Risk Tolerance and Support for Potential Military Interventions

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Abstract

When evaluating an ongoing military conflict, the public has the advantage of observing, at least partially, outcomes of the conflict. Because there are no outcomes to observe, by their nature, *potential* conflicts add an additional dimension of uncertainty to the evaluation process. This research note seeks to examine the effect of risk priming on the evaluation of potential military conflicts. Using an experiment from the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we find that priming less risk-tolerant individuals to consider risk lessened their support for a potential military intervention in Darfur, while the prime appeared to increase uncertainty among risk-tolerant individuals.

Public opinion scholars have long debated whether citizens formulate coherent attitudes when evaluating military conflicts (see Aldrich et al. (2006) for a review). Research initially portrayed public opinion on these issues as ill-informed and lacking coherent structure (Almond 1950). However, recent studies have concluded that the public's support for military interventions reacts rationally to information about how the war is proceeding, particularly with regard to the number of American casualties (Mueller 1973; Gartner 2008), though these reactions are conditioned by the public's beliefs about the merits of the conflict and the likelihood of success (Gelpi et al. 2005). Other scholars have called into question these findings, positing instead that elite cues are most influential in affecting support for war. Specifically, this body of work has demonstrated that when there is elite consensus about a military conflict, the public tends to support the effort while elite divisions tend to generate more opposition (Berinsky 2009; Gelpi et al. 2009).

While scholars have devoted significant attention to understanding public opinion toward *ongoing* wars, there has been less attention to how the public forms opinions about *potential* military conflicts, partly because assessing support for a potential military intervention places an even greater burden on the average individual. When evaluating an ongoing conflict, citizens can rely on information about how the war is going and elite interpretations of that information to help formulate their opinions. However, when assessing a proposed military intervention, individuals must cope with the inherent uncertainty involved in making prospective judgments about the potential consequences of taking such action. Dalton (1996) notes that, "[p]rospective judgments are based on a speculative and complex decision-making process. [...] a task that imposes a considerable information burden on the voter" (p. 223). In such an uncertain climate, citizens may react more to new pieces of information or cues from elites (Berinsky 2009; Gelpi

et al. 2009). They also may base their opinions on the stated policy objectives of the proposed intervention (Jentleson 1992) as well as ethnocentrism (Kam and Kinder 2008).

Even when individuals can rely on elite cues and other sources of information to formulate expectations about the merits and likely success of a military intervention, they are making these calculations under substantial uncertainty. In other words, the decision of whether to support or oppose a proposed military intervention is one that includes significant risk, a factor that may also influence how citizens approach the decision. Recent work indicates that considerations of risk may play an important role in affecting individuals' vote decisions and attitudes on political issues (e.g., Ehrlich and Maestas 2010; Kam and Simas 2010). While individuals may consider risks relative to any policy proposal, these considerations may be particularly influential when it comes to evaluating whether to send troops into harm's way. Slovic et al. (1979) note that perception of risk is significantly influenced by the characteristics of the hazard that the individual is evaluating. A hazard with high levels of dread is one that would have catastrophic, sensational and fatal consequences, and one which the individual feels no sense of control over. Individuals will be particularly averse to such risks. The hazards of war are often catastrophic and fatal; thus, the potential exists for risk to weigh heavily on evaluations of whether to go to war.

However, individuals may not always consider risk when offering their opinions on a potential military intervention. When volunteering their opinions, citizens often forego an exhaustive search for information and rely instead on considerations that are most accessible to them at that moment (Zaller 1992). In fact, people may hold different attitudes on the same issue at different points in time because different considerations are more or less accessible to them at that moment. The accessibility of a particular concept or consideration—such as risk—can be

influenced by how frequently or how recently those concepts have been activated in the person's mind. Priming occurs when a consideration is activated by external stimuli, such as elite rhetoric or alterations in the wording of a survey question. When individuals are primed to think about risk, they may be less likely to support sending troops into harm's way.

Of course, considerations of risk may not be equally influential to every individual's opinion. As Kam and Simas (2010) demonstrate, some individuals are more tolerant of risk than others and Nadeau et al. (1999) demonstrate that individuals who are less accepting of risk tend to give more weight to the worst possible outcome when faced with a proposal for political change. In such a climate, priming a risk-averse individual to think about risk may cause them to become less supportive of intervention while those who are more tolerant of risk may be less influenced by such a prime.

The Survey Experiment

To best determine how risk influences the public's support for entering into military conflicts, we chose the case of Darfur. Unlike Iraq and Afghanistan, America did not intervene militarily in Darfur, allowing us to use the case to gauge attitudes toward a *potential* military conflict. However, while the U.S. had not engaged in Darfur, politicians and advocacy organizations were active in placing the issue of intervention on the political agenda. During the 2008 campaign, every major contender for the presidency took a position on the extent to which they would intervene in Darfur. Since the principal policy objective in Darfur would be humanitarian (to end the ethnic genocide) and U.S. involvement would be part of a multinational operation, support should be relatively high (Jentleson and Britton 1998).

To answer these questions, we embedded an experiment in a module of the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, a national internet survey of 1,000 American adults conducted through YouGov/Polimetrix (Appendix 1). Each respondent answered identical questions about four policy proposals. The sample was randomly divided into control and treatment groups. The control group received instructions to "Please indicate whether you approve or disapprove of the proposals." The treatment group received a slightly different version of the preface designed to prime the respondents to think about risk before they answered the questions. This preface read, "Keeping in mind that policies always involve some amount of risk, please indicate whether you approve or disapprove of the proposals." Among the four proposals respondents were asked to evaluate was "The use of US troops in Darfur as part of a multinational force to help end the ethnic genocide there."[1]

It is important to note that the treatment employed in this experiment was fairly subtle. The addition of a phrase referring to risk is only a slight change to the instrument to which control group respondents were exposed. Furthermore, this alteration was confined to the instructions that appeared at the top of the page, something that many respondents might glance at quickly as they worked through the survey. Thus, on one hand, it would not be surprising to find limited differences between respondents in the control and treatment groups. On the other hand, if risk is as powerful a determinant of decision making as much of the literature suggests, then even a subtle treatment should induce significant differences.

As noted above, we expect those who are least tolerant of risk will be most influenced by the priming condition. To measure risk tolerance, we employed a survey instrument developed

[1] The survey we used to design our question was conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Interviewing was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, May 30 - June 3, 2007 and based on 1,503 telephone interviews. The text of the Pew question read, "Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops in Darfur as part of a multinational force to help end the ethnic genocide there?"

and tested by Barsky et al. (1997). The measure of risk tolerance was developed from a two-question battery on the survey.[2] Figure 1 presents the questions used to determine each respondent's level of risk tolerance. As the figure indicates, the two-question survey instrument generates a four-point scale of risk tolerance ranging from 0 (low tolerance for risk) to 3 (high tolerance for risk). A majority (53%) of respondents scored lowest on the scale of risk tolerance while 17% had the highest level of risk tolerance. Appendix 2 includes additional information about our measure of risk tolerance. In the analysis that follows we expect to find particularly strong risk priming effects for those who scored a 0 on this scale since those respondents would likely be most sensitive to considerations of risk.

Results

Table 1 presents the differences in responses for those in the control and treatment conditions among all respondents and depending on the respondent's risk tolerance.[3] For each proposal, respondents were given the option of answering that they "strongly approved," "somewhat approved," "somewhat disapproved," "strongly disapproved," or "did not know." The table presents two sets of results. In the first three columns, the table shows the extent to which the risk prime affected the percentage of respondents who offered a "don't know" answer. The second set of columns presents the support for intervention in Darfur among those who took a position.

[2] These questions were asked later in the survey to assure that respondents' answers to these questions were not influenced by the earlier risk prime. We examined whether receiving the risk prime earlier in the survey affected how respondents answered this question and found no difference between those who received the prime and those who did not.

[3] Support in our survey was similar to that registered in a May, 2007 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. In the Pew poll, 55% of those expressing an opinion said that they supported sending U.S. troops to Darfur to end the ethnic genocide.

While the expectations related to the "don't know" responses are not entirely obvious, it would not be surprising to find that the prime causes a significant proportion of risk-averse respondents to move from "don't know" to being opposed to the intervention. After all, given the challenge of formulating an opinion in such an uncertain context, these risk-averse respondents may use the prime as a cue about the likelihood of success. Indeed, this is what Table 1 reveals: the most risk-averse respondents become more likely to take a position when treated with the risk prime ("don't know" responses decline by 7% under the priming condition, $p<.1$). This increased propensity to offer an opinion under the priming condition resulted in reduced support for the proposal. Support was 68% among risk intolerant respondents who did not receive the risk prime but just 53% for those who did receive this prime. The difference in proportions was significant at $p<.05$, indicating a high level of confidence that the priming effect is generalizable to the population of Americans who are relatively intolerant of risk.

Similar differences in support were not evident among respondents who were more tolerant of risk. For example, the risk prime generated virtually no difference in support for military intervention in Darfur for individuals who received either a 1 or 3 on the risk tolerance scale. Respondents who were rated as a 2 for risk tolerance actually became more supportive of intervention of Darfur when primed to think about risk. However, because of the small number of respondents in this condition, the difference is statistically insignificant and may very well be due to sampling error ($p=.23$).[4]

Notably, Table 1 reveals that respondents in the most risk-tolerant group were five times more likely to answer "don't know" when primed. This increase in "don't know" responses does not come disproportionately from supporters or opponents--support for intervention is the same

[4] We conducted a power analysis which revealed that we would have to triple the size of our original sample for this difference to achieve statistical significance at $p<.05$.

regardless of whether a risk-tolerant respondent received the prime. It may be that more risk-tolerant individuals are less likely to have naturally considered the risks involved in taking military action in Darfur. Thus, when primed to think about risk, a significant share of supporters and opponents may decide that they have not given enough considerations to these risks to offer an opinion on intervention.

Overall, the findings presented in Table 1 provide support for our expectation that priming risk intolerant individuals to think about risk will reduce their support for military intervention. While random assignment of our control and treatment conditions should obviate any concerns that these findings are spurious, we do have to be conscious of the fact that the patterns for different levels of risk tolerance may actually be attributable to some other variable that is correlated with tolerance for risk. For example, if less-educated respondents are less tolerant of risk, then the effects reported in Table 1 may be due to the fact that those with lower levels of formal education are more susceptible to priming effects in general.

To determine how confident we can be in the findings presented in Table 1, and to help control for some of these factors, we estimated a logit model where support for military intervention in Darfur is the dependent variable. We include in this model an indicator for whether the individual received the risk prime, the level of risk tolerance for the individual, and an interaction term between those variables. In addition, we also include several control variables that might also be related to support for intervention in Darfur along with interactions between each of these control variables and the risk prime indicator.[5]

[5] These include the respondent's gender, level of formal education, amount of attention he/she pays to politics, and the individual's ideology and partisanship. Education is an ordinal variable, ranging from a value of 1, if the respondent did not complete high school, to 6 for respondents who have done post-graduate work. Ideology is captured on a 5-point scale ranging from "very liberal" (1) to "very conservative" (5). Party ID is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (7). "Attention to politics" takes on four values, ranging from those who say they pay attention to politics "hardly at all" to those who pay attention "most of

Table 2 presents the results from this model. Two interaction terms are statistically significant—(1) the interaction between the risk prime and ideology and (2) that between the risk prime and risk tolerance. The predicted probabilities for these relationships are plotted in Figure 2. With regard to ideology, both liberals and conservatives became more supportive of intervention when risk was primed, but the effect was stronger for conservatives. Conservatives may have interpreted the risk prime as a liberal argument against intervention, and therefore reacted by taking the opposing position (in favor of action). The figure also shows that respondents who were least tolerant of risk were somewhat less likely to support intervention in Darfur under the risk priming condition. However, the most risk-tolerant respondents actually became more supportive of intervention when primed to think about risk. Thus, when risk was not primed, a respondent with a lower tolerance for risk would be expected to favor intervention more than a respondent with a higher risk tolerance. But when risk was primed, risk-tolerant respondents were more supportive than those with less tolerance for risk.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this paper, we find that using a subtle prime to induce respondents to think about risk leads to a significant reduction in support for taking military action among those who are least tolerant of risk taking. Despite the fact that our results are confined to the single case of Darfur, they point to important implications. Specifically, when Americans think more about the risks associated with a military intervention, they may be less willing to support such an action. Yet, since much of the public does not pay a great deal of attention to foreign affairs, the risks involved in military interventions may not be easily accessed when people are asked to evaluate

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the time." It is necessary to include interaction terms for all of the variables that might be correlated with risk tolerance and the prime to ensure that our findings are not the result of omitted variable bias.

such proposals. This point intersects with the notion that elite rhetoric can be particularly influential when it comes to how the public evaluates military conflicts (Berinsky 2009). If there is not significant elite opposition to a proposed military intervention, then it is unlikely that Americans will hear enough about the potential risks involved in that intervention to cause them to seriously consider those risks. In such a situation, pollsters may register greater public support for an intervention than they would if Americans were giving more considerations to the risks involved. For example, during the debate over whether to invade Iraq in 2002, survey experiments found that support for the invasion was much lower when respondents were primed to consider the risk of casualties involved in such action (Pew 2002). This indicates that while pollsters found that significant majorities favored military intervention in Iraq in most pre-war surveys, this support may have been exaggerated because of the public's failure to consider the risks involved in pursuing such an intervention.

Opinions about ongoing interventions can be based on objective indicators such as military casualties or elite interpretations of how the intervention is progressing, but the public must rely more on elite predictions about uncertain outcomes when formulating opinions about potential interventions. If few elites are discussing the risks of a potential intervention, then the public may give little thought to these risks. This makes it particularly challenging for pollsters and researchers to measure public opinion on *proposed* military interventions. Such opinions will be highly dependent on context—both the nature of elite discourse on the issue (i.e. whether elites are discussing the risks of intervention) and the nature of the survey instrument itself (i.e., whether the question primes respondents to think about risks). Given the gravity of a government's decision to engage in military conflict, it may be unwise to present policy makers

with a picture of public opinion that was formed without sufficient attention to the risks of engaging in such a conflict.

Appendix 1: The Cooperative Congressional Election Study

The survey data analyzed in the manuscript comes from a module to the 2008 CCES. The CCES is a cooperative survey project that allows teams to purchase individual module surveys of 1,000 respondents. The survey was conducted via the Internet by YouGov/Polimetrix using a matched random sample design. A subset of respondents recruited for online surveys were selected by matching them on a set of demographic characteristics to a randomly selected set of individuals from the population of American adults. Propensity score weights for the samples were developed so as to ensure that the sample represents the demographic characteristics of the adult population as reflected in the 2004 and 2008 Current Population Survey. The 2008 CCES was conducted from October 8th to November 3rd for the pre-election survey and November 5th to December 1st for the post-election battery. The within panel response rate (RR3) for this study was 47.1%. Additional information about the sampling methodology and the total survey error for vote and other objective indicators is presented in the guides to each of the surveys, posted at http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html.

Appendix 2: Measuring Tolerance for Risk

A number of different survey instruments have been created by political and social scientists to measure an individual's tolerance for risk. See Kam and Simas (2010) for a useful review of these approaches. In general, measures of risk tolerance take one of two approaches. The first approach is to rely on respondents to rate themselves with regard to how comfortable they are taking risks. For example, Ehrlich and Maestas (2010) ask respondents to place themselves on a scale that ranges from "extremely comfortable taking risks" to "extremely uncomfortable taking risks."" Kam and Simas (2010) use an index of questions asking whether they agree with statements such as "I would like to explore strange places" or "I like new and exciting experiences, even if I have to break the rules." Since respondents sometimes are unwilling or unable to provide accurate responses to such self-evaluative queries, we rely on the second approach, which captures a respondent's orientation to risk by asking him/her to participate in a hypothetical situation where he/she chooses between a probabilistic outcome and one that is certain. The two-question battery we use was pioneered by Barsky et al. (1997), and a similar question was asked on the 1996 Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

While the distribution of responses to our question is very similar to that reported by Barsky et al. (1997), our sample does appear to be slightly more tolerant of risk. While Barsky et al. report that 65% of their respondents were least tolerant of risk, we find that 53% of our respondents fall into that group. Barsky et al. find 13% of their respondents falling into the most risk-tolerant category, whereas 17% of our sample falls into that category.

On one hand, the question we use in this paper avoids potential complications related to asking respondents for a self-assessment of their orientations toward risk. On the other hand, there may be a concern that we are only measuring one's orientation to taking *financial* risks

while people may be more or less tolerant when it comes to other types of risks. While we cannot fully address that possibility in this paper, we can address whether our measure has properties that are generally consistent with other measures that have been used in previous research. Kam and Simas (2010) find that measures of risk tolerance are usually negatively correlated with age and positively correlated with education and income. They also find that women are less tolerant of risk than men and respondents who are married are less tolerant than those who are not married. With the exception of income, our measure of risk tolerance is consistent with these patterns. Notably, income was uncorrelated with our risk tolerance scale, indicating that responses to the hypothetical job offer were not influenced by the respondent's current income.

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Table 1: Effect of the Risk Prime on Support for Military Intervention in Darfur

	% Don't Know (Among All Respondents)			% Supporting Intervention (Among Respondents Taking a Position)		
Group	Not Primed	Primed	Difference	Not Primed	Primed	Difference
All Respondents	16.5%	18.7%	2.2%	63.8%	59.0%	-4.8%
	N=492	N=502		N=424	N=426	
Risk tolerance = 0	19.0%	12.0%	-7.0%*	68.3%	53.0%	-15.3%**
	N=274	N=268		N=230	N=232	
Risk tolerance = 1	22.5%	21.0%	-1.5%	70.1%	72.2%	1.1%
	N=72	N=92		N=59	N=77	
Risk tolerance = 2	14.6%	22.1%	7.5%	51.0%	68.4%	17.4%
	N=58	N=56		N=53	N=45	
Risk tolerance = 3	5.3%	26.4%	21.1%**	56.5%	56.5%	0%
	N=84	N=80		N=79	N=68	

Note: All proportions produced with sampling weights applied.
*p<.1, **p<.05, F-test for difference of proportions

Table 2: Logit Model Estimating Support for Military Intervention in Darfur

Independent Variables	Coeff.	Std. Err.	P-Values
Risk Prime	-.219	1.629	.893
Risk Tolerance	-.181	.115	.117
Risk Tolerance X Prime	.360	.172	.037
Education	.159	.142	.262
Education X Prime	-.253	.201	.209
Political Attentiveness	.682	.250	.006
Attentiveness X Prime	-.178	.334	.594
Ideology	-.628	.172	<.001
Ideology X Prime	.551	.261	.035
Party ID	.031	.089	.729
Party ID X Prime	-.119	.124	.337
Female	.321	.299	.282
Female X Prime	-.077	.413	.852
Intercept	-.292	1.248	.815

Note: Estimates produced with sampling weights applied.
N=784. Log Likelihood = -463.309

Figure 1: Risk Tolerance Battery

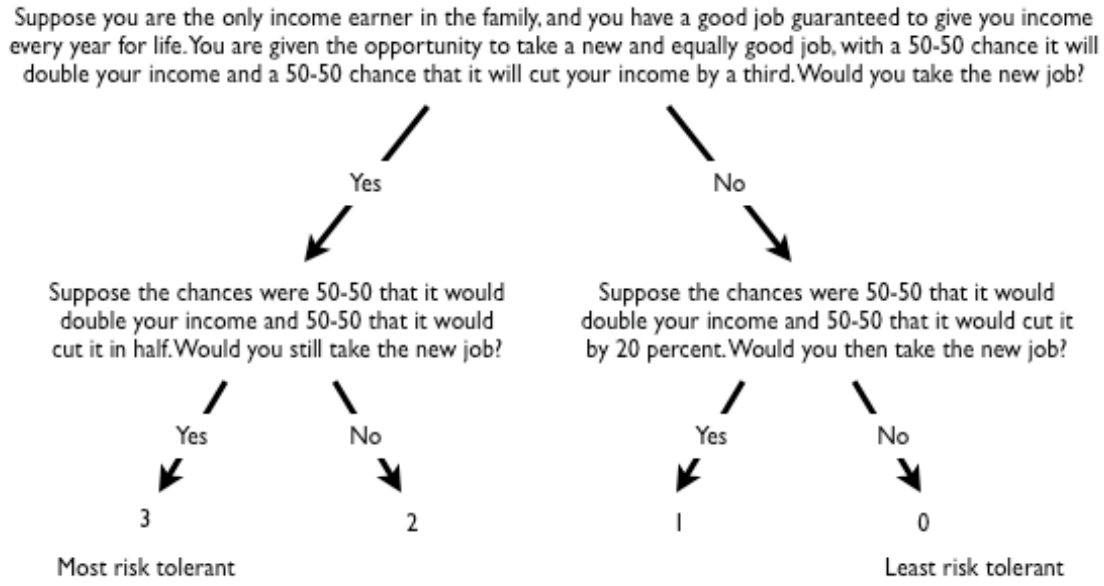
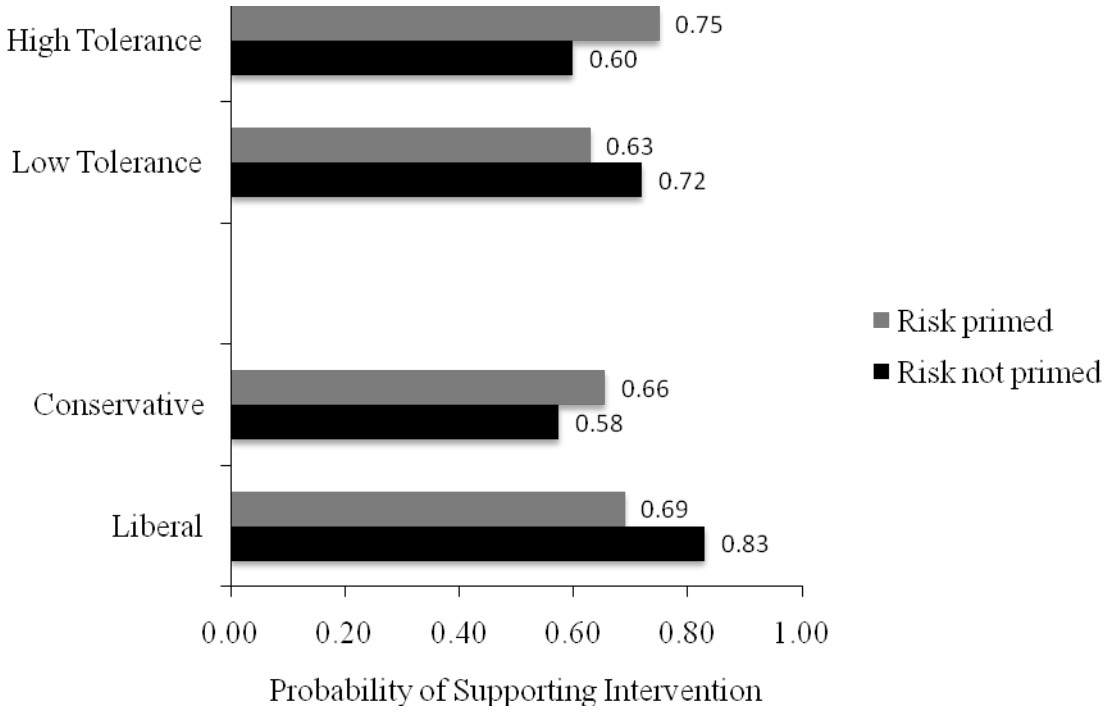


Figure 2: Predicted Effects of Risk Tolerance and Ideology on Probability of Supporting Intervention in Darfur in Control and Treatment
Conditions



Note: Predictions generated from the model presented in Table 2 while holding all other variables in the model at their means.