

No Man Left Behind?

Hostage Deservingness and the Politics of Hostage Recovery

Abstract

Kidnappings of soldiers, journalists, aid workers, and other civilians by armed groups happen every day. Yet, the politics of hostage recovery remains relatively understudied by international relations scholars. Whether and how governments choose to recover their citizens varies widely, as does public sentiment about bringing hostages home. To explain this variation, we develop a theory of hostage deservingness and detail how perceptions of deservingness affect support for a range of recovery options. We argue that deservingness is determined by the circumstance of capture—particularly whether hostages are perceived to be to blame for their capture. We test the argument using experiments embedded in two large, national surveys of the American public. The results of the experiments 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 and ransom payment is at its highest. However, when capture occurs under circumstances that suggest the hostage bears responsibility, support for rescue and ransom payment decreases, especially when recovery is costly. These findings suggest that the public is out of step with U.S. government policy, which dictates circumstance of capture should be ignored, and predicts potential backlash for policymakers in recovering less sympathetic hostages.

1 Introduction

Armed groups kidnap thousands of soldiers, journalists, aid workers, and other civilians each year. These kidnappers demand—and often receive—significant concessions, especially when governments cannot rescue their citizens held captive abroad. Yet, kidnapping and hostage recovery are understudied in international relations (Loertscher and Milton 2018). Whether and how governments recover their citizens held captive varies across countries and over time. This variation has serious political ramifications: Hostage taking and recovery are highly salient events, and their resolution (or lack thereof) can spark public outrage or joy.

Recent missions to recover Americans kidnapped abroad highlight two unexplained gaps in our understanding of these dynamics. First, some hostages appear to earn public sympathy, while others receive public scorn. Why does the public react this way, and how does this reaction translate to individual attitudes towards government efforts to bring them home?¹ Second, while public opinion may deem some kidnapped Americans less deserving of government intervention because of the circumstances of their capture, official U.S. policy is clear: The circumstances of a hostage’s initial capture are not taken into consideration for recovery decisions. What are the political ramifications of this distance between policymaking and the public? Even if the deservingness of the hostage is to be ignored when deciding *whether* to engage in recovery, how might political considerations and a hostage’s deservingness influence its implementation?

The contrast in the public response to the recovery of hostages Captain Richard Phillips and Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl exemplifies these tensions. On April 10, 2009, U.S. Navy SEAL

¹Our work joins other recent scholarship that seeks to understand individual attitudes about important issues in international security. See, e.g., Mattes and Weeks (2019); Myrick (2019); Kertzer, Rathbun and Rathbun (2020); Tomz and Weeks (2020); Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020); Dill and Schubiger (2021); Kostyuk and Wayne (2021).

Team 6 parachuted into the pirate-laden waters off the coast of Somalia, where the Navy destroyer *USS Bainbridge* was watching a hostage crisis unfold. The SEALs were sent to recover U.S. Merchant Marine Captain Richard Phillips, held hostage for four days in a small lifeboat by three Somali pirates (McNight and Hirsh 2012). Under direct orders from the President of the United States, the SEALs took simultaneous shots from the back of the *Bainbridge*, killing all three pirates and ending Phillips’s ordeal. The public hailed Phillips 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.

While the response to Captain Phillips’s daring rescue suggests that Americans are invested in recovering upstanding professionals whose job responsibilities put them in the line of danger, not all captured Americans garner this level of public support.² Several months later, in June 2009, recently deployed Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl walked off his base in Paktika province, Afghanistan. Ostensibly hoping his desertion would provide the opportunity to report management problems to senior leadership, Bergdahl was instead captured by the Taliban and held by the Haqqani Network for five years (Rubin 2019). When Bergdahl disappeared, the military immediately launched around-the-clock search and rescue teams to recover him, including an unsuccessful Navy SEAL mission in which one SEAL lost part of

²Reporting suggests that Captain Phillips was not a “perfect” victim, despite being heralded as a hero: Crew from the *Maersk Alabama* sued their employer over the captain’s alleged negligence and forsaking protocol. See Erich Fuchs, “This Lawsuit Supposedly Tells the ‘True Story’ of Captain Richard Phillips’ Pirated Ship,” *Business Insider*, 11 October 2013, Online at <https://www.businessinsider.com/lawsuit-against-maersk-line-over-captain-phillips-ship-2013-10>.

his leg and a service dog was killed. Throughout these rescue attempts, the circumstances of Bergdahl's capture featured prominently in the minds of those involved. As reported in the popular podcast, *Serial*, Ken Wolfe, the Command Sergeant Major, stated about the rescue, "The other battalions within the organization were looking for him too. And so, you know, how does it make you feel when you've walked for 15 days straight looking for a guy who walked off?" The reporter and podcast host, Sarah Koenig, replied that the military "...also knew, or were at least pretty confident, that Bowe had left [his outpost] voluntarily, and now they felt like they were going through hell on his behalf...Most of the people I talked to about this time, they said this search inflicted such major damage on morale, which can be a delicate thing to maintain in the best of times."³

Years after multiple unsuccessful rescue attempts, President Obama authorized a prisoner exchange, trading Bergdahl for the release of five Taliban detainees held at Guantanamo. The public's outrage at the swap stemmed at least in part from the fact 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"; President Trump 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).

Inspired by these and other cases, we develop a theory of hostage deservingness and explain how deservingness affects the politics of recovery efforts. We test the theory using experiments embedded in two large, national surveys of the American public (a pilot fielded in 2016 and a final survey in 2020). We examine two key factors that we hypothesize will influence support for recovery policies. We focus first on the deservingness of the hostage,

³From transcript of *Serial*, Season 2, Episode 2, found here: <https://serialpodcast.org/season-two/2/the-golden-chicken/transcript>

which we conceptualize as the worthiness of a hostage of government support based on perceptions of who's to blame for the hostage's capture. Second, we contrast deservingness with the cost sensitivity of the public in terms of the size of a rescue mission and the amount of ransom demanded. Finally, we hypothesize an interaction between the two with cost sensitivity decreasing for hostages perceived as more deserving.

We find that public support for hostage recovery is highly dependent on the public's perception of who's to blame for the hostage's capture. In general, support for hostage rescue missions is high and preferred to paying a ransom. A majority of respondents surveyed support hostage rescue in all cases tested, with the greatest support for recovering Americans who were captured while "just following orders" or granted permission to travel by the State Department. However, when the circumstances of the kidnapping suggest that the hostage holds personal blame for being in a dangerous situation, support for rescue plummets—especially when the ransom amount is high or the rescue mission is costly.

Our theory and findings make several important contributions to the study and practice of international politics. First, we bring together several literatures across the social sciences, including research on public support for social welfare programs, that note a pattern of the use of deservingness as a heuristic to explain a range of social outcomes. Our work is the first to our knowledge to focus on deservingness in the field of international security. Second, to our knowledge, this represents the first scholarly examination of the politics of hostage 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 and the potential impact on recovery options. In the United States—as well as other countries such as France (Simon 2019) and Israel (Sherwood 2010)—kidnapping events garner tremendous public attention, thus it is essential to understand more about how the public thinks about these attacks. Whether Americans believe a hostage is more or less deserving of recovery can affect the political calculus of

leaders tasked with bringing them home under public scrutiny. Third, our findings suggest a disconnect between public opinion and policy on this issue: While our results show that the public is apparently discerning about differences in hostage deservingness, U.S. doctrine makes no distinction among hostages in this way. We suggest that this is a design feature, not bug, of policies meant to provide assurance to Americans taking risky assignments abroad, and to deter would-be hostage takers from capturing Americans. Still, our work shows that perceptions of deservingness can shape how hostage recovery is implemented, and that officials may face political consequences for rescuing blameworthy victims—or for failing to recover hostages seen as more deserving.

2 Hostage Taking and Recovery

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.⁴

Despite their designation as a war crime, hostage takings are pervasive, and the majority are kidnappings—the “forceful abduction of an individual by a non-state armed group, including

⁴Customary IHL, “Practice Relating to Rule 96. Hostage-Taking.” International Committee of the Red Cross.

terrorists, rebels, and criminals” (Gilbert 2020, 3). The Global Terrorism Database includes 15,620 hostage-taking incidents between 1970 and 2019, 13,739 of which were kidnappings.⁵ According 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).

Few scholars have considered the role of kidnapping in international relations or public opinion, but some existing work can provide a sense of this understudied empirical phenomenon. For example, kidnapping is underreported,⁶ and its demands, duration, and outcomes may vary. In the last two decades, hundreds of Americans have been kidnapped abroad in several dozen countries (Loertscher and Milton 2015; Gilbert 2020). While many of these victims are kidnapped by criminal groups for ransom and are released within days, those captured by non-state actors with political motives face much longer, and more complicated, captivity (Loertscher and Milton 2018). For example, hostages held by a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) were held for an average of 63% longer than those captured by other perpetrators.⁷ The vast majority of kidnapped Americans are released following ransom payment or other concessions to the kidnappers; some die, fewer are rescued, and even fewer escape.⁸

⁵National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). “Global Terrorism Database.” (2016). <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁶For 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; the dataset in Gilbert (2020) only includes three publicly reported kidnappings in Mexico in that same period.

⁷This disparity is likely dramatically underestimated, 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.

⁸For more information, see descriptive statistics on kidnappings in SI.

2.1 Hostage Recovery Policy in the United States

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. In particular, policy has changed with respect to how hostages are recovered (whether rescue missions or ransom payments occur) and which hostages are recovered (whether recovery is limited to U.S. servicemembers and government officials or available to all). Two hostage-taking events in particular—the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, and the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847—set the stage for current U.S. hostage recovery policy. 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 (Naylor 2015, 3). Post-mortem analyses revealed that the different military services had failed to coordinate effectively in service of the mission.⁹ 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 Americans taken hostage abroad.

Around the same time, hijackings took off as favored tool of armed groups. In June 1985, Hizballah militants took over TWA flight 847 flying from Cairo to San Diego, diverting the

⁹Author interview with former FBI special agent, May 16, 2019.

aircraft, including 17 American passengers, to Beirut and Algiers. Over the next 17 days, the hijackers killed American Naval diver SW2 Class Robert Stethem and held 39 men hostage, while demanding the release of 766 Lebanese prisoners held in Israel. In response, President Ronald Reagan declared:

America will never make concessions to terrorists. To do so would only invite more terrorism. Nor will we ask nor pressure any other government to do so. Once we head down that path, there will be no end to it—no end to the suffering of innocent people, no end to the ransom all civilized nations must pay (President Reagan, quoted in Auerbach 1999).

Three days after the Americans were freed, Israel released 300 of the prisoners in question; U.S. and Israeli officials denied any connection to the hijacking. This episode illustrates some of the paradoxes in U.S. ransom policy: While officials have, since Reagan, vociferously denied that the U.S. will pay terrorists' ransom demands, government officials do make allowances for negotiations, prisoner exchanges, or having third parties pay (Gilbert 2019).

February 2002 marked the next 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 attempting to recover *any* American citizen kidnapped abroad. The policy of “Mission First, People Always,”¹⁰ allows explicit U.S. government intervention, provisions for negotiating with kidnapers, and the ability to order rescue missions; the new policy also ended the

¹⁰“Personnel Recovery Strategic Communication Guidance, (30 January 2008)” Online at http://dtic.mil.dpmo/laws_directives/documents/stratcomm_guidance.pdf

prohibition on private companies’ paying ransom or using kidnapping and ransom (K&R) insurance policies to recover their employees (Jimenez 2002). In response, the global industry for hostage negotiation and ransom payment thrived (Shortland 2019).

Finally, in 2015, U.S. hostage recovery policy underwent its most recent major revision. In the wake of the kidnappings, ransom demand, failed rescue, and deaths of several Americans captured by the Islamic State, the Obama Administration conducted an extensive review of U.S. hostage recovery policies. Heralded as a sweeping “broad overhaul”¹¹ of administration policies, the resulting Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD-30) 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 work to recover kidnapped Americans while upholding 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.¹²

¹¹Julie Hirschfield Davis, ”Obama Ordering Changes in U.S. Hostage Policies,” *The New York Times*, 23 June 2015. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/world/obama-ordering-changes-in-us-hostage-policies.html>.

¹²Presidential Policy Directive 30, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/24/presidential-policy-directive-hostage-recovery-activities>. In 2020, these provisions were codified into law through the Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act.

Since 2015, therefore, international kidnapping cases are managed at two levels: The HRG makes decisions about what to do in each case, while the HRFC manages the operational side of hostage recovery. If the kidnapper is not a designated FTO, the government permits and may assist the hostage's family or employer to pay the likely ransom demand. However, if the perpetrator is an FTO, the government will seek other options.

2.2 The Costs and Benefits of Paying Ransoms and Rescue

When an American is kidnapped for ransom abroad, the U.S. government must contend with competing foreign policy priorities—bring the captive American home, and prevent future attacks on American interests. Sometimes these priorities are directly at odds, such as when paying a ransom to recover one captive helps fund the group for its next attack (Brandt, George and Sandler 2016). For certain perpetrators—such as FTOs—the cost is deemed too high; ransoms to such groups are thus legally prohibited. But even when ransom is allowable, it is not always possible, such as when a group's demands are higher than the target can pay.

In such circumstances, rescues are an attractive if costly alternative to making concessions. If successful, they recover the captive, plus they punish—rather than reward—the perpetrator. However, rescue missions can be exceptionally costly. They represent the most dangerous time for a hostage—when she is most likely to be killed by her captors or die in the crossfire (MacWillson 1992; Wright 2009). They require substantial, accurate intelligence and legal permissions to invade, and they put U.S. servicemembers at risk. For these reasons, rescues are rare and decisions are not taken lightly. 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. The stated preference for

official rescue missions belies the reality that only several dozen of these mission attempts have been reported, and many were unsuccessful.

Since 2001, there have been at least 33 American hostages who have been the object of a rescue mission.¹³ 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 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.

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 Riggle	Tourist	Somalia	Navy			x
Luke Somers	Journalist	Yemen	SEALs			x
Steven Sotloff	Journalist	Syria	Delta Force		x	

Table 1: **Known U.S. Hostage Rescue Attempts by American Forces, 2001–2015**

The globe is divided into “areas of responsibility” (AOR), and the rescue force is determined accordingly: Hostages in Somalia can be rescued by SEALs, whereas those in Iraq can be rescued by Delta Force. According to 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 thou-

¹³In 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.

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		

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

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

sands 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

The case of American aid worker Jessica Buchanan is representative of the dynamics of rescue missions outlined above. As the *Washington Post* reported after Buchanan’s rescue, President Obama personally approved the mission to recover her from Somalia based on three factors. First, there was a “window of opportunity”—intelligence that she might soon be moved to another location, and that her captors’ security was limited. Second, there was a lack of progress on other means of recovering Buchanan: Her captors had demanded \$10 million ransom and had refused her family’s counteroffer of more than \$1 million. Third,

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

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

the White House had intelligence that Buchanan’s health was dire, and that a rescue was necessary to save her life. Throughout her 93 days of captivity, decisions were made at the highest level of government: President Obama was informed within 24 hours of her capture and was briefed regularly over the subsequent three months.¹⁶

3 Hostage Recovery and the Public

Presidents, like Obama in the Buchanan case, must also factor in public reactions to rescue and ransom decisions, as kidnappings of Americans abroad are highly salient events. As Chermak and Grunewald (2006) and Weimann and Brosius (1991) have shown, international kidnappings attract significantly more media coverage than other forms of violence. For example, 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 Islamic State 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). Thus, although foreign policy decisions are frequently insulated from public opinion because of American disinterest in the subject (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955), the public is likely more familiar with and potentially more influential in affecting the outcomes of international kidnapping cases. The public salience of these events makes the political stakes for elected leaders for hostage recovery actions quite high.

¹⁶Karen DeYoung and Greg Jaffe, “Navy SEALs rescue kidnapped aid workers Jessica Buchanan and Poul Hagen Thisted in Somalia,” the *Washington Post*, 25 January 2012, Online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-forces-rescue-kidnapped-aid-workers-jessica-buchanan-and-poul-hagen-thisted-in-somalia/2012/01/25/gIQA7WopPQ_story.html.

There are several features of international kidnappings that have been shown to affect the amount of media coverage a case receives, including whether the kidnapping is framed as terrorism, the total number of hostages taken, and whether or not there was a rescue attempt.¹⁷ Hostages captured while at work receive more media attention than those kidnapped while on vacation, suggesting there is more interest in hostages seen as duty-bound than those seen as walking into danger (Gilbert 2020). Such was the case with contractor Mark Frerichs, an American kidnapped in Afghanistan in January 2020 who received almost no media coverage. According to a former national security official working on Frerichs’s case, early reports that Frerichs was abducted in a remote outpost (rather than in the capital, Kabul) may have erroneously suggested that he was courting danger—and thus unworthy of rescue. “I have worked on several cases where the public narrative of an American hostage’s disappearance is inaccurately portrayed in the media, and it has an impact on how a case is covered.”¹⁸

Hostage rescue missions—particularly when they are eventful 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 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 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

¹⁷There is more newspaper coverage for kidnappings framed as terrorism; the fewer victims there are per kidnapping, the more coverage the incident will receive.

¹⁸Author interview with Eric Lebson, August 8, 2020.

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

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 2020).

3.1 A Theory of Hostage Deservingness

We argue that as Americans learn about these events they will rely on certain cues or heuristics about the hostage to inform their opinion on whether the government should expend resources on a rescue attempt or pay a ransom demanded as a condition of release. The real world examples discussed throughout our manuscript as well as the literature on public opinion and international conflict more generally points to at least two key features of the kidnapping scenario that will influence public opinion: the hostage’s deservingness (defined below) and the cost of the mission or ransom. We discuss each in turn.

First, we build on a large body of work explaining support for government expenditures like welfare to argue that the deservingness heuristic affects individuals’ beliefs about how government resources should be expended for hostage recovery. Specifically, research on public opinion about domestic welfare programs finds that judgements about how recipients came to be in need of financial assistance affects how individuals view the obligation of their government to help them. 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

We can build on this logic to theorize about hostage deservingness. First, governments must decide to allocate resources to assist hostages 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 instead, if their capture was not their fault or the result of bad luck. Hostages will be viewed as more deserving if their capture is the result of bad luck rather than bad judgment. We expect perceptions of hostage deservingness to then influence individual support for recovery efforts. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: The more hostages are perceived as responsible for their capture, the less the public will support their rescue and payments of ransom.

Next, we consider the idea of cost sensitivity. This builds on the idea of casualty sensitivity found to be a relatively good predictor of support or opposition to military interventions abroad. Scholars have looked for example at how casualties accumulated over time during the course of a war affect approval for wartime efforts (Mueller 1971). Public opinion trends

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).

suggest that support for war tends to degrade over time as casualties rise. Others have argued that cumulative casualties cannot be separated from simple time trends and have thus argued that marginal increases or decreases in casualties should be explored. These researchers find that Americans are also sensitive to recent casualties with support for military involvement decreasing in the presence of large recent increases in casualties (Gartner and Segura 1998). In addition to approval or disapproval of a given conflict, scholars have also shown that casualties affect other political outcomes such as approval of the president and vote choice (Karol and Miguel 2007). We extend this logic to hostage recovery arguing that on average Americans will be less supportive of large rescue missions that risk many soldiers' lives and will be less willing to pay large ransoms.

H2: The public will have higher support for less costly recovery options (small rescue missions and small ransom payments) and lower support for more costly recovery options.

Finally, we theorize here that hostage deservingness will condition how cost sensitive the American public is to recovery efforts. This follows from the research cited above, which shows that individuals are willing to support a larger welfare state apparatus when they believe the poor are the victims of bad luck rather than to blame for their financial circumstances. More directly, researchers have argued that casualty sensitivity is conditional on beliefs about the “rightness or wrongness” of a war (Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2006). The public may be more tolerant of the human costs of war when the war effort is viewed as righteous. This suggests that Americans may support more costly efforts to bring hostages home if that hostage is viewed as more deserving. On the other hand, Americans may be more price sensitive if they assign blame to the hostage for his or her situation. This leads to the following conditional hypothesis.

H3: The public will be less cost sensitive when hostages are perceived to not be

responsible for their capture and more cost sensitive when hostages are assigned blame.

Although our theory centers the power of hostage deservingness in explaining support or opposition to hostage recovery and how recovery is implemented, an alternative hypothesis is that the U.S. public follows U.S. doctrine in ignoring circumstance of capture. The official U.S. government policy is indeed unequivocal: The United States 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).”²¹

This stated policy of ignoring the circumstances of capture likely serves three important functions for protecting Americans abroad. First, it could deter would-be hostage takers. If armed actors know that holding any American could incur a raid, they might be less likely to kidnap in the first place. Not only would the kidnappers be denied whatever concessions they had desired; they would also be at serious risk of death at the hands of U.S. special forces.²² Second, this blanket policy provides assurance for Americans considering working abroad: If you are captured, you will not be left behind. This may be especially important for those accepting particularly dangerous positions in the military, aid work, or journalism. Finally, the public may acknowledge that they cannot possibly know all of the true details of a hostage’s circumstances and capture and thus opt to support recovery.²³

²¹Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

²²This logic suggests that rescue missions serve both as *deterrence by denial* and as *deterrence by punishment*. See (Snyder 1959).

²³For example, there have been several Americans taken hostage with ambiguous links to the U.S. government, with suggestions that they

Thus, a plausible null hypothesis to our theory of deservingness is that circumstance of capture plays no role in explaining public support for hostage recovery.

H4: Perceptions of responsibility for capture are uncorrelated with support for rescue and payments of ransom.

3.2 Why Identifying the Effects of Hostage Deservingness Matters

Finally, it is important to interrogate why public perceptions of hostage deservingness matter if U.S. doctrine specifies that deservingness should be ignored. We suggest there are several reasons why public opinion matters in this case. First, even with this official policy, some hostages may receive more attention from the government than others. Public perceptions of deservingness could shape how high a priority a certain hostage becomes, or whether a case is put on the back burner. Second, hostages' families and employers often engage in significant public outreach in support of bringing their loved one home, including launching social media campaigns²⁴ and online petitions.²⁵ These campaigns are not aimed at the kidnappers themselves, but rather, at the U.S. government officials in a position to do something about the case. A hostage seen as more deserving might attract more public support, thus lending weight to these lobbying campaigns.

were captured spies. See, for example, the cases of Robert Levinson, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/us/politics/robert-levinson-cia-iran.html>, or Paul Whelan, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/02/681564973/whelan-doesnt-fit-the-profile-of-a-spy-former-cia-officer-says>.

²⁴Elizabeth Dias, "The Art of the Hostage Deal," *Time*, 27 July 2017, Online at <https://time.com/4876077/the-art-of-the-hostage-deal/>.

²⁵Jason Rezaian, "Opinion: A hostage in Tehran goes free (for now)," the *Washington Post*, 23 August 2018, Online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/08/23/a-hostage-in-tehran-goes-free-for-now/>.

Third, a gap between public opinion and official policy suggests that there could be consequences for policymakers who fail to recover a sympathetic hostage, or who do recover an unsympathetic one. For example, President Obama was steadfast in his support for bringing Bowe Bergdahl home, stating “The United States has always had a pretty sacred rule, and that is we don’t leave our men or women in uniform behind... regardless of the circumstances, whatever those circumstances may turn out to be, we still get an American soldier back if he’s held in captivity. Period. Full stop. We don’t condition that.” Obama’s celebration of Bergdahl’s recovery and warm embrace of the Bergdahl family was highly controversial, and it led to vociferous, bipartisan criticism of his Administration’s choices.²⁶

Finally, if individuals tend to be influenced by deservingness cues, but U.S. policy ignores circumstance of capture, then this could affect morale among those tasked with implementing the policy. For example, a more recent Afghanistan hostage provoked resentment among FBI agents responsible for planning her rescue. As the *Washington Post* reported, Caitlin Coleman’s “decision to travel to one of the world’s most dangerous places, when [she] was already six months pregnant, raised questions about whether [Coleman and her husband, Joshua Boyle] harbored support for the Taliban.” According to an FBI official working on the case, officials “set aside” the circumstances of capture while they planned the rescue. “Still, no one just goes hiking in Afghanistan.”²⁷ Policymakers too harbor judgments about

²⁶Michael Crowley, “How the Bergdahl Story Went from Victory to Controversy for Obama,” *Time*, 3 June 2014, Online at <https://time.com/2817830/bowe-bergdahl-obama/>.

²⁷Missy Ryan, “No one just goes hiking in Afghanistan: American woman gave birth as a Taliban hostage. Now she seeks to end her mystery,” the *Washington Post*, 23 August 2019, Online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/no-one-just-goes-hiking-in-afghanistan-american-woman-gave-birth-to-three-kids-as-a-taliban-hostage-she-now-seeks-to-end-the-mystery-surrounding-her-saga/2019/08/23/d036c346-8939-11e9-98c1-e945ae5db8fb_story.html

hostages, which may or may not affect how they pursue a hostage’s recovery and the team’s morale. Some may tow the policy line as one former FBI agent stated, “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.”²⁸ Yet, as illustrated by the reporting on the Bergdahl recovery mission, his deservingness loomed large in the minds of those carrying out the mission and affected the morale of those involved.

4 Research Design

We test our theory of hostage deservingness using experiments embedded in nationally representative surveys of Americans fielded in 2016 and 2020. The findings from a large, pilot survey fielded in 2016 are reported in the Appendix. We replicate and extend those findings from the pilot in the 2020 survey. Thus, we focus here on the results of the experiment embedded in a 2020 survey measuring Americans’ political attitudes fielded just before the November 2020 election. The survey firm, Dynata, recruited a sample of respondents based on demographic data from the U.S. census. Respondents completed the survey online and received a small amount of compensation for their time. Around 2,000 respondents completed the survey.²⁹

The experiment in the 2020 study builds on the 2016 pilot in important ways. The pi-

²⁸Interview with author, May 16, 2019.

²⁹The Appendix includes descriptive statistics that show the representativeness of the survey sample as well as balance tests that demonstrate the three main experimental treatments were balanced across demographic variables.

lot experiment randomized elements of a hypothetical scenario that describes an American *missing* abroad. In contrast, our 2020 experiment focuses more precisely on the scenario of an American *captured* abroad. Several features of the scenario are randomized to control for important characteristics of kidnappings, such as the geographic location, the identity of the captors, and the gender and profession of the captured American. These are randomized independent of our core treatments of *Deservingness* and *Cost*, but also included as control variables in regression models. In other words, when we analyze the effects of the deservingness and cost sensitivity treatments, we average over the other randomized elements of the scenario.

Before reading the scenario, respondents were told that they would be reading about a situation that could happen in the future. When they clicked to the next screen in the survey, they were asked to read a short vignette detailing the kidnapping. Here is the text of the scenario:

A [*rebel/terrorist*] group captured an American [*soldier/aid worker/journalist/hiker*] in [*Colombia/Syria/Somalia/Afghanistan*]. Intelligence officials say [*he/she*] is being held in the [*rebel/terrorist*] group's stronghold...

An additional sentence was included in the scenario for all respondents that randomized the deservingness of the captured American. For the three treatment conditions in which the American was described as a professional, *Deservingness* manipulated whether the American was following orders or not. Here is that text:

- [*He/She*] traveled to the dangerous area [*following the orders/without the knowledge/against the orders*] of [*his/her*] superiors.

In the case of the hiker who was there for personal reasons, we manipulated whether or not the hiker had permission from the U.S. State Department. This is what that text looked like:

- The hiker [*received permission from the U.S. State Department to hike/did not contact the U.S. State Department before hiking/was warned by the U.S. State Department not to hike*] in the dangerous area.

After reading the scenario, respondents were asked how much the captured American was to blame for their situation and asked about their approval or disapproval for different policy options to bring them home. With regards to the former, we asked respondents directly about blame. The question read:

- To what extent do you think the captured [*soldier/aid worker/journalist/hiker*] is to blame for [*his/her*] situation? Completely to blame, Somewhat to blame, Somewhat blameless, Completely blameless

After the question about blame, we asked about support for a rescue operation, support for negotiating a ransom, and support for paying the full amount of a ransom.³⁰ For the rescue and ransom policy options, we included randomizations related to costs. For rescue, the mission was described as using a nearby unit of either 10, 100, or 1,000 soldiers to rescue the captured American. For the ransom, respondents read that the rebel or terrorist group was demanding \$100 thousand, \$1 million, or \$10 million in ransom to release the prisoner.³¹ Respondents were given a five-point scale ranging from disapprove strongly (coded as 1) and approve strongly (coded as 5).

³⁰It is important to note here that in our pilot survey the order of questions was different. In the pilot, the respondents received the scenario, then a question about support for rescue, and then the question about blame. In the 2020 survey, the blame question preceded the rescue and ransom questions. We find that the order of the blame question does not change the treatment text's effects on the dependent variables.

³¹Another treatment group read that the rebel or terrorist group had not made contact and the ransom demands were unknown. For simplicity, we do not use this treatment group in the analysis that follows.

The distribution of responses for the question measuring deservingness beliefs and our dependent variables of *Rescue*, *Negotiate*, and *Pay* can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. With respect to deservingness, the modal response was to say that the captured American was “somewhat to blame” for their circumstance, with nearly 50 percent of respondents selecting this option. Another 25 percent said the captured American was “completely to blame”. When looking at the other end of the spectrum, respondents appear evenly split between believing the captured American was “somewhat” or “completely” blameless. It should be noted that the figures of the distributions of this variable and the dependent variables pool together respondents in different treatment groups. As we show below, the deservingness treatment significantly affects whether respondents believe the captured American is to blame for their situation.

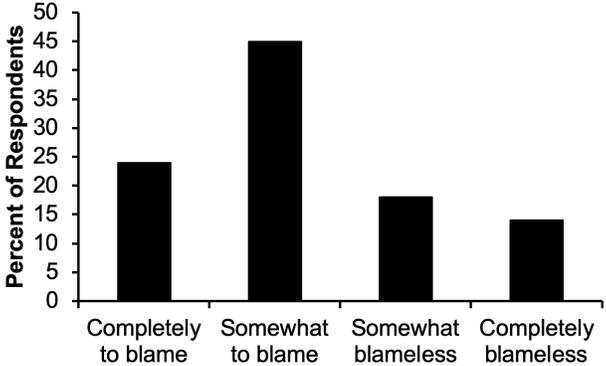


Figure 1: **Distribution of beliefs about deservingness**

Turning to the dependent variables, we see in Figure 2 that there is significant variation in support for the different policy options. Nearly three-fourths of the sample approve somewhat or strongly of the rescue mission to recover the captured American. The next supported policy option is to negotiate the ransom with a little over half of respondents approving of this option. The least supported response by the government to a captured American is for the U.S. to pay the full amount of the ransom. Only around a quarter of

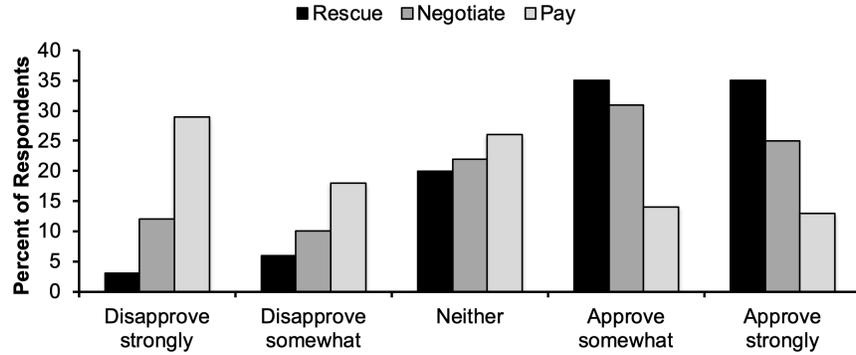


Figure 2: **Distribution of dependent variables**

respondents approved of this option either somewhat or strongly. Again, these distributions pool respondents across treatments. As we will see in the following sections, support for these policy options depends substantially on the perceived deservingness of the hostage and the costs to bring the hostage home.

5 Findings

Recall that we hypothesized that individuals would be more supportive of government attempts to recover the captured American if they were perceived to be less responsible for their situation and recovery was less costly. We also anticipated an interaction between deservingness and cost sensitivity, with Americans being less willing to support costly missions as the perceived deservingness of the hostage declines. Our experimental evidence reported below supports these hypotheses for the rescue and pay the ransom outcomes, but is ambiguous for the negotiate outcome.

We first examine the effects of the deservingness treatment on our rescue and ransom outcomes. Figure 3 shows the average treatment effects from OLS models regressing *Rescue*, *Negotiate*, and *Pay* on the deservingness treatment and controlling for the other treatments.

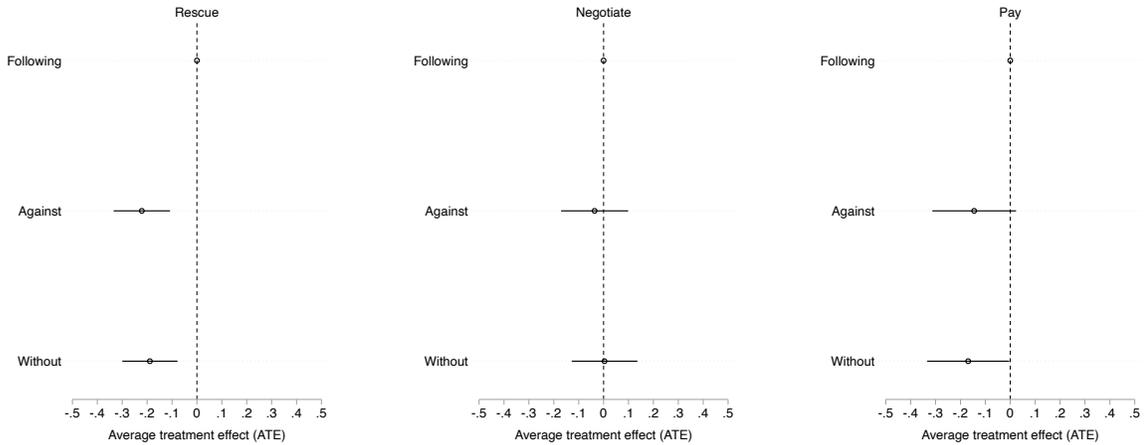


Figure 3: **Average Treatment Effect of Deservingness on Rescue and Ransom**

In each model, “following orders” is the baseline category.³² The other two treatment conditions, which describe situations in which the captured American has either not told the relevant authorities or has acted against them, have strong, nearly identical, negative effects on support for a rescue mission and for paying the full amount of the ransom. Interestingly, the deservingness treatment does not affect support for negotiating the ransom amount. This may be related to the perceived costs of these options. While a rescue mission and paying the full amount of the ransom are costly, negotiation presumably does not cost as much as either of those options. As we will see below, deservingness matters less when the costs of the recovery option are low.

Figure 4 provides evidence of the mechanism. We show that the deservingness treatment affects how respondents assign blame to the hostage. By telling respondents in the scenario that the kidnapped American had defied orders or the U.S. State Department, respondents are much more likely to say that the hostage is to blame for their situation. Like

³²Recall that for the hiker treatment the equivalent of following orders was “with the State Department’s permission.”

the results for the various recovery options, respondents do not distinguish between the scenario in which the hostage actively disobeyed versus simply acting without the knowledge of the authorities. For both the recovery policies and perceptions of deservingness, these two treatment conditions have equally negative effects on support and blame. Thus, for ease of interpretation in our interaction models that follow, we create a binary indicator for deservingness where respondents receiving the “following orders” treatment or “with the State Department’s permission” treatment are labeled as “deserving” and coded as 1 and the other two categories are labeled as “not deserving” and coded as 0.

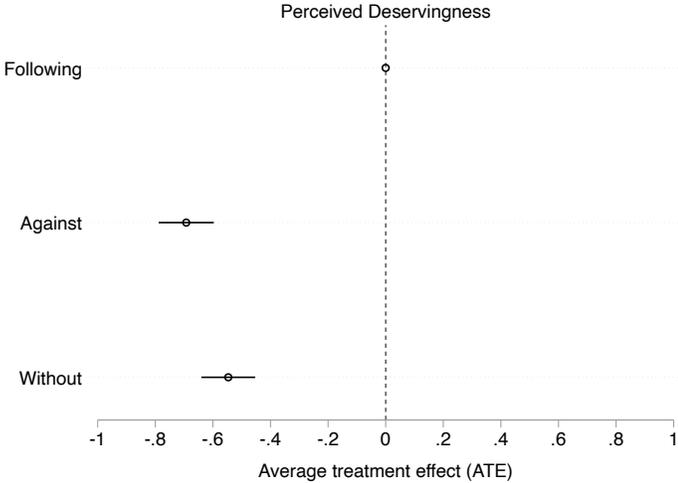


Figure 4: **Average Treatment Effect of Deservingness on Perceived Deservingness**

Turning to cost sensitivity, we hypothesized that individuals would be less supportive of more costly recovery options and more supportive of relatively less costly options. To test the hypothesis, we independently randomize the size of the mission and the amount of ransom demanded by the captors. Figure 5 displays the average treatment effect for the rescue cost treatment. Compared to a mission of 10 soldiers, respondents are relatively less supportive of missions of 100 or 1,000 soldiers. However, there is no statistically significant difference between a mission of 10 or 100 soldiers, while the mission of 1,000 soldiers is

significantly different from the baseline of 10 soldiers. The size of the treatment effect is also relatively smaller in magnitude than the deservingness treatment and smaller than the cost treatment for the ransom outcomes. Overall, mission size has a significant, but substantively relatively smaller effect on support for rescue. For ecological validity, it should be noted that each of these mission sizes in some way captures the number of servicemembers working on a typical hostage rescue. As a former FBI special agent with intimate knowledge of these cases explained, hostage rescues involve around two dozen special forces operators on the ground, but hundreds or thousands of servicemembers in supporting roles to pull off a successful rescue mission.³³

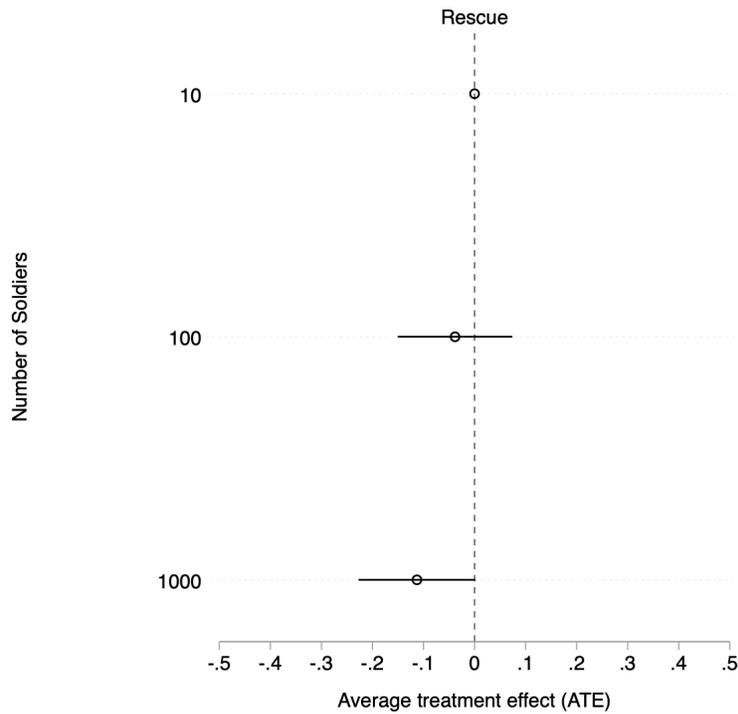


Figure 5: **Average Treatment Effect of Costs on Rescue**

For the ransom outcomes of *Negotiate* and *Pay*, the ransom amount demanded by the

³³Author interview with former FBI special agent, May 16, 2019.

captors has a larger effect. As shown in Figure 6, compared to the baseline of \$100,000, respondents are much less willing to negotiate and much less willing to pay the full amount of the ransom. Our respondents also do not seem to differentiate much between the demand of \$1 million and the demand of \$10 million, both have about the same effect on support for these policy options. It should be noted that in terms of ecological validity, \$10 million is a much larger ransom amount than is typical, while \$100,000 is relatively lower than normal amounts.³⁴

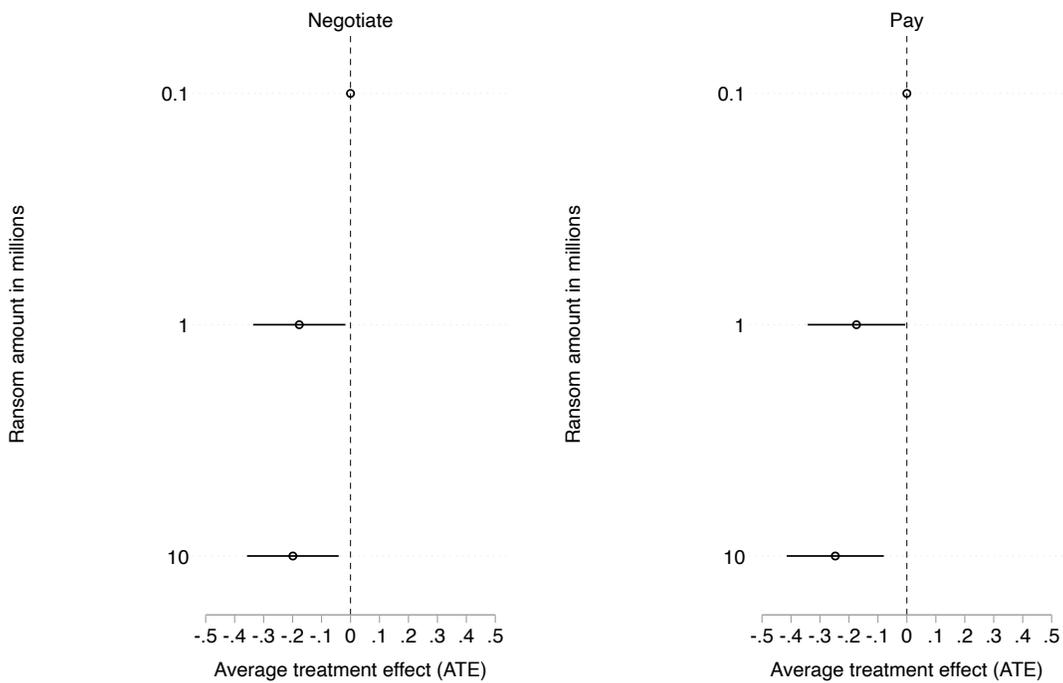


Figure 6: **Average Treatment Effect of Costs on Ransom**

Next, we examine the hypothesis that hostage deservingness conditions the cost sensitivity of the public. To do so, we include an interaction term in our OLS models between the binary indicator for the deservingness treatment described above and the cost treatments.

³⁴Author interview with former FBI special agent, May 16, 2019.

We find significant support for the hypothesis. Figure 7 shows the predicted levels of support for the rescue mission by the deservingness treatment and the cost treatment. In terms of the cost sensitivity of respondents, for hostages described as following orders when captured, the costs of the rescue mission have no effect on public support. It is only for hostages described as not deserving because they either went against orders or did not inform the authorities where we see costs mattering. Support for the rescue mission decreases significantly as the costs increase for these hostages. Interestingly, we also find that costs condition the effect of deservingness. Based on these results for rescue as well as the results below for ransom, we also find that the deservingness cue is less important for recovery options that are less costly. In the case of rescue, the deservingness of the hostage does not matter for small rescue missions.

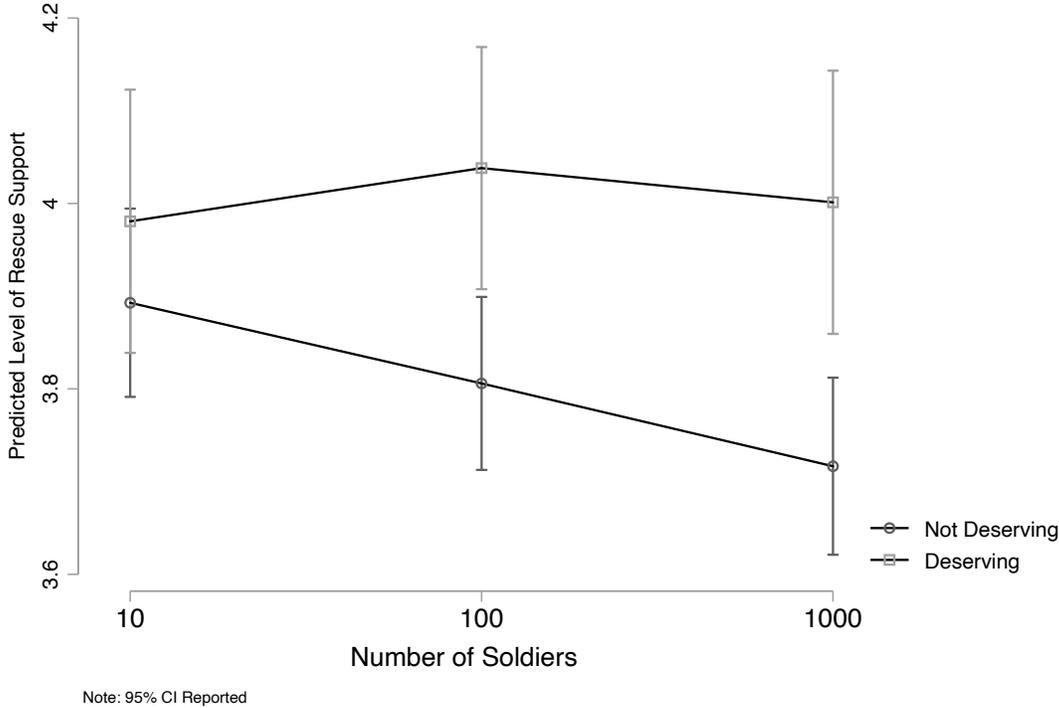


Figure 7: Predicted Average Level of Rescue Support by Deservingness and Cost

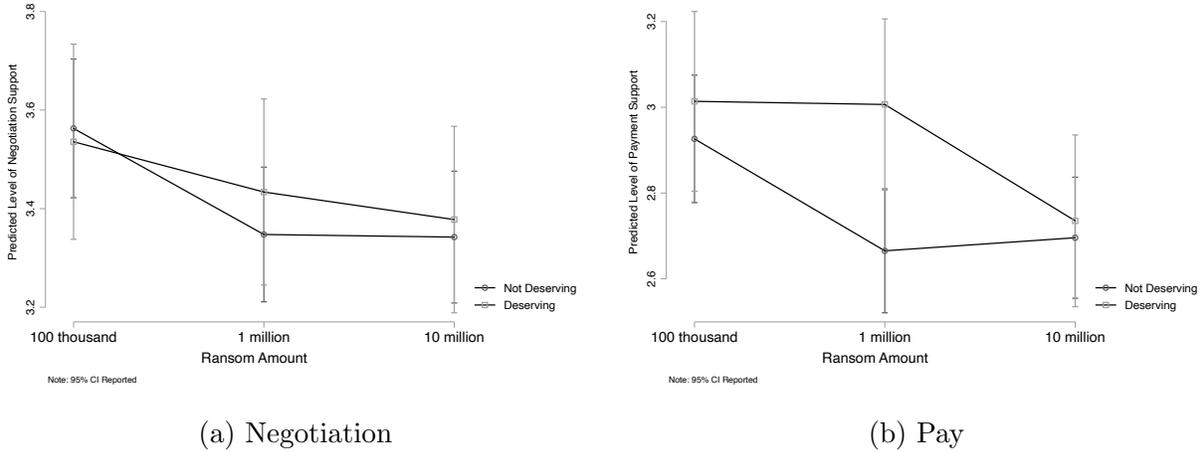


Figure 8: **Predicted Average Level of Ransom Support by Deservingness and Cost**

The conditioning power of the deservingness heuristic on cost sensitivity is also quite interesting for the ransom policy outcomes. Again we see that deservingness has little impact on the *Negotiate* outcome. For negotiation, the primary consideration appears to be the ransom amount. On the other hand, deservingness does condition the effect of the ransom amount on support for payment of the ransom. When the hostage is described as following orders, there is no difference in support for payments of \$100 thousand or \$1 million dollars. Cost sensitivity kicks in however at \$10 million where support for payment declines for even deserving hostages. This is in contrast to hostages described as not deserving where there is a significant drop in support for ransom payment at \$1 million. In fact, the deservingness treatment has its largest effect size at this level of ransom amount. When the ransom amount is small, support for payment is relatively higher regardless of the deservingness treatment and when the ransom amount is quite large, support for payment is relatively lower regardless of the deservingness treatment. This is particularly interesting for its proximity to a real-world ransom demand amount: the biggest effect of the deservingness treatment on support for rescue has the largest gap at \$1 million—the most realistic ransom demand amount.

Finally, we note here that we do not find evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis that hostage deservingness is unrelated to support for recovery. The alternative hypothesis

we specified suggested that the U.S. public could follow U.S. policy to ignore circumstance of capture and commit to bringing home any American abroad regardless of how they came to be captured. While there is some evidence that when the mission or ransom demanded is less costly, circumstance of capture is ignored, we find that it weighs heavily on the minds of citizens for larger missions and more costly ransoms.

5.1 Robustness and Additional Results

The above discussion clearly demonstrates that the deservingness heuristic is alive and well shaping Americans' support for hostage recovery and conditioning the resources they are willing to expend to bring hostages home. In this section, we look at both the robustness of these results to an expanded set of control variables, as well as highlighting some additional variables that also play a role in explaining variation in public support for hostage recovery.

As noted above, we included a number of other experimental variations in our hostage recovery vignette in addition to measuring several demographic background characteristics of the respondents in our sample. We include control variables for these additional experimental treatments as well as important demographic characteristics of the respondent. We report coefficients and standard errors *for variables that obtained statistical significance* in Table 3.

We first highlight that the deservingness treatment and costs treatments retain their significance even with the full set of control variables.³⁵ Here again, we can see that compared to the “following orders” condition, the other two deservingness treatments have a negative and similar effect on support for rescue and paying the full ransom amount. As noted above, the deservingness of the kidnapped American does not affect support for negotiating the ransom amount. We also see confirmed the patterns discovered above for the mission costs

³⁵This is unsurprising given that the treatments were independently randomized from each other and well-balanced on demographic characteristics.

	Rescue	Negotiate	Pay
<i>Deserving: Without</i>	-0.21*** (0.058)	-0.08 (0.083)	-0.23*** (0.081)
<i>Deserving: Against</i>	-0.23*** (0.059)	-0.08 (0.086)	-0.21** (0.083)
<i>Soldiers: 100</i>	-0.04 (0.059)	0.00 (0.085)	0.03 (0.082)
<i>Soldiers: 1000</i>	-0.19*** (0.061)	0.04 (0.087)	0.10 (0.085)
<i>Ransom: 1 million</i>	-0.06 (0.067)	-0.19** (0.086)	-0.21** (0.083)
<i>Ransom: 10 million</i>	-0.03 (0.067)	-0.24*** (0.085)	-0.30*** (0.082)
<i>Job: Aid Worker</i>	-0.15** (0.067)	-0.08 (0.097)	-0.11 (0.094)
<i>Job: Journalist</i>	-0.24*** (0.067)	-0.10 (0.096)	-0.18* (0.093)
<i>Job: Hiker</i>	-0.31*** (0.069)	0.00 (0.100)	-0.11 (0.097)
<i>Order: Rescue First</i>	-0.01 (0.048)	-0.26*** (0.069)	-0.28*** (0.067)
<i>Political Interest</i>	0.14*** (0.030)	0.06 (0.044)	0.03 (0.043)
<i>Party: Republican</i>	0.04 (0.067)	-0.06 (0.097)	-0.23** (0.094)
<i>Party: Independent</i>	-0.04 (0.068)	-0.19** (0.098)	-0.33*** (0.095)
<i>Party: Other</i>	0.17 (0.313)	-0.41 (0.430)	-0.70* (0.417)
<i>Party: None</i>	-0.51*** (0.151)	-0.35 (0.229)	-0.05 (0.222)
<i>Internationalism</i>	0.23*** (0.053)	0.31*** (0.076)	0.28*** (0.074)
<i>Ideology</i>	0.04*** (0.010)	0.02* (0.014)	0.03** (0.014)
<i>Full-time Employed</i>	0.07 (0.057)	0.18** (0.083)	0.37*** (0.080)
<i>Age</i>	-0.00 (0.002)	-0.01** (0.002)	-0.03*** (0.002)
<i>Parent</i>	0.13** (0.052)	0.04 (0.076)	0.10 (0.073)
<i>Education</i>	-0.07*** (0.026)	-0.03 (0.038)	-0.03 (0.037)
Constant	3.87*** (0.281)	3.45*** (0.422)	4.54*** (0.410)
Observations	1,895	1,411	1,412
R-squared	0.13	0.11	0.27

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The models include, but do not report, indicators for treatments that had no significant effect on respondents' support for rescue and ransom. These treatments include the gender of the kidnapped American, whether the captor was a rebel or terrorist group, and the location of the kidnapping. The models also include, but do not report, respondent characteristics that had no significant relationship with the dependent variables. These respondent characteristics include household income, race, gender, and state of residence.

Table 3: Additional Effects and Correlations with Demographic Variables

treatment and the ransom costs treatment. Both the number of soldiers involved in the mission and the ransom amount have a negative effect on support for hostage recovery as the costs increase. These results confirm the robustness of the treatment effects to a more complete set of controls.

In addition to these results, we also find two other strong treatment effects. The first treatment that also has a strong effect on support for hostage recovery is the jobs treatment. We find that relative to recovering kidnapped soldiers, respondents are much less supportive of rescue missions to recover aid workers, journalists, and hikers.³⁶ Interestingly, these effects do not replicate for either negotiating the ransom or paying the full ransom amount. The second treatment effect of note is a question order experiment in which we asked half the sample about their support for rescue first and then asked about support for ransom payment. The other half of the sample received the reverse order. As can be seen in the table, there is a strong order effect on support for the ransom options if respondents received the rescue questions first. Respondents are much less likely to support either negotiating or paying a ransom when the possibility of rescue is made salient to them by answering questions about that option first. Question order has no effect on the other hand on support for rescue. We take this as further evidence that Americans prefer rescue missions to negotiating or paying ransoms to recover kidnapped Americans.

Additionally, there were some treatments that were included to control for different elements of a kidnapping scenario that could influence public opinion that did not have a significant effect on support for hostage recovery. Unlike in our pilot experiment, the gender of the kidnapped American in the 2020 survey did not affect support for either rescue or ransom. In the pilot and consistent with the well-established phenomenon of the "Missing White Women Syndrome," we found that individuals supported a rescue mission more when we used female pronouns to describe the kidnapped American rather than male pro-

³⁶This finding also replicates a similar pattern in the pilot.

nouns.³⁷ In this study, gender had no effect. Similarly, the identity of the captors—rebels or terrorists—and the geographic location of the kidnapping also produced null effects for all outcomes. The former null effect is in some ways surprising given elite rhetoric and U.S. policy forbidding negotiations with foreign terrorist organizations.

Finally, several demographic variables of survey respondents were significantly correlated with support for hostage recovery. The most consistent finding across the recovery options is that internationalists are much more likely to support all recovery options compared to isolationists. All other demographic variables have inconsistent patterns across the recovery options. Most notable in this respect is political party. There appears to be bipartisan consensus when it comes to supporting rescue missions and negotiating ransoms, with Republicans and Democrats supporting both at equal rates. *Paying* ransoms is where Republicans and Democrats diverge with Republicans being significantly less supportive than Democrats.

All together, the findings presented here and in the Appendix demonstrate that deservingness—again, conceptualized here as lacking blame for capture—has a strong and consistent effect on costly recovery policies. Costs do matter, but significantly less so when the hostage is viewed as deserving. As we discuss throughout the paper and revisit in the conclusion, the political calculations for U.S. lawmakers are not as straightforward as current recovery policy, which bluntly forbids considering circumstance of capture. Our results suggest the deservingness heuristic will likely affect the magnitude of public pressure for hostage recovery, the resources and priority placed on recovery, and the public response to political leaders when Americans are brought home.

³⁷“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 2019).

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. We develop a theory of hostage deservingness and show that individuals' beliefs regarding a hostage's responsibility for putting herself in danger affects overall support for recovery options. We further show that beliefs about a hostage's deservingness affect how sensitive Americans are to the costs of bringing a hostage home.

While this variation is at odds with official U.S. policy on hostage recovery, it explains the public pushback in cases of “undeserving” victims. This is reflected in the recent media interest in pregnant American hiker Caitlan Coleman 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 publicly resolute in deciding to launch 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.”³⁸ Yet, as research on this case has shown, the perceived deservingness of a hostage can affect how that job is performed and the approval of elected leaders responsible for recovery efforts.

³⁸Alex Horton, “At Bergdahl sentencing, a former Navy SEAL sheds tears recounting death of military dog,” the *Washington Post*, 25 October 2017, Online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/10/25/at-bergdahl-sentencing-former-navy-seal-sheds-tears-recounting-death-of-military-dog/>.

This study demonstrates that the American public largely supports hostage recovery missions and that support plummets for more costly recoveries and less “deserving” victims. Considering the United States in comparative perspective, a puzzle remains: Given the high levels of support for bringing captured Americans home, why do individual hostage crises not receive *more* attention and advocacy? For several close U.S. allies, including France, Israel, and Canada, hostage crises spur major public protests (Simon 2019). In these countries, a culture of protest against the government maintains public pressure until hostages are brought safely home. Future work could investigate these dynamics, exploring why some populations seem more concerned with hostage recovery than others. We suspect the analogy to welfare policies could travel to this comparative context, generating a greater expectation of government intervention in states with more robust social welfare programs, and lower expectation where individual responsibility is culturally paramount. Understanding these dynamics is an important next step in assuring hostage safety and survival, as kidnappers may leverage public outrage to exact increasingly painful concessions.

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Appendix for “No Man Left Behind?
Hostage Deservingness and the Politics of Hostage Recovery”

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1 Descriptive Statistics

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)

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

Note: Descriptive statistics on all publicly identifiable Americans kidnapped abroad from 2001–2015, from Gilbert (2020).

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Age	49.838	16.735	18	90	1898
Woman	0.536	0.499	0	1	1898
Education Level	4.456	1.109	1	6	1898
Employed	0.427	0.495	0	1	1898
White	0.736	0.441	0	1	1898
Income	4.811	3.052	1	10	1898
Democrat	0.387	0.487	0	1	1898
Ideology	6.601	2.903	1	11	1896
Internationalism	0.599	0.49	0	1	1898
Has Children	0.584	0.493	0	1	1898
Political Interest	3.198	0.881	1	4	1898

Table 2: **Descriptive Statistics of 2020 Survey Sample**

2 Balance Tests

Variable	Mean			P-Value for test that:			N
	Following (FOL)	Without (W/O)	Against (AG)	FOL=W/O	FOL=AG	W/O=AG	
Age	49.738 [17.169]	49.959 [16.685]	49.811 [16.343]	0.812	0.939	0.875	1898
Woman	0.545 [0.498]	0.542 [0.499]	0.52 [0.5]	0.909	0.371	0.43	1898
Education Level	4.353 [1.105]	4.521 [1.098]	4.493 [1.119]	0.006	0.026	0.656	1898
Employed	0.409 [0.492]	0.435 [0.496]	0.436 [0.496]	0.345	0.331	0.96	1898
White	0.74 [0.439]	0.737 [0.441]	0.729 [0.445]	0.914	0.67	0.746	1898
Income	4.748 [3.039]	4.772 [2.975]	4.923 [3.15]	0.886	0.313	0.38	1898
Democrat	0.382 [0.486]	0.394 [0.489]	0.385 [0.487]	0.662	0.938	0.726	1898
Ideology	6.813 [2.816]	6.466 [2.951]	6.523 [2.933]	0.031	0.08	0.726	1896
Internationalism	0.56 [0.497]	0.634 [0.482]	0.602 [0.49]	0.006	0.128	0.24	1898
Has Children	0.583 [0.493]	0.573 [0.495]	0.597 [0.491]	0.699	0.62	0.379	1898
Political Interest	3.213 [0.911]	3.211 [0.856]	3.167 [0.877]	0.973	0.36	0.374	1898

Note: Averages for each treatment condition of key variables. Standard deviation in brackets. P-Value based on OLS regressions of variable on treatments.

Table 3: **Balance Test: 2020 Deservingness Treatment**

Variable	Mean			P-Value for test that:			N
	Size=10 (10)	Size=100 (100)	Size=1000 (1000)	10=100	10=1000	100=1000	
Age	49.875 [17.105]	49.942 [16.929]	49.692 [16.2]	0.943	0.85	0.786	1898
Woman	0.535 [0.499]	0.546 [0.498]	0.527 [0.5]	0.682	0.78	0.476	1898
Education Level	4.47 [1.151]	4.446 [1.078]	4.453 [1.105]	0.702	0.782	0.918	1898
Employed	0.416 [0.493]	0.423 [0.494]	0.44 [0.497]	0.808	0.406	0.535	1898
White	0.732 [0.443]	0.73 [0.444]	0.744 [0.436]	0.959	0.616	0.563	1898
Income	4.864 [3.112]	4.839 [3.053]	4.733 [2.999]	0.885	0.458	0.529	1898
Democrat	0.39 [0.486]	0.4 [0.489]	0.371 [0.487]	0.723	0.486	0.274	1898
Ideology	6.414 [2.989]	6.414 [2.9]	6.776 [2.821]	0.273	0.031	0.255	1896
Internationalism	0.598 [0.491]	0.571 [0.495]	0.631 [0.483]	0.338	0.237	0.026	1898
Has Children	0.563 [0.496]	0.597 [0.491]	0.588 [0.493]	0.217	0.367	0.746	1898
Political Interest	3.221 [0.857]	3.146 [0.907]	3.233 [0.874]	0.133	0.81	0.073	1898

Note: Averages for each treatment condition of key variables. Standard deviation in brackets. P-Value based on OLS regressions of variable on treatments.

Table 4: **Balance Test: 2020 Mission Size Treatment**

Variable	Mean			P-Value for test that:			<i>N</i>
	100,000 (100thd)	1 Million (1mil)	10 Million (10mil)	100thd=1mil	100thd=10mil	1mil=10mil	
Age	49.962 [17.18]	50.276 [16.765]	50.089 [16.503]	0.777	0.908	0.863	1416
Woman	0.533 [0.499]	0.568 [0.496]	0.553 [0.498]	0.282	0.534	0.639	1416
Education Level	4.416 [1.115]	4.451 [1.094]	4.528 [1.08]	0.626	0.116	0.271	1416
Employed	0.422 [0.495]	0.409 [0.492]	0.427 [0.495]	0.683	0.893	0.578	1416
White	0.708 [0.455]	0.756 [0.43]	0.744 [0.437]	0.099	0.211	0.676	1416
Income	4.784 [3.064]	4.868 [3.046]	4.856 [3.114]	0.678	0.723	0.948	1416
Democrat	0.389 [0.488]	0.347 [0.476]	0.419 [0.494]	0.187	0.347	0.021	1416
Ideology	6.497 [3.018]	6.774 [3.018]	6.613 [2.967]	0.149	0.542	0.391	1414
Internationalism	0.587 [0.493]	0.622 [0.485]	0.618 [0.486]	0.268	0.326	0.892	1416
Has Children	0.609 [0.489]	0.578 [0.494]	0.581 [0.494]	0.344	0.39	0.924	1416
Political Interest	3.252 [0.872]	3.167 [0.856]	3.234 [0.887]	0.141	0.753	0.233	1416

Note: Averages for each treatment condition of key variables. Standard deviation in brackets. P-Value based on OLS regressions of variable on treatments.

Table 5: **Balance Test: 2020 Ransom Amount Treatment**

3 2016 Pilot Experiment

We fielded a pilot study in November 2016 using a survey of around 1300 Americans. The survey included an embedded experiment with a vignette that randomized elements of a scenario of a search and rescue operation for a missing American. 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 manipulations of 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 deservingness and cost 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 main dependent variable is a question asking respondents about their support for a rescue mission. In the pilot, we did not ask about support for paying a ransom. 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 0.¹

After answering the rescue mission support question, respondents answered a question designed to measure the deservingness mechanism. 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.” This question appears 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

We use the pilot data to test the deservingness and cost hypotheses as well as the conditional hypothesis that predicts mission cost and hostage deservingness interact to shape support for rescue.

First, 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 average treatment effect is a more than 10 percentage point increase in support.² 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.

Next, we examine the effects of the deservingness treatment on perceptions of blame. We observe that in the pilot the deservingness cue also 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 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.

¹Results do not vary if we use the full six-point scale as our dependent variable.

²For ease of exposition, we discuss the results in the text in terms of percentage points instead of probabilities.

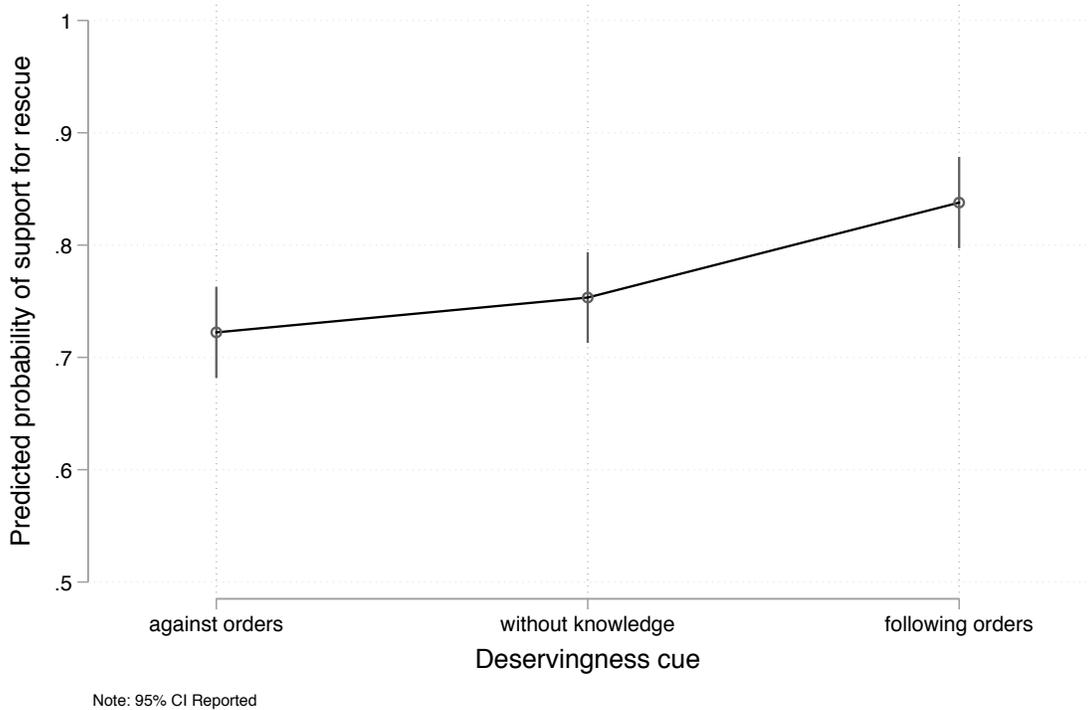


Figure 1: **Predicted Probability of Support for Rescue by Deservingness Cue Treatment**

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. Importantly, in the pilot, the blame question came after the question about support for rescue, while in the 2020 survey, the blame question came before the rescue question. These results show that regardless of where we asked about perceptions of blame in relationship to the dependent variable, we see similar effects of the deservingness treatment on support for rescue.

Finally, the pilot clearly shows a similar interaction between deservingness and costs. At low cost, deservingness matters little. In both the 2020 survey and the 2016 pilot, the deservingness treatment is not significant when the rescue mission is small. When the rescue mission is larger however, this is when Americans begin to consider the deservingness of hostages. In both the pilot and the 2020 survey, we see a significant effect of deservingness on support for rescue when the number of soldiers involved is 100 or 1000.

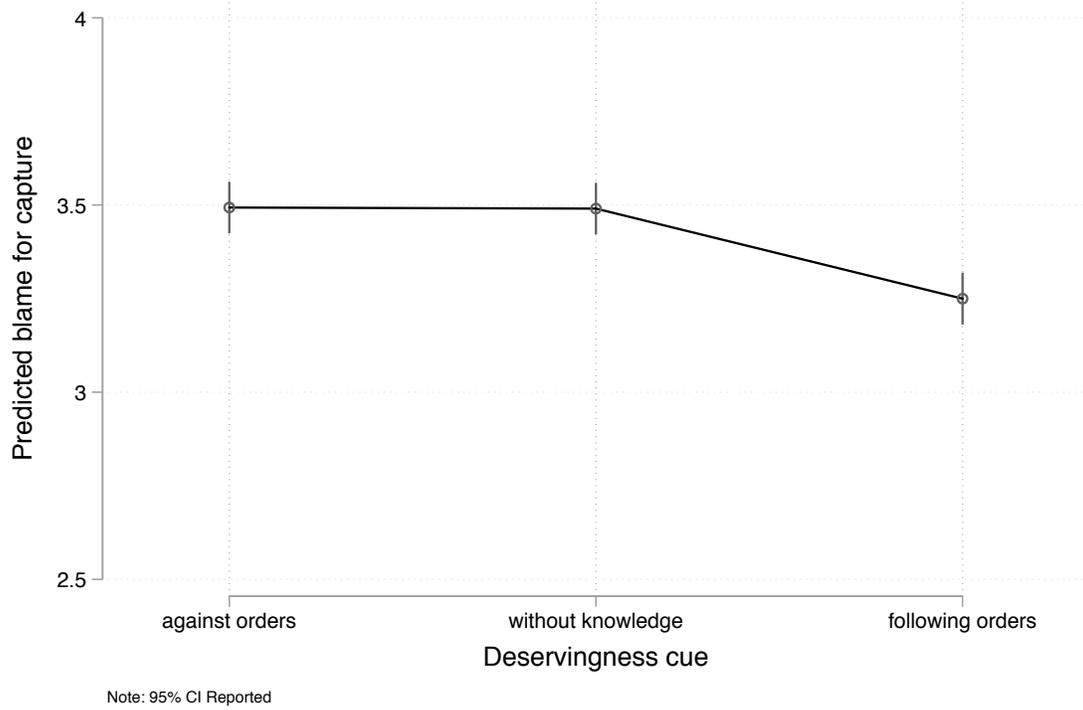
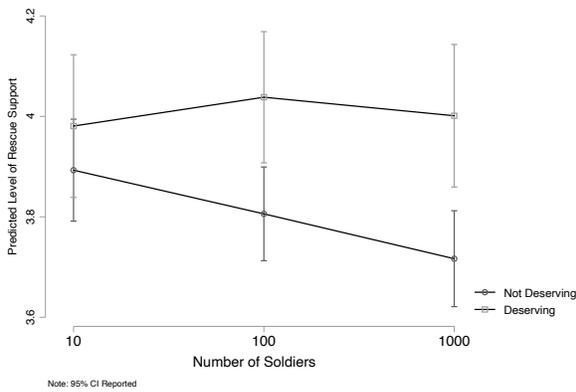
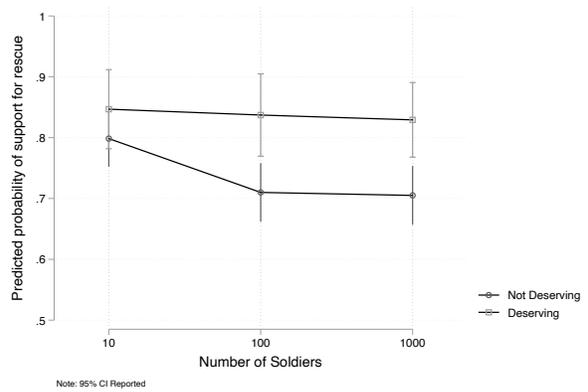


Figure 2: Predicted Perception of Blame for Capture by Deservingness Cue Treatment



(a) 2020



(b) 2016

Figure 3: Predicted Level of Rescue Support by Deservingness and Cost

References

Gilbert, Danielle. 2020. "The Oxygen of Publicity: Explaining US Media Coverage of International Kidnapping."