

When Elections Turn Proxy Wars:
The Polarizing Effect of Foreign Intervention

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Abstract

What do voters think when outside powers become de facto participants in a country's election? We conceptualize two types of foreign intervention: a partisan stance, where the outsider roots for a particular candidate slate, and a process stance, where outsiders support the democratic process. We theorize that a partisan outside message will polarize partisan actors domestically on the issue of appropriate relations with the outsiders: partisans who are supported will want closer relations with the outside power, and partisans who are opposed will favor more distant relations. A process message, in contrast, will have a moderating effect on voters' attitudes. We present evidence of partisan polarization along those lines from a survey experiment we conducted in Lebanon in the wake of the 2009 Parliamentary elections. We discuss the implications of our findings for future studies of how outsiders can encourage moderate electoral outcomes in democratizing states.

1 Introduction: Whose Side Are You On?

What happens when states intervene in each other's elections? Despite a dubious legacy of Cold War intercessions in developing world domestic politics and twenty years of post-Cold War democracy promotion, we have surprisingly few tools, theoretical or empirical, to answer these questions. Yet electoral interventions are common. The United States, Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia all jockeyed for influence in recently-conducted elections in Iraq and Lebanon, Russia has exerted pressure in Georgia, the Ukraine, and the central Asian states on its borders, and the United States has long been accused of meddling in elections throughout Latin America. By one count, outside powers have tried to influence the outcome of more than 120 national elections taking place in 66 countries between 1960 and 2006 — an average of over 2.5 interventions per year.¹ Startlingly, lost in the shuffle of all of these interventions is the most fundamental set of actors of all: the voters themselves.

How do voters react to foreign interventions in the quintessentially domestic concern of elections? We are aware of virtually no prior work in this area. Dominant theories in international relations focus almost entirely on states and their leaders and usually bring in voters only as a stylized fact.² Work in comparative politics, meanwhile, often acknowledges that foreign interventions “matter” in elections, especially where democracy is fragile, but rarely theorize on how they matter to voters.³ A practitioner-oriented empirical literature offers descriptive “lessons learned” from individual elections, plausible but ultimately untested assertions that emphasize voter disillusionment with interventions, particularly by the United States.⁴

In this paper, we begin the task of building theory on how voters respond to foreign intercessions in their elections. More specifically, we examine how interventions of different types shift popular opinions on foreign relations with intervening states. We study voter reactions to two stylized types of foreign intervention: democracy

¹ National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA), <http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda/>.

²Exceptions to the rule include work on democracy promotion (Pevehouse, 2002), work on partisan incentives to settle conflicts (Schultz, 2005).

³Recent advances in comparative politics have begun to examine foreign influences on elections in semi-authoritarian regimes. See Vachudova (2005), Simpser (2005), Blaydes (2006), Bunce and Wolchik (2010).

⁴See, for example, Falcoff, Valenzuela and Purcell (1988), Thompson and Kuntz (2004), Ferguson (2008).

promotion and ally promotion. We argue that one-sided intercessions on behalf of a contestant in the election polarizes voters toward the intervening power. Because partisan states become de facto participants in the target country’s domestic politics, domestic partisans wish to adjust relations with the foreign power in order to maximize (minimize) the benefits (drawbacks) of future interventions. Consequently, we hypothesize that voters prefer closer relations with a power that supports their own side during the campaign, and more distant relations with a power that supports their opponents.

We test our argument via a survey experiment we deployed in Lebanon in the wake of its June 2009 parliamentary elections, in which numerous foreign powers took an active and public interest. We embedded a randomized framing experiment within a nationally-representative survey of over 2000 voting-age adults, highlighting partisan and democratic process-oriented interventions on the part of the United States and Iran, the principle foreign protagonists in the election. We find broad support for the polarizing logic sketched above. We also find some surprising and intriguing variations on this theme, the most prominent of which is that opinion shifts appear to track only what the United States does, and not what Iran does.

Our paper makes three broad contributions. First, we take the initial theoretical steps to conceptualize how voters react to foreign interventions in their elections — studying target *publics* rather than target states — which reaches into the overlapping area between international relations and comparative politics. Second, we focus directly on voters in our empirics, moving beyond broad descriptives to demonstrate systematically how their opinions shift with different interventions. Third, we show how the technique of randomized framing experiments — increasingly used in the American politics literature but still rare in international relations and comparative politics — can open a window on foreign interventions that would be difficult if not impossible to budge with other empirical methods.

2 Theorizing Voter Responses to Intervention

2.1 Elections As the New Proxy Wars of Choice

Why might foreign powers engage in ally promotion? In principle, supporting a preferred set of local contestants may help them win an election, form a government, and subsequently implement policies preferred by, or at least friendly to, the intervening

state. Foreign powers can use a number of mechanisms to promote their allies, including help with campaign logistics via funding and expertise,⁵ attempts to swing the vote directly through threats of sanctions or promises of aid,⁶ or even corrupting the electoral process itself by ignoring or contributing to abuses by their protégés.⁷ The common thread running through all of these examples is the attempt to tip the balance of electoral support in favor of the foreign power's domestic allies.

International relations theory tells us that states look out for their interests. Securing allies abroad is a natural way to promote those interests. The dominant view on how alliances are formed envisions a voluntary association, designed to counteract real or perceived common threats (Walt, 1987). Yet, domestic factions do not always agree on which foreign power to please and which to slight. Powerful states can use a number of strategies beyond voluntary cooperation to get the foreign partners they need. States can occupy other countries to put in place a pliant leader.⁸ States can push allies into office with the help of economic sanctions,⁹ or by sponsoring a coup d'état.¹⁰ Great powers and regional hegemonies may battle for allies by fueling proxy

⁵The newly created U.S. spy agency campaigned vigorously against the Left in 1948 Italy, the Serbian opposition got Western coaching in its fight against Milošević, and India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party agents were allegedly active in Nepal in the most recent election there.

⁶The unexpected win for the Right in Nicaragua is credited to U.S. threats of sanctions, Russia tied the payment of Finnish reparations to whether the People's Democratic League won the 1948 Finnish elections, and one of the campaign slogans of the Slovak opposition against Mečiar in 1998 was an exhortation to vote as "Europe" wanted.

⁷In Lebanon, concerns about vote-buying resonate: the value of an individual vote in the 2009 election was said to be between 400 and 800 dollars, numbers linked to a price war between foreigners awash in cash (*The New York Times*, "Foreign Money Seeks to Buy Lebanese Votes", Robert Worth, April 23, 2009).

⁸In Book Five of his history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides gives the example of Sparta using force and threats to install in office the party of the oligarchs in Argos: unlike the Argive democrats, the oligarchs wanted peace and alliance with Sparta (Robert Stressler, 1998, 395–399). The Soviet Union applied the same strategy to postwar Eastern Europe.

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¹⁰The list of coups (allegedly or actually) sponsored from abroad is a long one, with those against Iraq's Mohhamad Mosaddeq and Chile's Salvador Allende representing two of the most notorious examples.

civil wars.¹¹

Intervening in elections abroad provides another way to get friends in office. What sets electoral interventions apart in the post-cold war period is the wide-spread normative legitimacy of voting as the principal way of changing governments, coupled with the waning legitimacy of the traditionally more forceful ways of promoting leaders to power. Moreover, the gargantuan costs and uncertain long-term success of militarized regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq make electoral interventions appear, if nothing else, dramatically cheaper and potentially much more cost-effective. Put together, these trends transform elections into the new proxy wars of choice in international politics.

Our proposed contribution to international relations theory is three-fold. First, we are opening a conversation on a hitherto ignored question: how do states succeed or fail in enhancing their security by taking stances in foreign elections. This question elides traditional power politics with themes from the democratic peace and democracy promotion literatures.¹² Democracies may be superior to the alternatives, but we suspect that states' security concerns do not end with the holding of elections.

Second, we join other perspectives in the field in questioning the view, implicit in realism, that state "interests" can be readily deduced from the security environment.¹³ Empirically, elections often feature ideological divides on what actually constitutes a state's core interests. One view may win, but this only happens in the context of a national conversation on the merits of pursuing one or other alliance. We argue that to understand states' foreign policy trajectories, we would benefit from recognizing and studying this fluidity.

Third, with our emphasis on partisan polarization, we call for a more nuanced view of what it means to gain or lose allies abroad. For a state seeking to maximize its security, the question is not merely whether the party winning an election abroad is

¹¹An enduring image of the Cold War is that of a chess-board with American and Russian money and weapons moving proxy armies into battle in Asia, Latin America and Africa (Westad, 2005).

¹²Both literatures are too rich to summarize even briefly, so we point to a few seminal pieces: Maoz and Russett (1993), Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995), Cox, Ikenberry and Inoguchi (2000), Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2006).

¹³Constructivist scholars, for example, argue *contra* realism that state interests are subject to interpretation and construction (Wendt, 1995; Katzenstein, 1984; Hemmer and Katzenstein, 2002).

friendly or antagonistic. The question is: *how* friendly (antagonistic)? In democracies, power changes hands. Encouraging moderate views across the political spectrum may be no less important than swinging the election.

While international relations supplies a useful macro-level motivation for our puzzle, our interest in voters recommends the more micro-level tools of comparative politics for our theory development. In particular, what do voters make of foreign interventions? Despite growing theoretical interest in mass audiences (Fearon, 1994; Weeks, 2008) there have been only a few systematic efforts to study such audiences directly (Tomz, 2007; Croco, 2010), and none, to our knowledge, that study target publics. We consequently have little to guide us in thinking about how the electorate incorporates interventions into the ultimate electoral outcome.

2.2 A Theory of Taking Sides

States would sometimes but not always choose to take sides in other states' elections. Our argument is that when this occurs, it will polarize the electorate. To understand the micro-foundations of this claim, we consider parties, ideological agendas, foreign influence and voter responses.

We begin by conceptualizing two types of foreign involvement in an election: a *partisan* one and a *process* one. A partisan intervention occurs when a foreign actor seeks to advance a specific ticket. A process intervention occurs when foreign actors seek to support the rules of democratic contestation, irrespective of who wins. Based on our reading of the empirical evidence, these two types capture reasonably well the variety of actions adopted by intervening powers. We also find it plausible to argue that voters will categorize foreign activities into one of these two broad conceptual categories, whether, e.g., the activity involves foreigners giving cash to candidates, threatening sanctions unless a candidate is elected, or seeking an independent electoral commission. Foreign actors either support a contestant or the rules of the game.¹⁴

One point bears emphasis. We are not interested in rhetorical or purely public stances by foreign powers. Rather, we envision a process in which voters, through the media and due to what they see in everyday interactions, come away with impressions of what the foreign power is really seeking to accomplish. Voters may have predispositions

¹⁴It is possible to believe that both logics are at work, such as when the West supported clean elections in Ukraine: the ultimate beneficiary of the clean dénouement of the “Orange” election was the pro-Western candidate.

and pre-existing beliefs about the foreigners, and the foreign power may seek to cast itself in misleading light. We believe that these activities may cloud voters' perceptions of what is actually going on, but we also believe that, in equilibrium, if the foreign power adopts clear actions that shore up either the process or partisan image, perceptions will align with actual policy.¹⁵

Why do states take sides in elections abroad? Adopting language used in the economic coercion literature, we may ask: why would a sender state choose to back a ticket in the electoral competition of a target state? We spell out the conditions that push some sender states toward a patron-client relationship with a partisan ticket abroad.

Ideological Conflict and Electoral Outcomes in Target

We assume, building on work in the political economy literature, that some elections feature exogenous ideological distinctions among candidates (Persson and Tabellini, 2000). When this is the case, post-election policy will generally diverge and will be set along partisan lines.¹⁶ For our purposes, we care about and focus on ideological distinctions between the sender state and the main political forces in target state. When the main political forces in target state are either all in broad ideological agreement with sender, or all share an antagonistic view of the sender state, the outside power will have no incentive to back a specific side. In those cases, whoever wins, the sender gets the same policy. When, however, key partisan forces in target are split along ideological lines, so that some are sympathetic to sender and some are not, there will be incentives to back one side so as to help it prevail. A simplifying assumption we make is that partisan tickets accept foreign support when this would help them win.

To clarify a key point: we assume that ideological affinity between partisan tickets in sender and target, whether it is along Left-Right or some other dimension, is at least

¹⁵Our empirical strategy in the paper is to introduce random variation in what message each voter is exposed to, and so in what the voter believes to be the foreign power's strategy. This implies that we do not study why and how foreign powers decide to adopt the strategies they do select for particular cases. While the latter is a promising topic for future research, our identification strategy does not depend on settling that issue. Our inference strategy only depends on successfully swaying voters' prior beliefs about the foreigners with our prompts.

¹⁶Assuming that voters cannot control politicians after the election, and deriving partisan preferences from a "citizen-candidate" model of electoral races, is one way to derive these results (Persson and Tabellini, 2000, Chapter 5).

in part exogenous to the strategic interaction between these actors. In the outcomes we observe in the real world, we will see some tickets allying more or less closely with outside powers. Observed outcomes reflect both the level of ideological conflict actors start out with *and* the strategic interaction between the actors in an electoral setting. What we want to show is that, when there is initial ideological divergence in views on the foreign power, the strategic interaction will polarize these views further.

We assume that partisan tickets are stable aggregations of policy preferences (Cox, 2005). The ticket that wins the election, will implement its preferred partisan policy. The sender state could engage in post-election interventions and get even ideologically-opposed actors to enact its preferred policies (provided it is powerful enough). However, especially as the degree of ideological conflict grows, it will be cheaper to try to get a politically-friendly ticket elected to office relative to attempting to swing post-election policy.

Power asymmetry between the sender and target states, as well as the geo-political salience of the issue of ideological conflict will increase the attraction of attempting to influence the outcome of a specific election. Often the same logic driving a foreign power to support a ticket, drives that rivals' power to support the opposite ticket, so as to offset the advantage in resources. Geopolitical rivalries increase the odds of intervention.

Democratic Consolidation and the Risks and Benefits of Electoral Intervention

Foreign attempts to propel a preferred ticket into office are more likely to be cost-effective where democratic institutions are fragile and non-consolidated. There are two reasons for that. For one, foreign cash to finance campaigns or buy votes can more easily bestow a comparative advantage to a ticket where democratic institutions are untested and easier to corrupt. For another, in consolidated democracies, widely-shared democratic norms may cause a backlash against foreigners who come across as meddling. Whether this backlash assumes nationalistic overtones or not, it is especially likely in cases where democratic norms of popular self-determination are widely accepted.

Voter Attitudes Toward Intervening Powers

Foreigners undertake electoral interventions to help a ticket win – when the strategy is most likely to work. What do we expect voters to make of this? Partisan voters whose ticket receives support, would favor pursuing even closer relations with the outsider power. Closer relations maximize the influence of the friendly power in the affairs of the country, and so maximize the odds of a future successful shot at power for the friendly ticket. The opposite applies to voters for the ideologically opposed ticket. Partisanship gives no reason for independent voters to turn for or against an intervener, and so yields no prediction on the attitudes of those voters.¹⁷

We have a simple theory of what voters are after. They derive satisfaction from having their partisan ticket in office (if they have one), and they derive satisfaction from cooperating with the foreign power. When the level of cooperation with the foreigners begins to impact the odds of capturing power, partisan voters favor optimally reducing or increasing cooperation to capture the externality cooperation generates in the game of winning power.

This is the polarizing effect of foreign intervention we envision. In part, preferences on relations emerge as an endogenous reaction to the incentives foreigners develop when confronted with ideological splits in potential targets of interest. Because foreign strategies and resulting attitudes are simultaneously determined, observing and testing for the polarizing effect we posit is non-trivial.¹⁸

We look at voter attitudes, even though actual policy outcomes are determined by their agents, the political parties. One way to justify this is to assume that, when it comes to relations with the foreign power, agents will tend to represent the preferences of their principals. Another argument for considering what voters think is that actual policy is filtered through institutional arrangements and other intervening variables. Political representatives may sometimes be bought off and fail to implement the partisan policy representative of the voters' preferences. Voter attitudes should still reflect the underlying logic linking partisanship to preferred relations with a meddling foreign power.

¹⁷These voters may respond to threats by the outsider and so be instrumental in deciding the outcome of the election. Since we focus on the polarizing effect of intervention in this paper, we cannot study at length the issue of who responds to foreign pressure. We leave that question for future research.

¹⁸David (1991) argued that the alignment of Third World dictators is best explained as balancing against domestic threats. The logic we propose has similar flavor but it applies to the case of democratic political competition.

Our hypotheses, then, are:

Hypothesis 1 *Partisan voters want closer relations with foreign powers that take their side in elections.*

Hypothesis 2 *Partisan voters want more distant relations with foreign powers that take their opponent's side in elections.*

International Institutions, Reputation and the Strategies of Interveners

In the argument we present, foreign powers cannot help but intervene when this would be beneficial to their ticket. But states can avoid being drawn in others' elections. This observation informs our empirical strategy, so we offer some discussion here.

Existing work on democracy promotion argues for the ability of international institutions to tie the hands of intervening powers when it comes to supporting their "clients." Regional organizations dominated by democracies allow member states to pursue principled support for democratic institutions abroad (Pevehouse, 2002; Vachudova, 2005). In addition, work on America's "grand liberal strategy" has suggested that, because of its makeup and traditions, the United States is at least sometimes able to put aside short-term realpolitik objectives and to pursue principled, democracy-promoting strategies (Ikenberry, 2000, 2001). These types of arguments suggest that, especially within a permissive international environment (where the importance of ideological affinity or conflict in other states abates), states can abstain from engaging in otherwise strategically-warranted interventions.

This gives us an idea of how to gain empirical traction over the theoretical propositions we are developing. Because interventions and polarization are determined simultaneously in observational data, we need some way of varying the image of the foreign power if we are to get voters' responses to vary in the theoretically predicted direction. We adopt the following strategy. Because sometimes different impulses pull U.S. policymakers in different directions, the American position would sometimes come across as a mixed message. On the one hand, there is the *real-politik* image of the United States always supporting its side where ideological conflict exists.¹⁹ On the other hand, there are numerous regional initiatives in which the United States, especially since the end

¹⁹This may lead to anti-Americanism as a growing literature has started to demonstrate (Lynch, 2006; Katzenstein and Keohane, 2007; Chiozza, 2009). The Middle East is an area of special concern, where the challenges of encouraging moderation are both pressing and

of the Cold War, has championed the right to democratic self-determination. In our experimental setup, these discordant images provide an opportunity. We seek to highlight the different images to different groups of voters – and then study the response. Fundamentally, we are able to do this because institutions provide states with more than one option in their foreign policy repertoire.

3 Data and Methods

When selecting a specific research strategy for the polarization hypotheses, it is helpful to think about the range of possible outcomes in observational data.

Table 1 classifies a number of empirical cases by degree of ideological affinity of the main political parties in target state (we consider a simple case with two actors A and B), and by degree of democratic consolidation in the potential target of intervention. Cases where all main parties, both A and B , share a common ideological attraction or aversion to the foreign actor (we allow for states and organizations), are not attractive targets for electoral intervention. Thai political life is rife with conflict but the main protagonists agree on the strategic alignment with the United States, and the same applies to British elections. Russia knows its popularity is historically low in Georgia and Poland and so has no ideological ally to back. The USSR during the Cold War often took pains to make sure that Finland pursued a policy of neutrality it liked.²⁰ The Soviets, however, did not take sides, mindful both of the possibility of sinking their allies and the limitations of throwing cash at candidates in a country with seasoned democratic institutions.

By contrast, strong splits in the electorate, and weak democratic institutions invite interventions. Nicaragua, Lebanon, Ukraine and Nepal furnish four examples observed in different regions and different points of time.

While not intended as a comprehensive list of interventions, Table 1 is sufficient to illustrate the pitfalls of a research design based on cross-national observational data. Our argument states that foreign interventions occur where they are most likely to succeed in placing a preferred party in office, and that it is in those case that the electorate is most likely to polarize in its preferences over relations with the foreign power. In observational data, at best, we are likely to observe the simultaneous effects of ideological affinity (between sender and target party) and the intervention decision

complex. See recent work by Lust-Okar (2005), Jamal (2007), Blaydes and Linzer (2008).

²⁰By negotiating with the elected government.

Table 1: Patrons and Clients: Main Parties A, B in Target[**state**], by Ideological Affinity with Sender[**state**] (one sender per case)

Ideological Affinity	Hi	A Thailand US	B Thailand US	A Belgium US	B Belgium US
		A Lebanon '09 Iran	A Nicaragua '90 US		
		A Ukraine '05 Russia	A Nepal '08 India	A Finland USSR	
		B Lebanon '09 Iran	B Nicaragua '90 US		B Finland USSR
		B Ukraine '05 Russia	B Nepal '08 India		
		A Georgia Russia	B Georgia Russia	A Poland Russia	B Poland Russia
	Lo	Lo			Hi
		Democratic Consolidation in Target			

on outcomes. A case-by-case comparison in a cross-national design would not help because in each case the logic operates, the outcome will be set endogenously to the intervention strategy.

As an alternative, in our research design we try to manipulate experimentally the beliefs voters hold about the strategy of the intervening power in the context a specific election, and to map that into variation of voters' views on the foreign power. We chose an election in Lebanon. As a venue for intervention, Lebanon shares many characteristics with other cases such as Nicaragua, Nepal and Ukraine. Robust outside interest, a split ideological party setting and a vulnerable political process run through those and other cases. While these similarities do not guarantee the same findings in those or other cases, they suggest that, in ways that matter to our theory, the choice of the Lebanese case is as good as the choice of any other instance of intervention.

The Lebanese case of 2009 offers us an especially good opportunity to deploy our experimental strategy. The mixed messages supplied by the United States on its position on candidates gave us an opening to highlight some pieces of the American strategy and not others and to randomly allocate different pieces of information to respondents. The presence of competing powers, Iran among others, gives us another 'intervener

case' to work with while increasing the potential payoff/cost to voters from having or losing a patron.

3.1 Background to the Lebanese Parliamentary Elections

We conducted our survey experiment in the wake of “tiny Lebanon’s titanic vote”²¹ in the 2009 parliamentary elections, which we describe momentarily. Lebanon itself provides rich empirical terrain for a test on how foreign interventions affect voter attitudes toward the intervening power. After experiencing one of the anti-authoritarian revolutions of the early-2000s — the so-called “Cedar Revolution” of 2005, which followed Serbia’s Bulldozer Revolution in 2000, Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004 and Georgia’s Rose Revolution of 2003 — attention turned to the 2009 election as a test of how well-consolidated Lebanon’s renewed democratization had become. Consequently, the elections attracted considerable international interest not only in the context of democracy promotion and consolidation, but also from foreign powers hoping to see their domestic allies prevail at the ballot boxes.

Since its 2005 Cedar Revolution, Lebanon has, to paraphrase a supposedly ancient Chinese curse, “lived in interesting times.” After massive anti-Syria demonstrations following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the Syrian armed forces withdrew from Lebanon and the summer parliamentary elections returned an anti-Syria majority. Over the course of the next four years, Lebanon suffered through the summer 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, a long-running opposition sit-in in downtown Beirut, a lengthy constitutional vacuum when the opposition-aligned speaker of parliament refused to convene the legislature to elect a new president, and finally the armed takeover of West Beirut by Hizballah’s militia and its allies in May 2008. Foreign mediation, headed by Qatar, produced an agreement on a national unity government, the election of a new president, and an election law for the parliamentary elections to be held in 2009.

The origins of the two main political coalitions, as well as one of their central recurring dimensions of cleavage, is foreign policy orientation. Their namesake days, March 08 and March 14 of 2005, marked competing pro- and anti-Syria demonstrations that respectively drew an estimated 600,000 and 1 million people out of a resident population of about 4 million to downtown Beirut. The two main Shia parties, Hizballah and

²¹The phrase comes from a *Christian Science Monitor* article of the same title published on election day, 7 June 2009.

Amal, organized the former rally, whereas the dominant Sunni and Druze parties, along with virtually all Christian factions, participated in the latter. The two main political alliances took their names — or rather misnomers²² — from these two days, although in the spirit of their contemporaries in the Eastern European colored revolutions they were fractious coalitions prone to disputes and in-fighting. In terms of popular support, most Shiites supported the opposition March 08, whereas most Sunnis and Druze supported March 14. Christians, in contrast, were much more internally competitive, with the largest faction lined up with the March 08 opposition and numerous others supporting March 14 and allied independents.²³

Campaigning in the lead-up to the 2009 parliamentary elections focused heavily on foreign policy and Lebanon's relations with outside powers. Notably for our purposes, the March 14 campaign ran heavily against Iranian influence in the country, while March 08 ran against American meddling in Lebanese affairs (AUTHOR). Both powers, in turn, sent mixed messages about their intentions. American policy, for example, seemed to oscillate between supporting the democratic process and favoring the March 14 coalition. The US secretary of state, in a pre-election visit, told the Lebanese that they had "been through too much and it is only right that you are given a chance to make your own decisions," but then took time to meet disproportionately with March 14 leaders, while the American vice president warned in a subsequent visit against the

²²We say misnomers because the March 08 coalition comprises not only Hizballah and Amal, but also the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the largest Christian party in parliament which was a major participant in March 14 the event but which joined the Hizballah-Amal opposition after falling out with its March 14 co-revolutionaries. The FPM and its allies in the smaller Armenian Tashnaq Party have taken great but largely unsuccessful pains to draw distinctions between "the opposition," of which they consider themselves members, and "March 08," of which they do not. We adopt the same shorthand used by the Lebanese media and simply refer to March 08 rather than the more accurate but less concise March 08 and Opposition Christians.

²³March 14 is more visibly fractious than March 08. Notably, March 14 did not run complete electoral slates in several districts in the 2009 elections, especially in the Christian heartland of Mount Lebanon, where March 14 figures allied with independent personalities not formally associated with March 14. Moreover, the alliance began to unravel shortly after the elections, with the main Druze party leaving the coalition and one of the main Christian parties doing the same, albeit for different reasons. For details, see AUTHOR.

danger of forfeiting US generosity if the “wrong” side won.²⁴ Iran acted analogously, both supporting Hizballah and its electoral allies in March 08 as well as proclaiming, in its ambassador’s words, that it “bless[es] every democratic process that demonstrates the choices of the Lebanese people through the upcoming elections.”²⁵

Below, we seek to gain empirical leverage on the central question our polarization hypotheses pose: whether or not the interventions shifted public opinion for or against closer relations with the intervening country.

3.2 Experimental Design

To examine our claims, we utilize data from a set of experiments embedded in a nationally representative sample of the voting age population of Lebanon we conducted shortly after the conclusion of the June 2009 elections. The $n = 2500$ sample consists of randomly selected adults from each of the country’s 30 administrative districts (*cazas/qadas*), with the sample proportional to the district population size. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face by members of the same sex and same sect.²⁶ As

²⁴BBC, 26 April 2009, “US calls for ‘fair’ Lebanon poll.” Reuters, 26 April 2009, “Clinton says US will never sell out Lebanon.” CNN, 22 May 2009, “Biden: US aid at risk if Lebanon strays from ‘principles’.” BBC, 22 May 2009, “How far will US support for Lebanon go?”

²⁵NOW Lebanon, 3 June 2009, “Qassem: Iran has given everything to Hezbollah.” NOW Lebanon, 3 June 2009, “Shibani: Iran blesses Lebanon’s democracy.”

²⁶Beirut-based Information International (<http://www.information-international.com/info/index.php>) drew the sample and conducted the interviews. It sampled residents of the main town and two randomly selected villages in each district proportional to population size. Interviewers asked for the number of persons above 21 in a household, chose the one with the most recent birthday (at the date of interview), up to three-follow-up visits were conducted if the respondent was not home, after which a new household was selected. The administrative districts formed the basis of most of the electoral districts in the 2009 elections, except that two administrative districts were combined into one electoral district in four cases. In all cases Sunnis interviewed Sunnis, Shiites interviewed Shiites, and Druze interviewed Druze. Given the multitude of small Christian sects in Lebanon, we relaxed our requirement for same-sect interviewers such that Christians interviewed Christians, although Armenians always interviewed Armenians. Note that we a subset of the data to a separate experimental manipulation, so our effective sample size for this paper’s analyzes is $n = 1822$.

is becoming increasingly common in political science, we exploit the internal validity of the experimental manipulations — here, of the question frames — along with the external validity of a representative sample to make causal claims about how the Lebanese population as a whole responds to foreign intervention in their elections. Although survey experiments as a method are most widespread in the framing literature in American politics (Sniderman and Grob, 1996; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Gaines, Kuklinski and Quirk, 2007; Bullock, 2009), they are beginning to appear in comparative politics (Brader and Tucker, 2001, 2009; Dunning and Harrison, 2010; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010) and international relations (Hiscox, 2006; Tomz, 2007) as more subfields diversify their methodological repertoires.

For this experiment, we assigned respondents randomly to either a control or one of four treatment groups. All respondents first heard that there had been considerable international interest in their elections, a prompt designed to assure that the control group was sensitized to the international component and hence comparable to the treatment groups. Treatment respondents, in turn, received an additional manipulation appended to the base prompt about an intervention type attributed to one of two sources, either the *United States* or *Iran*. Hence, the skeleton introductory prompt reads as follows, with all respondents receiving text in the normal font, treatment groups receiving the italicized text, and the boldfaced text indicating the two randomly varying dimensions of source country and intervention type:

There was a lot of international interest in the recent Lebanese elections,
for example, ***Country*** made it clear that ***Type***.

Our set of intervention types includes a *Party* treatment, expressing support for a contestant in the elections, and a *Process* type, expressing support for the democratic process as a whole. The *Party* treatment reads that the intervening country “strongly preferred one side over the other,” whereas the *Process* treatment reads that it “supported the democratic process, whatever the outcome of the elections.” Hence we have $2 \times 2 = 4$ treatment combinations in addition to the untreated control group.

After receiving their respective treatments, respondents indicated on a 4-point scale how hard the new government should work to protect Lebanon’s relations with a number of foreign governments, among them the United States and Iran, in random order.²⁷

²⁷The question wording reads, “How hard do you think the new Lebanese government should work to protect Lebanon’s existing relations with each of the following foreign governments and organizations?” The response categories were very hard (4), somewhat hard

Our outcome question is phrased the way it is because we thought that a question such as “should Lebanon and the US have good relations” may be bland, and that asking voters to conceive of the issue more as priorities of the government, and what the government should focus on, has an edge over an alternative formulation.²⁸

Figure 1 summarizes the survey response patterns: in the aggregate, the United States and Iran received comparable levels of support, but the Lebanese varied considerably in their assessments of the two countries. Our interest, however, is less in aggregate levels as it is in the relative changes in support induced by different electoral interventions, which our experiments are designed to mimic.

[Figure 1 about here]

Our experimental prompts are designed to exploit the mixed message sent by outsiders in the Lebanese election. By highlighting either the process or partisan aspects of the stances adopted by foreigners, we aim to cause some updating of the priors held by our respondents — priors no doubt developed through personal exposure to a noisy and vigorous campaign on the street and in the media. Our assumption is that the mixed and contradictory claims surrounding the roles of the outside powers will allow our prompts to cause some, possibly modest, Bayesian revision of the prior beliefs in the direction of the prompt. Another assumption that we make is that when respondents hear that the United States supported a party, they will understand this to mean the Sunni-dominated March 14 alliance, and same for Iran and the Shia-dominated March 08 alliance. In view of the situation on the ground in Lebanon, we believe that this assumption is warranted. Thus, our process prompt is presumed to tell respondents that the power they have always suspected as being on a specific side of the election may in fact be more impartial, whereas our party prompt reinforces a piece of prior knowledge about the direction of that power’s preferences.

Before turning to the results of the experiments, we first take a moment to clarify our means of reporting our findings. To estimate the average experimental effect, we rely on simple difference-in-means tests because they have the advantage of clarity and simplicity and do not require us to make potentially heroic assumptions about our data.

Some of our hypotheses are about aggregate effects of the treatments on all voters, and

(3), not very hard (2), not hard at all (1). The item non-response rate was low at 4.4 percent.

²⁸We are not as concerned that someone who is pro-US and thinks Lebanon already has good relations will just say “no need to work hard” because Lebanon was in the process of forming a unity government, and neither the priorities nor the future direction of policy were taken for granted. Even if some people in fact answered that way, this would simply make it harder for us to detect movement among the pro-US group.

others are specifically about partisans. In the Lebanese case, we identify partisans by a combination of sectarian affiliation and self-identified alliance affiliation (e.g., March 14 Sunnis, March 08 Christians, and so on).²⁹ Sectarian affiliation is important in that different sects need not be partisan in the same way — while Shiites and Sunnis heavily supported March 08 and 14, respectively, Christians were evenly divided between the blocs. One practical consequence of the diversity of Lebanese society is that we do have a large number of logical comparisons to make.³⁰

To economize on space, we present our results in Figures 2–7, which can be read similarly to a correlation table. Along the diagonal (black circles) we report the relevant group mean. In the lower triangle (grey squares) we report the difference in means between the row group and the column group (the absolute value, to be precise). Although we make one-tailed predictions in our hypotheses, we indicate statistical significance with both one- and the more conservative two-tailed p -values.

In the main body of the text, we report the difference between two conditions as $D_{p\text{-value}}$. Finally, we will occasionally have substantive reason to pool some of the treatment groups together to compare against a specific manipulation.

4 Results

Overall, our results show that foreign interventions change voter opinions about the intervening countries in substantively meaningful ways. We find no evidence that a nationalistic backlash decreases support for any intervening power regardless of intervention type, or that voters dole out blanket punishments for one-sided interventions and rewards for supporting the democratic process.

Instead, we find broad support for the polarizing logic described in Hypotheses 1–2,

²⁹Voters supply information on sectarian affiliation and bloc affiliation prior to receiving the experimental manipulation (minuscule item non-response at 0.02 and 1.9 percent). A subset of respondents identify as independents or as supporting no bloc. Independents largely allied with the March 14 forces in the Christian areas, so we consider them together.

³⁰We compare the control group to two relevant treatments per outcome variable while subdividing the sample by the three main sectarian communities and two broad blocs within each of them as we examine their opinions on US and Iranian relations. All told, this amounts to 3 sects \times 2 alliances \times 3 unique pairs of experimental conditions \times 2 outcome variables = 36 comparisons to make and report.

albeit with a couple of interesting qualifications. Overall, our experiments suggest that March 14 Sunnis respond favorably (H_1), and March 08 Shiites respond unfavorably (H_2), to one-sidedness by the United States. When confronted with a partisan American intervention, the former wish to upgrade relations with the United States while the latter wish to downgrade relations. The data also offer two qualifications. Surprisingly, we observe little opinion shift among Christian subjects in contrast to their Muslim peers. More importantly, subjects appear to respond primarily to American interventions rather than Iranian ones. We elaborate on these findings below.

4.1 Relations with the United States

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 begins our analysis with the Shia community, the sect most prominently associated with Iran, Hizballah, and the March 08 alliance, as well as the least supportive of relations with the United States. We find little support within this community for nationalistic backlash against all interventions.

What we do observe is that American one-sidedness causes March 08 Shiites to support downgrading relations with the United States (H_2). The *US Party* treatment, when compared to the *Control* and *US Process* conditions, caused roughly a quarter-point drop in the importance of US relations, although the relatively small number of respondents in each of the cells means that individual differences just miss statistical significance at conventional two-tailed levels ($p = .11$ and $.15$, respectively). Pooling the *Control* and *US Process* conditions and comparing them to the *US Party* condition confirms this inspection: we find an average difference of $.23_{.07}$. This one-sidedness effect represents a relative drop in support for relations of about 17 percent, which we suspect actually *understates* the magnitude of the treatment effect due to an instrument floor.³¹ March 08 Shiites, in other words, wish to punish the United States only when it engages in partisan interventions. This evidence supports our polarization argument and the claim that voters prefer more distant relations with powers that take sides against them (H_2). Evidence from the Sunni community strengthens support for this polarizing logic.

³¹Given that March 08 Shiites are already *a priori* likely to hold dim views on the United States (control group mean of 1.59), there is relatively little room for them to go lower on the 1–4 scale that we use.

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 reports the opinion shifts among Sunnis, the community most prominently identified with the US-preferred March 14 alliance. Contrary to their Shia counterparts, we find that American one-sidedness causes March 14 Sunnis to support *upgrading* relations with the United States (H_1), the predicted opposite dynamic of what we observed among March 08 Shiites. The *Control–US Party* and *US Process–US Party* comparisons yield substantial increases in support for US relations of more than a quarter of a point, and a comparison of the *US Party* condition against the *Control* and *US Process* conditions pooled together yields an average effect of .30.03. This one-sidedness effect represents a relative increase of about 10 percent in support for US relations. As with Shiites, we suspect this increase understates the magnitude of the effect due to an instrument ceiling.³² Sunni support for American partisanship, taken in conjunction with Shia rejection of it, offers support for the polarization logic we developed above.

[Figure 4 about here]

We turn lastly to the Christian respondents, who in contrast to the less competitive Shia and Sunni communities split almost evenly between supporting March 08 and supporting March 14 and allied independents. Figure 4 reports the results matrices for the two Christian camps. The results are easy to summarize: nothing happens anywhere. Christian opinions on the importance of relations with the United States do not budge.

4.2 Relations with Iran

[Figure 5 about here]

[Figure 6 about here]

³²Analogous to the Shia floor effect, this summary difference may understate the treatment effect due to an instrument ceiling. March 14 Sunnis are already *a priori* likely to hold positive views on the United States (control group mean of 3.07), and there is relatively little room for them to go higher on our 1–4 scale.

[Figure 7 about here]

We turn now to opinions on relations with Iran, for which the data paint a decidedly different picture. In contrast to the polarization of the Sunni and Shia communities we observed on American relations, no such dynamic emerges with Iranian relations. We find only weak and scattered evidence of any opinion shifts at all, and those we do find do not point consistently in an immediately comprehensible direction. We observe little movement in the Shia community (Figure 5), where Iranian one-sidedness does not appear to evoke much change among either March 08 partisans or their non-March 08 peers. Nor can we detect any Iranian partisanship effects in the Sunni community (Figure 6), either among March 14 supporters or their non-March 14 counterparts. Nor again can we detect such an effect among Christians (Figure 7), whether March 08 supporters or detractors.³³

4.3 Discussion

What can we make of these results? Overall, we argue that they offer experimental support for the polarization logic we presented. In particular, when the United States takes a side in elections — here, in favor of the March 14 alliance — opinions among March 14 Sunnis shift in favor of upgrading American relations (H_1), while March 08 Shiites break the opposite way and prefer to downgrade relations with the United States (H_2). The Shia community *a priori* holds the American government in low regard to begin with, which when reinforced by partisan US activity appears to threaten even further deterioration of their opinions. The Sunni community, in contrast, starts with a fairly high level of support for relations with the United States, and US activity in support of “their” alliance appears to improve American standing even further. When taken in tandem, the Sunni and Shia results suggest that one-sided interventions

³³In fact, the only hints of opinion shifts we can detect are tentative, inconsistent, and, if anything, in the “wrong” direction. These differences center on the *Control–Iran Process* comparison — but, curiously, not the *Iran Party–Iran Process* comparison — among non-March 08 Shiites, non-March 14 Sunnis, and non-March 08 Christians (Figures 5b, 6b, and 7b). The first and third react positively to the process intervention, whereas the second react negatively. We can think of no plausible explanation that would yield this particular combination of outcomes. Given the marginal statistical detectability of the results and the uninterpretable dynamics, we put little substantive weight on these stray findings.

polarize the electorate, with increased popular support among allied constituencies matching up with decreased popular support among opponents.

As we said, however, the evidence in favor of polarization is not without two substantively meaningful qualifications. The first caveat that our data offer is that only American one-sidedness seems to polarize. Despite the invocations of Iranian influence that appeared in the electoral campaign, we find no evidence that Iranian partisanship shifts opinions on relations with Iran in a way consistent with polarization or any other logic. Hence, this evidence suggests that the electorate responds primarily to what the United States does.

We cannot identify with precision from these data what accounts for the difference between how voters respond to American and Iranian messages. There are many ways in which Iran is different from the United States. For one, Iran is a regional rather than global power. The difference in resources may account for why voters are moved more by US one-sidedness. For another, Iran's democracy promoting credentials are, at best, deeply-flawed. Iran is better known in the region as an "exporter of revolutions", and theocracy and religion mark its pursuit of local allies. Iran's close ties to political movements in the region are well-known, and those movements' commitments to democratic power-sharing are often thrown in doubt. Since our experimental manipulations hinge on updating the information voters hold in theoretically plausible ways, there may not be much we can do in the Iranian case. The recent history and institutional arrangements of Iran may commit it to ally-promotion in ways that makes uncovering the effects of switching strategies hard or impossible.³⁴ We must admit, however that these are only some of many possibilities.³⁵ Further work is needed to establish why

³⁴There may also be a significant amount of pessimism about whether the United States really supports the democratic process regardless of outcome. Existing work, however, indicates that Arab publics take US democracy promotion gestures in earnest (Lynch, 2007, 216). Further, our experiment was deployed shortly after President Obama's Cairo speech, a potential signal to Arab publics of American commitment to democracy.

³⁵To add one more conjecture, one could say that the post-election nature of the survey may have played a role. The outcome of the election has been presented either as a relative draw or as a modest victory for the American-backed slate. One may surmise that the reason Iranian prompts did not produce movement has to do with a perception that Iranian support does not translate into victory. We have little reason to believe that such a perception was actually at work, but present it for readers to consider nonetheless.

the process or partisan stances of some countries meet a different reaction by voters on the ground.

Our Christian respondents provide the second and more surprising qualification: they appear not to respond to American interventions at all. This null finding among Christians contrasts sharply with the dynamics evident among both Sunnis and Shiites. Although we freely acknowledge it to be post hoc, we offer the following informed speculation. Among Lebanese, the Christian community in the aggregate is traditionally seen as the most Westernized, as well as most familiar with and sympathetic to the United States. The Sunni and Shia communities, in contrast, traditionally have fewer western connections and less familiarity, and consequently have more malleable opinions about the United States. Both are still trying to determine if the United States is a benign or malignant power — or else an expedient ally or not — and are consequently more easily swayed by the intervention environment than are their Christian compatriots. In the aggregate, Christians have apparently already made up their minds about the importance of American relations, for better (non-March 08 baseline 2.91) or mildly worse (March 08 control group mean 2.57). In the much acclaimed “battle for hearts and minds,” then, it appears that the United States can take Christians for granted — their opinions do not seem to change — and focus instead on the Muslim communities, whose opinions do change with American actions.

5 Conclusion

If elections are the new proxy wars of choice, what do voters think about foreign involvement in electoral processes? Our paper provides a first set of theoretical propositions and findings relevant to this question, and points to ways scholars of international politics can learn more.

Our findings lend an important empirical check — to our knowledge, the first of its kind — to the aspirations of democracy promoters. The stylized view that “we win when the democrats win” may call for promoting specific parties, but runs the risk of stimulating both support and opposition in the electorate. When the proponents and detractors of a foreign power are comparable in demographic weight within a country — as they are likely to be in a close election — then the effect of side-taking washes out in the aggregate even as it polarizes the electorate.³⁶ If the gamble pays off and the favored party wins, the foreign power gets a one-term ally and a potentially

³⁶Our theory and findings harmonize with the conjectures of seasoned observers of electoral

disillusioned opposition they must face again the next time around.

There is another stylized view — “we win when democracy does” — that calls for the promotion of the democratic process as a means to cultivate potential protractors and detractors alike with principled even-handedness. As plausible and normatively-attractive as this view may be, we find little evidence to support it in our experiments. The best we can say is that it does not hurt. Such a dynamic may, of course, be welcome if process-oriented interventions demonstrably improve the administration of the process and indirectly contribute to more democratically-oriented parties winning fairer elections — at least the intervening power need not face a decline in popular support for meddling in the election. Avoiding further polarization of the electorate in divided societies may be a non-trivial benefit to democracy-building in its own right; we know that polarized political systems are less likely to sustain democratic institutions (Dahl, 1971; Sartori, 1976).

Polling voter views, as we do, on what a country should adopt as its foreign policies has advantages and also limitations. Views do not equal policy. Popular support for a foreign power is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the emergence of democratic moderation with respect to that country or its favored policies. Yet, it is difficult to argue that popularly-elected governments would find it easy to dismiss popular sentiments all the time (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). It is plausible to assume that the emergence of popular mandates that favor a foreign government and its priorities is more likely where domestic perceptions of the country in question are more positive in nature.

The use of survey experiments also has its advantages and limitations. Survey-experiments embody a short-term manipulation of the views that respondents hold: the manipulation may be too mild to produce long-term changes in views and behavior.

Yet, in defense of survey experiments, what counts as real change in voter views, in a

interventions. Senior US diplomat Stephen Bosworth, for example, wrote on eve of the 1988 plebiscite in Chile: “Yet, the United States would do well to exercise considerable restraint in claiming credit for the progress of recent years in the restoration of Latin American democracy. Because of the demonology that surrounds so much of what we say and do in Latin America, any tendency in our part to claim a pivotal role in the restoration of democracy tends, perversely, to weaken those moderate forces in still-fragile democracies which are trying to build institutions on the narrow middle ground between the extremes of right and left” (Falcoff, Valenzuela and Purcell, 1988, vii).

non-experimental setup, is simply a chain of successive manipulations based on bits of information, each possibly small, but adding up to a real change at the end (Bullock, 2009). The experiment captures how a small change in information available to a respondent translates into changing views on a subject — the effect of the manipulation may be small, but we still learn something about the direction in which certain types of intervention affect people’s views.

A strength of our approach is that randomization allows us to learn something about the effects of a policy that states normally craft and deploy vis-à-vis other states in a highly selective and non-random fashion — we control the counterfactual rather than wait for one to occur that may never come. Using cross-national data alone to understand what type of effects different interventions generate runs into endogeneity and selection issues, where the analyst cannot distinguish the effects of non-random assignment to treatment from the causal effects switching policy may produce in a specific case. All approaches have a mix of limitations and strengths when it comes to studying the issue we identify: our claim is that survey-experiments may prove a valuable addition to a multi-method inference strategy, balancing the limitations of other approaches.

Finally, while our results speak, by necessity, to the one specific case observed at a specific point of time, the theory we develop can serve the production of generalizable knowledge on the issue we study. We argue that voter polarization, based on the belief that foreigners help a ticket win, is more likely in some and not other cases. This may prove useful in pushing further the conversation on why electoral interventions happen, and in understanding their micro-effects among voting publics.

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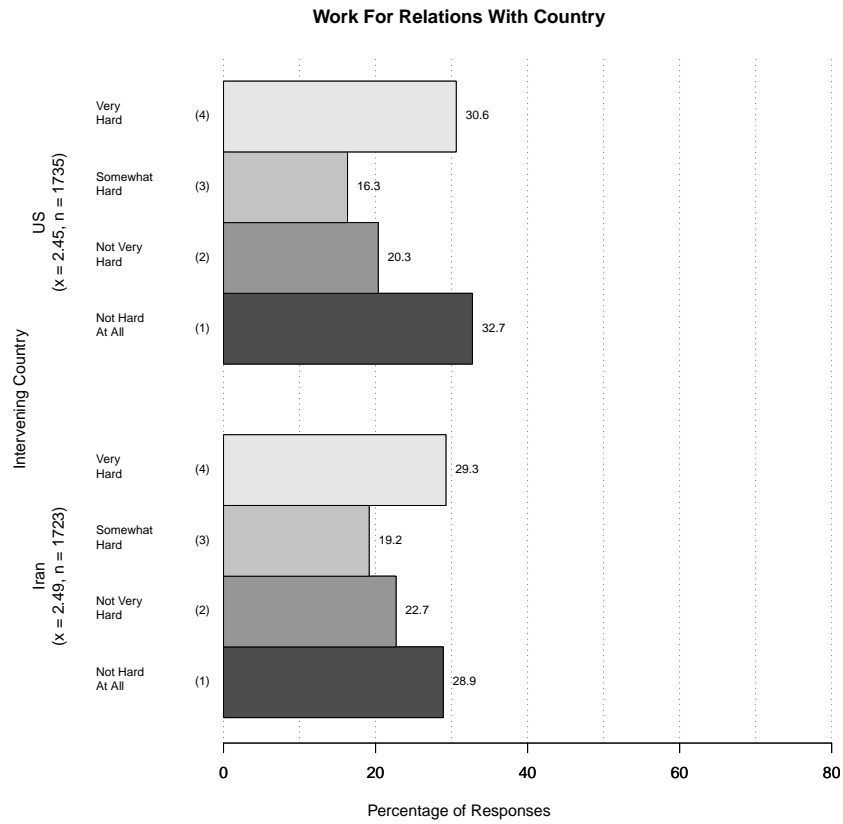


Figure 1: Summary Statistics, Respondent Views on Lebanon’s Relations with Country — “How hard do you think the new Lebanese government should work to protect Lebanon’s existing relations with < ... > ?”

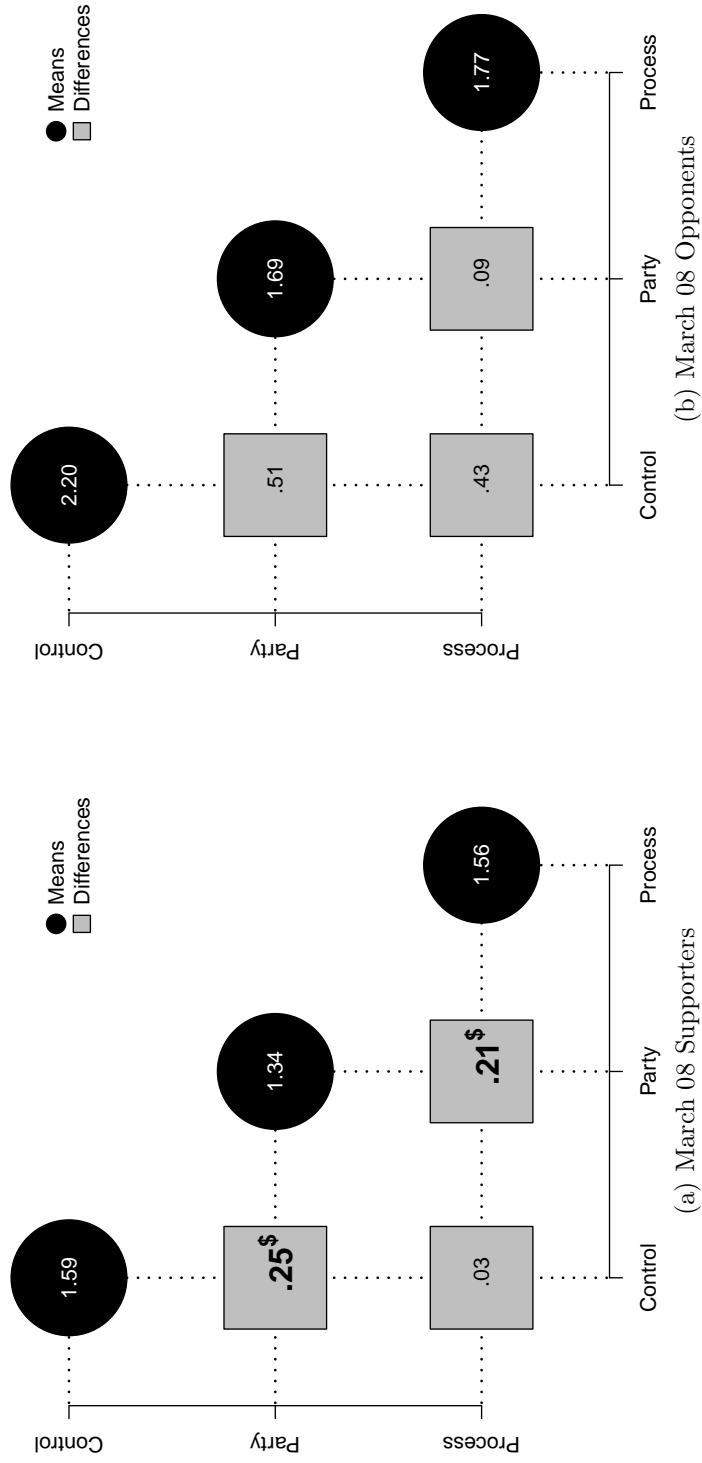


Figure 2: Shia Relations with United States (two-tailed p : .05*, .10#, .15\$)

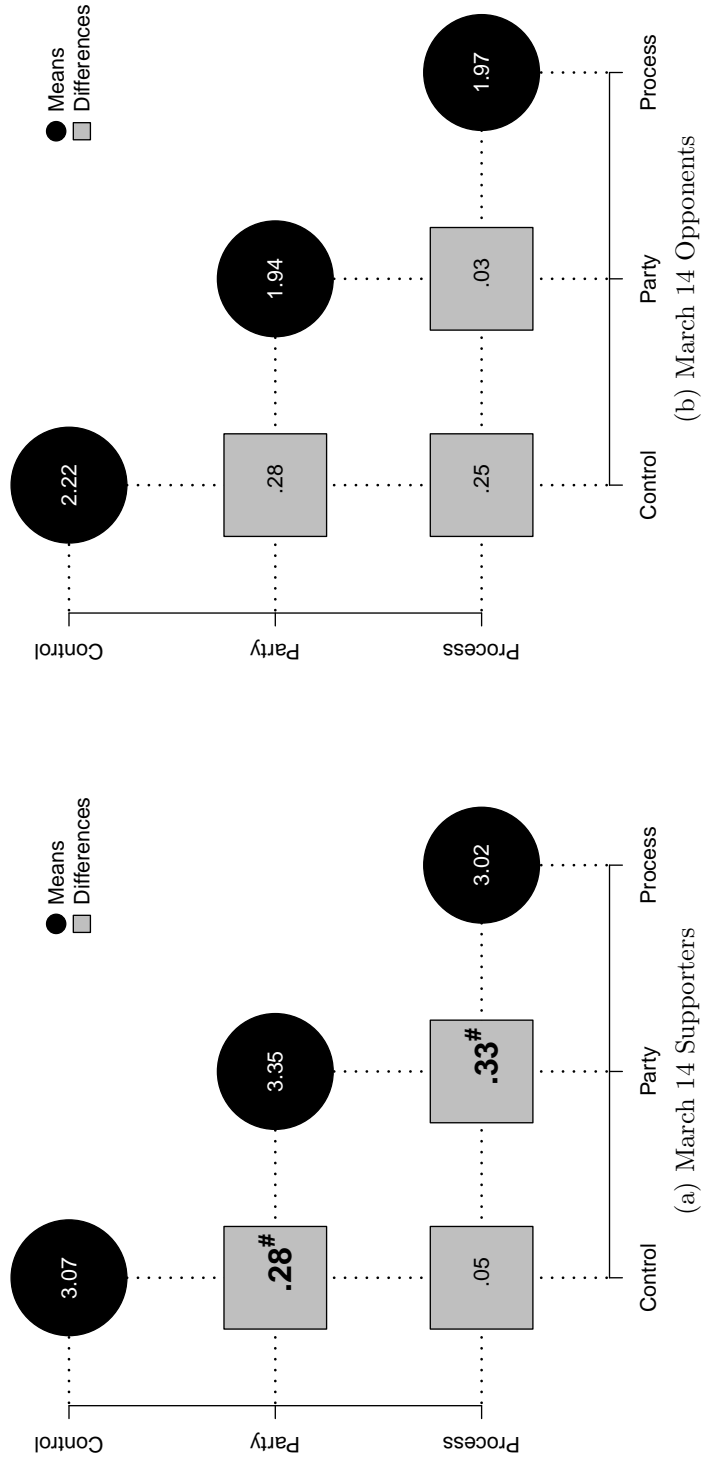


Figure 3: Sunni Relations with United States (two-tailed p : .05*, .10#, .15^{\$})

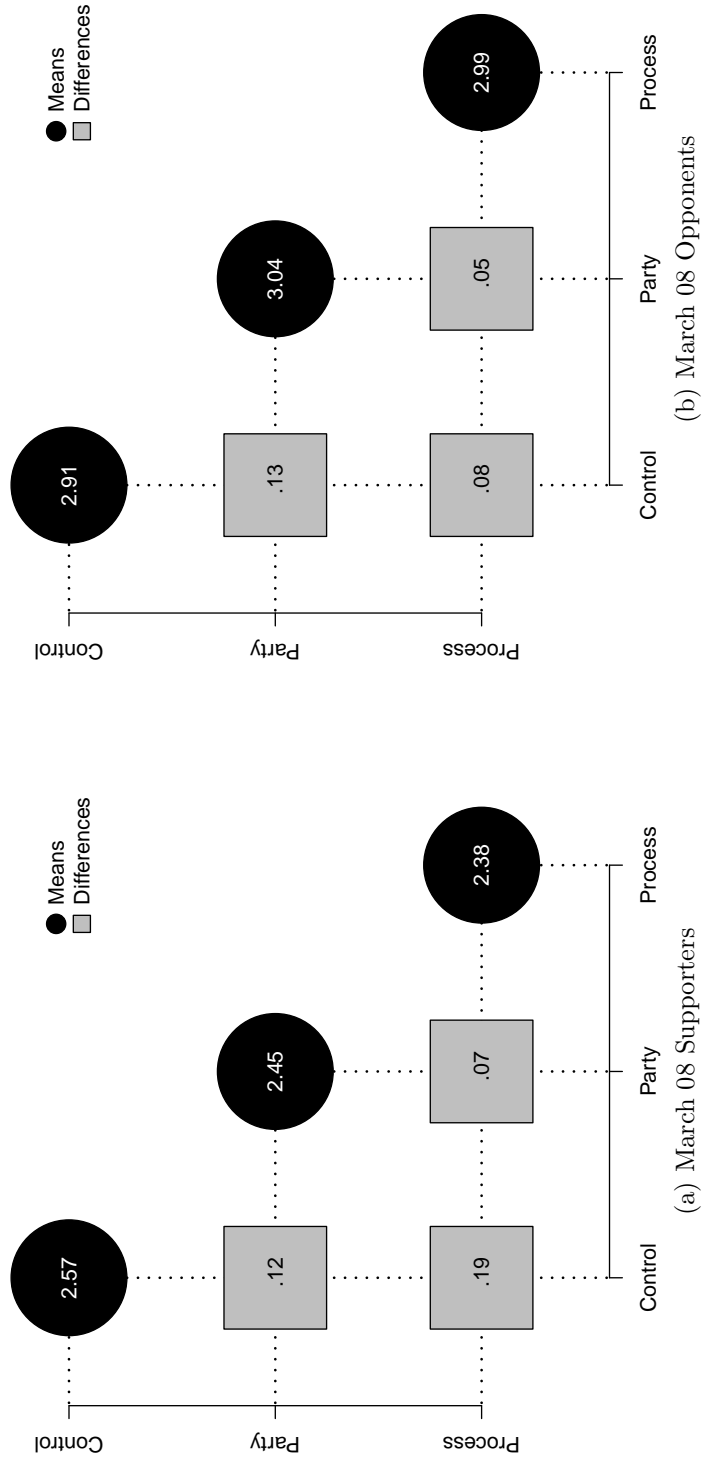


Figure 4: Christian Relations with United States (two-tailed p : .05*, .10#, .15\$)

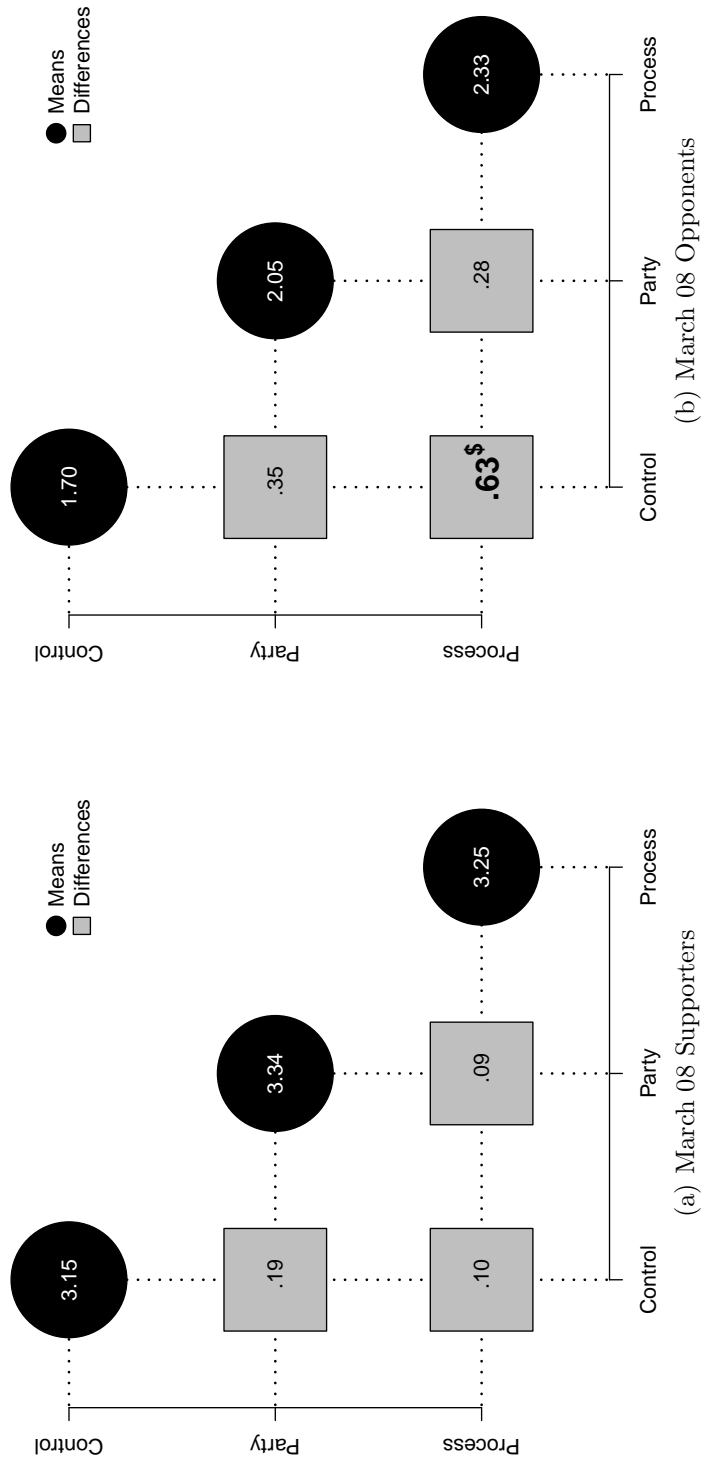


Figure 5: Shia Relations with Iran (two-tailed p : .05*, .10#, .15\$)

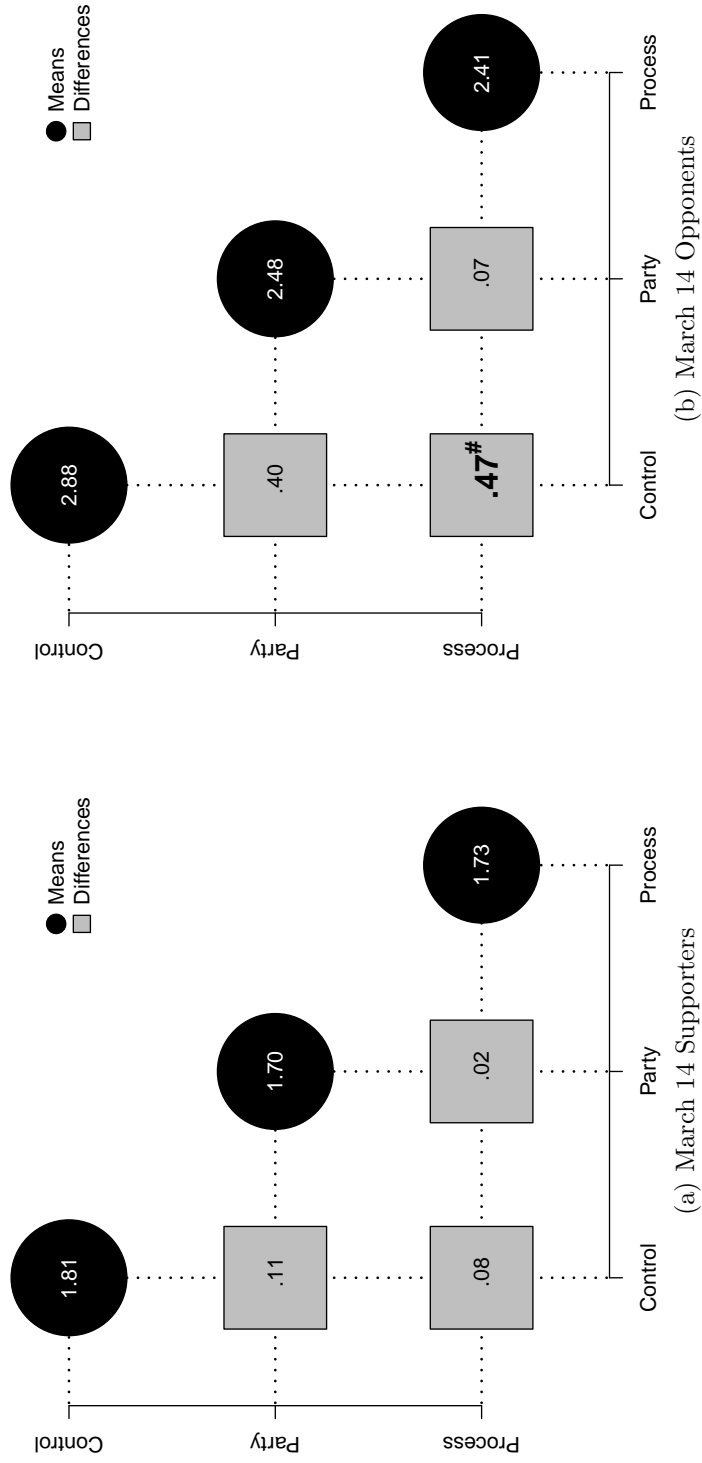


Figure 6: Sunni Relations with Iran (two-tailed p : .05*, .10#, .15\$)

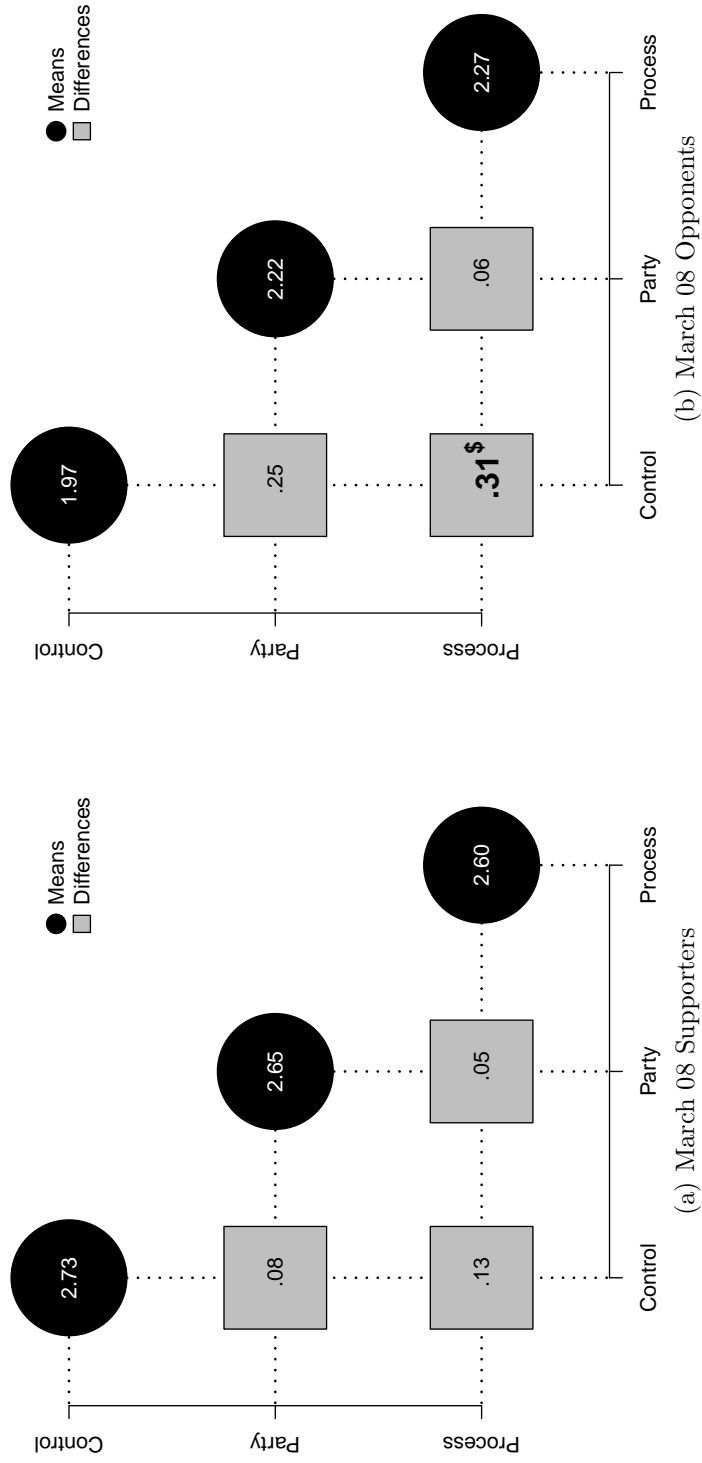


Figure 7: Christian Relations with Iran (two-tailed p : .05*, .10#, .15\$)