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What You Ask Is What You Get: Citizens’ Support for Military Action, But Not Diplomacy, Depends on Question Framing

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Abstract

Drawing on past research on judgment and decision making, as well as preference reversal, we investigated the impact of question framing on support for military versus diplomatic conflict resolution strategies. In three studies with two heterogeneous samples from the U.S. and one representative sample from Israel, preferences for military action were substantially stronger when asked in isolation (i.e. “yes/no” [support/reject]) rather than in conjunction with the alternative of diplomacy (i.e. “either-or” [military or diplomacy]), sometimes even causing a complete reversal from majority support for military action to majority support for diplomacy. These findings point to problems in public opinion polls and scientific research on military support (usually presenting no alternatives), and address issues important for psychology, political science, sociology, and survey methodology. In a real world context, our findings have important implications for governmental decisions on conflict resolution strategies and the implementation of policies based on public opinion.

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Most models of judgment and decision making see violent political behavior, such as the use of military force, as the outcome of rational utilitarian reasoning (e.g., Page & Shapiro, 1992; Smith, 1983). Although there is a lack of empirical investigations of people’s judgment and decision making over questions of whether or not to engage in, or support, political violence, the assumption that such judgment and decision making is based on rational cost-benefit calculations is the standard in the literature (Allison, 1999; Gaddis, 1995; Pape, 2003). Predictions and assessments of public opinion on the use of military force are based on these rational-choice models dominating the literature and discourse, and they play an important role in governments’ decisions to engage in political violence in lieu of other approaches to conflict (e.g., diplomacy; Converse & Traugott, 1986). Flawed modeling of public opinion can therefore have grave consequences (see also Schuldt, Roh, & Schwarz, 2015), facilitating far-reaching decisions such as the use of military force and its oftentimes negative effects on the public (casualties, economic and other costs, etc.). Yet, the real world is full of examples violating the expectations of rational-choice models, as in the case of protracted conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which continue for decades. Clearly, then, models of judgments and decisions about violent political behavior need to account for human “irrationality” as well.

Addressing the need for human “irrationality”, research on biases in judgment and decision making and on attitude formation, as well as on preference reversal and on boundary factors of rational choice models has chiefly focused on personality and situational factors. This focus has been highly generative, producing a wealth of knowledge (e.g., Herrmann, Tetlock, & Visser, 1999). At the same time, however, it also
has left other factors unexplored. Here we explore bias in people’s support for the use of military force or diplomacy in approaching intergroup conflict, addressing the need for the scientific study of political violence as an important phenomenon that is commonplace (Aumann, 2006), albeit not inevitable (Leidner, Tropp, & Lickel, 2013), and challenging the dominant notion in the literature that people’s support for political violence is driven by instrumental-rational factors (see also Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007). To our knowledge, to date there is no research investigating whether people’s judgments on the use of military force are irrational in the sense that they can even change within the same person, in the same situation. Thus, in the present contribution we highlight this irrationality by showing that people report stronger support for military force when deciding on its use without considering alternatives such as diplomacy, as opposed to deciding on its use while considering alternatives. Importantly, we demonstrate that this bias is largely specific to judgments on the use of military force, while it is relatively absent for judgments on the use of diplomacy. In doing so, we contribute to the aforementioned literatures on rational choice models of judgment and decision making in general and judgment and decision making in conflict in particular, as well as to the literatures on boundary factors of rational choice models, on cognitive biases in general and on response bias (e.g., Schwarz, 1999, 2007; Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001; Zaller, 1992) in particular. Further, this research makes a first step in synthesizing these literatures.

The investigation and reduction of bias in self-reported support for military approaches to conflict is also important from both the perspective of applied research and the perspective of real life policy and decision making. Public opinion on the use of force
plays an important role in governments’ decisions to engage in, or maintain ongoing, political violence in lieu of other approaches to conflict (e.g., diplomacy). Although politics, rhetoric, and media can be used to strategically influence public opinion (Berinsky & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2004, 2007; Herrmann et al., 1999), when the public’s support for military action is low, (democratic) governments have difficulty waging war, for instance in Vietnam (Milstein, 1973; Milstein & Mitchell, 1968; Mueller, 1971, 1973). Thus, when deciding how to approach conflict, among other things governments take into account (and even conduct their own) public opinion polls (Converse & Traugott, 1986; see also Kteily, Hodson, & Bruneau, 2016; O’Brien, Leidner, & Tropp, 2016). Flawed assessments of public opinion can therefore have grave consequences (see also Schuldt et al., 2015), facilitating far-reaching decisions such as the use of military force and its oftentimes negative effects on the public (casualties, economic and other costs, etc.). Similarly, response bias and question framing effects as the ones we demonstrate in the studies reported below can distort the results of research investigating conflict resolution processes and the inferences made in such research. This issue is especially problematic given that most research measuring support for political violence uses a question framing that, as we will show, leads to larger measurements of support than alternative (but less frequently used) question framings.

**Evaluating the Use of Military Force vs. Diplomacy**

People often evaluate the use of military force in moral terms (*is it right or wrong*?), whereas they evaluate the use of diplomacy in instrumental-rational terms (*is it going to work? is it worth it?*) Atran, 2003; Ginges, 1997; Ginges & Atran, 2009, 2011; Ginges, Atran, Sachdeva, & Medin, 2011). Further, they perceive violent responses to
conflict as normative, and nonviolent responses to conflict as less normative (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). Judgments of right or wrong and evaluations of normative courses of action are made with ease, and therefore without comparisons to alternatives (Kahneman, 2003). Judgments of utility and effectiveness, and evaluations of non-normative courses of action, on the other hand, can hardly be made without comparisons to alternatives (see Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). Thus, people think about whether or not to use military force in a rather isolated manner, whereas they think about whether or not to use diplomacy in a less isolated manner, comparing diplomacy to alternatives such as the perceived norm of force.

Evaluating a course of action in isolation, without considering alternatives, is cognitively easier. As research on preference reversal has demonstrated, this cognitive ease of evaluation plays a key role in people’s preferences for the course of action in question (for a review see Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, & Bazerman, 1999). The more easily it can be evaluated, the stronger people’s preference for it (e.g., Hsee, 1996; see also Kahneman, 2003). Thus, evaluating a course of action in isolation should increase the likelihood for this course of action to be chosen over other, unconsidered alternatives (see also Song & Schwarz, 2008; Schwarz, 1999, 2007; Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001). This bias does not occur, however, when the same course of action is considered jointly with other alternatives (Druckman, 2004; Hsee, 1996).

Given these prior findings – that (a) evaluation of a course of action in isolation leads to stronger support than joint evaluation of this course of action and an alternative, and that (b) military force by default tends to be evaluated in isolation whereas diplomacy by default tends to be considered in conjunction with the normative alternative of military
force – we predicted that people’s self-reported support for military force should depend on the mode of evaluation (isolated vs. joint). Moreover, it should depend on the mode of evaluation more strongly than people’s self-reported support for diplomacy. In other words, self-reported support for military force should be more biased than self-reported support for diplomacy.

**Overview of the Current Research**

In order to examine the effect of mode of evaluation (isolated vs. joint) on people’s self-reported support for the use of military force and diplomacy, in three experiments we manipulated how the question about military force or diplomacy was framed. Similar to past research showing that the provision of different response alternatives to questions can affect the answers to these questions (Bartels, 2003; Druckman, 2001; Schwarz, 1999, 2007; Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001; Zaller, 1992; see also Berinsky & Druckman, 2007; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Boettcher, 2004; Boettcher & Cobb, 2006; Entman, 2004, 2007), we asked people about either approach to conflict in isolation, as a “yes/no” question, or in conjunction with one another, as an “either/or” question. In Study 1, we tested the effect in the context of the threat of Iran’s nuclear program to Israel in a field setting with a representative sample of Jewish Israelis. Showing the generalizability of the effect, Study 2 tested it for two hypothetical and one real-life conflict with a convenience sample of American adults. Showing the boundary conditions of the effect, Study 3 investigated whether the effect depends on conflict severity, testing the effect for low-, medium-, and high-severity conflicts, again with a convenience sample of American adults.
Study 1

If the expected dependency of self-reported support for the use of military force on mode of evaluation has real-life implications, it should be observed in a real-life context and a field setting. Thus, Study 1 aimed to establish the effect in the real-life context of the conflict around Iran’s nuclear program in Israel and the public opinion of Jewish Israelis regarding whether Israel and its allies should respond to Iran’s nuclear program with a military or a diplomatic strategy. At the time of data collection (June 2007), Iranian officials had made multiple overt threats of military strikes against Israel. Iran’s access to ballistic missile systems with the ability to reach Israel, coupled with the uncertainty as to whether Iran’s nuclear energy program also had a military dimension, furthered Israeli concerns over an Iranian attack and the discussion of a “strike-first” plan to prevent such an attack (rather than a diplomatic plan, also discussed at the time by Israel as well as its allies). Importantly, data for this study was collected before Iran relaxed its opposition to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in August 2007 (see Kerr, 2016).

Method

Participants. A representative sample of 499 Israeli adults (245 women, 254 men; age M = 44, range = 18-94) was approached in a telephone survey carried out in June 2007 with random digit sampling. Two hundred and thirty-three participants identified as secular Jews, 134 as traditional Jews, 104 as religious Jews, six as non-Jewish, and 22 did not identify their religious affiliation. One hundred and nineteen participants were single, 298 married, 58 widowed or divorced, and 24 did not report their marital status. Fifty-two participants had less than twelve years of education, 202
Sixty-seven participants were born in Asia or Africa, 170 were born in Europe or the U.S., 111 were first-generation Israeli from Asian or African descent, 70 were first-generation Israeli from European or U.S. descent, and 80 were second-generation Israeli, and one did not report their origin.

Procedure. After giving consent, participants were asked to convey their voting opinion regarding how their government should deal with Iran’s nuclear program. The question was randomly varied, between-subjects, in one of three ways, asking participants (a) whether they supported or opposed a military plan to deal with Iran’s nuclear program (isolated question framing), (b) whether they supported or opposed a diplomatic plan to deal with Iran’s nuclear program (isolated question framing), or (c) to choose between a military or a diplomatic plan to deal with Iran’s nuclear program (joint question framing).

Materials. The telephone survey contained the following instructions and questions.

Isolated framing/evaluation of military force. Participants were asked to “Imagine that a new military plan has been proposed to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. This plan involves a military attack against Iran where Israel, the United States and the European Union will make significant sacrifices.” Following the question “Would you vote for this military plan to stop Iran?”, participants could either vote for the military plan or not, coded “1” and “2”, respectively.

Isolated framing/evaluation of diplomacy. Participants were asked to “Imagine that a new diplomatic plan has been proposed to stop Iran from developing nuclear
weapons. This plan involves negotiation with Iran where Israel, the United States and the European Union will make significant sacrifices.” Following the question “Would you vote for this diplomatic plan to stop Iran?”, participants could either vote for the diplomatic plan or not, coded “1” and “2”, respectively.

Joint framing/evaluation of military force and diplomacy. Participants were asked to “Imagine that two new plans have been proposed to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons: a diplomatic plan and a military plan. The diplomatic plan involves negotiation with Iran where Israel, the United States and the European Union will make significant sacrifices. The military plan involves a military attack against Iran where Israel, the United States and the European Union will also make significant sacrifices.” Following the question “Which would you vote for: the military plan or the diplomatic plan?”, participants could choose either the military or the diplomatic plan, coded “1” and “2”, respectively. The order of plans (i.e. response options) was counterbalanced and had no effects on the results reported below.

Results and Discussion

To assess whether changes in support occurred depending on question framing (isolated vs. joint), we conducted chi-square tests comparing the frequency of voters for the military plan in the isolated and joint questions, and comparing the frequency of voters for the diplomatic plan in the isolated and joint questions.

Under isolated question framing, a majority of 63.4% of the participants voted for the military plan, whereas under joint question framing only a minority of 45.6% favored the military over the diplomatic plan. The chi-square test revealed the military response frequency under isolated question framing to be significantly higher than the military
response frequency under joint question framing, $\chi^2 = 10.91$, $p = .001$. Regarding the diplomatic plan, 56.7% voted for it under isolated question framing, compared to 54.4% under joint question framing. The corresponding chi-square test did not reach significance, $\chi^2 = 0.17$, $p > .05$.

As predicted, people’s support for military action was stronger under isolated than joint question framing, whereas the support for diplomacy did not significantly change under the two question frames. Strikingly, a majority for military force under isolated question framing turned into a minority for military force under joint question framing.

**Study 2**

Study 2 tested the generalizability of our hypothesis that support for military action would be stronger when asked in isolation rather than conjunction. To this end, Study 2 sampled American participants. Further, to ensure that the findings of Study 1 generalized to scenarios other than Iran, and to maximize internal validity, we added two hypothetical conflict scenarios to the real-life scenario that again targeted the conflict about Iran’s nuclear program. At the time of data collection (July 2007), American concerns over Iran’s nuclear program mostly revolved around trepidation about nuclear proliferation, a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and the impact that would have on American interests and stability in the region. Further, while Iran did not have the capability to strike on American soil, it did have the capability to strike American targets in the region. Like in Israel, whether to deal with Iran’s nuclear program through military strikes or through negotiations and other diplomatic means had been widely discussed in the American public.
Method

Participants. Study 2 included 334 American adults (254 women, 73 men, 7 did not indicate their gender; age M = 32, SD = 12.57, range = 19-76) recruited via Craigslist. Participants’ responses to the item “In general, I am… [1 = very conservative, 7 = very liberal]” indicated that participants’ political views were on average slightly more liberal than conservative (M = 5.20), but there was considerable variability in political views (SD = 1.73). No other demographic information was assessed in this study.

Procedure. Participants were asked to fill out an online survey on “Attitudes and Decision-Making.” They were informed that they would read different scenarios, some real and others hypothetical in nature, and then prompted to answer questions about the scenarios without there being any right or wrong answers. In a within-subjects design, all participants read three vignettes about conflict between the United States and a hypothetical or real opponent. For each vignette, they were randomly assigned either to the military-isolated, the diplomacy-isolated, or the joint question. To guard against carry-over effects – such that exposure to one question framing on the first vignette might affect responses to a different question framing on a subsequent vignette – we presented the vignettes in random order. Thus, any carry-over effects that might have occurred should even out at the aggregate level and therefore not affect statistical analyses and results.

Materials. The experiment contained three vignettes, two depicting hypothetical conflicts with a fictitious opponent, the third focusing on the actual conflict between the U.S. and Iran over Iran’s nuclear program (see scenarios 1-3 in the appendix). Further,
the experiment contained three questions, which, with different framings, assessed participants’ support for military and diplomatic approaches to conflict. Participants were asked to “imagine that your vote would decide what we will do to end the conflict.” The military-isolated question asked “Would you vote for a military option (the use of armed force)?” The diplomacy-isolated question asked “Would you vote for a diplomatic option (negotiations)?” The joint question asked “Which of these two options would you vote for: a military option (the use of armed force), or a diplomatic option (negotiations)?” The isolated questions were answered with “yes” or “no”, the joint question with “military option” or “diplomatic option.” The order of response alternatives – whether “yes” was presented before or after “no,” and whether “military option” was presented before or after “diplomatic option” – was counterbalanced and recorded. Adding the order as covariate to the analyses reported below did not change the significance of results; in fact, the covariate had no significant effect on responses at all.

**Results and Discussion**

We compared the frequency of voters for military action under isolated and joint question framing, and the frequency of voters for diplomacy under isolated and joint question framing (see Table 1). As Figure 1 shows, there were more voters for military action under isolated question framing than under joint question framing; all tests of the difference between frequency under joint and frequency under isolated question framing were significant, $\chi^2(1) > 10.00$, $p_s \leq .001$. While there were also more voters for diplomacy under isolated than joint question framing, this difference was smaller than for military action, and in case of the Iran scenario not even significant.
To test for these differences more directly, we ran a nonlinear mixed model analysis with question framing as categorical independent variable, subject as a random factor, and response as categorical dependent variable. As expected, the main effect of question framing was significant, $F(2, 658) = 105.64, p < .001$. Pre-planned contrasts revealed that, as expected, military support was higher under isolated ($estimate = 0.14, SE = 0.12$) than under joint question framing ($estimate = 1.24, SE = 0.14$), $t(658) = 6.21, p = .001$, and much more so than diplomacy was higher under isolated ($estimate = 1.67, SE = 0.15$) than joint question framing ($estimate = 1.24, SE = 0.14$), $t(658) = 2.18, p = .030$, confirming our hypothesis that military responses are more biased by question framing than diplomacy responses. Importantly, this bias in military support as opposed to diplomacy support replicated the findings of Study 1 with a wider range of scenarios, a different population, and in a different language and culture. The fact that it also occurred for hypothetical scenarios also indicates that this bias in people’s reasoning over political violence may not only originate from human affect (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004) and motivation (Ginges et al., 2007), but also from basic human cognition.

Due to the within-subject design and the random assignment to isolated military, isolated diplomacy, or joint question framing, many participants were exposed to both the military and the diplomacy response option over the course of the within-subject presentation of the different scenarios. This may have led to confounds and carryover effects. To test how much this issue may have distorted the results reported here, we ran the same analysis with a dichotomous covariate, coded ‘0’ for participants who were exposed to more than one question framing / set of response options across scenarios, and ‘1’ for participants who were exposed to the same question framing / set of response
options in each scenario. The effect reported above held when adding this covariate to the model, $F(2, 658) = 105.55, p < .001$, and the covariate had no significant effect, $F(1, 658) = 0.11, p = .745$. Further, we tested the above model among only those participants who were exposed to the same question framing / set of response options in each scenario, and, separately, among only those participants who were exposed to more than one question framing / set of response options across scenarios. The effect held in each case, $F(2, 90) = 5.30, p = .007$, and $F(1, 568) = 98.93, p < .001$, respectively. Thus, it appears that the effect of question framing we observed cannot be reduced to the fact that over the course of the within-subject presentation of the scenarios, many participants were exposed to both the military and the diplomacy response option/alternative.

**Study 3**

The effect of question framing on self-reported support for military force demonstrated in Study 1 and 2 should only occur for conflicts of moderate severity. Given that severity of harm as well as threat predict people’s retributive motives and punitiveness (Rucker, Polifroni, Tetlock, & Scott, 2004; Singh & Lin, 2011), military force should receive consistently greater support than diplomacy when a conflict is severe. Thus, the bias observed in Study 1 and 2 should not occur for high-severity conflicts, with military support receiving a majority of “votes” even when considering the alternative of diplomacy under joint question framing. Nor should the bias occur for low-severity conflicts, because in a low-severity conflict military force should seem immoral even under isolated question framing, and thus less viable than diplomacy. In other words, there should be ceiling effects for military and diplomacy support in high- and
low-severity conflicts, respectively, canceling out the question framing effect observed in Study 1-2 and hypothesized for moderate-severity conflicts in Study 3. This hypothesized dependence of the effect under investigation on severity has also been observed for other phenomena such as the effect of threat to social order on punitiveness (Rucker et al., 2004).

Method

Participants. We recruited 598 Americans (312 women, 281 men, 5 did not indicate gender; age M = 46, SD = 13.08, range = 20-84) via the Study Response Project (Stanton & Weiss, 2002; Stanton, 2006; Wallace, 2004). The Study Response Project provides researchers with access to a panel of 70,000 to 90,000 participants, recruited through “an all-volunteer ‘open’ recruitment model that ensures purely voluntary participation” (Stanton, 2006, p. 2). Participants’ responses to the item “In general, I am… [1 = very conservative, 7 = very liberal]” indicated that participants’ political views were on average right in the center between liberal and conservative (M = 3.84), but there was considerable variability in political views (SD = 1.91). No other demographic information was assessed in this study.

Procedure. The procedure was identical to Study 2, but adding low- and high-severity conflict scenarios, so that all participants were presented with altogether seven vignettes, and resulting in an additional within-subject factor of conflict severity. The order of response alternatives was counterbalanced and had no effects on responses.

Materials. The experiment contained seven vignettes. Three of these were the same as in Study 2 (see scenarios 1-3 in the appendix), the other four were added for this study (see scenarios 4-7 in the appendix).
Results and Discussion

Chi-square tests with “military or diplomacy” responses under joint question framing as observed and military or diplomacy responses under isolated question framing as expected values revealed that with the exception of military support for the low-severity conflict, $\chi^2 = 0.85, p = .358$, all differences between military/diplomacy support under isolated vs. joint question framing were significant, $\chi^2 s > 7.00, ps < .01$. As expected, for moderate conflicts military support was greater under isolated than under joint question framing, and this difference was greater than the corresponding difference in diplomacy support. For the low-severity conflict, military support did not differ significantly based on question framing, and diplomatic support was significantly lower under isolated as compared to joint question framing. For high-severity conflicts, the pattern we observed for moderate conflicts reversed. The difference in diplomacy support under isolated as compared to joint question framing was greater than the difference in military support under isolated as compared to joint question framing.

To test for the predicted effects of question framing and conflict severity more directly, we ran a nonlinear mixed model analysis with severity and question framing as categorical independent variables, subject as a random factor, and response as categorical dependent variable. The main effects of question framing and severity were significant, $Fs > 55.00, ps < .001$. Pre-planned contrasts revealed that regardless of conflict severity, military support was higher under isolated ($estimate = 0.17, SE = 0.09$) than under joint question framing ($estimate = 0.52, SE = 0.08$), $t(3570) = 5.63, p < .001$, while diplomacy support did not differ between isolated ($estimate = 0.62, SE = 0.07$) and joint question framing ($estimate = 0.52, SE = 0.08$), $t(3570) = 0.72, p = .470$, confirming our hypothesis
that military responses are more biased by question framing than diplomacy responses. Further, regardless of question framing, responses differed between all severity levels, $t$s $> 2.80$, $p$s $< .005$. In line with our hypothesis that severity should moderate the effect of question framing, the main effect of question framing was qualified by an interaction, $F(6, 3570) = 48.51$, $p < .001$. As expected, the effect of question framing on military responses was significant (i.e. support was higher under isolated than under joint framing) when the conflict was moderate ($estimate_{isolated} = 1.71$, $SE_{isolated} = 0.12$, $estimate_{joint} = 0.43$, $SE_{joint} = 0.09$), $t(3570) = -8.98$, $p < .001$, or high in severity ($estimate_{isolated} = 0.71$, $SE_{isolated} = 0.16$, $estimate_{joint} = -0.28$, $SE_{joint} = 0.14$), $t(3570) = -4.63$, $p < .001$, but not significant (i.e. similar support under isolated as under joint framing) when the conflict was low in severity ($estimate_{isolated} = -2.67$, $SE_{isolated} = 0.28$, $estimate_{joint} = -2.42$, $SE_{joint} = 0.26$), $t(3570) = 0.65$, $p = .516$. The effect of question framing on diplomacy responses was in the same direction, but less pronounced, when the conflict was moderate or high in severity (moderate: $estimate_{isolated} = 1.04$, $SE_{isolated} = 0.17$, $estimate_{joint} = 0.31$, $SE_{joint} = 0.15$), $t(3570) = 3.32$, $p < .001$; high: $estimate_{isolated} = 0.22$, $SE_{isolated} = 0.09$, $estimate_{joint} = -0.46$, $SE_{joint} = 0.09$), $t(3570) = 5.50$, $p < .001$, and significant in the opposite direction (i.e. support was higher under isolated than under joint framing) when the conflict was low in severity, $estimate_{isolated} = 1.03$, $SE_{isolated} = 0.17$, $estimate_{joint} = 2.49$, $SE_{joint} = 0.27$), $t(3570) = -4.65$, $p < .001$. In sum, with the exception of low-severity conflicts, military support was stronger under isolated than under joint question framing, and this effect was stronger than the one for diplomacy support (see Figure 2).\(^1\)

\(^1\) As in Study 2, results held when entering a covariate in the model that represented whether or not participants had been exposed to more than one question framing / set of response option over the course of
Validation Study

In Study 3, we had decided which conflicts were low, medium, or high in severity based on face validity. To gain more confidence in the scenarios’ severity, we ran a validation study with a new sample of 90 Americans, recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (48 women, 42 men; age M = 38, SD = 12.14, range = 19-77). Participants’ responses to the item “In general, I am… [1 = very liberal, 9 = very conservative]” indicated that participants’ political views were on average slightly left to the center (M = 4.35), but there was considerable variability in political views (SD = 1.91). Forty-eight participants reported that they themselves or close family members served in the U.S. Armed Forces. In terms of religion, the sample included 26 agnostics or atheists, 22 Protestants, 12 Catholics, two Buddhists, two Jews and two Muslims; 18 participants reported to have no religious affiliation, and six participants did not choose any affiliations. With respect to education, one participant had completed less than high school, nine a high school degree/GED, 19 some college, 11 a two-year college degree, 28 a four-year college degree, 17 a Master’s degree, three a doctoral degree, and two a professional degree (JD, MD). No other demographic information was assessed in this study.

All participants were presented with the seven scenarios used in Study 3. For each scenario, they indicated on visual analog scales from 1 = Not at all to 9 = Very much how “severe”, “extreme”, “upsetting”, and “infuriating” the event they had just read about was. For each scenario, the four items loaded onto one factor in an exploratory factor analysis. Thus, we averaged them into one composite score per scenario, labeled

the within-subject presentation of scenarios.
severity (of scenario 1, 2, 3, … 7). Descriptives and reliability indices are displayed in Table 3.

All scenarios differed significantly in severity, with the exception of scenario 1 and 2, and scenario 6 and 7 (see Table 3). As expected, scenario 4 was lowest in severity (and significantly different from all others), and the only scenario that did not significantly differ from the midpoint of the scale, $t(89) = 1.24, p = .217$; scenarios 5-7 were highest (all being significantly higher than scenarios 1-3, but scenario 5 was significantly lower than 6 and 7); and scenarios 1-3 fell in the middle (all being significantly higher than scenario 4, but scenario 3 was significantly lower from scenario 1 and 2). Altogether, this provided strong support for our use of severity in Study 3, and validated Study 3’s findings regarding the moderating effect of conflict severity. Further, when using the average severity ratings for each scenario obtained in the validation study in the mixed model analyses in Study 3 (providing more accurate severity estimates than our previous “ad-hoc” severity classifications) as a continuous (rather than categorical) moderating factor, the results of Study 3 remained the same. As can be seen in Figure 3, the effect of question framing on military support steadily increased with increasing conflict severity, whereas the effect on diplomacy support did not (but was constant, regardless of conflict severity).

**General Discussion**

Polling the public on its preference for conflict resolution strategies is one of the factors taken into account by government officials and decision makers when considering military and diplomatic strategies to approach conflict. Similarly, it is an important factor
in a large body of research on conflict and its resolution. Across three experiments and two nations, using both representative (Study 1) and convenience samples (Study 2-3), we have demonstrated that questions asking about either strategy in isolation, only giving “yes” or “no” response options (e.g., “Do you support a military solution in the conflict with X?” – yes/no), led to seemingly stronger public support for military strategies than questions asking about both military and diplomatic strategies in conjunction with one another (e.g., “Do you support a military or a diplomatic solution in the conflict with X?” – military/diplomatic). This difference in support depending on question framing went as far as Jewish Israelis displaying a majority in favor of military strategies to resolve the conflict over Iran’s nuclear program when asked under isolated question framing, as opposed to a majority in favor of diplomatic strategies when asked under joint question framing.

Particularly troubling is that self-reported support for use of force depends far more strongly on question framing than self-reported support for diplomacy. In other words, question framing biases self-reported support for military conflict resolution more strongly than self-reported support for diplomatic conflict resolution. Furthermore, the effect was found to depend on conflict severity: For all but low-profile conflicts, biases in people’s support for conflict strategies more strongly affected self-reported support for military conflict resolution rather than self-reported support for diplomatic conflict resolution. This was most strongly the case for moderate conflicts – situations where decision makers are most likely to take into account public opinion when considering their options in the conflict.

What causes the bias?
The data presented here do not speak directly to the causes of the effects we found. Where does the framing bias come from, and why does it affect support for military force more strongly than support for diplomacy? The bias might stem from different criteria people follow when evaluating an approach to conflict in isolation versus in conjunction (see also Schwarz, 1999, 2007; Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001). As we have argued, people might ask themselves whether something has to be done about the conflict at hand or not when thinking about a conflict resolution approach in isolation, whereas they might ask themselves what is the best thing to do about the conflict at hand when thinking about the approach vis-à-vis an alternative approach (see Atran, 2003; Ginges, 1997; Ginges & Atran, 2009, 2011; Ginges et al., 2011). In the former situation, people will thus be more likely to express support for the approach in question than in the latter situation, when considering it vis-à-vis an alternative approach. The better defined the question is by response alternatives, the more people will shift to the “what’s best” criterion.

This explanation can account for why the bias occurs in general, but not for why it is particularly strong for military support and less so for diplomacy support. The reason for this difference is that military conflict resolution strategies are generally more salient in people’s minds than diplomatic ones (see Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). Thus, when asked about diplomacy in isolation, diplomacy might be automatically pitted against the normative alternative of military strategies, the “no” response option being (re-)interpreted by respondents as “military.” When asked about military approaches in isolation, on the other hand, such a re-interpretation is less likely to occur, as diplomacy is not as salient or normative as use of force, and therefore the “no” response option is
unlikely to be (re-)interpreted by respondents as “diplomacy.” While these two explanations can account for our findings and are also in line with decision making research (Ginges & Atran, 2009, 2011; Ginges et al, 2011; Hsee et al., 1999; Schwarz, 1999, 2007; Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001), further research is warranted to test them directly.

Limitations

Of course, the difference in support for conflict resolution strategies under isolated vs. joint question framing raises the question of which framing yields the more accurate measurement of public opinion. Evidently it is hard, perhaps impossible, to obtain a criterion of accuracy in the context of the research presented here. Yet, we believe that it is ultimately less important which framing yields the more accurate responses. What is more important is to understand that when people evaluate how a conflict should be approached (militarily or diplomatically), sooner or later they will consider different options rather than only considering whether to use or not to use one option. Therefore, the joint question framing should provide the more “conservative” estimate of the public’s support for military action, and thus it seems most reasonable and pragmatic to us.

Another issue is the partially ipsative nature of our data. Naturally, “military” responses to the joint question were not independent from “diplomacy” responses on the same question. At the same time, however, we had to analyze military and diplomacy responses as two separate dependent variables in order to test our hypotheses, as the ipsative element of our data (analyses) is inherent to our research question of comparing the difference in military support under isolated vs. joint question framing to the
difference in diplomacy support under isolated vs. joint question framing. Further, this problem is inherent to research on preference changes (e.g. Hsee et al., 1999).

Importantly, our data show that framing bias in military support is most strongly driven by changes in military support under isolated relative to joint question framing, less so (or not at all, see Study 1) by changes in diplomacy support under isolated relative to joint question framing. Thus, the ipsative nature of our data analysis cannot account for why the bias we identified operates more strongly for military than for diplomacy preferences, and our findings cannot be interpreted to simply reflect a statistical artifact. Nor does it take away from the practical importance of our findings: (a) there is a great risk in measuring people’s support for military action in isolation, which can lead to misinformed decisions by government and military officials, politicians, policy and decision makers in favor of military rather than diplomatic approaches to conflict; and (b) pollsters and researchers should give an alternative response option (e.g., diplomacy) when asking people what approach to conflict they support.

**Conclusion**

Regardless of the causes, our findings clearly show that the measurement of people’s support for use of force in response to foreign policy crises strongly depends on question framing, which could lead to mis- or under-informed decisions by government and military officials, politicians, policy and decision makers as to how approach conflicts. In order to gather more “conservative” estimates of the public’s support for military action, both pollsters and researchers need to provide an alternative conflict resolution strategy (i.e., diplomacy) for respondents to consider when asking them what approach to conflict they support.
References


Table 1: Frequencies for responses under separate/joint question framing for all scenarios of Study 2, tested for difference from 50%.

*** p < .0001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .07, ns = not significant
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario number (level of severity)</th>
<th>Question framing</th>
<th>Military support (in percent)</th>
<th>Diplomacy support (in percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (moderate)</td>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>41.27 *</td>
<td>58.73 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomacy separate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>67.79 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military separate</td>
<td>75.63 ***</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (moderate)</td>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>43.41 *</td>
<td>56.59 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomacy separate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>73.66 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military separate</td>
<td>66.84 ***</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (moderate)</td>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>32.74 ***</td>
<td>67.26 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomacy separate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>76.47 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military separate</td>
<td>48.66 ns</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (low-profile)</td>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>8.16 ***</td>
<td>91.84 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomacy separate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>73.26 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military separate</td>
<td>6.54 ***</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (severe)</td>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>60.59 **</td>
<td>39.41 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomacy separate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>59.14 *</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Military separate</td>
<td>86.89 ***</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (severe)</td>
<td>Joint</td>
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<td>21.53 ***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Diplomacy separate</td>
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<td>37.04 ***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Military separate</td>
<td>90.95 ***</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Joint</td>
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<td>17.32 ***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomacy separate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>35.35 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military separate</td>
<td>92.12 ***</td>
<td>-</td>
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</table>

Table 2: Frequencies for responses under separate/joint question framing for all scenarios of Study 3, tested for difference from 50%.

*** p < .0001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .07, ns = not significant
Table 3: Perceived severity for all scenarios used in Study 3; scenarios with different subscripts significantly differed in severity (p < .05), scenarios with common subscripts did not differ significantly in severity (p > .05).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario number</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Cronbach’s α</th>
<th>Severity</th>
<th>Subscript</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
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<td>.96</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>90</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>7.53</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.97</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>2.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>8.13</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>8.39</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
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Figure 1: Frequency of participants supporting the military plan or the diplomatic plan under separate (s) or joint (j) question framing in Study 2.
Support for Military and Diplomacy (under Joint or Separate Question Framing)

Figure 2: Frequency of participants supporting the military plan or the diplomatic plan under separate (s) or joint (j) question framing in Study 3.
Figure 3: Effect of question framing (joint vs. separate) on support for the military plan or the diplomatic plan in Study 3, with conflict severity as a continuous moderator (based on conflict severity ratings in the validation study).
Scenarios in Study 1 and 2

Scenario 1: Imagine that **100 US soldiers** have been captured and are being held hostage by "Country X".

Scenario 2: Imagine the following was true: Three months ago it was discovered that Bundistonia has been dumping radioactive substances in the Pacific Ocean. This practice is damaging the water supply of the United States. Without water a country cannot survive. Bundistonia has been told that they must stop, but has so far ignored all requests to stop. This has led to increasing tension between the U.S. and Bundistonia.

Scenario 3: As you might know, Iran's program for nuclear power is advanced. Democrats and Republican members of Congress are nearly unanimous in arguing that an Iran with nuclear weapons is a threat to the United States and its allies.

Scenario 4: Imagine the following was true: Yesterday the president of the United States visited the republic of Myanmar on an official visit to give a speech to the parliament of Myanmar. Just as he entered the hall to begin his speech, a group of anti-American students burst in and threw rotten eggs
at the president. The eggs landed on the president's face. Disorientated, the
president fell to his knees and tripped over. Everybody in the hall roared
with laughter, some pointing at the president of the United States, some
clapping. Shocked and deeply humiliated, the president rushed off the
stage and left the parliament, escorted by his bodyguards.

Scenario 5: Imagine that 100 innocent men, women and children who are US
citizens have been captured and are being held hostage by "Country X".
"Country X" is expected to torture and kill all the hostages.

Scenario 6: Imagine that one month ago, 100 citizens of different countries, including
citizens of the US, were captured by a country we will call "Country X" as an
act of war. Those hostages included men, women and children and
were all brutally tortured and killed. The killings were broadcast
throughout "Country X" and widely celebrated there. Now 100 more
innocent US citizens have been captured and are being held hostage by
"Country X". "Country X" is expected to torture and kill all the
hostages.

Scenario 7: Imagine the following was true: American Parents for Peace (APP) is a
group of American doctors and nurses who have given up their jobs in the
United States to work for free in hospitals in Dombonia, a developing
country with a history of anti-American activities. The government of
Dombonia encouraged the peace mission, guaranteeing the safety of the volunteers and their families. Many volunteers came with their children, who go to the American embassy's kindergarten. This evening, when many parents came to pick up their children, the American kindergarten was attacked by Dombonia's military and police forces. The children were forced to watch while their parents were tortured and killed. After murdering the parents the killers mutilated the bodies of the dead. Videos of the killings are being broadcasted in many international TV stations and in the internet. The children are still hostage. Every ten minutes, one child is killed in front of a video camera and its corpse thrown out of the window to the hands of the enthusiastic crowd around the building, burning American flags.
Author bios

Bernhard Leidner is an Assistant Professor in the Psychology of Peace and Violence Program of the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. As a social and political psychologist, Dr. Leidner’s research focuses on intergroup violence, international conflict (reduction), and justice. His work, often conducted in multiple countries and world regions, and making heavy use of online surveys and experiments, has been supported by both federal and private funding sources, and published in top-tier outlets in psychology in general and social psychology in particular, as well as in more multidisciplinary journals in the area of conflict studies.

Jeremy Ginges is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. His research focusses on two related problems: how do humans decide whether to cooperate across cultural and group boundaries, and why do people sacrifice everything (their own lives, the lives of loved ones) for an abstract cause like nation or god? To answer these questions he runs psychological experiments in the lab, and field experiments in places around the world - like Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, or Indonesia - that oscillate between extreme conflict and surprising cooperation.