

Anticipating the Cost of Withdrawal: How the US Presidential Election Affects European Willingness to Spend and Defend

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Abstract

How do individuals react to fluctuations in the reliability of mutual defence within NATO? The toss-up election between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris for President of the United States features two candidates with diametrically-opposed stances towards NATO. On the campaign trail, Trump has insinuated that he would encourage Russian attacks on NATO allies, provided the targeted states do not meet their NATO spending commitments. For her part, Harris has promised a business-as-usual approach to NATO and Article 5 commitments. The uncertainty of the election outcome thus presents a rare opportunity to compare the effects of hegemonic withdrawal and its counterfactual on public attitudes towards defence. Using a survey experiment in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Germany, we explore how the threat of hegemonic withdrawal influences public willingness in NATO countries to, on the one hand, increase defence spending, and on the other, come to an ally's defence in the event of an attack. This is especially important given that Trump's threats are conditional for countries that under-spend on defence, and because a potential US exit or even a partial divestment would raise the cost of mutual defence for remaining states. Respondents were randomly exposed to a vignette predicting one of two potential outcomes of the 2024 US presidential election. While the Trump condition is paired with his threats to abandon NATO allies, the Harris condition reaffirms her ironclad commitment to the alliance. We then expose respondents to a second vignette in which a NATO ally is under attack, this time priming either in-group or out-group sentiment between the respondent's country and the allied country in need. Despite the universal promise of protection under Article 5, we hypothesize that fissures in alliance cohesion are more likely to appear when the alliance hegemon signals a desire to renege on their commitments.

1 Introduction

Since its origins in 1949, NATO has been a cornerstone of European security. Made up of 32 member states in Europe and North America, some scholars have ascribed the alliance a *sui generis* reputation as a security community, defined both by its principles of collective defence and promotion of democratic values (Blankenship, 2024; Schimmelfennig, 1998; Howorth, 2020). Though its *raison d’être* eventually faded with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, the alliance found a new purpose through the enlargement of its membership and expansion of its norms and values to Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the previously neutral Nordics (Sjursen, 2004; *Study on NATO Enlargement*, 1995). The underlying principle of collective defence, spelled out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, remains the trademark of transatlantic security since the Russian invasion of Ukraine raised tensions in Europe and made ensuring alliance cohesion all the more crucial for state security.

However, under increasingly urgent circumstances, the United States’ commitment to NATO and Article 5 has been called into question by the campaign rhetoric of Donald Trump. Seeking a second term in the White House, Trump promised supporters at a campaign rally in South Carolina that he would “encourage” Russia to “do whatever the hell they want” to countries that do not “pay their bills” (FitzGerald, 2024). Though Trump’s previous attempts to withdraw the United States from NATO proved futile, his rhetoric towards the alliance has grown increasingly hostile since his first term. In addition to stoking distrust and disdain amongst member states, naming and shaming from the alliance hegemon may have adverse effects on alliance cohesion, as member states might be less likely to act in accordance with the hegemon’s policies (Becker, Kreps, Poast, & Terman, 2024). Fear of the hegemon reneging on their mutual defence agreements may also decrease elite and popular support for the alliance. A loss of legitimacy to the collective security guarantee would also decrease the deterrent value of the alliance, which is only effective so long as adversaries readily believe that leaders and their publics would be willing to protect and defend their NATO allies in case of an attack (M. Tomz, Weeks, & Bansak, 2023).

A large literature has already shown that popular support, especially in the case of engaging in warfare, is crucial to a state’s foreign policy formation (M. Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Within alliances, leaders are often pressured by their publics to uphold agreements, due to a belief that they have a moral duty to protect allied partners, and because adherence to commitments is considered vital for status and reputation (M. R. Tomz & Weeks, 2013). However, if the costs are high and the stakes are low, public willingness to defend international allies decreases considerably (M. Tomz & Weeks, 2021, 11). We explore how the US presidential election and the changing stakes of intervention affect public willingness to uphold alliance commitments, using

two different indicators of transatlantic burden-sharing. Leveraging a survey experiment in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Germany, we explore how the threat of hegemonic withdrawal influences public willingness in NATO countries to, on the one hand, increase defence spending, and on the other, come to an ally’s defence in the event of an attack.

The 2024 US presidential election presents a rare opportunity to compare the effects of two potential outcomes for transatlantic security: hegemonic withdrawal and its counterfactual, which we conceptualize as “status quo transatlanticism.” We theorize that information about a likely Trump victory, when combined with information about his stance towards NATO and commitment to European defence, will have a negative effect on European willingness to increase defence-spending and uphold Article 5 commitments. This is especially important given that Trump’s threats specifically target countries that under-spend on defence, and because a potential US exit or even a partial divestment would raise the cost of mutual defence for remaining states. Respondents were randomly exposed to a vignette predicting either a Trump or a Harris victory, with the Harris condition promising a business-as-usual approach to Article 5 commitments. We then expose respondents to a second vignette in which a NATO ally is under attack, this time priming either in-group (“Us”) or out-group (“Them”) sentiment between the respondent’s country and the allied country in need. By priming respondents to think about either similarities or differences between their own country and other countries in NATO, we seek to test the durability of NATO’s community values and mutual defence commitments under a condition of hegemonic withdrawal. Despite the universal promise of protection for all NATO members under Article 5, we hypothesize that fissures in alliance cohesion are more likely to appear when the alliance hegemon signals a desire to renege on their commitments.

2 Alliance Costs and Burden-Sharing

Olson and Zeckhauser’s economic theory of alliances is a logical starting point for theorising the effect of hegemonic withdrawal on burden-sharing preferences in allied states. In asymmetric alliances like NATO, Olson and Zeckhauser argue that larger states tend to contribute disproportionately to providing the public good, in this case collective defence (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966). The remaining “small states” contribute less to the public good in absolute terms, which is to be expected given their relative size and power. However, when considering their contributions as a percentage of GDP, smaller states also tend to under spend, thus being said to *free-ride* on the larger states’ security guarantee.

2.1 Collective Security: An Exclusive Club Good

The economic theory of alliances finds some empirical validation in the United States’ positioning within the burden-sharing debate. Historically, American

presidents feared that their ability to withhold the promise of protection from European allies would decrease significantly after the Cold War. Once threats from foreign powers had been diminished, small powers could not be forced to cooperate as easily, and the risk of increased coordination between European countries threatened to offer a competitive alternative to the hegemon's public good (Kupchan, 1988; Oneal, 1990). Maintaining control over alliance membership and the collective good of international security defined the United States' hegemonic ambitions in Europe, making NATO an "anchor" of US power (Layne, 2000). From the perspective of the European partners, however, the credibility of US threats to withdraw had actually increased once the decline of Russia threatened to make NATO's *raison d'être* obsolete – their prevailing aim was actually to "keep the Americans in" (Rodman, 1995). A number of international relations scholars thus contend that collective security cannot be a true public good given that NATO is a centre of American power, constrained in both membership and territory, where the relative power of states affects their behaviour and the benefits they derive from the alliance (Ivanov, 2010; Ringsmose, 2010, 2016). The asymmetric power balance between NATO allies indicates a heterogenous mix of club members, with more powerful members determining the size of the benefits, and sub-clubs of mid-sized and smaller allies often making similar burden-sharing calculations (Ivanov, 2010). The excludability of both membership and benefits indicates that NATO's collective security guarantee is better described as a "club good." Allies aim to squeeze the benefits from collective defence while also minimizing the costs of their own contributions to burden-sharing (Cornes & Sandler, 1996; Ivanov, 2010).

According to the club goods logic, collective action problems like free-riding should theoretically be alleviated by the hegemon's ability to withhold military assistance from states that do not contribute adequately to the common good (Ringsmose, 2010, 2016). Indeed, American presidents have repeatedly tried to pressure and threaten European states to increase their defence budgets throughout their tenure of leadership in NATO (Blankenship, 2021). As NATO grew to encapsulate former members of the Soviet Bloc with limited military capabilities, the alliance did not increase the needed economies of scale to respond to the rising demand for collective security, introducing a problem of congestion (Ivanov, 2010). Frustration with chronic under-spending motivated the advent of a 2-percent-GDP guideline for defence spending amongst NATO members in 2014. However, the guideline has still not been met by a number of European states, and not all of them small. Why have Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Greece spent more on defence as a percentage of GDP than France, Germany, and Canada (*Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries*, 2024) have since 2018? Scholars who support the club goods interpretation have suggested that allied contributions should not only be understood as a financial measure of inputs (such as percent of GDP), but also as alliance outputs, such as contributions to force effectiveness or participation in peacekeeping and overseas missions (Ringsmose, 2010; Hartley & Sandler, 1999). Not only are rankings

of member state contributions to the alliance highly sensitive to the choice of indicator, but this expansion of indicators contributes to a qualitatively more complete picture of how burden-sharing looks in practice (Hartley & Sandler, 1999).

2.2 The Fluctuating Reliability of Collective Security

Burden-sharing statistics have vastly improved between 2014-2024, with 23 NATO allies now expected to meet or exceed the 2 percent target (*Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries*, 2024). These figures may be an indication of improved cohesion, but the reality of an excludable club good is that smaller states still have to trust that the hegemon will not withhold protection. Indeed, the most common reason for alliance failure is a drastic change of a state's military power, or changes in one or more of the states' domestic political institutions (Leeds & Savun, 2007; Johnson & Joiner, 2021). Such changes may cause sudden shifts in the foreign policy interests of the actors; a change in regime-type may make states less likely to honour an alliance obligation should it later become necessary. If a state suddenly turned towards isolationism, for example, this may create concern among their allied partners that they would no longer intervene in case of an attack.

Although the burden-sharing debate cyclically flares up between the US and its European partners, Donald Trump has arguably been more eager than his predecessors to bring his grievances into the public eye. In the 2024 US presidential election, Trump has escalated his hostile rhetoric, demarcating a more intense partisan split between the two candidates' willingness to commit US resources to the protection of European allies. Trump's hostilities towards under-spenders and the surprising claim that he would "encourage" Russia "to do whatever the hell they want" come close to a promise of hegemonic withdrawal from the alliance and its mutual defence clause (FitzGerald, 2024). The Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris, has criticised Trump for turning NATO into an arena of "political gamesmanship" and insisted that her commitment to Article 5 and the spirit behind it is "ironclad" (Harris, 2024; Madhani & Lee, 2022). Political leaders frequently utilise public statements as a means through which to pressure other countries and increase their own domestic credibility among constituents when they eventually follow through on campaign promises (Fearon, 1994). While such statements have often been written off as "cheap talk" (Yarhi-Milo, 2013), we argue that attempts by US presidential candidates to galvanize voters through hostile rhetoric may also reach foreign audiences and constitute credible threats. The 2024 election in particular has attracted a large global audience, making it likely that individuals in other countries learn about the US election through their own domestic media sources. Thus, it is not unlikely that Trump's campaign rhetoric may affect public preferences in allied states, especially those that will be directly affected by his antipathy towards NATO.

With the two presidential candidates representing diametrically opposing outcomes for the future of US relations with NATO allies, this study seeks to investigate how the threat of hegemonic withdrawal impacts the preferences of individuals in three different NATO states towards both input and output measures of transatlantic burden-sharing. On the one hand, their willingness to support an increase in the national defence budget, and on the other hand, their willingness to defend a NATO member that has been attacked by a shared adversary.

3 Public Opinion in International Alliances

The burden-sharing literature has provided many answers about why states of different sizes contribute to the club good at different rates, but few studies have explored whether these tendencies actually transcend down to the popular level. Indeed, size and power are not the only factors driving differential contributions within the alliance; a vital part of a state’s foreign policy formation, especially in democracies, is whether leaders’ policies are actually backed up by popular support (M. Tomz, Weeks, & Yarhi-Milo, 2020; M. Tomz, 2007; Baum, 2004). Thus, the public’s willingness to increase defence spending or engage in NATO missions must also be considered, regardless of whether it is done as a means of investing in the club good, improving alliance cohesion, or falling in line with hegemonic pressure.

3.1 Sources of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy

The literature on public opinion on foreign policy usually separates between a “bottom-up” process of opinion formation, that is through individual traits, and a “top-down” process, which emphasizes the role of elite cues and persuasion (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). When deciding whether to support a conflict or not, individuals usually consider whether the reason for a conflict aligns or clashes with their moral values, thus arriving at an opinion about the proposed intervention (DeMuth & Dietrich, 2023; M. Tomz et al., 2020; Liberman, 2006; Stein, 2015). If their moral principles and political reasoning are in alignment, individuals are more likely to support an intervention. Focusing on alliances specifically, public support for intervention often originates from a perceived moral obligation to be loyal to one’s allies, as well as the fear of a declining global reputation should they fail to uphold international commitments (M. Tomz & Weeks, 2021). In this way, the *sheer* existence of an alliance between two or more countries may increase popular support for defending an allied state that has been attacked. Looking instead at the “top-down” approach, citizens are reliant on elite cues to make opinions across many different policy-domains (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020). In the domain of foreign policy, where the the public has relatively limited information, this mechanism is especially important. Cues from trusted elites can sway support for a military conflict (Golby, Feaver, & Dropp, 2018), and change support for alliances,

especially among undecided co-partisans (Alley, 2023).

Outside of their own states, foreign elites often attempt to influence public opinion within allied states (Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2009). Threats by the hegemon to terminate security guarantees are effective at making the public more supportive of increasing defence-spending in allied states (Blankenship, 2024), even though shaming and threats of abandonment do not have the same effect on elites (Becker et al., 2024). Notably, these attempts at changing public opinion may also backfire. If the public in allied states believes they are losing control over their own foreign policy, and the hegemon no longer appears an attractive alliance partner, conditional threats and shaming attempts may actually decrease popular support for the alliance (Sukin, 2020). Beyond the burden-sharing literature, a number of public opinion studies offer insight into the individual and contextual drivers of popular support for military spending in various countries. Among other things, these studies explain the apparent domestic political incentive of some member states to under-contribute to input measures of transatlantic burden-sharing (Fay, 2020).

3.2 Public Defence-Spending Preferences

Perceived economic trade-offs have been shown to influence elite and citizen support for military spending, according to the *guns versus butter* hypothesis (Powell, 1993; Bove, Efthyvoulou, & Navas, 2017; Mintz, 1988). Under the protection of the hegemon, smaller states have been said to enjoy security without the associated costs, thus enabling higher investment in domestic and prosocial expenditures – so-called “peace dividends” (Johnsen, 1995; Fay, 2020). When the spectre of war raises the level of threat in the international system, states must decide how to allocate their limited domestic resources; either increasing military allocations or increasing domestic spending to satisfy internal needs. The trade-off depends on the state’s level of risk aversion and future calculations of the likelihood of defeat (Powell, 1993). Politicians may be incentivised to frame increases in military expenditures as a redirection of budget resources away from prosocial public spending, i.e., prioritising guns over butter, particularly in times of conflict and during election cycles (Bove et al., 2017; Mintz, 1988). Partisan interpretations of this binary budget trade-off tend to be distinct between parties on the left, which are typically keen to preserve social spending, and parties on the right, which are traditionally more hawkish and eager to increase military spending (Bove et al., 2017; Bonica, 2015; Kertzer, Brooks, & Brooks, 2021; Fay, 2020).

Though partisan divides on defence spending are significantly more well-documented, party support for NATO follows a similar split, with parties on the left traditionally holding more sceptical views of the alliance (Domke, Eichenberg, & Kelleher, 1987; Gavras et al., 2020). While left-wing parties are diverse in terms of their reasons for opposing NATO, pacifist preferences and

unfavourable opinions towards the US are shared across a number of European countries. The extreme right also tends to oppose the alliance “not out of dovishness”, but based on a characteristic scepticism of international institutions more broadly (Gavras et al., 2020). Center parties, meanwhile, are typically supportive of the alliance. Regardless of whether individuals are toeing the party line, support for NATO and the transatlantic partnership have been shown to be positively related to popular support for increased defence spending (Eichenberg & Stoll, 2017; Fay, 2020). Taken together, the correlation between these two variables and support for defence spending indicate a preference for cooperation and investment in NATO, or simply a continuation of the status quo. However, the possibility of hegemonic withdrawal may also trigger a reconsideration of alliance solidarity and a search for institutional alternatives that are not as vulnerable to the whims of American presidents. For Europhiles, the likely alternative is the European Union, while for others, the preferred solution is national autonomy. Thus, rather than relying on a single outcome measure of defence spending preferences, this experiment also allows respondents to express their opinions towards three institutional frameworks for security and defence cooperation.

Individuals with positive attitudes towards both NATO and the US are likely to support government decisions to spend more on defence. However, individuals with low affinities for NATO and the US may also support increases to the defence budget under the condition that public spending is used to scale up European security cooperation (Mader, Olmastroni, & Isernia, 2021; Gavras et al., 2020). Thus, support for NATO and close ties with the US are only able to tell part of the story about European willingness to spend and defend. In fact, as far as public sentiment goes, NATO and European defence integration need not be mutually exclusive. Reviews of public opinion dating back to the early 2000s have shown that the European public has generally held positive attitudes towards both European defence cooperation and NATO. This long-term trend indicates that on the menu card of security and defence frameworks, European citizens on average would prefer to “have it both ways” (Eichenberg, 2003; Mader et al., 2021). This sentiment has long been reinforced by policymakers and scholars who see European defence integration as a mechanism to strengthen European burden-sharing within the transatlantic alliance, reducing dependence on the US and striving for EU strategic autonomy (Howorth, 2020). Furthermore, preferences for national autonomy remain prevalent across many voter groups in Europe. A majority of European poll-takers in 2018 also expressed a wish to “have it both ways” when asked about equal management of foreign and defence policy at the national and EU level (Mader et al., 2021). Institutional preferences therefore explain important nuance as to where European defence spending goals are targeted, as well as which type of security structures individuals deem viable following the outcome of the US presidential election. We accordingly structure our outcome measure to allow for support to overlap all three institutions (NATO, EU, and national autonomy) without

making institutional preferences mutually exclusive.

If the alliance were to suffer hegemonic withdrawal, the remaining states would need to dramatically increase defence spending in order to fill the power and security vacuum left by the hegemon. Assuming that some allies had been under-contributing under the status quo of the hegemonic security guarantee, new increases in defence spending would invoke the trade-off with domestic spending that characterised the peace dividend in the first place (Fay, 2020). A noteworthy study of 25 European countries by Mader et al. found that popular support for security and defence cooperation was consistently lower when information about the costs of cooperation was paired with the policy proposal. The negative effects of economic costs, framed either as job cuts or strains on the national budget, were particularly significant in countries that had recently suffered economic crises or recession (Mader et al., 2024). However, these treatments did not leverage the additional (and highly realistic) concern that hegemonic withdrawal would retract the guarantee of mutual defence and drive up defence costs. This study builds on Mader et al.’s acknowledgement that sender credibility and higher mundane realism will likely lead to larger effects. If citizens are presented with the very likely prospect of hegemonic withdrawal and its associated consequences, their willingness to spend on defence and defend other allies will be affected, relative to the counterfactual: the status quo of US leadership in NATO and continued guarantee of collective security. A noteworthy study on European public audiences by Blankenship revealed that rhetorical threats of abandonment from the United States do in fact increase popular support for increased defence spending (Blankenship, 2024). We thereby derive hypotheses about the effects of hegemonic withdrawal on willingness to spend and defend in three country cases.

4 Research Design

4.1 Case Selection

We selected three NATO members that vary on a number of political and military dimensions, thus achieving a more complex and realistic picture of how attitudes towards spending and defending may be differentially affected by hegemonic withdrawal. The club goods literature has argued for a conceptualisation that goes beyond the rather narrow category of “free-riders.” *Hard-riders* contribute above the alliance average, and demonstrate both a willingness to uphold the costs of collective security and an aversion to free-riding. These are typically larger states, meaning that even marginal increases in their contributions disproportionately increase the deterrence potential of the alliance. Meanwhile, *easy-riders* are typically small states that are unable or unwilling to uphold the costs of collective security, and thus contribute below the alliance average. Admittedly, the goal of our analysis is not to generalize the effects to all NATO members, but rather to pick three states that vary in terms of size and power,

as well as the level of threats they face from Russia. With the United Kingdom, Germany, and Sweden, we present a set of *three NATO hard-riders* of different sizes and strategic cultures, which face low, medium, and high levels of threat from Russia, respectively. Moreover, in order to form meaningful conclusions about the effect of hegemonic withdrawal on institutional preferences, it was important to select countries that either currently or previously had overlapping membership in both NATO and the EU. Available public opinion trends indicate that we will see significant variation in institutional preferences for defence cooperation across these three hard-riders.

The UK, one of the founding members of NATO, is a hard-rider with broad global security interests and a demonstrated desire to promote regional stability through its foreign policy. As a result, British security policies have been deeply intertwined with NATO since its inception, sharing a common history that spans from the alliance’s original *raison d’être* to its subsequent enlargements (Sjursen, 2004). Given its military power and geographic position, the UK faces a lower threat from Russian territorial aggression, relative to other continental European countries. Historically, the UK has also signalled Atlanticist traditions at the level of foreign policy and public attitudes. While elites have upheld a “Special Relationship” with the US, the British public also mirrors the militarist and liberal international values found in many public opinion studies of Americans (Reifler, Scotto, & Clarke, 2011; Soroka & Wlezien, 2005; Gravelle, Reifler, & Scotto, 2017). Both before and after Brexit, public opinion among Britons has been coloured by a clear preference for transatlantic cooperation rather than deeper EU defence integration. Including the UK in our study allows us to depict whether hegemonic withdrawal has an “overturning” effect on the public’s Atlanticist preferences, and whether defence cooperation with the EU is seen as a viable alternative, post-Brexit.

Germany’s accession to NATO formally began in 1955 and ended in 1990 after the former German Democratic Republic reunified with the Federal Republic of Germany (Ikenberry, 2011). Germany’s deep historical ties with NATO continue to be characterised by long-term investments in interoperability and pervasive structures of transatlantic military cooperation. In fact, Germany still hosts five out of seven US Army garrisons in Europe, as well as two major US Air Force bases (Knight, 2024). The longstanding presence of US and NATO bases in Germany and above average contributions to force effectiveness and manpower are clear signs of its regional security interests, commitment to transatlanticism, and hard-rider status. Moreover, its geographic proximity to Russia raises the level of threat relative to that of the UK. However, Germany’s foreign policy and strategic culture continues to be coloured by its past, with vast swaths of the public still preferring anti-militarist policies over interventionism (Mader & Pötzschke, 2014), and the lingering presence of Russia-friendly sentiment among individuals on both the left and right of the ideological spectrum (Thomson, Mader, Münchow, Reifler, & Schoen, 2023). Time series data from the Eu-

robarometer also indicates that although support for NATO is quite stable in Germany, the German public is one of the strongest supporters of a common defence *and* a common foreign policy amongst the EU member states (Mader et al., 2021). Including Germany in our study allows us to explore whether hegemonic withdrawal is a persuasive trigger for increased defence spending even among more hesitant individuals, and whether hostile rhetoric from the hegemon causes an up-tick in Europeanist preferences.

Sweden’s journey to becoming NATO’s newest member in 2024 was made all the more unique by its sharp pivot from a history of neutrality and the contestation of its accession bid by Hungary and Turkey (Thorhallsson & Stude Vidal, 2024). Albeit a smaller state with narrower security interests than Germany and the UK, this is not to say that Sweden lacks military capacity or infrastructure. Sweden outspends both the UK and Germany in terms of per capita defence expenditure and has historically struck a fine balance between non-alignment and autonomous military preparedness (*Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries*, 2024; Ydén, Berndtsson, & Petersson, 2019). Since the early 2000s, the Swedish public has demonstrated widespread scepticism towards EU defence integration, with a majority of the public supporting close transatlantic ties even during the period of non-alignment (Mader et al., 2021). Sweden’s willingness to contribute higher-than-average amounts to security is driven by its direct exposure and sensitivity to Russian threats and resembles the behaviour of a hard-rider more than an easy-rider (Starcevic, 2024).

4.2 Sample

Participants were recruited using Cint’s survey panels in Sweden, the UK, and Germany. The target group for this study was legal adults who are eligible to vote in their national elections. Around 1000 respondents were recruited from each of the three countries in this study in order to achieve sufficient statistical power. The study was fielded between the 28th and 29th of October 2024 in order to collect data on public perceptions before the US election on the 5th of November 2024. A final sample of 2973 was obtained after screening out inattentive and non-consenting respondents.

4.3 Randomization

We first randomized respondents into one of three conditions: a control group, the hegemonic withdrawal condition, and the status quo transatlanticism condition. The control group received no information about the US presidential election, while the remaining groups received a vignette with polling data predicting either a Trump victory or a Harris victory based on narrow margins in the electoral college. For the second vignette, the control group received no additional information about the NATO ally that has (hypothetically) been attacked by Russia, while the two treatment groups were randomly presented

with an ally that demonstrates either similar or dissimilar attributes, in order to prime either in-group or out-group sentiment.

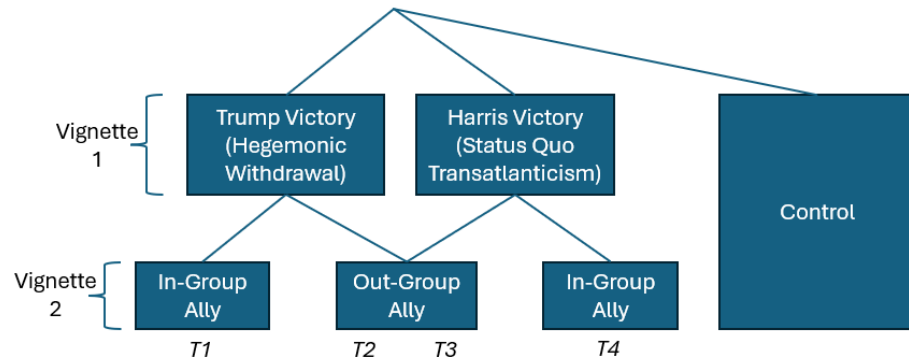


Figure 1: Treatment Conditions and Control

4.4 Dependent Variables

The core dependent variables in this study relate to public willingness to spend and defend in the event of hegemonic withdrawal and a possible attack by a shared adversary. Values for all dependent variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale. The first dependent variable was measured directly after the administration of the first vignette, and operationalised as respondents' willingness to support a government decision to increase defence spending as a percentage of the national budget. Respondents were then asked three questions about their institutional preferences for defence cooperation, each representing three potentially distinct visions for European security: continued cooperation through NATO, strengthened European cooperation, and increased national autonomy.

The second dependent variable were measured after the second vignette on a similar support scale, this time about the government's decision to come to the defence of an ally under attack. Finally, an exploratory outcome variable measured respondents' confidence that other NATO members would come to their country's defence in the event of a similar Russian attack on their home soil.

4.5 Vignette 1: Effect of Hegemonic Withdrawal on Defence Spending Preferences

The first vignette presents respondents with a prediction about how the outcome of the 2024 US presidential election will affect NATO and European defence. Election prognoses were made using the most recently available data from three trusted US polling sources: The Hill, FiveThirtyEight, and the New York Times/Siena College. States that polled either consistently Republican or consistently Democrat in the final weeks of the election (up until the 28th of October 2024) were held constant across both conditions. However, at the time of fielding, there were seven “toss-up” swing states which were likely to determine the results of the electoral college and thus decide the election. By looking at small, but consistent marginal leads in each state and election simulations across all three polling sources, we assigned North Carolina, Georgia, and Arizona as likely going to Trump and Michigan, Wisconsin, and Nevada as likely going to Harris. We were left with two nearly identical Electoral College maps; the only difference between the two treatments is whether Pennsylvania, the largest and most coveted swing state, gives its 19 electoral votes to either Trump (see Figure 2) or Harris (see Figure 3).

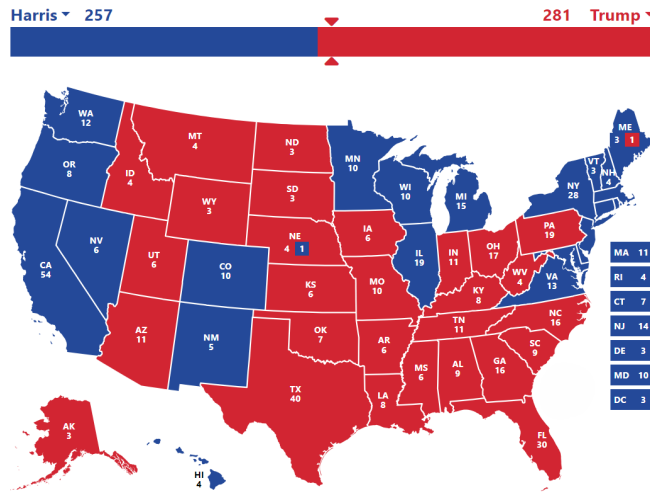


Figure 2: Trump Victory Map

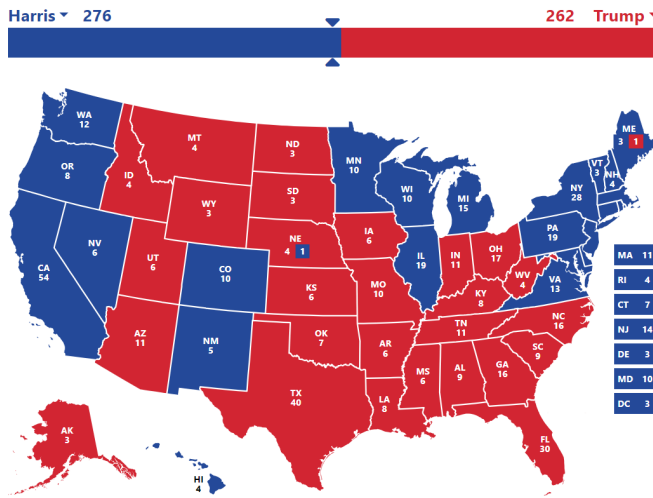


Figure 3: Harris Victory Map

The condition under which Donald Trump is predicted to win contains the additional hegemonic withdrawal vignette: an argument that a Trump presidency will mean decreased trustworthiness of the American security guarantee. We draw on Trump’s recent claims that he will withdraw from Article 5 commitments, raising doubt about the trustworthiness of the United States’ mutual defence commitments (FitzGerald, 2024). The condition under which Kamala Harris is predicted to win the election presents the counterfactual: the US remains committed to its NATO allies in the face of Russian aggression (Madhani & Lee, 2022). Both conditions use real quotes from the candidates which describe their positions towards NATO. For Trump, this is a campaign rally speech from February 2024, and for Harris, her address to the Munich Security Conference in February 2024 (FitzGerald, 2024; Harris, 2024).

The latest polls indicate that (Donald Trump / Kamala Harris) will win the US presidential election this November. (Trump / Harris) has made clear that under (his / her) leadership, the US (cannot / can) be trusted to cooperate with European countries on defence. (Trump / Harris) has stated that (if a NATO country did not meet its defence spending target and was suddenly attacked by Russia, he would not protect them, but rather encourage Russia “to do whatever the hell they want.”/ her “commitment to NATO remains ironclad” and that she “will stand strong” with NATO allies against Russian aggression.)

Based on the two treatments, we derive the following hypotheses about the effects of hegemonic withdrawal and status quo transatlanticism:

H1: The threat of hegemonic withdrawal will make respondents more willing to increase defence spending, relative to those in the status quo transatlanticism condition.

H2: The threat of hegemonic withdrawal will reduce support for continued cooperation in NATO.

4.6 Vignette 2: Effect of In-Group Attitudes on Willingness to Defend

After answering the first outcome question about willingness to raise national defence spending, participants were randomised once again into one of two treatment conditions. This time, respondents were asked to imagine a scenario in which an ally of their country is suddenly the victim of an attack by Russia.

Building on Henrikson’s attributional model of distance thinking, the two treatment conditions will vary the ally in need according to attributes that

countries either share or do not share in common, “with likeness and unlikeness being the key variables” (Henrikson, 2002). NATO’s own accession criteria specify that all alliance members should conform to the basic “principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law” (*Study on NATO Enlargement*, 1995). In fact, NATO leaders saw the post-Cold War enlargement as an opportunity not just to contribute to security, but also to democratization and the creation of a community of liberal values (*Study on NATO Enlargement*, 1995). We hence manipulate in-group and out-group feelings by juxtaposing between a NATO country that fits this “community” identity and one that does not. We theorise that when respondents are primed to think about similarities, in-group attitudes will be intertwined with a willingness to come to that country’s defence. Conversely, when respondents are primed to think about differences, out-group attitudes may be triggered instead. The purpose of this treatment is to test whether respondents are equally motivated to defend both types of allies, purely based on their belonging to the alliance, or whether “likeness” is predictive of willingness to defend:

Imagine that an ally of your country is suddenly attacked by Russia. This country is a NATO member and has been described by experts as a (well-functioning democracy / dysfunctional democracy), (like / unlike) [COUNTRY]. [COUNTRY’S] diplomatic relations with this country have been quite (close / difficult) over the last ten years.

Theoretically, the unifying factor of NATO membership across both “like” and “unlike” allies should not significantly affect willingness to defend; *every member state should be able to rely on the promise of mutual defence under the universality of Article 5*. If dissimilar attributes are overridden by a willingness to defend other NATO members, we can conclude the presence of an unconditional, NATO membership effect. However, while the universal protection of NATO allies under Article 5 may be true of the current transatlantic security complex, we theorize that hegemonic withdrawal may trigger a lack of cohesion among alliance members. Accordingly, we expect respondents in the hegemonic withdrawal condition to be less willing on average to come to the defence of their allies:

H3: The threat of hegemonic withdrawal will make respondents less willing to defend other NATO allies, relative to those in the status quo transatlanticism condition.

Finally, we wish to explore potential differences between European willingness to defend “like” allies and “unlike” allies. Across both US presidential election treatments, we preliminarily expect that:

H4: Overall, respondents will be less willing to defend an “unlike” ally than a “like” ally.

4.7 Control Variables

A number of demographic and attitudinal variables were measured within the experiment, which will enable the study to control for various background characteristics and perform sub-group analysis where relevant.

Among the demographic variables, age, gender, education level, and income level were measured. Measuring political ideology on a left-right scale will allow for subgroup analysis on partisanship, as outlined in Hypothesis 8. This may be especially important for analysing the effects of the US presidential race on defence spending preferences, as respondents could have pre-existing favourable attitudes towards either Donald Trump or Kamala Harris based on ideological affinity.

A set of attitudinal variables will explore respondents' predispositions towards NATO and their country's national security situation. Respondents who have very unfavourable views of NATO before the treatment may be generally unwilling to increase defence spending or come to the defence of an ally, regardless of which vignette they receive. Conversely, respondents who are particularly worried about Russia and their country's security situation may display ready willingness to increase defence spending, due to a high perception of threat.

Another set of attitudinal variables focuses specifically on respondents' predispositions towards the national economy and the level of defence spending in their home country. Respondents who have a generally negative perception of the state of the national economy may out-rightly oppose increasing defence spending, because they believe this decision comes at the expense of other public spending areas, like welfare or healthcare. To sort through respondents' predispositions towards public spending, a survey item will ask respondents whether they believe their country spends too little, too much, or just the right amount on defence relative to other public spending areas. This enables us to check for a potential guns versus butter mechanism behind defence spending preferences.

4.8 Preliminary Results

Preliminary results will be presented at DPSA, but have been excluded from this written draft due to time constraints.

4.9 Exploratory Analyses

While all three countries are NATO members, we expect to observe between-country variance. Below we describe a non-exhaustive list of exploratory hypotheses that we wish to carry out on the data.

Prior to conducting subgroup analysis, we believe that Swedish respondents will have higher baseline trust in the alliance, due to the nationwide political debate and substantial policy changes that precluded its accession as a new NATO member. Clearing these policy hurdles indicates a high willingness to adapt to the alliance's requirements in order to enjoy the benefits of mutual defence and

security cooperation. Respondents might also feel a need to prove their new-found loyalty to the alliance. As such, we expect Swedish willingness to spend and defend to be higher compared to respondents in the UK and Germany, both in the absence of treatment and across both conditions.

H5: Swedish respondents, compared to those in the UK and Germany, will be generally more willing to increase defence spending and defend other allied states.

Although Germany and the UK are nearly on par in terms of defence spending and military power (*Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries*, 2024), the UK is distinct in its possession of nuclear weapons. As a nuclear power, the UK is comparatively less reliant on the hegemon to ensure its own security, and the British public is generally supportive of having a strong military (Gravelle et al., 2017; Reifler et al., 2011). The contrast is especially clear with Germany, where contemporary foreign policy has been colored by a hesitancy to use military force abroad and the public is generally less hawkish (Gravelle et al., 2017; Mader & Pöttschke, 2014). In the absence of treatment, German respondents should on average be less willing to increase defence spending as a percentage of the national budget than British and Swedish respondents. However, a previous study found German attitudes towards defence spending to be particularly susceptible to threats of abandonment and conditional pressure from the US (Blankenship, 2024). As outlined in Hypothesis 5, we expect Swedes to have higher defence spending preferences and willingness to defend across both treatment conditions. Therefore, we expect the effect of hegemonic withdrawal on willingness to spend and defend to be smallest in the UK, due to a lower sense of dependence on the US and the public’s general willingness to spend more on defence:

H6: The threat of hegemonic withdrawal will have a smaller effect on British willingness to spend and defend, compared to Germany and Sweden.

While all three countries exhibit general support for NATO in public opinion polling, national preferences differ when it comes to how independent the EU should strive to be. Opinions towards a common European defence and security policy also differ widely across the three sampled countries, especially following Brexit. The German public has typically displayed stronger institutional preferences for EU cooperation, while the field is far more mixed in Sweden and the UK. This is most likely due to the Swedish tradition of neutrality and British concerns over sovereignty (Mader et al., 2021). In general, British and Swedish respondents tend to be more skeptical towards EU defence integration and instead believe that the transatlantic partnership should become stronger (Mader et al., 2021). In line with Hypothesis 2, we expect that the threat of hegemonic withdrawal will especially increase German preferences for EU co-

operation, compared to British and Swedish preferences which may lean more transatlantic or autonomous:

H7: The threat of hegemonic withdrawal will increase German preferences for EU cooperation the most, relative to the UK and Sweden.

Across European democracies, parties further to the left tend to be more skeptical of NATO, distrustful of the US, and resistant to increase defence spending (Domke et al., 1987; Gavras et al., 2020). We expect that far-left voters may be especially concerned about trade-offs between defence spending and public spending. Far-left respondents will be unwilling to increase defence spending as a matter of principle, regardless of changes in American commitments to NATO allies. Thus, the treatment effect of hegemonic withdrawal is expected to be small in this group of individuals. The far-right also tends to be less supportive of NATO, though this likely has less to do with the trade-off between guns and butter (Gavras et al., 2020; Fay, 2020). While right-leaning parties tend to be more supportive of military spending and the use of force, the far-right in Europe also tends to be more isolationist (Isernia, Mader, Martini, Radu, & Schoen, 2024). An exception might be the far-right Sweden Democrats, who pivoted to support Sweden’s NATO membership bid in 2022 (Ringstrom, 2022). Still, we expect the treatment effect of hegemonic withdrawal to be relatively small amongst respondents on the far-right; the possibility of declining American commitments to NATO should not significantly affect far-right willingness to spend or defend. Meanwhile, centrist voters may be the most affected by the threat of hegemonic withdrawal:

H8: The effect of hegemonic withdrawal amongst those on the far-left and far-right ends of the ideological spectrum will be smaller compared to those on the centre-left and centre-right.

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Appendices

.1 Questionnaire

1. Basic Demographic Battery
 - (a) Age
 - (b) Gender
 - (c) Highest Achieved Education Level
 - (d) Monthly Household Income
2. Where would you place yourself on a left-right political scale, where (0) is totally on the left, and (10) is totally on the right?
 - (a) Left-1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-Right
3. How interested in politics are you?
 - (a) Not at all interested (1)
 - (b) 2
 - (c) 3
 - (d) 4
 - (e) Very interested (5)
4. Pre-Treatment Opinion on Defence Spending: There are many different areas of public spending within the national budget, including public health, agriculture, education, energy, defence, and the environment. Relative to other public expenditures, do you think [COUNTRY] spends too little, too much, or just the right amount of money on defence?
 - (a) Far too little (1)
 - (b) Too little (2)
 - (c) Just the right amount (3)
 - (d) Too much (4)
 - (e) Far too much (5)
 - (f) Don't Know
5. Attention Check: We know that respondents who take surveys like this one are often very busy. Many do not have time to read the full questions. We are examining whether people read our questions. To show us that you have read this question thoroughly, please select the first two options (both "Not at all important" and "Slightly important") and none of the other options.

- (a) Not at all important
 - (b) Slightly important
 - (c) Moderately important
 - (d) Very important
 - (e) Extremely important
6. In your opinion, how desirable is it that [COUNTRY] maintains a close relationship with the United States?
- (a) Extremely undesirable (1)
 - (b) 2
 - (c) 3
 - (d) 4
 - (e) Extremely desirable (5)
 - (f) Don't Know
7. Do you think your country's membership in NATO is a good thing or a bad thing?
- (a) Very bad (1)
 - (b) Somewhat bad (2)
 - (c) Neither good nor bad (3)
 - (d) Somewhat good (4)
 - (e) Very good (5)
 - (f) Don't Know
8. What do you think about the economy these days? Would you say the state of the economy is very bad, very good, or something in between?
- (a) Very bad (1)
 - (b) Somewhat bad (2)
 - (c) Neither good nor bad (3)
 - (d) Somewhat good (4)
 - (e) Very good (5)
 - (f) Don't Know
9. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? *I feel afraid of Russia's current foreign policy.*
- (a) Strongly disagree (1)
 - (b) 2
 - (c) 3
 - (d) 4
 - (e) Strongly agree (5)
 - (f) Don't Know

.2 Pre-Vignette Text

NATO is a military alliance between 32 European and North-American countries. NATO countries consult and cooperate with one another on collective defence and security-related issues. Collective defence means that an attack against one or several NATO countries is considered an attack against all. As a guideline, all NATO members agreed to allocate at least 2% of their national budget to defence spending, with the United States currently spending the most by far.

ONLY FOR TREATED: Now we are going to present you with some information about the upcoming presidential election in the United States.

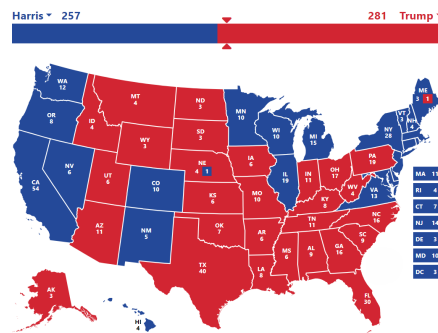


Figure 4: Trump Victory Election Prognosis

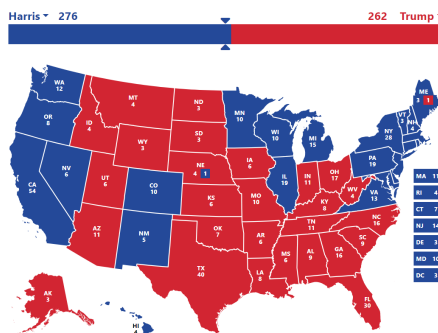


Figure 5: Harris Victory Election Prognosis

.3 Election Outcome Vignette:

The latest polls indicate that (Donald Trump / Kamala Harris) will win the US Presidential Election this November. (Trump / Harris) has made clear that under (his / her) leadership, the US (cannot / can) be trusted to cooperate with European countries on defence. (Trump / Harris) has stated that (if a NATO country did not meet its defence spending target and was suddenly attacked by Russia, he would not protect them, but rather encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want." / her "commitment to NATO remains ironclad" and that she "will stand strong" with NATO allies against Russian aggression.)

10. Imagine that the [Country] government needs to reallocate how much of the national budget it sets aside for different areas of public spending. In your opinion, should the [Country] government increase, decrease, or not change the percentage of the national budget that it spends on defence?
 - (a) Decrease a lot
 - (b) Decrease a little
 - (c) Keep it as it is
 - (d) Increase a little
 - (e) Increase a lot
11. Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements:
 - (a) COUNTRY should continue cooperating with NATO on security and defence
 - i. Strongly disagree (1)
 - ii. 2
 - iii. 3
 - iv. 4
 - v. Strongly agree (5)
 - (b) COUNTRY should work more closely together with the EU on defence
 - i. Strongly disagree (1)
 - ii. 2
 - iii. 3
 - iv. 4
 - v. Strongly agree (5)
 - (c) COUNTRY should make its own decisions on defence without consulting other countries
 - i. Strongly disagree (1)

- ii. 2
- iii. 3
- iv. 4
- v. Strongly agree (5)

.4 Hypothetical Attack on an Ally Vignette:

Imagine that an ally of your country is suddenly attacked by Russia. This country is a NATO member and has been described by experts as a (well-functioning democracy / dysfunctional democracy), (like / unlike) [COUNTRY]. [COUNTRY'S] diplomatic relations with this country have been quite (close / difficult) over the last ten years.

- 12. To what extent would you support a decision by your government to come to this country's defence?
 - (a) Strongly oppose (1)
 - (b) 2
 - (c) 3
 - (d) 4
 - (e) Strongly support (5)
- 13. Please explain in a few words, why you would support or oppose your government's decision to come to this country's defence.
- 14. How confident are you that other NATO members would come to (COUNTRY's) defence, if it were the target of a similar attack by Russia?
 - (a) NATO members would definitely not come to (COUNTRY's) defence
 - (b) NATO members would probably not come to (COUNTRY's) defence
 - (c) NATO members might or might not come to (COUNTRY's) defence
 - (d) NATO members would probably come to (COUNTRY's) defence
 - (e) NATO members would definitely come to (COUNTRY's) defence

.5 Manipulation Check

- 15. Who do you think is most likely to win the US presidential election on the 5th of November 2024?
 - (a) Donald Trump
 - (b) Kamala Harris
 - (c) I don't know