

Taking Sides in Other People's Elections: The Polarizing Effect of Foreign Intervention¹

Daniel Corstange

dancorst@umd.edu

Department of Government and Politics
University of Maryland

Nikolay Marinov

nikolay.marinov@yale.edu

Department of Political Science
Yale University

December 7, 2011

¹We thank John Bullock, Jula Choucair-Visozo, Sarah Croco, Alexandre Debs, Brad Epperly, Donald Green, Susan Hyde, Pierre Landry, Ellen Lust, Kenneth Matis, Irfan Nooruddin, David Patel, Nicholas Sambanis, Kenneth Scheve, Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, Susan Stokes, and participants at Yale University, the University of Maryland, Cornell University, and a panel at the 2010 Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting for comments on the project and survey design. We are grateful to Vinicius Lindoso and Baobao Zhang for capable research assistance. For their generous financial support, we thank the the MacMillan Center and the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University, as well as the Center for International Development and Conflict Management, the Department of Government and Politics, and the Designated Research Initiative Fund at the University of Maryland. Replication materials are available at <http://isps.research.yale.edu/research-2/data/>.

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.

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 this question. 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, with some success, 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, especially American.⁴

In this paper, we begin the task of building theory on voter responses to electoral intercessions by examining 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 promotion and ally promotion. We argue that one-sided interces-

¹See National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) as documented in Hyde and Marinov (2011).

²Exceptions include work on partisan incentives to settle conflicts (Schultz, 2005).

³Recent comparative work has begun to examine foreign influences on elections in autocracies (Blaydes, 2011; Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Vachudova, 2005).

⁴Carothers (1999); Falcoff et al. (1988); Ferguson (2008).

sions 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 2009 parliamentary elections, in which numerous foreign powers took an open and active interest. We embedded a randomized framing experiment within a nationally-representative survey of over 1700 voting-age adults, highlighting partisan and democratic process-oriented interventions on the part of the United States and Iran, two of the principal foreign protagonists in the election. We find broad support for the polarizing logic sketched above. We also find some intriguing and 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.

1 A Theory of Taking Sides and its Effects

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 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.

Realist arguments tell us that states look out for their own interests; securing allies abroad is a natural way to promote those interests. The dominant view on how alliances form envisions a voluntary association, designed to counteract real or perceived common threats (Walt, 1987). Domestic factions, however, do not always agree on which foreign ally to choose. Powerful states can use a number of strategies beyond voluntary cooperation to get the local partners they need. Their options include occupation to set up a pliant leader,⁸ applying economic sanctions to push allies into office (Marinov, 2005), sponsoring coups d'état,⁹ or battling for allies by fueling proxy civil wars.¹⁰

⁵The CIA campaigned vigorously against the left in Italy in 1948, the Serbian opposition got Western coaching in its struggle against Milošević, and agents of India's Bharatiya Janata Party were allegedly active in Nepal in the most recent election there.

⁶The unexpected rightist victory in Nicaragua in 1990 is credited to American threats of sanctions, Russia tied the payment of Finnish reparations to a victory for the People's Democratic League in the 1948 elections, and one of the campaign slogans of the Slovak opposition against Mečiar in 1998 was an exhortation to vote as "Europe" wanted.

⁷ Foreign funding of vote buying campaigns allegedly bid up the value of an individual ballot to between \$400 and \$800 in the 2009 Lebanese elections ("Foreign Money Seeks to Buy Lebanese Votes," *New York Times*, 23 April 2009).

⁸Thucydides details how Sparta used force and threats to put the Argive oligarchs in power, who, unlike their democratic counterparts, wanted peace and an alliance with Sparta (Stressler, 1998, 395–399). The Soviet Union applied the same strategy to postwar Europe.

⁹Coups against Mosaddeq in Iran and Allende in Chile are two of the most notorious examples from a long list of foreign-sponsored coups, actual or imagined.

¹⁰An enduring Cold War image is that of a chessboard with American and Soviet allies

Intervening in elections abroad provides another way to get friends in office. What sets the post-Cold War period apart is the widespread normative legitimacy of voting as the principal way of changing governments, coupled with waning tolerance for 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 by comparison. To adapt a Cold War term to the new realities of democratic government, these trends have made elections the new proxy wars of choice in both great and regional power 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.¹¹ Democracies may often be partners of choice in international relations, but we suspect that these choices depend, at least in part, on who won the last election.

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.¹² Empirically, elections often feature ideological divides on what actually constitutes a state’s core interests, as, for example, in the 1981 Spanish election with the right pro- and the left anti-NATO. One view may win, but only in the context of a national conversation on the merits of pursuing one or the other alliance. The question of voter attitudes arises naturally in this respect.

Third, our emphasis on partisan polarization calls for more nuance on what it means to gain or lose allies abroad. Security-maximizing states must consider both the target country’s current government as well as its future governments. Encouraging moderate views across fighting proxy battles throughout the third world (Westad, 2005).

¹¹Seminal pieces include Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995), Cox et al. (2000), and Maoz and Russett (1993).

¹²Constructivist scholars, for example, argue that state interests are subject to interpretation and construction (Hemmer and Katzenstein, 2002; Katzenstein, 1984; Wendt, 1995).

the political spectrum may be no less important than swinging a particular 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), and none, to our knowledge, that study target publics. We consequently begin by laying out a theory about how the electorate incorporates interventions from abroad into views of the level of appropriate relations with the foreign power.

1.1 Interventions and Polarization

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.¹³ A process intervention, in contrast, occurs when foreign actors seek to support the rules of democratic contestation, irrespective of who wins. Voters, we suggest, can categorize foreign activities into one of these two broad conceptual categories, as when the activity involves foreigners giving cash to candidates, threatening sanctions unless a candidate is elected, or seeking an independent electoral commission. Hence, intervening powers either support a preferred contestant or else the integrity of the contest itself.

We focus here not on purely rhetorical stances by foreign powers. Instead, we envision a process in which voters, based on what they learn from media reports and everyday discourse with their peers, formulate impressions of what those powers actually seek to accomplish through their interventions. Voters may, of course, have pre-existing beliefs about the foreign

¹³We conceptualize partisan interventions inclusively as a basket of strategies from which senders choose that could bestow electoral advantages on domestic allies, such as campaign financing, threat of sanctions, or harassment of opponents. For the polarization logic we posit, voters need only perceive the interventions as helping the ticket win.

powers, and the latter may seek to cast themselves in a misleading light. Such activities may cloud voters' perceptions, but if the foreign powers adopt clear actions that shore up either the process or partisan image, perceptions should align with actual policy in equilibrium.

Using terms from the economic coercion literature (Drezner, 2003), we ask about the conditions under which sender states might intervene as partisans in a target state's elections. Building on prior political economy work, we assume that elections feature competition between ideologically distinct contestants, who set post-election state policy that may diverge along partisan lines (Persson and Tabellini, 2000). We assume that ideological affinity between sender states and partisan tickets in the target are at least partly exogenous to the strategic interactions between these actors. Sender–ticket alliances reflect both the level of pre-existing conflict between domestic tickets *and* the endogenous polarization that arises from the interaction of domestic tickets and intervening states. We contribute the theoretical claim that, when there is initial divergence in views on the foreign power, the strategic interaction polarizes these views further. We focus on one key dimension of potential disagreement in the target state: positions on the type of relations that the sender and target states should have. When the target's main political forces broadly agree on the sender, foreign powers stand to gain little from intervening — potential senders get friendly (or unfriendly) governments regardless of who wins.¹⁴

When, in contrast, the election's main contestants split into parties sympathetic and antagonistic to a sender, the latter has a strong vested interest in who wins and sets the target's subsequent foreign policy. As the policy divergence between the contestants increases, the electoral stakes for the sender rise and partisan interventions grow more attractive. In expected terms, ally promotion at election time may be more cost-effective than contending with an antagonistic target state should opponents prevail.

Some states make more attractive intervention targets than others. Power asymmetries

¹⁴Contestants may diverge on domestic issues yet share common views on sender states. The latter have little incentive to intervene when domestic divisions do not focus on foreign policy, as in the example of contemporary Thailand and its relations with the United States.

between a sender and a target increase the former's leverage and thus its potential influence in a given election. Geopolitical rivalries, meanwhile, increase the cost of non-intervention when a rival sender aids one faction — providing incentives to aid the other side and offset the disadvantages imposed by the rival sender.

Finally, we might expect partisan interventions to occur principally in unconsolidated democracies where electoral processes are still fragile and face some non-trivial risk of failure. Here, institutions are easier for foreign powers to sidestep or corrupt. Consequently, we expect parties and voters in emerging democracies to discount the value of future elections much more so than their counterparts in institutionalized democracies, for whom the prospect of a collapse of their democratic institutions may be virtually unthinkable.

Voters thus have reasons to be uncertain about both the outcome of the upcoming election and the sustainability of the democratic process itself. Under such conditions, we expect voters to hedge their democratic commitments by welcoming partisan interventions on their side and rejecting those on behalf of their domestic opponents. Were the democratic process to collapse after the elections, the current contest really is winner-take-all. Barring such a worst-case outcome, however, strengthening relations with a foreign power enhances its influence in domestic affairs. Voters consequently prefer to increase cooperation with their own foreign patron, and decrease cooperation with that of their rivals, to improve their chances of winning future elections. Partisan interventions thus polarize the electorate.

1.2 Hypotheses

What, then, are some of the observable implications of our theory of one-sided interventions? In broad terms, our theory touches on multiple levels of analysis and encompasses strategic interactions between intervening states, parties contesting elections, and ultimately the electorate. In this paper, however, we focus on a more discrete set of implications: voter responses to foreign intercessions in election campaigns. We hypothesize that:

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.*

Hypotheses 1 and 2 articulate the core of the polarization logic as it applies to voter views about intervening powers. Voters respond when foreign powers become de facto allies or adversaries in the country's domestic politics rather than neutral referees, at which point they try to maximize (minimize) the influence of their foreign protagonist (antagonist). Consequently, the electorate polarizes when foreign powers take opposing sides in the elections as voters receive either a push or a pull into opposite camps.¹⁵

Testing for our polarizing effect is, however, non-trivial due to the endogeneity between foreign strategies and voter attitudes. We have argued that partisan interventions split the electorate in a target state, but we would also expect foreign powers to intervene precisely when target electorates are divided. Simply observing cases of intervention and polarization going together cannot tell us which one caused the other. Untangling the causal arrows proves to be a knotty problem for observational methods. We consequently test our hypotheses with data collected via an experiment, the design of which we describe in the next section.

2 Data and Methods

This section lays out our empirical methodology. To test our polarization claims, we rely on data from an experiment we embedded in a nationally-representative survey of Lebanese voters we conducted shortly after their 2009 elections. We begin by motivating our choice of Lebanon as an empirical venue for this research and then describe the sample and the

¹⁵We conceptualize closer relations to draw from a basket of options, including military alliances, enhanced economic ties, and coordination in IOs. Distant relations can include renunciation of treaties or pacts, opposing the sender's foreign policy initiatives in IOs, breaking off diplomatic relations, or harboring anti-sender militant groups.

experimental manipulations. Finally, we summarize the control group’s assessments of key foreign powers, which measure voters’ baseline views prior to receiving our treatments.

We chose the microfoundational approach over multi-country comparison of aggregate data for two broad reasons. One is the endogeneity we would anticipate at the country level between interventions and polarization: interventions may stimulate foreign policy divides in the target state, but such divisions may attract foreign intercessions in the first place. A cross-national design based on observational data would provide very limited leverage to parse through the reciprocal causality, especially given that no two countries would be sufficiently comparable to make one a plausible counterfactual for the other.

The other reason we utilize the individual level of analysis is that the polarization dynamics we propose may be difficult to measure in highly-aggregated electoral returns. We anticipate one-sided interventions to intensify voters’ views. If the polarization dynamics push roughly similar numbers of undecided voters into either camp, such voters would largely cancel each other out and the aggregate shift against the counterfactual result would be much more subtle than the many shifts in individual attitudes.

2.1 Lebanon as Empirical Venue

Utilizing experimental methods in the wake of the 2009 Lebanese elections provides an opportunity to gain analytic traction over the endogenous formation of voter attitudes. The mixed American messages that promoted either democracy or local allies provide us with an opening to highlight some portions of its strategy and not others by randomly allocating different pieces of information to respondents. Meanwhile, we leverage Iran’s involvement to compare voters’ reactions to different intervening powers.

Lebanon provides rich empirical terrain for a test on how foreign interventions affect voter attitudes toward intervening powers. 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, Georgia’s Rose Revolution of 2003, and Ukraine’s

Orange Revolution of 2004 — attention turned to the 2009 election as a test of how well-consolidated Lebanon’s renewed democratization had become. Consequently, the elections attracted international interest not only in the context of democracy promotion, but also from foreign powers hoping to see their local allies prevail at the ballot boxes.

Several factors make Lebanon an appealing setting within which to test the microfoundations of our polarization logic. First, Lebanon is a weak state in a geopolitically-important location with only modest capacity to forestall foreign interventions in its domestic affairs. Past interventions suggest that regional and world powers care strongly about who wins and loses domestically, making the country broadly comparable to others such as the Ukraine, Bolivia, or Nepal. As in many other parts of the developing world, the state’s weakness makes electoral interventions more viable than they would otherwise be in a stronger state.

Second, Lebanon’s reemerging democratic institutions are fragile and unconsolidated. Elections ceased during its long civil war, reappeared in a limited capacity under post-war Syrian occupation, and revived again in 2005 after the Syrian withdrawal. Since that time, the country has experienced a series of political crises, including a war, a constitutional vacuum, and the armed takeover of part of the capital by one of its parties’ militias.¹⁶ These crises heighten uncertainty about the sustainability of Lebanon’s unconsolidated institutions and shorten time horizons for both domestic actors and their potential foreign patrons. This uncertainty invites intervention from risk-averse powers and makes it more palatable to nervous voters in a way that would be implausible in consolidated democracies where both foreign powers and the electorate take for granted the survival of the country’s institutions.

Third, disputes over foreign policy orientation divide Lebanon’s two competing coalitions. The Western-oriented March 14 alliance included the dominant Sunni party and several

¹⁶Armed parties frequently contest elections and disrupt institutional consolidation in much of the developing world, as in Iraq, El Salvador, Nepal, Angola, and Côte d’Ivoire (Reilly, 2011). See Corstange (2010) on the 2005–2009 crises, Salem (2008) on Hizballah’s 2008 armed occupation of Beirut, and Corstange and Inman (2011) on Lebanese views toward the latter party’s weapons.

Christian factions, while its Iranian- and Syrian-backed March 8 opponent comprised the main Shia parties and their Christian allies. In terms of popular support, most Sunnis, a little over a quarter of the electorate, supported March 14 while nearly all Shiites, another quarter, backed March 8. Christians, around 40 percent of the electorate, split roughly evenly between the two alliances.¹⁷ For simplicity, we refer in our empirical analyses to “Sunnis” as the main body minus a small minority of March 8 supporters, analogously to “Shiites” minus March 14 supporters, and to “Sunni-allied” versus “Shia-allied” Christians.¹⁸

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 Sunni-led March 14 campaign ran heavily against Iranian influence in the country, while the Shia-led March 8 alliance ran against American meddling in Lebanese affairs.¹⁹ Large segments of

¹⁷As in many other plural societies, virtually all Lebanese parties are single-community organizations, but are obliged to coalesce in order to govern (Dhahir, 2008; el Khazen, 2002; Hashishu, 1998). In the spirit of their contemporaries in other colored revolutions, however, they are fractious coalitions prone to disputes and in-fighting. According to the 2009 voter rolls, Sunnis and Shiites each comprised 27 percent of the electorate, while Christians accounted for 39 percent of voters. Druze and Alawis composed the remaining 7 percent, but we exclude them from our analysis due to very small sub-sample sizes. Interior Ministry data reported at <http://elections.naharnet.com/locations/>, accessed 4 June 2009.

¹⁸Virtually no Shiites in our sample (3 percent) identified with March 14. We remove them from our empirical analyses, although including them leaves the results qualitatively unchanged (with only 16 respondents in 5 conditions, we cannot analyze them separately). Meanwhile, some 18 percent of our Sunni sub-sample supported March 8-aligned politicians. We separate them from the main body of Sunnis for testing purposes, although do not report the results to economize on space (briefly, we expect and find little; results available upon request). Lastly, we combine March 14 Christians with declared independents (55 percent) because March 14 candidates allied with independent personalities not formally affiliated with March 14 in several of the Christian districts.

¹⁹See Corstange (2010) for details. Although it traditionally has factored prominently into

the electorate were, in turn, sharply divided in their views on these two countries.

As a point of comparison, we rely on 2009 data from a 25-nation attitude survey conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project — serendipitously fielded during the peak of Lebanon’s electoral campaign. Figure 1 reports aggregate favorability ratings of the United States and Iran. Lebanon sits at the sample’s one-third quantile with some 55 percent of its population favorably disposed to the United States, roughly on par with Spain, China, and Russia, below Indonesia and above Egypt and Jordan. Meanwhile, it occupies the two-thirds quantile on Iran with 35 percent expressing favorable views, on par with Kenya, Egypt, Jordan, and South Korea. These aggregate figures mask, however, sharp divides in the population. An estimated 89 ± 4 percent of Sunnis held favorable views on the United States versus a vanishingly small 2 ± 1 percent of Shiites. We see the mirror image pattern on Iran: 98 ± 2 percent of Shiites held favorable views as opposed to 1 ± 1 percent of Sunnis.²⁰

[Figure 1 about here]

We previously noted the potential endogeneity between foreign interventions and polarization: interventions may create or aggravate foreign policy divides, but such divisions may Lebanese domestic politics, Syria played at most a muted role in the 2009 campaign period, in part due to heavy international pressure not to interfere in the elections. Campaign rhetoric and slogans instead focused squarely on Iran, which in turn played a visible role.

²⁰The Pew data do not allow us to distinguish between supporters of the two coalitions; with that caveat in mind, 66 ± 5 percent of the divided Christian community held favorable views on the United States, and 21 ± 4 percent held such views on Iran. The main question wording reads, “Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of (INSERT)?” We follow Pew’s practice of dichotomizing the responses into *Favorable* and *Unfavorable* views for summary purposes. All data come from a 25-nation survey conducted between 18 May and 16 June 2009 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project (<http://pewglobal.org>). The Project bears no responsibility for the interpretations presented or conclusions reached based on analysis of the data.

attract interventions in the first place. Given that key segments of the Lebanese electorate were a priori starkly divided, it may, as a practical matter, be difficult to induce further polarization. To the extent that this supposition is true, then Lebanon provides us with a hard rather than an easy test case. The experiment we describe shortly tries to move respondents from what could plausibly be strong prior beliefs. If anything, we would expect the effects of interventions to be stronger in other settings where foreign policy divides are less stark and people's priors less strongly held.

Against this backdrop of a divided electorate, both the United States and Iran sent mixed messages about their intentions. American policy, for example, oscillated between supporting the democratic process and favoring the Sunni-led coalition. In a pre-election visit, the American secretary of state 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 met disproportionately with March 14 leaders, while her colleague the vice president warned in a subsequent visit against the danger of forfeiting American generosity if the "wrong" side won.²¹ Iran acted analogously, both supporting the Shia-led alliance 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."²²

Below, we lay out our empirical strategy to gain purchase on the central question behind our polarization hypotheses: whether interventions shift public opinion for or against closer relations with the intervening power.

²¹BBC, 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?"

²²NOW Lebanon, 3 June 2009, "Qassem: Iran has given everything to Hezbollah." NOW Lebanon, 3 June 2009, "Shibani: Iran blesses Lebanon's democracy."

2.2 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 June 2009 elections. The $n = 1703$ sample consists of randomly selected adults from each of the country's 30 administrative districts (*cazas*), with the sample proportional to the district population size. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face by members of the same sex and same sect.²³ As is becoming increasingly common in political science, we exploit the internal validity of the experimental manipulations 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 (Bullock, 2009; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Sniderman and Grob, 1996), they are beginning to appear in comparative politics (Brader and Tucker, 2001, 2009; 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

²³Beirut-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. In all cases Sunnis interviewed Sunnis and Shiites interviewed Shiites. 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.

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**.*

The *Party* treatment expresses support for a contestant in the elections and reads that the intervening power “strongly preferred one side over the other,” whereas the *Process* treatment reads that it “supported the democratic process, whatever the outcome of the elections.”

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.²⁴ Figure 2 summarizes the survey response patterns in the untreated control group. These patterns capture voters’ baseline views of the two countries prior to their exposure to our treatments. For simplicity, we combine the bottom two points of the scale and say that such respondents *Oppose* relations with the country in question, and combine the top two points and say that they *Support* relations. Figure 3, in turn, plots the control group’s degree of *Support* by political bloc along with 95-percent confidence intervals.

Figure 2 shows that both the underlying scale and our summary *Support/Oppose* measure tell the same basic story. Both the United States and Iran received nearly identical levels of *Support* in the aggregate — the former at 47 percent, and the latter at 48 percent. Figure 3, meanwhile, reveals that the aggregate measures overlay significant disparities between the political blocs. Sunnis and their Christian allies held favorable views of the United

²⁴The 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*, *somewhat hard*, *not very hard*, and *not hard at all*. The item non-response rate was low at 4.4 percent.

States, but dim views of Iran. We see exactly the reverse pattern among Shiites; the latter's Christian allies are, meanwhile, middling on both countries.

[Figures 2 and 3 about here]

The control group data reveal substantial divergence in pre-treatment views. Our interest, however, is in the relative changes in support induced by different electoral interventions. We designed our treatments to mimic the mixed messages sent by foreign powers during the elections. By highlighting either the process or partisan aspects of these stances, we aim to induce some modest updating of respondents' prior beliefs about the intervening countries. We assume that, when respondents hear that the United States supported a party, they understand this claim to mean the Sunni-led March 14 alliance, and likewise for Iran and the Shia-led March 8 alliance. Given the public discourse throughout the campaign period, we believe that this assumption is warranted. Thus, our process prompt tells respondents that the power they have always suspected of being on a specific side of the election may in fact be somewhat more impartial, whereas our party prompt reinforces and strengthens a piece of prior knowledge about the direction of that power's preferences.

Before describing our findings, we first note how to map the experimental manipulations onto our hypotheses. From H_1 , we expect Sunnis and their allies who receive the *US Party* treatment to be *more* supportive of relations with the United States than their peers in the other conditions. Meanwhile, H_2 suggests that the same prompt should make Shiites and their allies *less* supportive of US relations than their counterparts in the other treatment groups. The reverse patterns should, in turn, hold for Iran.

The most limited test of these claims would compare the *Control* group to the relevant *Party* condition, but we expand the scope of the tests by comparing the groups to each other. First, the limited test sacrifices considerable statistical power. Restricting the test data to two conditions drops 60 percent of the sample. Second, including more pairwise comparisons allows us to check how robust the findings are. For example, if we find that *US Party*, when compared against *US Process* treatments, yields similar effect as *US Party* against *Control*,

we are more likely to have a robust finding on American one-sided intervention.

3 Results

Figures 4 and 5 report the results from the experiment. We estimate the average experimental effect with simple difference-in-proportions tests because they have the advantage of clarity and simplicity and do not require us to make potentially heroic assumptions about our data. We have a large number of logical comparisons to make, however, so economize on space by laying out the figures analogously to a correlation table.²⁵ The black squares running down the diagonal report sample sizes and the proportions ($\hat{\pi}$) of each experimental condition that *Support* relations with the state in question. The circles off the diagonal, in turn, report the absolute (unsigned) differences in proportions between the conditions in the corresponding rows and columns along with subscripted p -values (two-tailed $p \leq .05^{**}$, $p \leq .10^*$). We denote statistically-detectable differences in purple to offset them visually from the non-effects. We occasionally mark differences that reach one- but not two-tailed levels of detectability in a lighter purple to provide a visual cue to underlying dynamics.²⁶

Overall, we find broad support for the polarizing logic described in Hypotheses 1 and 2 — albeit with a couple of theoretically interesting qualifications. Sunni proponents of the Western-backed alliance responded favorably to American one-sidedness (H_1), while Shia supporters of the opposing Iranian-backed bloc responded unfavorably (H_2). When confronted with a partisan American intervention, the former wished to upgrade relations

²⁵There are $K = 5$ conditions and thus $\sum_{k=1}^K (k - 1) = 10$ unique treatment-to-treatment comparisons to make for each partisan bloc on each outcome. With 4 partisan blocs (simplified here as Sunnis, Shiites, Sunni-allied Christians, and Shia-allied Christians) and 2 outcome measures (American and Iranian relations), we have 10 unique treatment pairs \times 4 blocs \times 2 outcomes = 80 comparisons to make and report.

²⁶We report more conservative two-tailed tests throughout the paper, although our hypotheses are directional and as such could support one-tailed tests.

with the United States while the latter wished to downgrade relations. The data also offer two qualifications. First, in contrast to their Muslim peers, we observe little opinion shift among Christians, and none about relations with the United States. Second, and more importantly, subjects appeared to respond primarily to American interventions rather than Iranian ones.

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

Figure 4a reports opinion shifts about relations with the United States among Sunnis, the community most prominently identified with the American-preferred March 14 alliance. Visual inspection of the figure reveals that Sunnis responded systematically — and favorably — to the *US Party* condition, but not to any of the other manipulations. In particular, the line of purple circles indicating detectable differences corresponds only to comparisons between the *US Party* group and its counterparts. More precisely, Sunnis hearing about a partisan American intervention were discernibly more supportive of foreign relations with the United States ($\hat{\pi} = .78$) than were their peers in the other conditions ($.59 \leq \hat{\pi} \leq .68$). In contrast, none of the other treatment groups differed detectably from each other ($p \geq .25$).²⁷

Overall, Sunnis reacted favorably to American one-sidedness, but neither reacted to the other conditions nor distinguished between them in a detectable way. For a summary measure, then, we pool these latter four conditions together ($\hat{\pi} = .63, n = 303$) and compare them to the *US Party* treatment. On this metric, the *US Party* group was, in absolute terms, some $\hat{\delta} = .14$ ($p < .01$) probability points more favorable toward American relations than the other groups (Figure 6). Translated to relative terms, Sunnis getting the partisan American message were as estimated 23 percent more likely than their peers to support for-

²⁷Note that the *US Party* v. *Control* difference reaches one- but not two-tailed significance ($\hat{\delta} = .10, p = .17$). This difference is both stronger and more precisely-estimated when we restrict the sample to active March 14 identifiers: *US Party* ($\hat{\pi} = .85, n = 66$) v. *Control* ($\hat{\pi} = .67, n = 70$) yields an absolute difference of $\hat{\delta} = .18$ ($p = .01$) probability points.

eign relations with the United States.²⁸ These results lend strong support to H_1 's contention that voters want closer relations with foreign powers that intervene on their behalf.

Figure 4b reports our results among Shiites, the group most clearly linked to Hizballah and the Iranian-backed March 8 alliance, as well as the least supportive of relations with the United States. As with their Sunni competitors, visual inspection of the figure shows that Shiites systematically responded to the *US Party* treatment, but not to any of the others. As before, the line of purple circles corresponds only to comparisons between the *US Party* group and the other conditions. In sharp contrast to the Sunni reaction, however, Shia responses were decidedly negative. More precisely, Shiites hearing about a partisan American intervention were noticeably less supportive of foreign relations with the United States ($\hat{\pi} = .09$) than were their counterparts in the other conditions ($.17 \leq \hat{\pi} \leq .22$). Meanwhile, none of the other treatment-to-treatment comparisons yielded detectable differences ($p \geq .35$).

[Figure 6 about here]

Shiites, like Sunnis, reacted only to American one-sidedness, but with a negative rather than positive response. Hence, we use the same summary measure as before, pooling the non-*US Party* conditions together ($\hat{\pi} = .19, n = 366$) and comparing them to the *US Party* treatment. On this metric, the latter group is an estimated $\hat{\delta} = .11$ ($p < .01$) probability points less favorable than the other groups toward American relations (Figure 6). Given the relatively dim views with which the community started, however, this difference is even more stark when translated into relative terms. More specifically, Shiites getting the partisan American message were an estimated 122 percent less supportive of relations with the United States than were their peers in the other conditions.

We turn lastly to the Christian respondents, who in contrast to the Sunni and Shia communities split almost evenly between the Sunni-led March 14 alliance and its Shia-led March 08 counterpart. Figures 4c and 4d report the findings for the two Christian

²⁸We derive the relative differences from the probability ratio (i.e., the risk ratio) π_1/π_2 as $(.78/.63) - 1 = .23$ and multiply by 100 to express it in percent terms.

campus. The results are easy to summarize: nothing happens anywhere. We offer possible explanations in the discussion section.

We turn lastly to opinions on relations with Iran, for which the data paint a decidedly different picture. Figure 5 reveals that, in contrast to the stark polarization of the Sunni and Shia communities we observed on American relations, we can detect very few opinion shifts about relations with Iran. First, we observe no detectable treatment-to-treatment differences among Shiites. Second, only 1 out of 10 treatment-to-treatment comparisons yields a statistically-detectable difference among both Sunnis and their allies in the Christian community — the same number we would expect by chance.²⁹ Put together, these null findings suggest that views on Iran were far less malleable than views on the United States.

These data do point to one reaction in one of the constituencies. Intriguingly, Figure 5d suggests that Shia-allied Christians reacted favorably toward Iran when exposed to the *US Process* treatment.³⁰ We had theorized about how country *A*'s partisan interventions affect voter assessments of *A*; this unanticipated result suggests that interventions by country *B* may also influence voters' views toward *A*.³¹ This finding hints at interesting additional sender-target dynamics and suggests avenues for future research.

²⁹We falsely reject the null of no difference 1 out of 10 times at the conventional $p \leq .10$.

³⁰After pooling the other conditions together, *US Process* ($\hat{\pi} = .68, n = 77$) v. *Others Pooled* ($\hat{\pi} = .43, n = 232$) yields an increase of $\hat{\delta} = .15$ ($p = .02$) probability points.

³¹We speculate that this constituency interpreted American support for the democratic process, “whatever the outcome of the elections,” to mean that the United States would not penalize Lebanon for choosing the “wrong” alliance or good foreign relations with America’s regional adversaries. Under this interpretation of the data, Shia-allied Christians updated their views on Iran only because they updated their views about the United States.

4 Discussion

What can we make of the results from our experiment? Overall, we argue that they offer broad support for the polarization logic we presented. In particular, when the United States takes a side in elections — here, in favor of the Sunni-led March 14 alliance — opinions among Sunnis shift in favor of upgrading American relations (H_1), while Shiites, the core supporters of the opposing alliance, break the opposite way and prefer to downgrade relations (H_2). The Shia community holds dim views on the United States to begin with, which when reinforced by partisan American activity appears to threaten even further deterioration of their opinions. The Sunni community, in contrast, starts with a high level of support for relations with the United States, whose 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 polarize the electorate, with increased popular support among allied constituencies matching up with decreased popular support among opponents.

Meanwhile, our results are *not* consistent with some plausible rival hypotheses. Our manipulations did not provoke a nationalistic backlash against any meddling in domestic affairs whatsoever, nor did people distinguish between types and reject partisan interventions while welcoming those that support the democratic process. By and large, people expressed neither qualms nor plaudits about democracy promotion and, as per our polarization logic, diverged on ally promotion depending on whether or not they were the allies being promoted. Nor do our data support a simple “anti-Americanism” narrative.³² Respondents did not react negatively to process-oriented interventions by the United States, while American partisanship drew both anger and approval depending on who it favored.

Although our data do not support basic narratives of anti-Americanism, they do offer two substantively meaningful qualifications to our polarization logic. First, subjects reacted

³²A growing literature on anti-Americanism highlights disapproval of American foreign policy and places special emphasis on Middle Eastern publics — see Carothers (1999); Chiozza (2009); Jamal (2007); Katzenstein and Keohane (2007); Lynch (2006).

only to our American treatments. In particular, American one-sidedness polarized Sunnis and Shiites toward the United States, but our partisan Iranian treatments failed to move respondents on Iran. These data do not allow us to identify with precision why people reacted to one source but not the other. The two interveners differ in multiple ways — for example, Iran is a regional rather than global power, and the difference in resources could account for why people responded more to American one-sidedness.

We think there is a more plausible explanation, however: people are legitimately uncertain about the role played by the United States, but have little doubt about Iran. American foreign policy frequently vacillates between idealist democracy promotion and interest-based realpolitik, so people’s priors about the United States likely reflect this ambiguity and are relatively open to updating. Institutionally, the United States is itself a democracy and has cooperated with other, democracy-dominated regional organizations to pursue principled support for democratic institutions abroad and champion the right to democratic self-determination (Pevehouse, 2002). 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 (Cox et al., 2000).

In contrast, Iran’s democratic credentials are deeply flawed at best, and its foreign policy is far better known for its stated aim to “export the Islamic revolution” than for democracy promotion. Moreover, Iran has consistently and openly provided massive material support to March 8-stalwart Hizballah for nearly three decades, so people’s ideas about Iran’s agenda may be relatively set and resistant to updating. In effect, *any* Iranian intervention may, by default, be treated as a partisan intervention.

We can follow this lead by returning to Figures 5a and 5b for a second look at Sunni and Shia support for relations with Iran. We note that Sunnis react most poorly to the two Iranian interventions, while Shiites react most favorably, although the differences are imprecisely estimated. When we pool the two *Iran* treatments and compare them to the others, however, we find tentative evidence that Iranian interventions also polarize — in relative

terms, Sunnis are some 31 percent ($p = .12$) less supportive of relations with Iran, while Shiites are an estimated 11 percent ($p = .07$) more supportive.³³ We hasten to emphasize that the effects are somewhat modest in size and hover on the border of conventional levels of statistical detectability, so should be treated with caution. They are, however, suggestive insofar as they conform to our polarization logic. These findings are by no means definitive, and if anything call out for further research to establish why electoral stances by different countries meet different reactions from voters.

Our Christian respondents provide the second qualification: they appear not to update their preferences over relations with the United States at all. This null finding among Christians contrasts sharply with the dynamics evident among Sunnis and Shiites. Although we cannot identify the reason with precision, we offer the following informed speculation. Among Lebanese, the Christian community 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 (Sunni-allied Christian baseline $\hat{\pi} = .58$) or mildly worse (Shia-allied Christian baseline $\hat{\pi} = .48$).

³³Among Sunnis, *Iran Pooled* ($\hat{\pi} = .22, n = 153$) v. *Others Pooled* ($\hat{\pi} = .29, n = 226$) yields an absolute drop of $\hat{\delta} = .07$ ($p = .12$) probability points. The difference is slightly larger and more precisely estimated ($\hat{\delta} = .08, p = .10$) when we restrict the sample to active March 14 supporters only. Among Shiites, *Iran Pooled* ($\hat{\pi} = .77, n = 188$) v. *Others Pooled* ($\hat{\pi} = .69, n = 261$) yields an increase of $\hat{\delta} = .08$ ($p = .07$) points.

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. The implication that interventions polarize electorates and weaken moderate voices harmonizes with views expressed by seasoned observers of electoral intercessions. Senior American diplomat Stephen Bosworth, for example, urged restraint by the United States on the eve of Chile’s 1988 plebiscite (quoted in Falcoff et al., 1988, vii):

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.

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 direct 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 given that polarized political systems are less likely to sustain democratic institutions (Dahl, 1971; Sartori, 1976).

Polling voter views on what a country should adopt as its foreign policies has advantages and also limitations. Public opinion may influence government policy, but the latter does not follow directly from the former. Popular support for a foreign power is neither necessary nor sufficient for a state to adopt a foreign policy amenable to that power. 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). 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 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 about the effects of a policy that states normally deploy vis-à-vis other states in a highly selective and non-random fashion — we control the counterfactual rather than wait for one that may never come. Not all states experience electoral interventions: Ukraine, Nepal, Lebanon, and Iraq have, but as far as we can tell, Canada and Switzerland have not. 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. Our

claim is that survey experiments can prove a valuable addition to a multi-method inference strategy, balancing the limitations of other approaches.

Finally, our empirical results provide, by necessity, a snapshot of a specific venue at a specific point in time. We believe the basic dynamics generalize to countries that are structurally prone to electoral interventions, but only further research in new settings can assess how well the results travel. We provide the first argument about what motivates states to intervene in some elections, and specify a mechanism linking such intercessions to voter attitudes. We hope that our theory and findings will help to push forward our understanding about why electoral interventions occur, and to introduce a hitherto ignored component of the dynamic into the conversation: the repercussions among voting publics.

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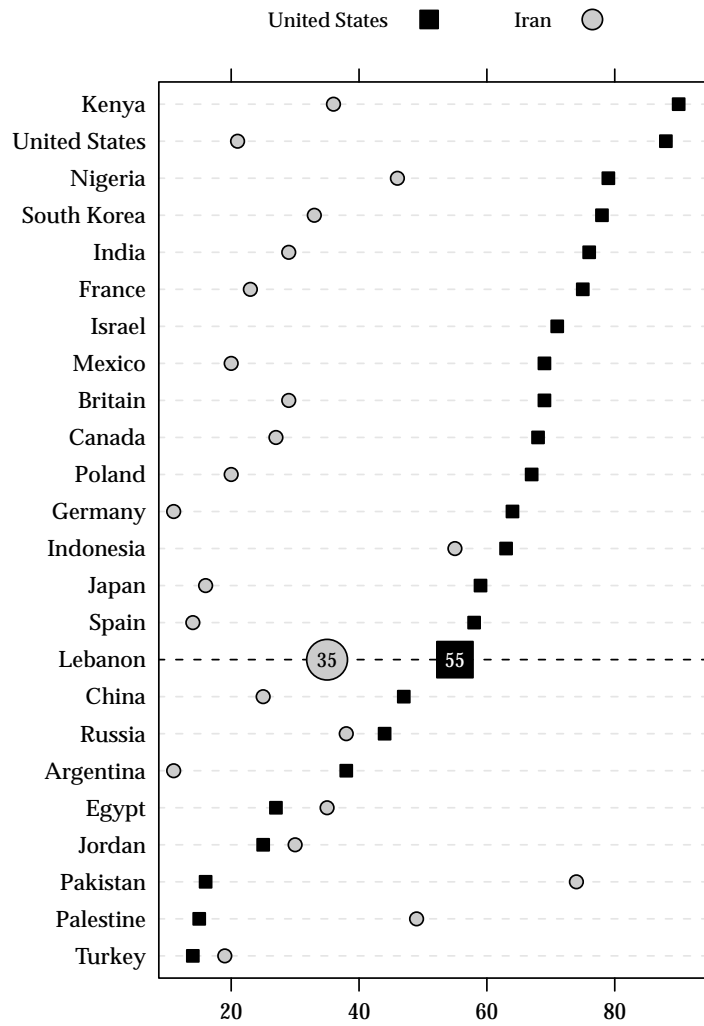
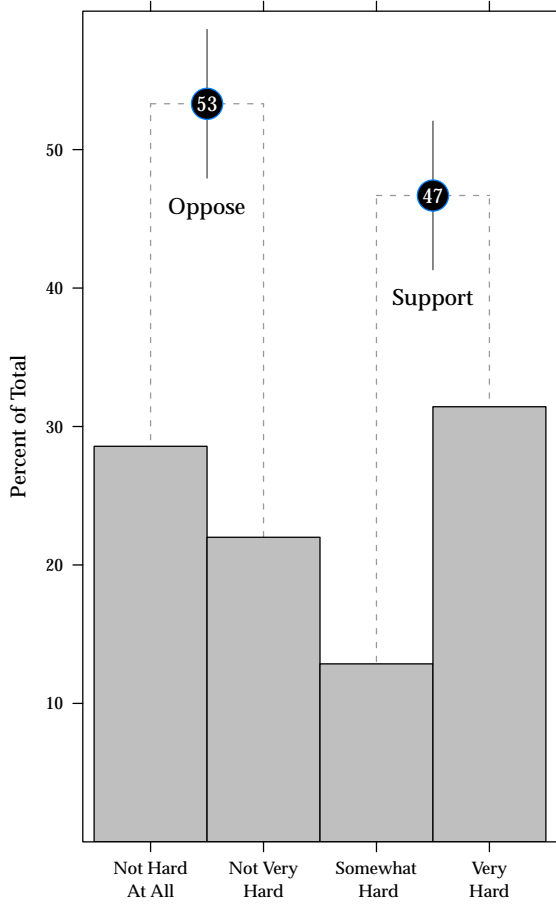
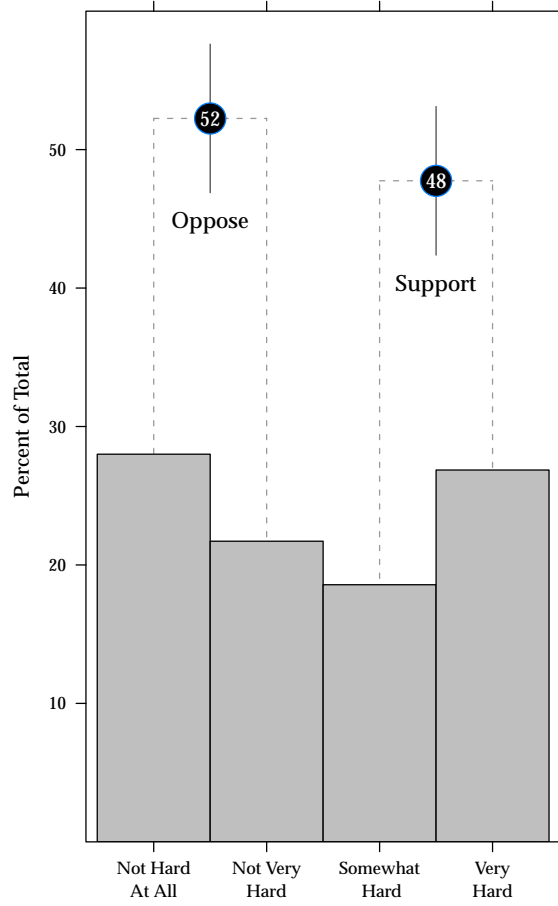


Figure 1: *Favorable* Views of the United States and Iran (Pew Global Attitudes Project)



(a) With the United States



(b) With Iran

Figure 2: Desired Effort to Protect Foreign Relations (Control Group)

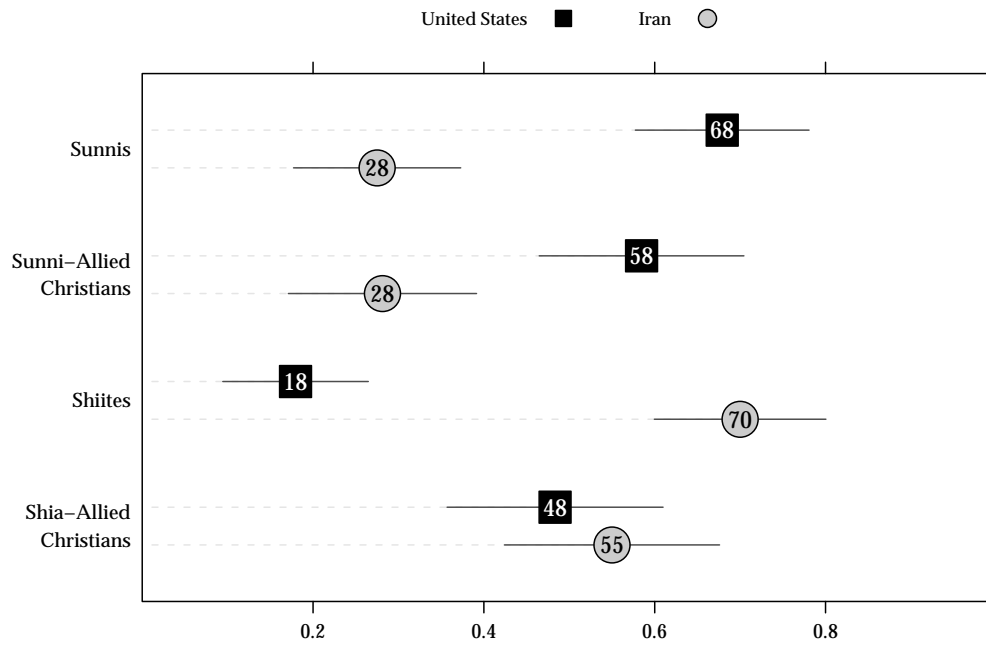
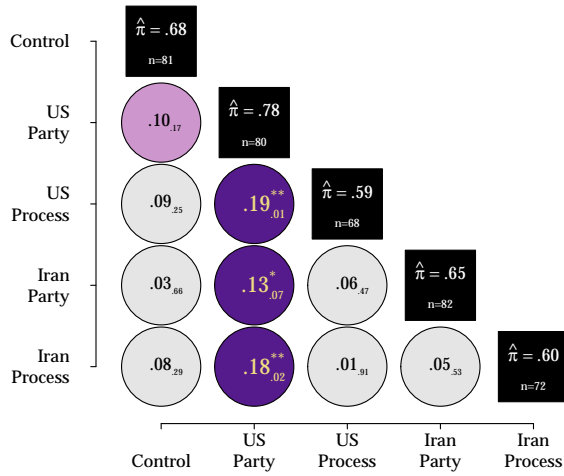
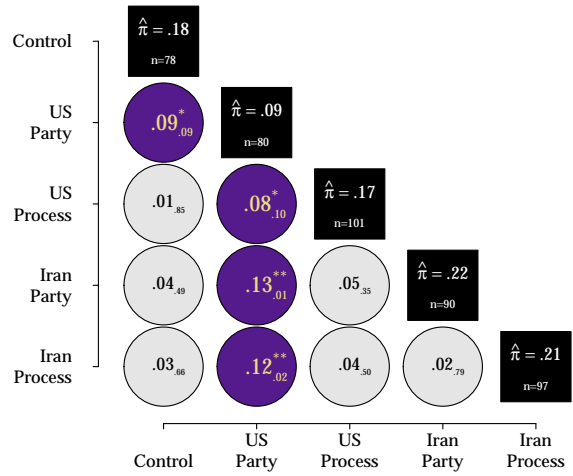


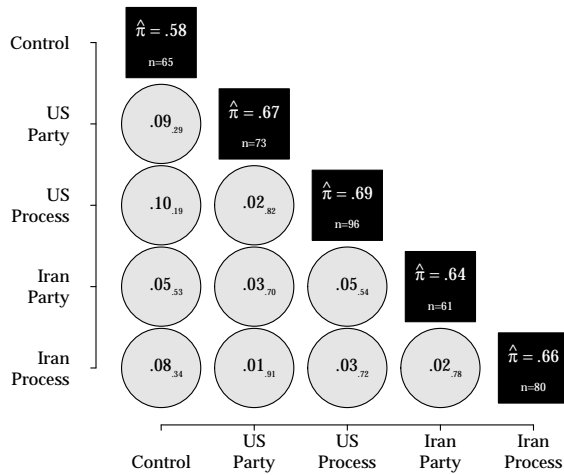
Figure 3: *Support* for Foreign Relations with the United States and Iran (Control Group)



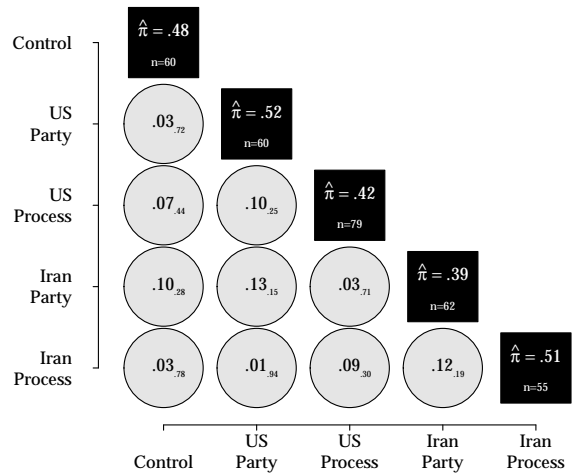
(a) Sunnis: *US Party* \rightarrow *Support*



(b) Shiites: *US Party* \rightarrow *Oppose*

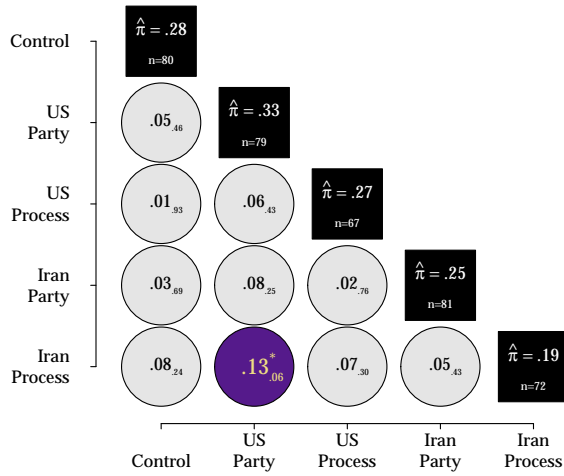


(c) Sunni-Allied Christians: No Effect

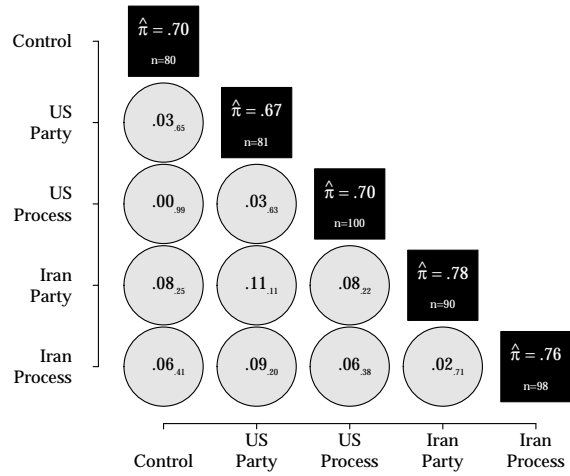


(d) Shia-Allied Christians: No Effect

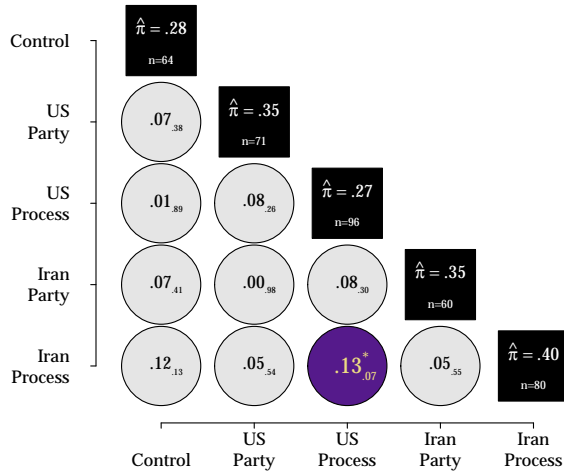
Figure 4: Relations With the United States — diagonal squares report group proportions ($\hat{\pi}$) that *Support* relations; off-diagonal circles report absolute (unsigned) differences in proportions between corresponding row and column groups along with two-tailed *p*-values.



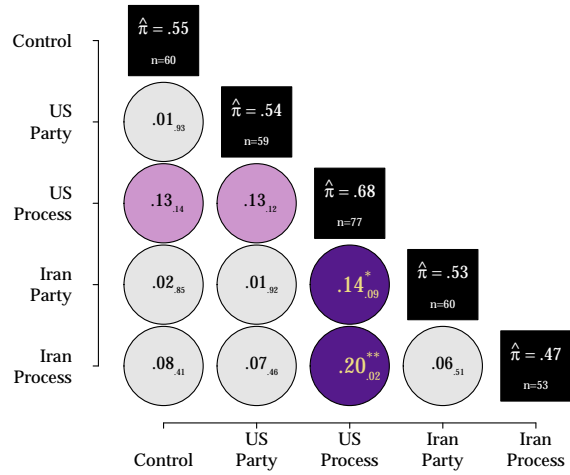
(a) Sunnis: No Effect



(b) Shiites: No Effect

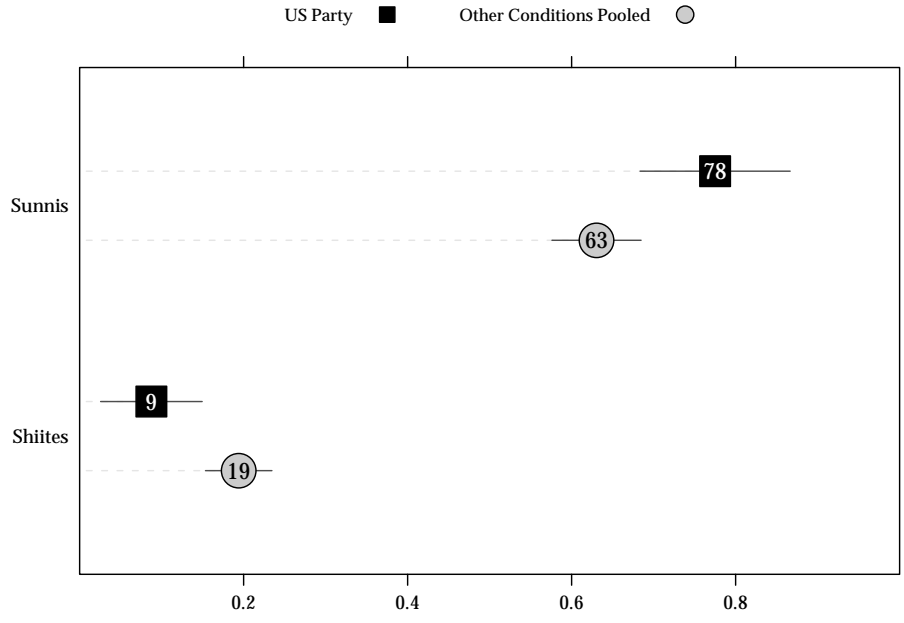


(c) Sunni-Allied Christians: No Effect

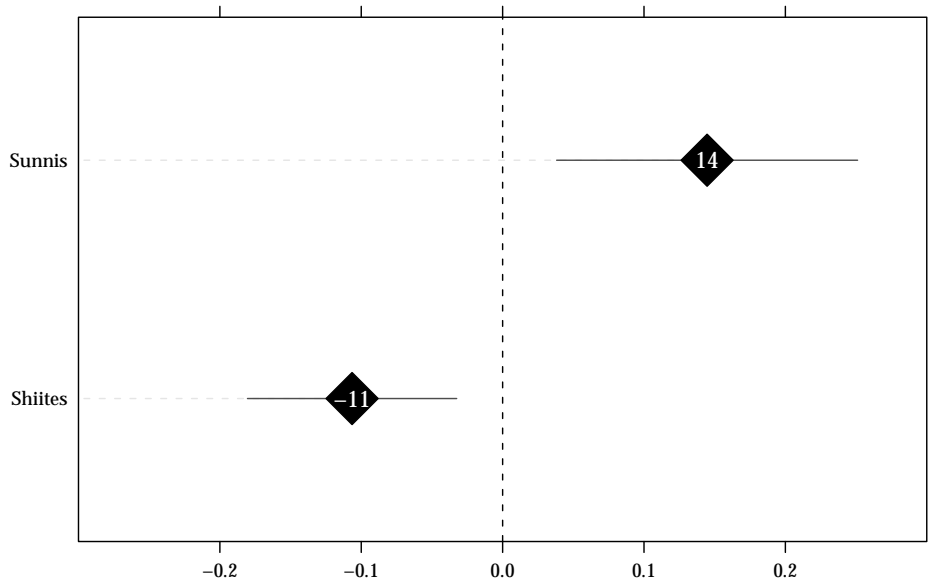


(d) Shia-Allied Christians: *US Process* → *Support*

Figure 5: Relations With Iran — diagonal squares report group proportions ($\hat{\pi}$) that *Support* relations; off-diagonal circles report absolute (unsigned) differences in proportions between corresponding row and column groups along with two-tailed *p*-values.



(a) *Support Levels in US Party Condition and when Other Conditions Pooled: Proportion Supporting, with 95-Percent Confidence Intervals.*



(b) *Differences in Proportions Between US Party and Other Conditions Pooled with 95-Percent Confidence Intervals*

Figure 6: *Support for Relations with the United States (Summary)*