These famous cases help illustrate two unexplained gaps in our understanding about efforts to rescue Americans attacked abroad. First, some hostages appear to earn public sympathy, while some receive public scorn. How does that translate to public perception about support for and viability of hostage recovery missions? Second, while public opinion about certain hostages may vary from those deserving or not deserving rescue, U.S. policy is clear: The circumstances of a hostage’s initial capture are not taken into consideration when deciding whether or not to launch a rescue mission. What are the implications of this distance between policymaking and the public?

In this paper, we explore these two gaps. Specifically, we ask: What explains the variation in public support for hostage recovery? And how does that relate to hostage recovery policies? Using an experiment embedded in a large, national survey of the American pub-

lic, we examine how characteristics such as the hostage’s gender and profession, and the perceived cost of the rescue mission, affect the public’s support for hostage recovery. We find that public support for hostage recovery is highly dependent on the public’s perceptions of who’s to blame for the hostage’s capture. In general, support for hostage recovery missions is high. A majority of respondents surveyed support hostage rescue in all cases tested, with the greatest support for recovering soldiers, and the least support for recovering tourists. However, when the circumstances of the kidnapping suggest that the hostage holds personal blame for being in a dangerous situation, support for rescue plummets—even for U.S. soldiers.

This paper makes several important contributions to the literature. First, it tests welfare theories of “deservingness” in a new empirical context—when an American citizen is held captive abroad. Second, to our knowledge, this represents the first scholarly examination of public opinion on hostage taking and recovery—a powerful and highly newsworthy form of international violence. While debates about ransom payments or negotiating with terrorists abound, little is known about what the American public thinks about these incidents. In other countries including France (Simon 2019) and Israel (Sherwood 2010), there are enormous public demonstrations in support of government-sponsored hostage rescue—a feature largely absent from American hostage crises. It would be valuable to understand more about how the American public thinks about these attacks. Third, our findings suggest a significant disconnect between public opinion and policy on this issue: While the public is apparently discerning about differences in hostage blameworthiness, U.S. doctrine makes no distinction among hostages in this way. This suggests we should anticipate significant pushback against rescue efforts for any kidnapping when the hostage is not the ideal type, as shown in the *Bowe Bergdahl* case.

2 Hostage Recovery Policy

What does the United States government do when an American is kidnapped abroad? U.S. hostage recovery policy has shifted dramatically over the last 40 years. Since the 1949 Geneva Conventions, hostage taking has been explicitly prohibited around the world; the 1979 International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages clearly defines and prohibits the form of “hostage taking” of interest in this paper:

Any person who seizes or detains and threatens to kill, to injure or to continue to detain another person (hereinafter referred to as a “hostage”) in order to compel a third party, namely, a State, an international intergovernmental organisation, a natural or juridical person, or a group of persons to do or abstain from doing any acts as an explicit or implicit condition for the release of the hostage, commits the offence of taking of hostages.²

Such international kidnappings³ are pervasive. For example, there are 6,120 kidnappings in the Global Terrorism Database between September 11, 2001 and the end of 2015.⁴ According

²Customary IHL, “Practice Relating to Rule 96. Hostage-Taking.” International Committee of the Red Cross.

³Following Gilbert (2019*b*), “kidnapping” refers to the “forceful abduction of an individual by a non-state armed group, including terrorists, rebels, and criminals. Kidnappings are abductions—a subset of hostage-taking attacks, in which the perpetrator takes victims to a new location, rather than holding them in place (as in a hijacking or barrier-siege attack).” This phenomenon therefore excludes “cases of detentions perpetrated on behalf of the state, such as unlawful imprisonment of Americans abroad—notably in Cuba, Iran, or North Korea—where tourists and journalists have been subjected to unsubstantiated and indefinite detention” (3).

⁴START 2016

to the former director of the U.S. Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, “Not a week goes by without the kidnapping of an American citizen abroad” (FBI 2018).

Though America has had a “hostage problem” since the 18th century (Gilbert 2019a), it was a particular hostage crisis that focused U.S. national security policy on the problem of hostage rescue. In 1979, a group of Iranian students took over the American Embassy in Tehran, holding 52 Americans hostage for 444 days (Bowden 2007). In 1980, the U.S. military launched a mission known as “Operation Eagle Claw” in an attempt to rescue the hostages, but it was an “ignominious disaster”: they did not rescue any of the captive Americans, and eight servicemen lost their lives when a helicopter crashed into a plane full of fuel and Delta Force soldiers (Naylor 2015, 3). Post-mortem analyses revealed that the different military services had failed to coordinate effectively in service of the mission.⁵ In response, the Joint Chiefs established the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) headquarters and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), a task force designed to coordinate the special forces units from multiple branches of the military in joint operations overseas. JSOC oversees five Special Missions Units, including the Army’s 1st Special Forces Operation Detachment–Delta (“Delta Force” or “Task Force Green”) and the Navy’s Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU, “SEAL Team 6,” or “Task Force Blue”). Both Delta Force and SEAL Team 6 have among their primary mission priorities the rescue of U.S. hostages and combatting terrorism.

February 2002 marked the second major turning point in modern U.S. hostage recovery policy. For the first two decades of operation, the JSOC teams, FBI, and State Department were only directed to recover Americans kidnapped abroad if they were U.S. military or government personnel. In the midst of the kidnapping of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, the U.S. government made a quiet but substantial change in how it dealt with the kidnapping of civilians, directing agencies to take an active role in investigating and

⁵Author interview with former FBI special agent, May 16, 2019.

attempting to recover *any* American citizen kidnapped abroad. The policy of “Mission First, People Always,”⁶ allows explicit U.S. government intervention, provisions for negotiating with kidnappers, and the ability to order rescue missions; the new policy also ended the prohibition on private companies paying ransom for its employees, using “kidnapping and ransom” (K&R) insurance policies, or other means of securing a hostage’s release (Jimenez 2002).

In 2015, U.S. hostage recovery policy underwent its third major revision. In the wake of the kidnappings, failed rescue, and deaths of several Americans at the hands of the Islamic State, the Obama Administration conducted an extensive review of U.S. hostage recovery policies. Heralded in the media as a sweeping, “broad overhaul”⁷ of administration policies, the resulting Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD-30) and Executive Order 13698 established an executive branch Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell (HRFC), coordinating the efforts of the FBI; Departments of State, Treasury, Defense, and Justice; Office of the Director of National Intelligence; and the Central Intelligence Agency. The Executive Order also established the Hostage Response Group (HRG) at the National Security Council, and a Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the Department of State, tasked with diplomatic efforts in hostage and detainee cases. These bodies collectively uphold the U.S. “no concessions” policy—a prohibition on paying ransom to U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) in exchange for a captured American. Specifically, the policy reasserts that the United States government denies “hostage takers the benefits of ransom, prisoner release, policy changes, or other acts of concession,” described as a means of protecting Americans by removing incentives to kidnap.⁸

⁶“Personnel Recovery Strategic Communication Guidance, (30 January 2008)” Online at http://dtic.mil.dpmo/laws_directives/documents/stratcomm_guidance.pdf

⁷cite needed

⁸Presidential Policy Directive 30, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/>

The stated preference for official rescue missions belies the reality that few such missions are ever attempted, and many are unsuccessful. In fact, rescue missions represent the most dangerous time for a hostage (MacWillson 1992; Wright 2009). Accordingly, security practitioners' guides on hostage recovery and negotiation are unambiguous on these points: The desirable outcome in any hostage crisis is first and foremost the safe return of the victim, and only once this has been achieved should law enforcement seek the secondary aims of capturing or thwarting the perpetrator while conceding as little as possible.

Few scholars have considered the role of kidnapping in international relations or public opinion,⁹ but some existing work can provide a sense of this understudied empirical phenomenon. Between 2001 and 2015, there have been 208 publicly identified cases of Americans kidnapped abroad across 29 different countries, and hundreds of additional kidnappings that were never reported in the media.¹⁰ While many of these victims are kidnapped by criminal groups for ransom and are returned safely within days, those captured by non-state actors with political motives likely face much longer, and more complicated, captivity. For example,

24/presidential-policy-directive-hostage-recovery-activities

⁹But see, for example: Sandler and Scott (1987) and Lapan and Sandler (1988) on analysis of risk and negotiations; Shortland (2019) for analysis of kidnap and ransom insurance; and Loertscher and Milton (2015) and Mellon et al. (2017), two data projects examining the outcomes for Westerners kidnapped abroad.

¹⁰Dataset from Gilbert (2019*b*). For example, a 2015 State Department travel warning for Mexico reports that there were more than 130 kidnappings of U.S. citizens between January and November of 2015; Gilbert's dataset only includes three in that same period. The 29 countries include: Afghanistan, Algeria, Benin, Chad, Colombia, Egypt, El Salvador, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Iraq, Kenya, Libya, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Ukraine, West Bank & Gaza, and Yemen.

the 63 hostages held by an FTO were held for an average of 760 days (two years and one month), while those captured by non-FTO perpetrators were held an average of 467 days (one year and three months). This latter figure is likely extremely high, as the cases least likely to be reported to the media (criminal cases for ransom) are the cases most likely to be resolved within a matter of days.¹¹

Since 2001, there have been at least 33 hostages who have been the object of a rescue mission.¹² Some of these hostages were part of the same rescue mission. For example, Jean and Scott Adam, Phyllis Macay, and Bob Riggle were part of the same doomed mission in which they were all killed; Gracia Burnham was safely rescued in the same mission in which

¹¹The full list of named perpetrators in the dataset includes: 1920 Revolution Brigade, Abu Sayyaf (ASG), Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Army of Islam/ Holy Jihad Brigades, Asaib al-Haq, Baluchistan Liberation United Front, Bini-Oru, Chechen rebels, Fatah Hawks, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Hadi Saud, Haqqani Network, Houthi rebels, ISIS, Iraqi insurgents, Islamic Army in Iraq, Islamic Companies, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), National Liberation Army (ELN), Nusra Front, Promised Day Brigades, Revenge Brigades, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Somali pirates, Swords of Righteousness Brigade, Taliban, Tawhid and Jihad, United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The remaining perpetrators were described in the media as: armed gang, armed men, armed tribesmen, Bedouin gunmen, forces loyal to Qaddafi, gang members, gunmen, men posing as Nepalese police, militant youths, militants, pirates, rebels, thieves, tribal warlord, and unknown.

¹²In Tables 2 and 3, “success” means that the hostage was recovered alive; “failed” means that the mission did not recover the hostage but is otherwise silent on the hostage’s final outcome; “killed” means the hostage died as a result of the rescue attempt.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Americans Kidnapped Abroad 2001–2015 (N = 208)

Variable	Frequency
<i>Hostage's Profession</i>	
Aid worker/ missionary	14.42% (N = 30)
Contractor	17.79% (N = 37)
Journalist	15.87% (N = 33)
Multinational	18.27% (N = 38)
Tourist	14.90% (N = 31)
U.S. military	2.88% (N = 6)
<i>Hostage Details</i>	
Age at kidnapping (N = 122)	Range: 14–71; Mean: 40; Med: 39
Female hostage	12.98% (N = 27)
Nonwhite hostage	17.79% (N = 37)
<i>Kidnapping Outcome</i>	
Escaped	5.77% (N = 12)
Killed	20.19% (N = 42)
Missing	14.90% (N = 31)
Released	57.69% (N = 120)
Rescue attempt	15.38% (N = 32)
<i>Region of kidnapping</i>	
Sub-Saharan Africa	21.63% (N = 45)
Americas	19.23% (N = 40)
Asia	15.38% (N = 32)
Europe	0.96% (N = 2)
Middle East/ North Africa	42.79% (N = 89)

Note: Descriptive statistics on all publicly identifiable Americans kidnapped abroad from 2001–2015, from Gilbert (2019b).

her husband Martin was killed. About half of these missions were led by JSOC teams, and the other half by foreign forces with the support of the U.S. military.

Table 2: Known U.S. Hostage Rescue Attempts by American Forces, 2001–2015

Hostage	Profession	Country	Force	Success	Failure	Death
Jean Adam	Tourist	Somalia	Navy			x
Scott Adam	Tourist	Somalia	Navy			x
Bowe Bergdahl	U.S. Army	Afghanistan	Army, SEALs		x	
Jessica Buchanan	Aid worker	Somalia	SEALs	x		
Jill Carroll	Journalist	Iraq	Special Ops		x	
James Foley	Journalist	Syria	Delta Force		x	
Roy Hallums	Contractor	Iraq	Delta Force	x		
Dilip Joseph	Aid worker	Afghanistan	SEALs	x		
Peter Kassig	Aid worker	Syria	Delta Force		x	
Phyllis Macay	Tourist	Somalia	Navy			x
Kayla Mueller	Aid worker	Syria	Delta Force		x	
Richard Phillips	Merchant marine	Somalia	SEALs	x		
Bob Riggie	Tourist	Somalia	Navy			x
Luke Somers	Journalist	Yemen	SEALs			x
Steven Sotloff	Journalist	Syria	Delta Force		x	

This discussion shows that hostages and those rescued vary on a number of dimensions including their gender and professions. In addition to these important characteristics of hostages, policymakers sought to make explicit their policy with regard to a third characteristic: circumstance of capture. Recognizing the potential tendency to evaluate hostages on this basis, U.S. policy is unequivocal: It does not differentiate among hostages on the basis of how they ended up in captivity. According to a former FBI agent who worked on hostage recovery, “Comparing someone like Jessica Buchanan who was working with a humanitarian organization to Bowe Bergdahl who walked off his base. . . it doesn’t matter.” Instead, there are only two official considerations before conducting a mission: “Risk to force (the guys going in); and risk to mission (the hostage).”¹³ The globe is divided into “areas of responsibility” (AOR), and the rescue force is determined accordingly: Hostages in Somalia will be rescued by SEALs, whereas those in Iraq will be rescued by Delta Force. According to

¹³Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

Table 3: Known U.S. Hostage Rescue Attempts by Foreign Forces, 2001–2015

Hostage	Profession	Country	Force	Success	Failure	Death
Wilmer Ayala	Contractor	Algeria	Algerian	x		
Gracia Burnham	Tourist	Philippines	Philippine	x		
Martin Burnham	Tourist	Philippines	Philippine			x
Frederick Buttaccio	Contractor	Algeria	Algerian			x
Caitlin Coleman	Tourist	Afghanistan	Pakistani	x		
Marc Gonsalves	Contractor	Colombia	Colombian	x		
Thomas Howes	Contractor	Colombia	Colombian	x		
Jeff James	Contractor	Nigeria	Nigerian	x		
Victor Lovelady	Contractor	Algeria	Algerian	x		
James Robertson	Contractor	Nigeria	Nigerian	x		
Gordon Lee Rowan	Contractor	Algeria	Algerian	x		
Keith Stansell	Contractor	Colombia	Colombian	x		

Note: At least six additional American hostages were rescued along with W. Ayala, F. Buttaccio, and G. Rowan by Algerian forces in the In Amenas hostage crisis. Their names have not been released.

a former FBI agent, each rescue is an enormous production: “There may be 20 to 25 men on the ground, but there are hundreds if not thousands of people involved in the broader mission, including transit, intelligence, support, and tankers.”¹⁴ For this reason, some family members of hostages oppose a rescue mission being launched for their loved one. “Some families are vehemently opposed, particularly those families of NGO or religious/ humanitarian workers, who can’t imagine putting someone else’s life in danger. But ultimately, it’s up to the U.S. government and a determination of U.S. national security, regardless of what the family wants.”¹⁵

3 Public Opinion and Hostage Rescue

Starting with the so-called Almond-Lippmann consensus, scholars have debated whether individuals have relatively low foreign policy knowledge (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955). Yet,

¹⁴Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

¹⁵Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

there is reason to believe the American public is familiar with and potentially influential in affecting the outcomes of some international kidnapping cases. As Chermak and Grunewald (2006) and Weimann and Brosius (1991) have shown, international kidnappings are more likely to attract media coverage than other forms of violence. According to a September 2014 *NBC/ Wall Street Journal* poll, 94% of Americans were aware of the kidnapping of journalist Jim Foley and his subsequent beheading at the hands of his ISIS captors—the highest proportion of Americans aware of any news event polled in the prior five years (NBC 2014). Moreover, kidnappings are precisely the types of events covered in many types of media including soft news, which is likely to reach even the relatively unaware (Baum 2002). In addition to media coverage initiated by news organizations, families of hostages often engage in significant public outreach themselves from launching social media campaigns¹⁶ to online petitions.¹⁷

There are several features of international kidnappings that have been shown to affect the amount of media coverage a case receives: whether the kidnapping is framed as terrorism, the total number of hostages taken (Gilbert 2019*b*),¹⁸ and whether or not there was a rescue attempt. Hostage rescue missions—particularly when they are somehow notable or unsuccessful—receive substantial media coverage, despite representing a minority of all international kidnappings.¹⁹ For example, American contractors Marc Gonsalves, Keith Stansell, and Thomas Howes were kidnapped together by the Revolutionary Armed Forces

¹⁶<https://time.com/4876077/the-art-of-the-hostage-deal/>

¹⁷<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/08/23/a-hostage-in-tehran-goes-free-for-now/>

¹⁸There is more newspaper coverage for kidnappings framed as terrorism; the fewer victims there are per kidnapping, the more coverage the incident will receive.

¹⁹Author interview with Special Agent Rob Saale, former director of the U.S. interagency Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, December 13, 2018.

of Colombia (FARC) when their helicopter crashed in the Andean jungle. They were held captive for more than five years among a group of hostages that included Colombian then-presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. The incident received significant media coverage in 2008, when an epic undercover mission called “Operation Jacque” (“Checkmate”) rescued the three Americans and all remaining hostages. Failed or fatal missions also draw media attention. Kidnapped Indian-American aid worker Dilip Joseph was rescued by Navy SEALs from his captivity in Afghanistan, but one SEAL died in the mission—a fact mentioned in 94% of the stories written about Joseph’s captivity. While each individual hostage is the subject of on average 128 newspaper stories, those attached to a rescue mission were the subject of on average 392 stories (Gilbert 2019*b*).

Although kidnappings may be unusual in the public attention they attract, we argue that individuals will nevertheless rely on certain cues or heuristics about the hostage or missing person to inform their opinion on whether the government should expend resources on a rescue attempt. The real world examples discussed throughout as well as the literature on public opinion formation more generally point to at least three relevant characteristics of the hostage: their deservingness (defined below), their profession, and their gender. We discuss each in turn.

First, we build on a large body of work explaining support for domestic welfare programs, to argue that the deservingness heuristic affects individuals’ beliefs about how government resources should be expended for rescue missions. Specifically, judgements about how the individual came to be in need of assistance may affect how individuals view the obligation of their government to help them. This has been referred to in the literature on domestic welfare as the “deservingness heuristic”. In the context of domestic welfare programs, scholars note that this heuristic follows from individual evaluations of the extent to which the poor are responsible for their economic condition (Gilens 1999; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Bénabou and Tirole 2006). People make both backward-looking and

forward-looking judgments by asking how individuals came to be poor (backward-looking) and whether they will attempt to improve their economic condition in the future (forward-looking) (Petersen et al. 2010).

The deservingness heuristic has been shown to be a key predictor of support for domestic redistribution in a wide variety of contexts (Gilens 1999; Fong 2001; Alesina and Giuliano 2011). Scholars have also demonstrated that variation in these beliefs contribute to the difference between the United States and Europe in the size of the welfare state (Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote 2001; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005). Americans on average tend to believe the poor are more responsible for their condition, while Europeans tend to think poverty is more the result of bad luck.²⁰

Applying this logic to the case of hostage recovery, we find many similar elements. First, governments must decide to allocate resources to assist the individual in the same way that governments decide to allocate resources to assist the poor. Second, like when individuals evaluate poverty-stricken individuals' responsibility for their economic situation, individuals may vary in the extent to which they think a hostage used bad judgment or was otherwise responsible for their own capture, or if their capture was not their fault or the result of bad luck. Given the power of the deservingness heuristic for other policy outcomes, we expect it to similarly influence individual support for rescue. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: The more individuals are perceived as responsible for their capture, the less the public will support their rescue.

We can use a similar logic to make predictions about other relevant characteristics of

²⁰In further support of the power of the deservingness heuristic, recent research has shown that if one induces Americans to believe the poor are less responsible for their economic condition, then Americans support redistribution at rates similar to Europeans (Aarøe and Petersen 2014).

hostages that make them more deserving of government assistance. First, we expect that individuals engaged in public-service-oriented activities such as soldiers, journalists, and aid workers, should be more deserving in the minds of the public than individuals who may be perceived to be engaging in risky behavior for their own personal interest such as tourists. Second, gender-based norms of assistance suggest that Americans will be more likely to feel compelled to support the rescue of female hostages over male hostages. “Missing white woman syndrome” (MWWS) suggests that white, female victims of crimes—particularly abductions—attract more media attention than their non-white, male counterparts, and may be portrayed as more sympathetic victims (Gilchrist 2010; Grunewald, Chermak and Pizarro 2013; Min and Feaster 2010; Simmons and Woods 2015; Sommers 2016; Slakoff and Fradella forthcoming).

H2: The public will have higher support for rescuing U.S. soldiers than other professionals or tourists.

H3: The public will have higher support for rescuing women than men.

As noted in the introduction, any variation in public opinion about rescue missions is at odds with U.S. policy. According to the former FBI agent, “We know that Americans will often say [of a hostage] ‘Well, they shouldn’t have been hiking there in the first place.’ But once someone is captured, that person now represents the United States, and we won’t let captors push the U.S. around.” That attitude pervades military thinking on the subject. He continued, “We’ll sustain 10 casualties, but it doesn’t matter: We have to get an American out.”²¹

²¹Interview with author, May 16, 2019.

4 Research Design

We provide an initial test of these hypotheses using data collected in November 2016 from a survey of around 1300 Americans. The survey included an embedded experiment with a vignette that randomized certain elements of a scenario designed to test the hypotheses. The scenario described an American missing in a rebel stronghold in a foreign country. The key manipulations concerned characteristics of the missing person such as their profession (soldier, journalist, or hiker) and gender (male or female) as well as language designed to cue the deservingness of the individual (3 treatment groups). Finally, we included additional manipulations that can serve as control variables for the cost and location of the mission. We randomize the cost of the mission by varying the number of soldiers involved (10, 100 or 1000) in the potential rescue as well as the country in which the American has gone missing (Nigeria, Syria or Afghanistan). This yielded a 3 x 2 x 3 x 3 x 3 design. Although this design has a small cell size for any given combination, we primarily are concerned with the effects of the profession, gender, and deservingness treatments averaging over the other manipulations. The scenario is provided in full below. The randomized elements are in italics and brackets.

An American [*soldier / journalist / hiker*] has gone missing in [*Nigeria / Syria / Afghanistan*]. [*She / He*] is believed to be in a rebel stronghold. [*She / He*] traveled to the area [*following the orders of / without the knowledge of / against the orders of*] [*his / her*] superiors. The U.S. government has proposed that a nearby unit of [*10 / 100 / 1000*] American soldiers conduct a search and rescue mission. When you have finished reading the situation carefully, click the arrow.

In the case of the hiker, we still wanted to provide a deservingness cue, but as a tourist a “superior” would not have been the appropriate wording. Thus, instead for those who received the hiker scenario the deservingness cue was as follows: [*She / He*] traveled to the area [*with the blessing of / without the knowledge of / against the wishes of*] [*his / her*]

family.

The scenario manipulations roughly represent the variation we see in real hostage recovery missions. As shown in Tables 2 and 3 above, one third of all rescue missions conducted since 2001 have been in one of the three manipulation countries; two thirds of the hostages connected to U.S. rescue missions were either a journalist, tourist, or affiliated with the U.S. military. Other professions frequently kidnapped abroad and subsequently rescued include aid workers and contractors, who we expect to be viewed like journalists and military, respectively. Further, while overall recovery missions are often planned by hundreds or thousands of JSOC personnel, it is usually a much smaller team of SEALs or Delta Force who get credit on the ground.

The main dependent variable is a question asking respondents about their support for the rescue mission. We also asked several questions to measure the mechanisms behind the treatment effects. In terms of the dependent variable, we first asked respondents immediately following the vignette, the following: “To what extent do you support or oppose the U.S. government’s proposed search and rescue mission?”. A six-point scale followed from “oppose a lot” to “support a lot.” We dichotomize this variable for ease of presentation such that all respondents who answered one of the three support options are coded as 1 and all respondents who answered one of the three oppose options are coded as 0.²²

After answering the rescue mission support question, respondents answered a series of questions designed to measure various mechanisms. We examine the deservingness hypothesis more closely by asking respondents how responsible they think the American is for their situation. The question reads as follows: “To what extent do you think the missing [*soldier* / *journalist* / *hiker*] is to blame for [*his* / *her*] situation?”. Respondents could give one of four response options ranging from “completely to blame” to “completely blameless.” Additionally, we also asked respondents about their perceptions of the likelihood of the success of

²²Results do not vary if we use the full six-point scale as our dependent variable.

this mission and about their perceptions of the costs. These two questions and their response options are listed below:

- If the search and rescue mission is approved, how likely do you think it is that it will succeed? Very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, not likely at all
- Do you think the number of soldiers involved in the U.S. government's proposed search and rescue mission is too much, too few, or just about right?

Our theory and hypotheses suggest the following observable implications. In terms of deservingness, we expect higher levels of support for the mission when respondents are told that the missing American was following orders. This cue should make respondents think that the missing person is less responsible for their situation and therefore more deserving of assistance from the U.S. government. The deservingness cue should not affect perceptions of cost or success of the mission.

In terms of the profession treatment, the following implication flows from the theory. Because journalists and soldiers are public-service-oriented professions, we expect the public to have the highest level of support for rescue missions to secure them. Given this, we also expect soldiers and journalists independent of the deservingness cue to be viewed as less responsible for their situation relative to hikers, which should lead to higher support for their rescue.

Finally, we expect to find that our gender treatment affects support for the mission and negotiation. As we noted in the theory section, gendered beliefs about assisting others and cultural perceptions of women in distress could lead respondents to have higher support for rescue when the individual is a woman. However, it is also possible that the treatment could have a neutral or even a negative effect if respondents have negative opinions of women who participate in seemingly risky professions or activities.

In the section that follows, we first present some descriptive statistics about public opinion

about rescue. To our knowledge, there are very few public opinion surveys that ask questions about general scenarios such as ours. Thus, our study offers a valuable baseline to understand public opinion on this issue. Then we follow this descriptive exercise by presenting both the correlates of support for rescue missions as well as the results for our experiment.

5 Findings

To begin, we describe the summary statistics for our key variables as well as examining the individual-level correlates of support for rescue missions. As noted above, few surveys exist that ask about a variety of situations in which the U.S. government could engage in rescue missions or negotiation. However, we can gather some initial evidence for our hypotheses in the few data sets that exist. In particular, Pew Research released a report in 2014 regarding President Obama’s efforts to secure the release of Bowe Bergdahl.²³ The main takeaway from the report is that while in general Americans support the U.S. government taking aggressive action to bring home captured servicemen and women, they were much more skeptical in the case of Bergdah because of his perceived responsibility for his capture. Nearly 30% of respondents said that because Bowe Bergdahl walked off base, the U.S. was not obligated to do all it could to bring him home. 60% however did think the U.S. government has a responsibility to do everything it can regardless of circumstance of capture.

On average, respondents in our survey have higher levels of support for rescue and negotiation even when a soldier is described as disobeying orders. Table 1 holds the summary statistics for the key variables in our study. *Rescue* is the variable measuring support for the rescue mission. We find averaging across all treatment conditions that 80% of respondents support the rescue mission. In general, respondents believed the mission would be successful, averaging a response of “somewhat likely” or 3 on the four point scale. Respondents

²³<https://www.people-press.org/2014/06/09/public-has-doubts-about-bergdahl-prisoner-exchange/>

also believed that the costs of the mission were reasonable with the average response to the perception of the number of soldiers allocated to the mission of “about right”. Finally, and perhaps most puzzlingly, despite relatively high average levels of support for rescue, respondents believed the missing individual was responsible for their situation more often than not. With an average score of 3.39 out of 4, suggesting an average response between “somewhat to blame” and “completely to blame.” To delve more deeply into what explains the high levels of support for rescue, we turn to preliminary exploration of the individual-level correlates of the dependent variables.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Rescue	0.81	0.39	0	1	1,341
Success	3.09	0.79	1	4	1,331
Cost	2.16	0.67	1	3	1,331
Blame	3.39	0.67	1	4	1,331

Table 1: **Summary statistics**

Model 1 of Table 2 shows the simple correlation between the three questions measuring the mechanisms and support for rescue. All three are strongly correlated with support for rescue in the expected direction. Individuals who believe the mission is likely to be successful are more likely to support it. There are negative relationships between both cost and blame and support for rescue. The more costly they feel the mission is the less they support it and the more responsible they feel the missing American is for their own situation, the less they support rescue. The magnitude and significance of these effects do not change when we control for the other individual-level factors and demographic characteristics of respondents. These results provide initial evidence in favor of the hypothesis that the deservingness of the potential hostage affects support for rescue.

In terms of demographic and other respondent characteristics, Model 2 reports the one demographic characteristic that had a significant relationship with the outcome. All other control variables included in the model had coefficients at or close to 0. Thus, the results

demonstrate that very little variation in support for rescue can be explained by these factors. We can note that rescuing missing Americans may be one of the few remaining bipartisan issues. We see that both Clinton voters and Trump voters have the same level of support for rescue. Curiously, individuals who supported other candidates in the 2016 presidential election and those who did not vote, were less likely to support rescue than either Clinton or Trump voters. Another interesting null result is the finding related to internationalism (not reported in the table). Rescue also seems to be a common point of agreement between internationalists and isolationists who both have similar support for rescue.

	Model 1	Model 2
Success	0.20*** (0.014)	0.20*** (0.014)
Cost	-0.12*** (0.015)	-0.12*** (0.015)
Blame	-0.08*** (0.015)	-0.08*** (0.015)
Vote: Trump Voters		-0.03 (0.022)
Vote: Other Party Voters		-0.09** (0.040)
Vote: Non-Voters		-0.08** (0.034)
Constant	0.70*** (0.081)	0.88*** (0.099)
Observations	1,331	1,324
R-squared	0.24	0.25

Standard errors in parentheses

** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Note: Table reports coefficients from OLS regression models. Each model contains control variables for treatments, but we do not report these here. The baseline category for *Vote* is Clinton voters. The table also includes control variables for political knowledge, political interest, employment status, age, race, gender, education, parent, and internationalism. Nearly all the coefficients for these variables were at or near 0.

Table 2: **Correlates of Support for Rescue**

With the supportive evidence from our regression models in mind, we now turn to the findings from our experiment. In the figures below, we show the predicted levels of support for hostage rescue and perceived responsibility of the missing individual. We use Model 2 in Table 2 to derive the predicted levels while holding constant the control variables.

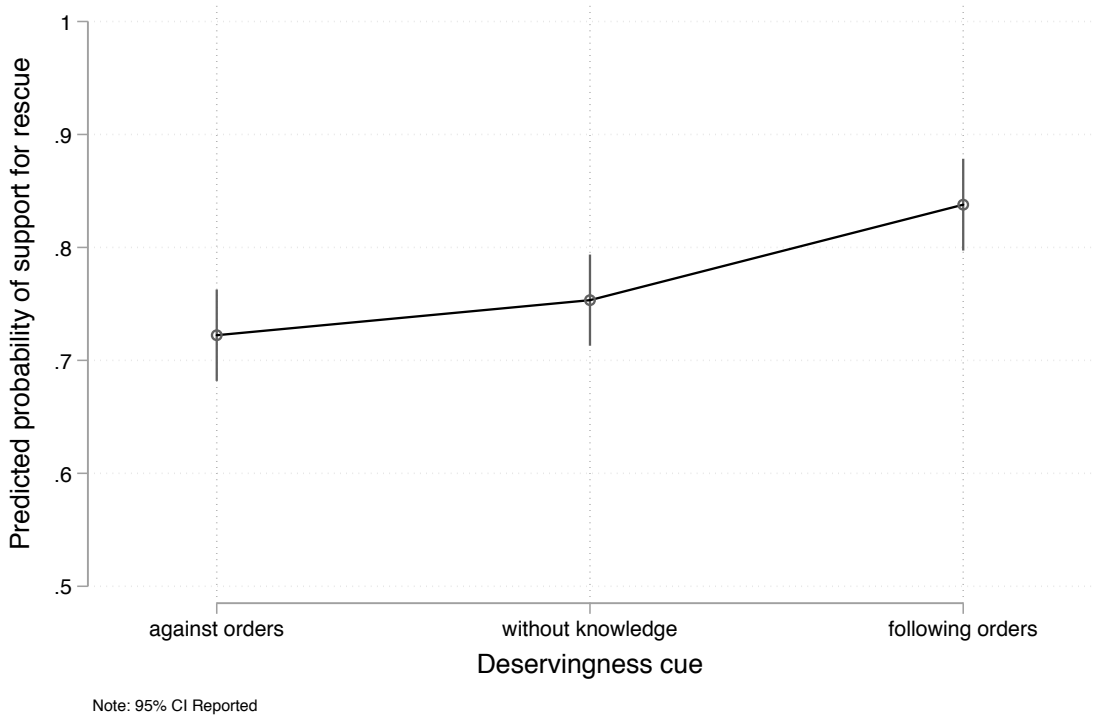


Figure 1: **Predicted Probability of Support for Rescue by Deservingness Cue Treatment**

We begin by examining the average effects of the deservingness cue on support for rescue. Recall that for respondents in the journalist or soldier condition, the individual was described as either being in the rebel stronghold against the orders, without the knowledge, or following the orders of their superior. In the case of the hiker, we use the hiker’s family. Figure 1 clearly shows the effects of the deservingness cue on support for rescue. Respondents are significantly more likely to support rescue when the individual is described as following orders or having the blessing of their family. The overall effect is a more than 10 percentage

point increase in support.²⁴ Support increases from 72% to 84% when the missing American is “more deserving”. Although support for rescue is still relatively high when the missing individual is not the ideal type, these results suggest that the American public does not ignore the responsibility of the missing person for their situation.

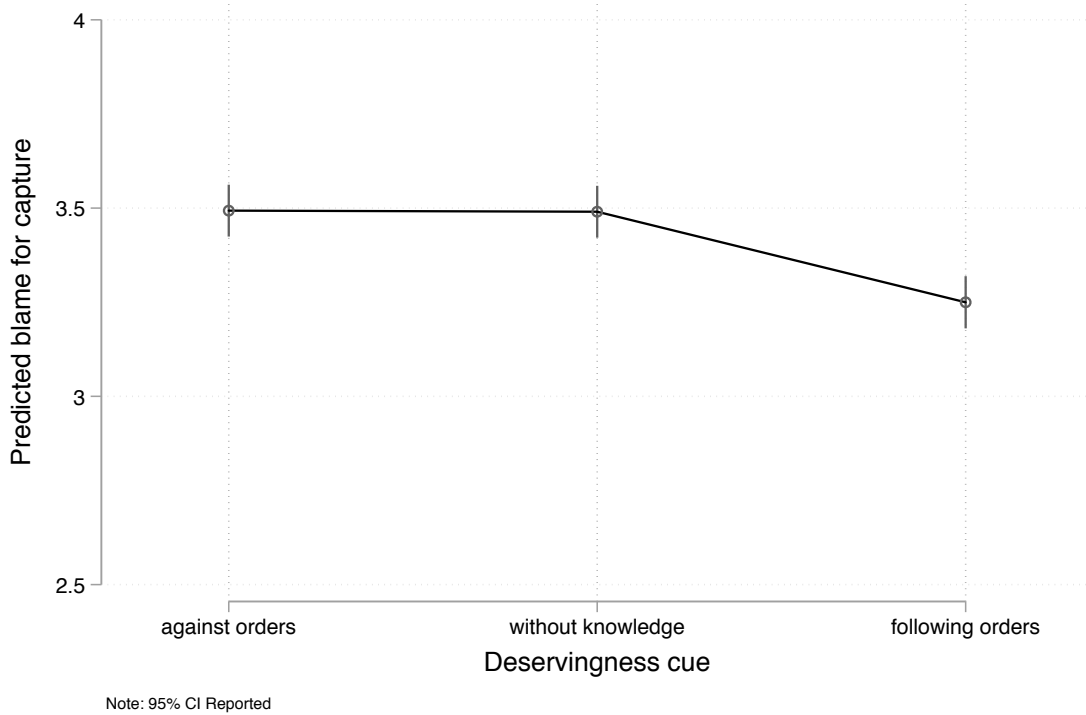


Figure 2: **Predicted Perception of Blame for Capture by Deservingness Cue Treatment**

Turning to the mechanism, we observe that the deservingness cue had the expected effect on individual perceptions of whether the missing person was to blame for their situation. Figure 2 shows that blame is lessened if respondents read that the missing person was just following orders compared to going to the rebel stronghold against orders or without the knowledge of his or her superior (or family). As noted above however there is still a high

²⁴For ease of exposition, we discuss the results in the text in terms of percentage points instead of probabilities.

level of belief that individuals are not completely or somewhat blameless even when going to a rebel stronghold following the orders of their superiors. This may indicate that going missing or getting taken hostage must be precipitated by an individual mistake even if in the location due to the orders of a superior. Together these results provide strong evidence that the responsibility the public feels individuals have for their potential capture or hostage situation influences support for government attempts at rescue.

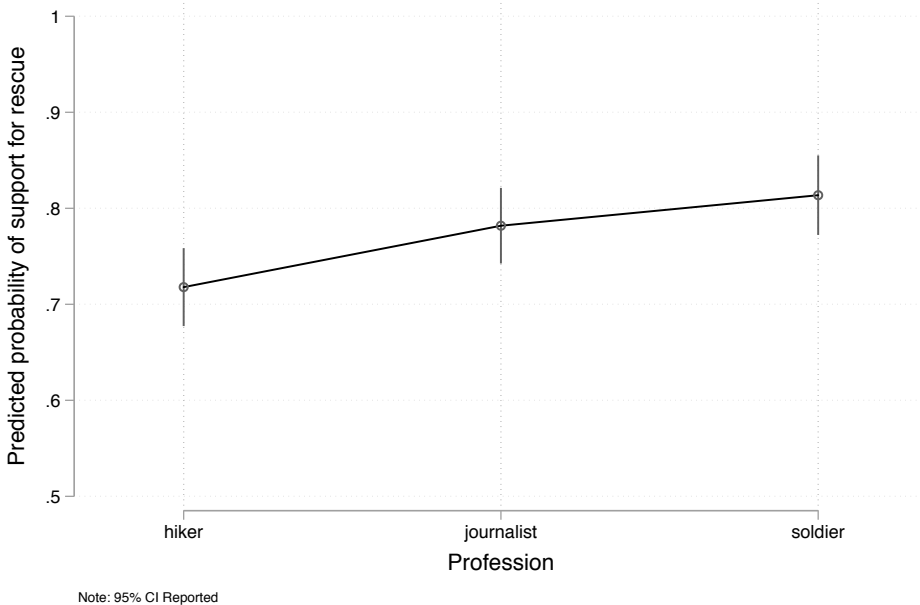


Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Support for Rescue by Profession Treatment

In addition to deservingness, we also hypothesized that other characteristics of the missing American could affect respondents' support for rescue. Specifically, we expect that soldiers and journalists will induce higher support for rescue missions than tourists like hikers. Additionally, we argue that the gender of the missing individual would affect support. Both of these hypotheses are supported by the data. First, Figure 3 shows that support for rescue is indeed the highest for respondents reading about the missing soldier as compared to the hiker. There is no significant difference between the journalist and soldier treatments, but

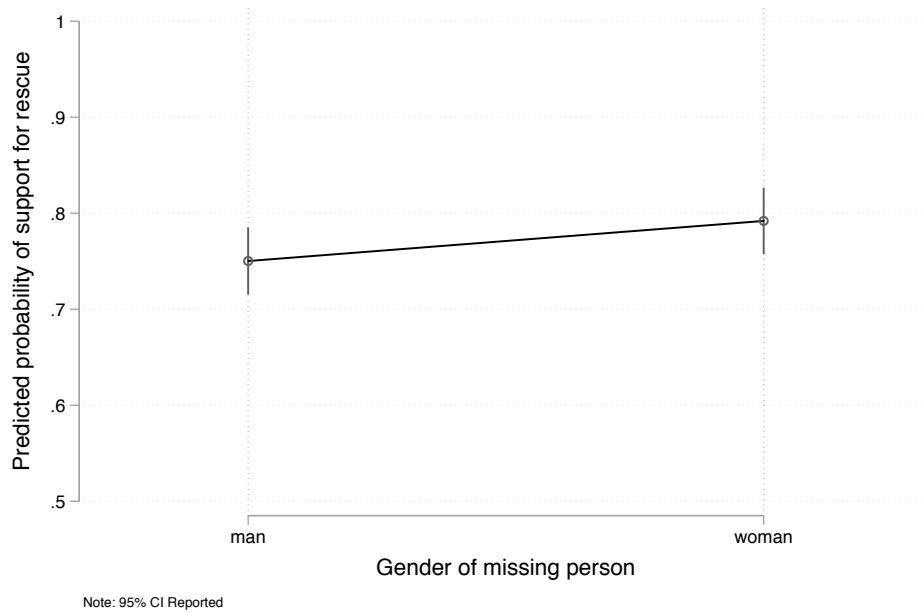


Figure 4: **Predicted Probability of Support for Rescue by Gender Treatment**

support is also significantly higher for rescuing the journalist relative to the hiker. Second, Figure 4 shows that there is a small but significant increase in support for rescue when the missing person is a woman relative to a man. The difference is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, but is only 5 percentage points.

Finally, we examine two conditional relationships. First, we analyze whether deservingness cues moderate the effect of profession. Second, we examine whether partisanship moderates the effects of deservingness cues. Beginning with the former, we expect that deservingness cues are quite strong such that when the missing individual is viewed as having gone against orders, the relative priority the public gives to journalists and soldiers relative to hikers should disappear. In other words, for respondents in the “against orders” treatment group, the profession of the missing person should not be associated with support for rescue. Figure 5 shows that this is indeed exactly what we find. Although support for rescuing hikers is still a few percentage points lower than for journalists or soldiers, there are no longer sig-

nificant differences between the three professions. Instead observed differences between the professions are only significant in the “without knowledge” and “following orders” treatment group.

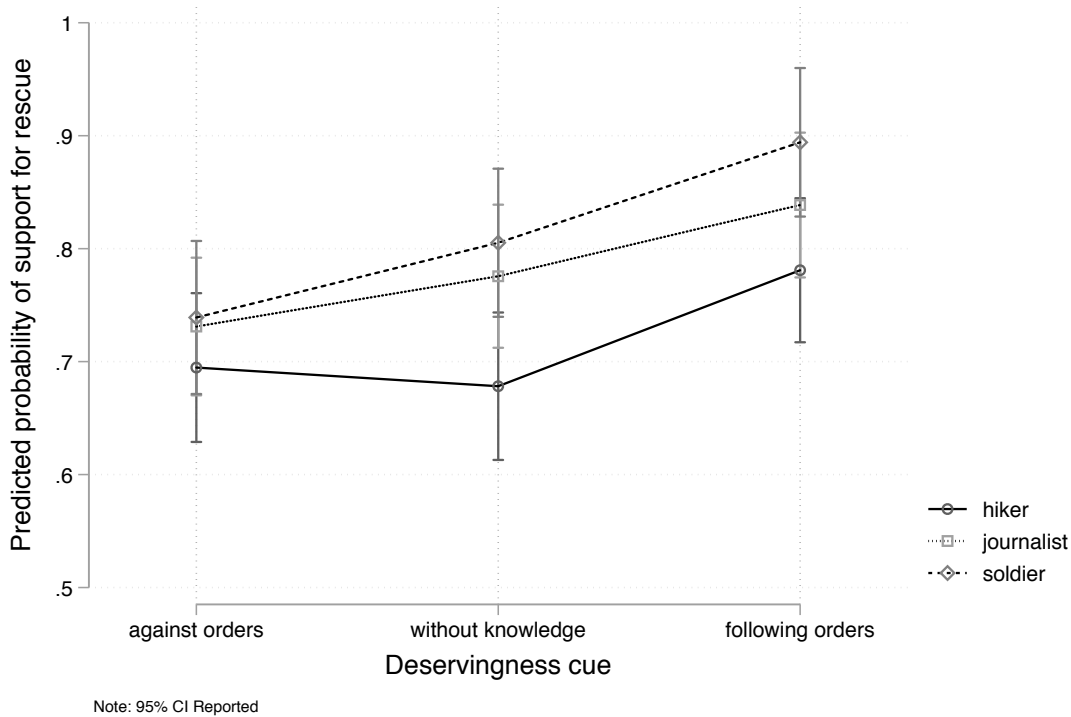


Figure 5: Predicted Probability of Support for Rescue by Profession Treatment and Deservingness Cue

Similarly, we find that partisanship moderates the effects of deservingness cues on support for rescue. Because conservatism in the United States tends to be associated with ideas about individual responsibility in the context of government-supplied welfare assistance, we expect that the same conservative tendency to emphasize individual responsibility will lead deservingness cues to have a stronger effect on support for rescue among conservatives in our data. We find considerable support for this notion. Using vote choice as a proxy for conservatism, we show that while following orders increases support for rescue by 6 percentage points relative to going against orders for Clinton voters, this effect size more

than doubles to 14 percentage points for Trump voters.

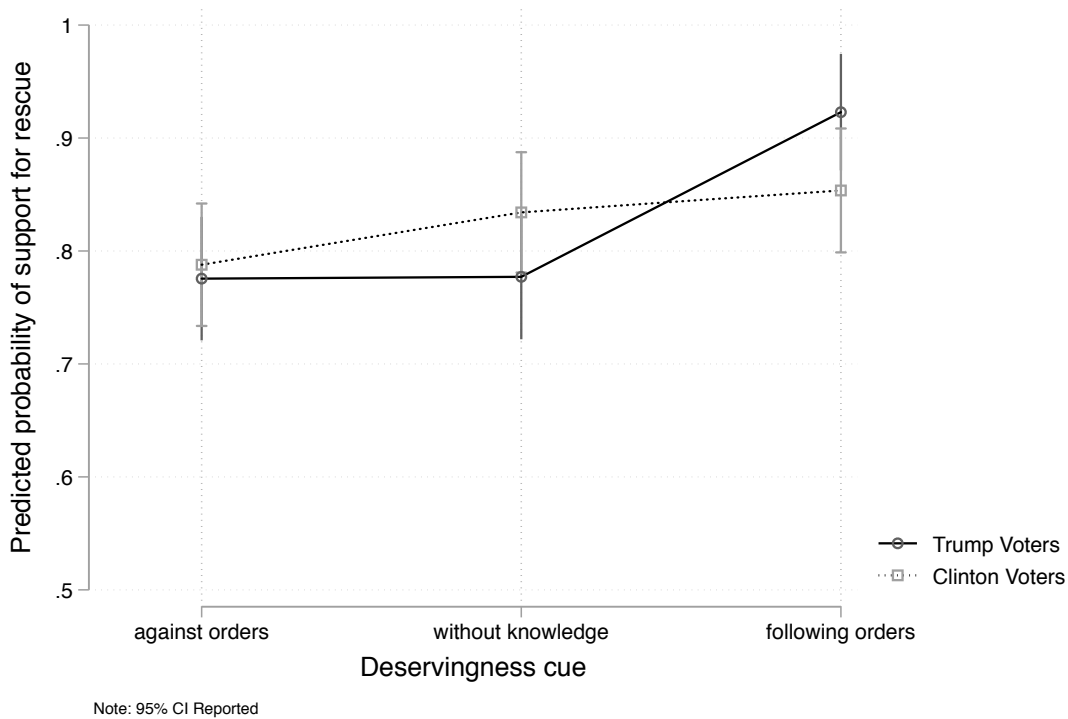


Figure 6: Predicted Probability of Support for Rescue by Deservingness Cue and 2016 Vote Choice

6 Conclusion

In exploring the public perception of a widespread and understudied element of international violence, this paper makes important empirical and theoretical contributions to literatures on security studies and public policy. It represents a first attempt to understand the variation in public support for hostage recovery missions. Applying the “deservingness heuristic” from theories of domestic welfare policies, we show that individuals’ beliefs regarding a hostage’s responsibility for putting herself in danger affects overall support for recovery missions. This varies in turn over the fictional hostage’s profession and gender, as well as the survey

respondent's partisanship.

Notably, all of this variation is at odds with current U.S. policy on hostage recovery, which predicts potential pushback in cases of “undeserving” victims. This is reflected in the recent media interest in pregnant American hiker and her Canadian husband Joshua Boyle, who were kidnapped while hiking in Afghanistan, and in the well known case of Bowe Bergdahl. For the moment, however, the U.S. military is resolute in their dedication to these missions. The Navy SEAL who lost his leg while searching for Bergdahl testified at Bergdahl's court martial hearing that the military knew Bergdahl had deserted his post when they went looking for him. Why did they still conduct the research and rescue mission? “Because he's got a mom,” the SEAL testified. “Plus, it's my job; that's what we're told to do.”²⁵

The current version of this experiment represents a plausibility probe for our concepts of interest. Going forward, we hope to expand and update the survey in several ways. First, we plan to re-run the survey, with small changes to the vignette. The current language does not explicitly say, but only implies, that the American has been kidnapped. In a future survey, we would make this action explicit—both to be more precise in our concepts, and also to potentially test any difference between the two surveys in support when “kidnapping” is explicitly mentioned. Second, we are interested in testing whether respondents are willing to tolerate higher mission “costs” as a function of the number of U.S. soldiers participating in the rescue, for soldiers and journalists, as compared to tourists. We think this might be the case because of the sacrifice journalists and soldiers make in their jobs. Last, we hope to replicate this survey experiment in Israel, to explore any systematic differences between the American and Israeli publics. We hypothesize that the Israeli public will have overall higher levels of support for rescue missions across all treatment conditions, and that they will be

²⁵<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/10/25/at-bergdahl-sentencing-former-navy-seal-sheds-tears-recounting-death-of-military-dog/>

less likely to discriminate among hostage professions as deserving of rescue. Moreover, Israel represents an interesting case given its policy of mandatory military service.

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