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Authors

Driscoll, Jesse

Maliniak, Daniel

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Did Georgian Voters Desire Military Escalation in 2008? Experiments and Observations

Jesse Driscoll, University of California, San Diego
Daniel Maliniak, College of William and Mary

In a foreign policy crisis between a strong and weak state, do citizens of the weaker party punish or reward a leader that escalates the crisis? Strong evidence suggests that there were electoral incentives for Georgian escalation in its August 2008 war with Russia. This article combines data from survey experiments, conducted on Georgian voters just weeks prior to the August 2008 war, with open-ended survey response questions from a survey fielded just weeks after the war. Respondents evaluated their leader's crisis behavior in the aftermath of a real war differently than the evidence from pre-war survey experiments would have suggested. The divergence in findings is demonstrated by providing evidence of three empirical phenomena: a "Rally 'Round the Flag" effect, a "Fog of War" effect, and systematic differences in evaluations of leader performance depending on respondents' proximity to actual violence.

Leaders of small states may be *rewarded* for escalating crises with big states and then backing down, where he would be castigated for simply backing down. Standing up to a "bully" may be praised even if one ultimately retreats.

—James Fearon (1994a, 588)

In the context of an extended foreign policy crisis between Russia and one of its weaker neighbors, do voters in the weaker party punish or reward a leader that escalates the crisis to full-scale war? In Georgia, a small country in the South Caucasus, many voters in 2008 wanted their leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, to engage in aggressive brinksmanship. Georgians did not punish him at the ballot box for announcing his intention to use violence to reclaim the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and many supported him when he backed his words with actions that culminated in an interstate war against Russia. At the time of this writing, there is substantial disagreement within the Georgian polity about whether or not Saakashvili actually "backed down" in any meaningful way. The primary contribution of this article is to present evidence for these claims, all of which support the basic intuition of Mansfield and Snyder (2007): Some leaders of emerging democracies face electoral incentives to adopt aggressive foreign policies.

For readers who are interested in probing the limits of the kinds of inferences that can be drawn from survey experiments, a secondary contribution of this article is a set of tightly controlled comparisons between different subject groups resulting from scientific serendipity. In the spring of 2008, survey experiments were employed to probe evaluations of leaders in hypothetical escalation scenarios between Georgia and Russia. But the situation changed unexpectedly from a hypothetical thought experiment into a real war in August 2008, when deadly fighting broke out between Georgian and Russian armed forces in the same conflict zones that the first study sampled. Another survey was quickly fielded, allowing for an unusual set of comparisons: not only a pre-war and post-war comparison between similar subjects but also pre-war and post-war comparisons of Georgians that actually lived in war zones compared to Georgians living in the relative safety of the capital city. This article reports a number of differences between the survey behaviors of indi-

Jesse Driscoll (jdriscoll@ucsd.edu) is an assistant professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California, San Diego, San Diego, CA 92093. Daniel Maliniak (dxmali@wm.edu) is an assistant professor in the Government Department at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23187.

Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the JOP Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/683340>.

viduals who took part in survey vignettes and the survey behaviors of individuals asked to evaluate leadership behavior after the lived experience of real war. A prominent behavioral change was a large increase in the level of mass support for the leadership in the event of an actual war. Another, for individuals who lived in close proximity to the conflict areas, is that once the actual costs of war were made manifest, respondents cared greatly about who initiated it—far more than data from the pre-war survey experiments would have suggested. Survey respondents who lived near the front lines were less likely to approve of Saakashvili's leadership if they believed he initiated the war independent of respondents' beliefs about whether Georgia had won or lost the military contest.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first begins with a very brief review of the state of the theoretical literature that motivated the inquiry and introduces the reader to the Georgian case. The second section presents evidence from a pre-war survey experiment. Prior to the conflict, Georgian citizens were asked to evaluate their approval of their president after listening to a randomly selected vignette (a 2×2 design, randomizing initiator-target and win-loss). The data suggest that public opinion was broadly receptive to war initiation, conditional on a reasonable chance of victory. The third section of the article discusses the findings of a survey conducted in the immediate aftermath of the August 2008 war. Analysis of post-war survey data reveals a strong "Rally 'Round the Flag" effect. There was also a "Fog of War" effect: many respondents earnestly reported believing different things about the events they had just lived through. And respondents close to the disputed territories—who could more easily imagine the costs of an actual war—responded differently than safe subsamples in both survey exercises. A fourth section summarizes and concludes.

WHY USE SURVEY EXPERIMENTS TO STUDY ATTITUDES TOWARD WAR, AND WHY IN GEORGIA?

Since wars are very rare events, many international relations scholars have turned to survey experiments to sharpen their intuitions about how voters might respond in the hypothetical event of an interstate conflict. The primary advantage of survey experiments is their very strong claim to internal validity. Asking balanced samples of respondents to imagine slightly different counterfactuals is a technique that can be used to isolate measurements of parameters that are of theoretical interest to the discipline and are difficult to measure with observational data. A secondary advantage of survey experiments is their plasticity. And so long as social scientists are interested in how American voters evaluate their leaders on military matters, the scope for imagination is

global: survey respondents can plausibly imagine acts of US military coercion all over the planet.¹

To understand the appeal of survey experiments in international relations, it is useful to consider a prominent second-image explanation for variation in states' crisis-bargaining behavior—a theory from Fearon (1994a), who hypothesizes that states in which the leader faces domestic punishment for bluffing then backing down should have a greater ability to credibly signal resolve than leaders who cannot generate "audience costs." If a democrat can risk her office by pretending at national resolve, but an autocrat cannot run this risk, other states should be able to more accurately gauge the resolve of democracies than autocracies.² This improved credibility may partially explain why bargaining disputes between dyads of democratic states rarely escalate to war.³

The problem is that empirically evaluating Fearon's conjecture requires a difficult counterfactual. Evidence consistent with the theory would be voters' demonstrated willingness to punish leaders who back down in negotiations—but leaders, knowing this, should not make claims they have to back down from in the first place. It is not enough to look for, and not find, evidence that publics disapprove of a leader backing down after having escalated and claim that this is evidence that the leader did not suffer audience costs.⁴ In Fearon's model, if a leader backs down after having escalated, it is always the case that the public approves of the decision to back down, since they are less keen on war than even the leader (who, according to the theory, has audience costs added in). The correct test would be to compare public approval after backing down to what it would have been if the

1. We wish to emphasize that we believe these studies are defensible and indeed valuable scientific exercises, even if only because they have the potential to provide valuable information on the kinds of rhetorical suasion and framing effects that are most likely to influence voters on matters related to the use of force.

2. Fearon summarizes: "Because governments are far more likely to be deposed or to lose authority due to internal political developments than due to foreign conquest and because opposition groups frequently condition their activities on the international successes and failures of the leaders in power, domestic audience may provide the strongest incentive to guard their states' 'international' reputations. Audience costs thus figure in a domestic system of incentives that encourage leaders to have a realist concern with their state's 'honor' and reputation before international audiences" (1994a, 581).

3. Extensions to the theory show additional indirect evidence for democratic states being more likely to win wars they fight (Filson and Werner 2004; Reiter and Stam 1998). Bueno De Mesquita et al. (1999) use this result to help explain the persistent finding of the democratic peace.

4. Efforts along these lines include Rosato (2003), Snyder and Borghard (2011), and Trachtenberg (2012).

leader had never escalated in the first place. But how can either case studies or large-*n* observational data possibly assist in proving that punishment would have existed if the leader had taken actions that she did not actually take?⁵ Tomz (2007) used a survey experiment to estimate these audience costs directly, showing that if the US president announced he would take a military action but then did not follow through, the bluffing attempt would be judged more harshly by US citizens than the counterfactual where the US president made no bluff at all. Since his seminal study, survey experiments have come to be understood by IR scholars as a technology well suited to cutting this particular kind of inference knot and with many studies in this vein.⁶

Most extant studies draw on the opinions of citizens who reside in the United States. Populations that have directly experienced war might respond differently than US voters evaluating distant foreign policy adventures.⁷ As the epigraph of this article suggests, Fearon himself recognized that the same kinds of electoral constraints he described in the theory may not hold for small states in hostile neighborhoods. Voters in weakly institutionalized and insecure new democracies are known to have systematically different attitudes toward foreign affairs than voters in their consolidated counterparts.⁸

Georgia is an exemplary “new democracy” in this respect. Georgia in 2008 was exactly the sort of state that scholars expect to be the greatest threat to interstate peace—a relatively tiny, populist state emerging from decades of authoritarian governance.⁹ It is also a country with a disputed map. Reasonable people disagree about whether the Russian soldiers that were fired upon by Georgian troops were a third-party peacekeeping force, protecting ethnic Abkhaz and South Ossetians from the Georgian military, or an occupying army. How did this situation emerge?

To summarize briefly, when the Soviet Union broke apart peacefully, Georgia was one of the violent exceptions to the rule. As the Soviet tide retreated, beached Russian military units—sometimes still in familiar Soviet uniforms, and sometimes wearing black ski masks—joined with patriotic para-

military units from neighboring republics in the North Caucasus.¹⁰ The civil war that broke out in Georgia as the Soviet experiment ended claimed as many as 20,000 lives and culminated in the ethnic cleansing of approximately 200,000 ethnic Georgians.¹¹ Russian peacekeeping—or “peacemaking” as the word *mirotvorchestvo* is more accurately translated—was never meant to facilitate general disarmament. These efforts did eventually fall under the auspices of the United Nations. To coerce elites in Tbilisi to participate in the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Russian support for secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia persisted throughout the first two decades of independence. The result was de facto independent unrecognized micro-states—typically termed “frozen conflicts.”¹² The position of the Georgian government since the early 1990s has been that Russian military troops remain illegally within Georgia’s internationally recognized territory. The Russian government did not accept Georgia’s demarcation of its border and asserted its right to play the “guarantor of security for beleaguered minorities” role that the West plays in Kosovo. As a result, the map of Georgia remains disputed, and violence flares up regularly (see fig. 1).

The Rose Revolution of November 2003 swept Mikhail Saakashvili into power, reigniting Georgian nationalist sentiment. Georgia strengthened its ties with the United States, manifesting in a 50-fold increase in its defense budget between 2002 and 2007.¹³ Georgia was included in prominent lists of “democracies with adjectives” in the last decade; in 2008 Georgia was an exemplar “electoral authoritarian” or “hybrid” regime. While in 2008 Freedom House, National Democratic Institute (NDI), and other democracy-promoting NGOs assessed Georgia as the most promising candidate for democratic consolidation in the South Caucasus or Central Asia, there seemed to be no local alternative that could compete with the immense incumbency advantages of the president.¹⁴

10. Derluguian (2005, 262–73).

11. See Billingsley (1999), Nodia (1998), and Wheatley (2005).

12. See King (2000), Trenin (1995), and Zurcher (2007).

13. Georgia’s defense budget was 18 million USD in 2002 and 780 million USD in 2007. The Georgian military that fought in 2008 would have been unrecognizable to the coalition of militias that “lost Abkhazia” in 1994. See Driscoll (2015, 53–59, 61, 66–70, 87–89, 141–42); O’Ballance (1997, 113); Wheatley (2005, 67–73); Zurcher (2007, 131, 137–43).

14. To give a sense of the scale of this incumbency advantage: When votes were counted after the 2008 Parliamentary elections, Saakashvili’s party, the United National Movement, controlled 119 seats in the 150 member parliament—a very comfortable cushion of safety above the 100 votes that would be necessary to actually rewrite the constitution. The second largest faction—the United Opposition, consisting of eight small parties and a few individual politicians—had only 17 seats. See Driscoll and Hidalgo (2014).

5. Attempts to answer this question asked in this way include Eyerman and Hart (1996), Gelpi and Griesdorf (2001), and Partell and Palmer (1999). The evidence has shown to be stubbornly robust, even taking into account the obvious selection issues (Schultz 2001), even in nondemocratic contexts (Weeks 2008).

6. See Brooks and Valentino (2011); Getmansky and Zeitzoff (2014); Grieco et al. (2011); Johns and Davies (2014); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012); Press, Sagan, and Valentino (2013); Reifler et al. (2014); Tomz and Weeks (2013); Trager and Vavreck (2011).

7. See Getmansky and Zeitzoff (2014).

8. See Mansfield and Snyder (2007, esp. 22–27, 32–33, 53–65).

9. See Snyder (2000, esp. 36–39 and 59–66).

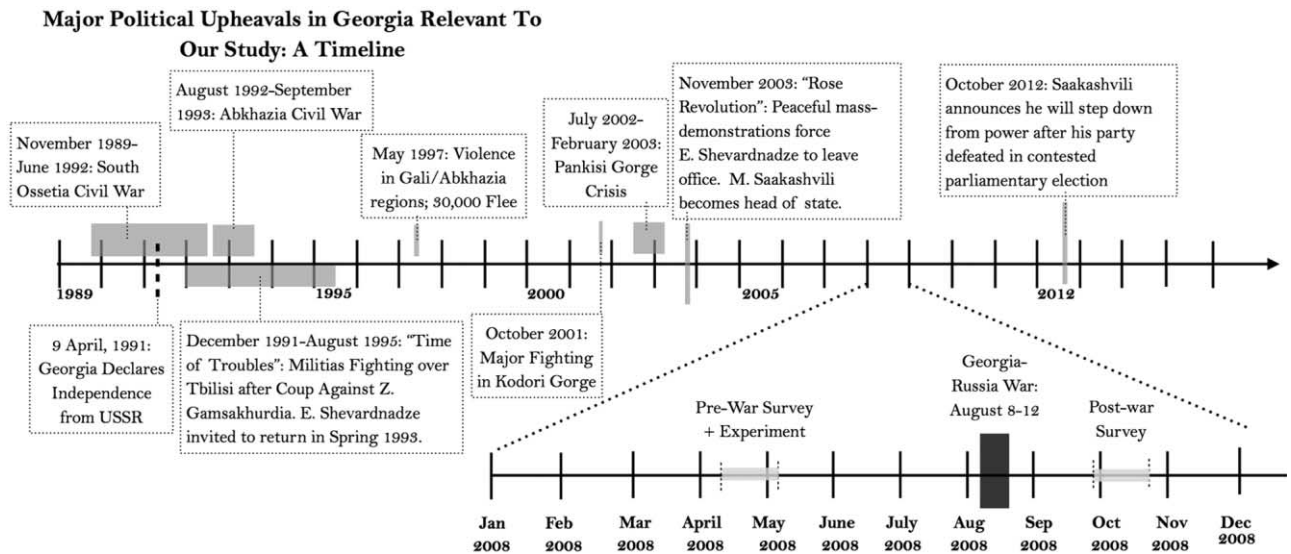


Figure 1. Partial timeline of recent Georgian history

Still, four years after the war, when his United National Movement (UNM) party was unexpectedly defeated at the ballot box in 2012, Saakashvili conceded and stepped down from power—a rare event in post-Soviet Eurasia. Elections do matter in Georgia, and voter preferences do inform and constrain leaders’ behavior.

The problem, as Mansfield and Snyder (2007) showed, is that these same electoral pressures almost certainly increase incentives for elites to politicize grievances, escalate international disputes, and try to ride the wave of nationalism to stay in power. As the other member of the conflict dyad, Russia is also a “new democracy” in most relevant respects. Many Georgian voters wanted to see their national military reclaim the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008—and many Russian voters wanted their government to demonstrate its military power and protect Abkhaz and South Ossetian minorities. Many Georgians still believe that these lands are rightfully part of Georgia, were taken from them unjustly, and are willing to pay costs to demonstrate resolve on the issue. As a democratizing state in a costly standoff over an issue of nationalist salience, the Georgian case fits the assumptions of the Fearon (1994a) epigraph quite closely.

EVIDENCE THAT GEORGIAN VOTERS WANTED ESCALATION

Unlike voter-audiences residing in the United States, Georgian citizens in early 2008 could easily predict the country they would fight against in a future interstate war (Russia) and the issue over which the war would break out (the dis-

puted territories).¹⁵ At the expense of external validity, the escalation scenario was adapted to fit the local context.

An experimental design

Not only was it impractical to vary the characteristics of the hypothetical enemy in the hypothetical war, it was also impossible to experimentally influence the threat environment (or the threat sequencing, in Fearon’s formal model). At the time that the survey went to field, belligerent statements were being issued from the Kremlin and the Georgian head of state almost every week. For Georgia in the spring of 2008, the proposition of a conflict between Georgia and Russia sparked by tension on the undeclared internal boundaries with South Ossetian and Abkhazia was all too plausible with Russian troops mobilized across the border. Thirty-eight percent of respondents in the survey that contained the experiment reported beliefs that an armed conflict “would break out over these regions some time in the next two years.” Because a high-stakes militarized crisis was, in fact, imminent, the comparison between a “backing down scenario” and a “never escalated scenario” was actually never on the table, though of course this could not have been known at the time. The dependent variable in the setup was

15. In exploratory stages, the Caucasus Research Resource Centers considered fielding survey instruments that would exactly replicate the approach of Tomz (2007), randomizing characteristics of Georgia’s opponent. It was decided that the dubiously plausible thought experiments—such as a war with Turkey or a European Parliamentary democracy—would squander the goodwill of survey subjects and yield a noisy, difficult-to-interpret set of estimates.

an evaluation of President Saakashvili in a hypothetical conflict, presented as a vignette. The scenario was manipulated in two ways, creating a 2×2 design. In all cases, a conflict occurs. The first factor manipulated was which party started the conflict. The second factor manipulated was which state was the victor. An English-language translation of the question in the first treatment is as follows: "Imagine fighting breaks out between Georgian militias and Abkhaz-backed militias. Clashes break out in the Abkhaz-controlled Gali region. Russian peacekeepers claim that the situation is under control, but Georgian military units deploy along the demilitarized zone. The militia violence continues, civilians flee the contested region, and tensions escalate. *After a 2-week stand-off, President Saakashvili orders the Georgian military to launch an attack into the Gali region to secure Georgian civilians. The Georgian army clashes with the Russian Army. Georgian Troops take many casualties and the Russian military forces Georgian forces to retreat.*"

The first set of italics indicates the first manipulated treatment. In this case, it is Saakashvili who is aggressive and provocative. The other version reads: "After a 2-week stand-off, Russian military forces attack the Georgian military—justifying their attack by arguing that it was a preemptive strike, and the Georgians were about to attack."

For the second portion, represented by the second italicized set of text, respondents are prompted with a cue to the success of the venture. Above, heavy casualties cause the Georgians to retreat. In the other version of the treatment, respondents were told: "Georgian troops take few casualties and force the Russian military forces to retreat."

Then respondents were asked to evaluate the president's response on a 1–10 scale. The variation was quite high, with a mean of 4.43 and a standard deviation of 3.33.¹⁶

One salient objection to this design is that there is no possible way that the Georgian military could force the Russian military to retreat. It would take an unlikely confluence of luck and geography for the Georgian military to defeat Russian forces in anything other than a tactical sense without a massive change in the external environment. The introduction of Western forces into the theater would probably be necessary (though not sufficient) for Georgia to declare strategic victory. Rather than fully describe that scenario, we opted to create a few easily codable anchor points for the psychological "primes" (leader chooses: preemptive attack or hold; nature chooses: victory or defeat) and allow the respondent to fill in the internal narrative link-

ages herself. Analysis of nonresponse and refuse-to-answer patterns do not suggest that respondents dismissed the "Georgia Wins" treatment-questions at a higher rate than other treatments.

Another concern is that initiating a conflict is obviously different than threatening to initiate a conflict then backing down. Moreover, there is no way for us to estimate the relevant "do not escalate in the first place" counterfactual, which is what a direct test of the audience cost hypothesis would require. We believe the Georgian case fits closely with what Schelling (1966) was imagining when he argued that war does not spring into existence with a violence threshold is crossed but is just another step in a high-stakes, ongoing bargaining process. Conflicts can evolve dynamically as information about resolve is revealed (Powell 2004). The thought-experiment of escalation to conventional war-fighting is a very strong signal of resolve, backing the national honor with action. Both the threat and mobilization are public in the experiment. Our proposed signal therefore is more than just bluster and speeches (which were occurring daily in the Georgian political arena at the time the experiment went to field) and is instead actual probing to demonstrate resolve, increasing the credibility of Georgia's willingness to fight. Our research partners decided to field the survey experiment because they became convinced that it was important to see if there was any evidence to support the hypothesis that the Georgian polity would support putting national honor on the line in this way—even in the event of a humiliating military defeat. Since there was no real uncertainty over capabilities, only resolve was at question within this conflict dyad. An estimation of Georgian national resolve was therefore policy-relevant information in April 2008.

Results

Is a strategy of escalation costly for the Georgian leadership? The survey experiment suggested not. As figure 2 illustrates, initiating the conflict and winning results in the highest evaluation of the president's handling of the situation. While it is unsurprising that winning is better than losing, conditional on losing, there appears to be no statistically significant punishment for initiating the conflict compared to being the target of Russian aggression. From a certain perspective, then, Saakashvili would be no more punished were he to escalate the conflict (to signal high resolve, in our formulation) and then lose than if he were to "hold" and then lose. On the other hand, he would enjoy a statistically significant bump in public support if he were to escalate a conflict and then win it, compared to "holding" and then winning. These results suggest that when imagining scenarios for conventional conflict

16. For ease of comparison with later figures, we have rescaled all values to a zero to three scale, with higher values representing higher levels of support.

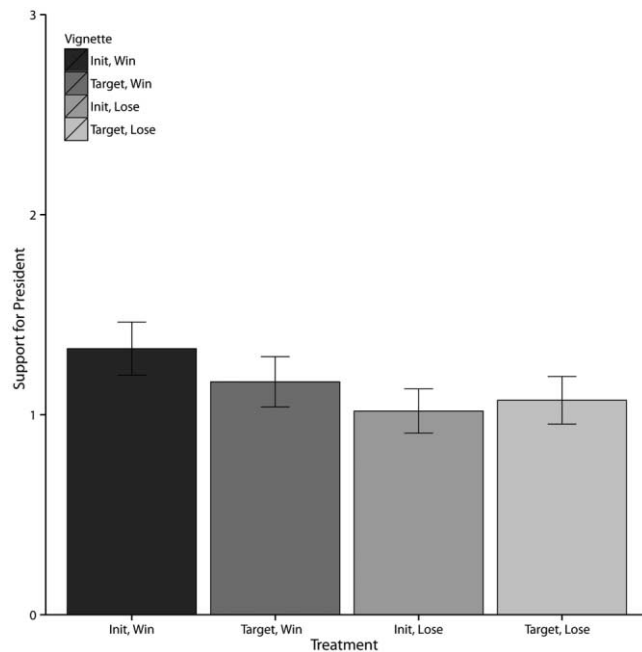


Figure 2. In vignettes, initiation is rewarded if the war succeeds. The vertical axis is a rescaled value of support for the president, with three being the highest and zero the lowest. Each bar represents the level of support for the given treatment, with the 95% confidence interval plotted.

over the territories, escalation makes a certain kind of sense, at least from an electoral point of view. Since the probability of winning is probably nonzero, Saakashvili may have been tempted to gamble for a win with an “escalation bump” for standing up to Russia.

Critical to this interpretation of the data is the statistical insignificance of the “initiate, lose” and “target, lose” treatments. If the leader of the weak state (in this case Georgia) has to choose to initiate or hold without knowing the outcome of the military engagement but knows that there will be a public opinion bump in the case of victory and no additional public opinion blame in defeat, it suggests that escalation strategies should be preferred. We acknowledge that our data are not fully conclusive on this matter, however. The sign on the effect is suggestive that citizens do have a weak preference for “holding” in the event of a military defeat. One might speculate that if we had a larger sample size, these results would be significant. One could further speculate that if a leader saw defeat as a near-certain outcome, he might not want to gamble that he would make things worse for himself by escalating. And, again, none of these results can speak to what is (for many Russians and most students of audience costs) the relevant counterfactual, which is a Georgian leader who never escalated the crisis in the first place with provocations. But with all that said, many Georgian voters clearly derived more pleasure from the

thought experiment of winning after Georgian forces attacked Russians first than the thought experiment of winning a war that was initiated according to Russian timetables.

The “escalation bump” results are robust to breaking the sample down into subgroups, as figure 3 demonstrates: Splitting the data a variety of theoretically interesting ways illustrates that Georgian citizens almost always prefer “Initiate, Win” to any other outcome. The effects are somewhat muted for higher educated citizens, but the trend holds. Self-reported “likely voters” respond in a way broadly consistent with “unlikely voters,” though the latter seem to prefer escalation even in the event of a military loss to winning while holding steady. Finally, those who think the country is headed in the wrong direction (a loose proxy for partisanship or distaste for the regime) report a preference for Saakashvili to initiate and lose to any other category. This is admittedly puzzling, but for our inferences what is important is that they demand escalation. Taken in tandem, these two findings suggest that in 2008 the entire political spectrum of Georgian voters—including those that were politically alienated or rabidly anti-Saakashvili—desired that their government pursue aggressive wartime bargaining behaviors vis-à-vis Russia.

For those who reported believing that the country was moving in the right direction, there was some evidence of a

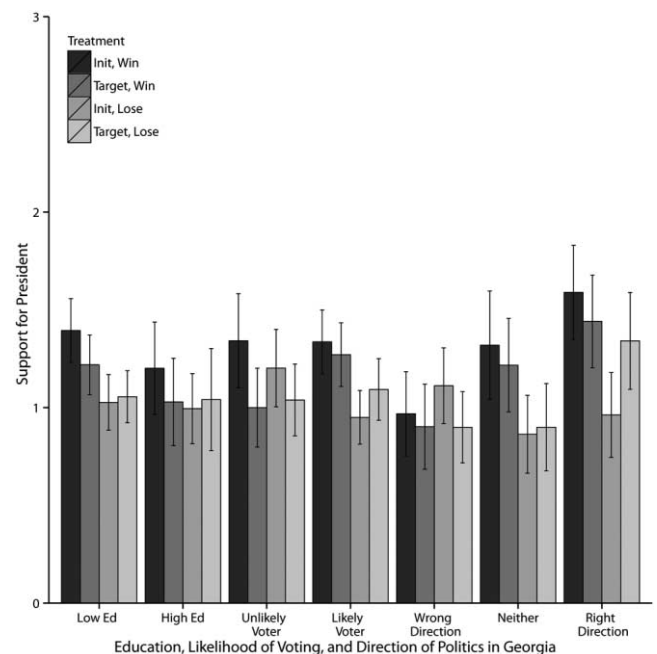


Figure 3. Heterogeneous treatment effects by education and political affiliation. The vertical axis is a rescaled value of support for the president, with three being the highest, and zero the lowest. Each bar represents the level of support for the given treatment, with the 95% confidence interval plotted. Each set of four bars is the results of the experiment for those respondents who fell into each category.

willingness to punish the leader, in the sense that this group does punish Saakashvili for escalating if he loses (compared to losing without committing troops). This is the best evidence that we have that escalation by the leader of a weak state is not an unproblematic politico-military strategy. The role of moderates are particularly interesting since they likely include the theoretical median voter who would presumably have to turn on the president to remove him from office. Moderates show evidence of the same trend, but it is far weaker—even though previous research suggests that these undecided voters should be the group most easily swayed by new foreign policy information.¹⁷ Our speculative explanation for this puzzling reversal of popular wisdom is that Saakashvili's core constituency is unusually attuned to foreign policy and could imagine a belligerent foreign policy hurting Georgia's reputation with a Western European audience.

Though results were interesting, we had serious concerns about the validity of the experiment as a forecasting tool. While the vignette presented to Georgians seemed realistic to us, we were skeptical that asking a large sample of citizens about a hypothetical war was actually comparable to voter attribution of blame (or, more formally, how voters would evaluate the plausibility of the relevant nonescalation non-war counterfactual) when it came time to vote after a real war. Our initial idea was to probe this question by examining patterns of heterogeneous treatment effects—comparing the survey experiment results on subsamples living in close proximity to the war to results on subsamples living in the capital city. But a few months later, we were presented with an unusual, and much more direct, opportunity to empirically evaluate the question of how leadership evaluations in real war differ from those in a survey experiment.

AND THE WAR CAME: OBSERVATIONAL EVIDENCE

Detailing the blow-by-blow brinkmanship that finally spilled over into war on August 8, 2008, is beyond the scope of this article—except to note that Russia's decision to send heavy armor through the Roki tunnel was the culmination of many months of gradually escalating military tensions.¹⁸ Before the five-day war between Georgia and Russia concluded, there were approximately 250 battle deaths and a contested historical record.¹⁹

There were important differences between the actual sequence of events yielding war and the hypothetical escalation scenario provided for respondents. Escalation began in South Ossetia, not the Abkhaz-controlled Gali region. There was a tense standoff (as in the prompt), followed by a short, noisy war, conducted in an information-saturation environment. Basic facts were quickly “submerged under a cloud of polemics involving spin and disinformation.”²⁰ Georgian citizens, many of whom absorbed the 24-hour news cycle in English, Russian, and Georgian, were inundated with conflicting facts. A practical result of this media war is that many people disagree about what really happened.²¹ Not knowing who believed what story in advance, it was very difficult to design a credible survey instrument that could explore counterfactuals. As a second-best inference strategy, individuals were solicited to share their full “narrative track” for the conflict, as a basic attempt to find some signal in the noise of the mass-media enabled fog of war.

Evidence of a postmodern “fog of war” effect

A large sample of Georgians were surveyed by the same organization that implemented the pre-war survey experiment—but with a survey instrument designed to measure how divided Georgians were on their understanding of the facts.²² With no cues, primes, or questions about the war,

20. Cornell and Starr (2009, 3). The “information warfare” aspect of the Russia-Georgia war has been documented extensively in Goble (2009) and Thomas (2011, esp. chaps. 9–12 and app. 3), Heinrich and Tanaev (2009), and esp. Diebert et al. (2012).

21. Numerous factually untrue statements have already “leaked” into official documents, to the frustration of future historians. E.g., a publication of the Strategic Studies Institute of the US War College reports that the Georgian government fled the capital of Tbilisi—which simply did not happen (see Thornton 2011, 28). In the intervening years, patriots on both sides of the conflict muddied the waters further by funding films purporting to be “based on actual events” of the war: *5 Days of War* and *August Eighth*. The English-language Wikipedia page for “Russo-Georgia War” was aggressively and competitively reedited for years and currently includes many maps and 330 footnotes.

22. A large ($N = 3,143$) nationally representative survey was implemented by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, which serves as the basis for the empirical generalizations that follow. This survey represented the first large-scale data collection effort in Georgia after the war. The sample was chosen to be representative of Georgian citizens who might vote against the UNM, so no efforts were made to sample in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or the non-Georgian ethnic enclaves. Because the initial survey did not explicitly exclude the non-Georgian ethnic enclaves, any subsequent analysis that focuses on the differences in result between the two surveys could be due to the difference sampling frames rather than other external factors. To deal with this, we replicate all subsequent analysis on a subset of the pre-war survey respondents, which more closely matches the post-war sample on the ethnic demographic. We do this by

17. See Baum (2002) and Baum and Potter (2008).

18. A summary can be found in Diebert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata (2012, 7–8).

19. Treisman (2012, 259) reports that the conflict cost the lives of 48 soldiers (including 10 peacekeepers) on the Russian side and 170 soldiers and 14 policemen on the Georgian side.

respondents were asked to describe, in their own words, what had happened in August. Respondents recited whatever stories they thought appropriate, laying out their beliefs about the causes of the war, the events of the war, and their evaluation of the outcome. We coded the different elements of these narratives into different categories based on the prevalent themes. We then organized these categories into six rough issue areas, within which comparisons would be most important. The data reveal that survey respondents—all Georgians, all of whom can plausibly claim to have “lived through the war”—disagree about what actually happened in it.

As figure 4 makes clear, fundamentals are contested. Comparing within the different issues is telling of this disagreement. Did Georgia initiate the conflict, or was it attacked? Was it a qualified military victory or a total defeat? Did the Georgian government flee Tbilisi? Was downtown Tbilisi shelled? While sequencing, causality, and appropriation of blame are complicated, fundamentally these are all matters of fact. Our interpretation of these trends is simple: Media coverage of the war was confusing, and these confusions were internalized by Georgian citizens in the form of internally coherent narratives. No matter what the next generation of historians writes about the conflict, many will think that person is distorting the truth. For roughly every four Georgians who said the West put pressure on Russia, one thought the West did not or could not come to Georgia's aid. Almost equal shares of respondents blame the roots of the conflict on events surrounding Georgia's independence as those who think it was driven by events in the Soviet times or earlier. Likewise, for roughly every four Georgians who said that Russia attacked Georgian troops in Abkhazia—something that most people would agree is objectively true—one Georgian said Russia attacked Georgian troops in Adjara—something most people in the West would say is untrue. Almost equal shares reported that their military performed well as reported the Russians continued to occupy national territory, refusing to leave.

Can we make responsible inferences about what social facts are salient for historical memory by examining trends in what parts of the story are emphasized, and de-emphasized, as a wide variety of Georgian citizens spontaneously describe events? Certain facts were part of many respondents' retelling of events. About half of the sample emphasized that many Georgians were killed and that Russia targeted civilians. More

than one-third of the sample emphasized that the conflict stems from independence, that Russia attacked first, and that the Russian soldiers were currently occupying their country and refusing to leave. And nearly half of the sample, when asked to describe events, began their statement by saying that they did not know what happened (often adding “because the news media lies”). Other versions of events are, on the whole, de-emphasized. Only a tiny fraction of our sample volunteered, in their narrative of events, that Georgian soldiers targeted civilians, that Georgia attacked first, or that the Georgian military did poorly. We have no way of knowing how many individuals in the sample privately held these beliefs: the voluntary and unstructured nature of the data collection makes it difficult to draw confident inferences from nonmentions.

Still, for exposition and comparability with the pre-war 2×2 research design, we aggregated general themes into two variables: attribution of blame for initiation and military outcome. Each respondent in the survey was placed in only one box, with the assumption that self-reported differences in the content of the survey responses map onto different actual perceptions of events. To determine whether a respondent thought that Saakashvili initiated the conflict, we combined multiple responses. We coded as “Target” if the respondent said that either the Russians or South Ossetian militias attacked first, or that the Russians instructed the South Ossetians to attack.²³ We coded the respondent as believing it was a “Qualified Win” if they thought the Georgian military performed well.²⁴ Our initial hypothesis was that, as a result of repeated exposure to nationalist themes (“we were attacked—but we prevailed!”), a single narrative would dominate in our sample. As table 1 makes clear, however, this is not what we found. In sum, 40% of respondents began by admitting that they did not actually know what happened. And respondents' answers span the gambit, with a sufficient number of respondents existing in each category to provide some statistical leverage. Approximately four Georgians believed that the war was lost to every

23. Those who explicitly stated that the Georgians started the war are grouped in with those who did not mention anything explicitly related to who started the war. Because we could not know what these individuals thought about the initiation, we felt that grouping in this way was most likely to bias in favor of a null effect in subsequent analysis, especially if those who did not mention anything about initiation actually blamed Russia or Georgia in a ratio similar to those who volunteered that as part of their narrative.

24. As with initiation, we grouped those who did not mention any statement explicitly about the outcome with those who were critical of the Georgian military's success. Since most who mentioned something explicitly about performance said the Georgian military performed well, we again thought the bias of grouping those who did not mentioned this explicitly in their narrative was likely to produce null results.

excluding individuals from sampled villages where more than a third of respondents were either Armenian (Samtskhe-Javakheti) or Azeri (Kvemo Kartli and Shida Kartli). Those results are presented in the appendix (available online) but show no significant difference from the findings using the full data set.

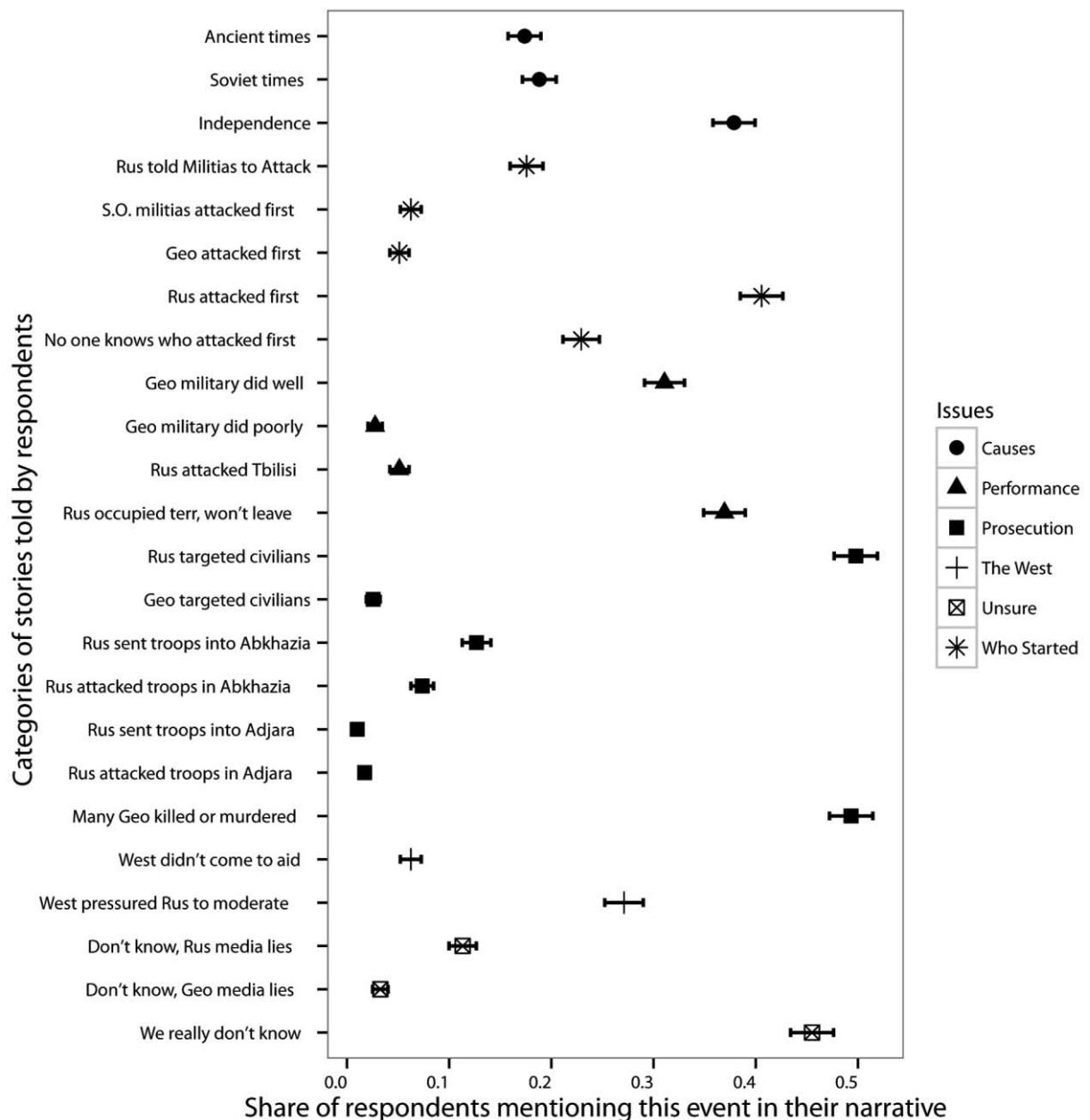


Figure 4. Diversity of opinions: Facts about 2008 are contested. Each point represents the share of respondents who mentioned the corresponding element in their narrative of the war, with the 95% confidence interval plotted. Categories are grouped roughly according to the types of issues which came up.

Georgian who thinks it was won. Approximately half-again as many Georgians believed that Saakashvili initiated the conflict as believe that their state was the victim of Russian aggression. There is a remarkable level of balance on a number of potential confounds, and striking similarities to the pre-war sample.

These narrative tracks were not randomly assigned to the population—they clearly correlate with self-reported media consumption patterns and other variables. This limits analysts' ability to make valid causal inferences without resort-

ing to complicated statistical techniques.²⁵ It is sufficient for our purposes here, however, to simply notice that different

25. Since many reported living through situations similar to each of the four experimental conditions in the initial survey experiment, it is possible to use matching methods to provide suggestive evidence that respondents, reflecting on the events of an actual war, evaluated their leader's crisis behavior differently than the pre-war survey experiment would suggest. Especially in war zones, Georgian respondents who believed that their president was responsible for baiting the Russians into conflict were more likely to evaluate his job performance negatively.

Table 1. Frequency of “Narrative Tracks” and Comparison with Pre-War Experimental Treatments

	No.	%	Highly Educated (BA or Above)	Male	Conflict (Potential or Actual)	Self-reported Voter Turnout	Ethnically Georgian	English Language Ability	Russian Language Ability
Pre-war:									
All	1,538	100	31.8	45.4	19.4	76.7	88.4	1.49	3.37
Init, win	376	24.4	31.8	45.5	18.9	79.5	88.8	1.46	3.37
Target, win	389	25.3	29.2	41.9	20.1	76.9	87.7	1.50	3.31
Init, lose	389	25.3	38.9	46.8	19.5	76.1	88.4	1.55	3.40
Target, lose	384	25.0	26.7	47.4	19.3	74.5	88.8	1.44	3.41
Post-war:									
All	3,143	100	28.2	40.4	12.3	80.6	90.3	1.56	3.44
Init, win	172	1.7	30.0	37.2	10.5	84.9	91.3	1.61	3.22
Target, win	495	5.0	27.7	44.7	19.2	83.2	92.5	1.56	3.39
Init, lose	1,674	16.7	28.5	38.3	8.9	78.2	86.0	1.53	3.50
Target, lose	802	8.0	27.7	41.2	15.3	80.9	94.0	1.58	3.46

Note. Question on voter turnout for the 2008 Special Presidential election. Both English and Russian ability are the mean value of ability to read the respective language, ranked by the respondent on a 5-point scale, with 0 meaning no ability, and 5 meaning fluency.

segments of the Georgian electorate were on different “narrative tracks”—which is to say they disagreed about the basic facts necessary to evaluate leader performance.

Evidence that Georgians “rallied around the flag”

Did the experience of a real war change the psychological disposition of the study population (i.e., a “rally ’round the flag” effect?), and did this alter survey behaviors? The answer to both questions is yes. The survey replicated the question that formed the dependent variable in the pre-war experiment—an ordered evaluation of Saakashvili’s performance during the August 2008 crisis. As before, the question asked, “How do you think the president Saakashvili acted in the foreign policy crisis?” Unlike the pre-war survey, where the treatments were administered experimentally through vignettes, the respondent’s experiences and proclivities are clearly part of their evaluation of their leader. But broad trends in the data reveal a substantial upward shift in public support for Saakashvili in the wake of an actual war across the entire sample, as figure 5 demonstrates.²⁶ The intercept shift in presidential popularity across the whole sample is easily large enough to overwhelm the effects of the survey experiment.

26. The only difference in question was that the possible response ranged from one to four, with one being “in a completely right way” and four being “in a completely wrong way.” The previous question was a 1–10 scaling. The figure is scaled to reflect this shift.

A broad stratum of Georgian voters, reflecting on the events of the war, reported firm resolve that territorial reunification should be prioritized. Near the end of the survey, respondents were asked to rank order seven different po-

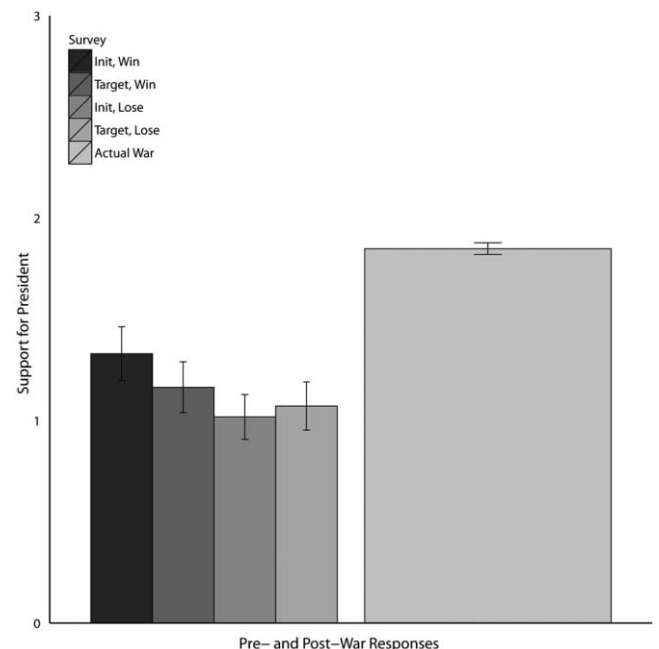


Figure 5. Ex-post signals of resolve: Support for Saakashvili surges in post-war survey. The vertical axis is a rescaled value of support for the president, with three being the highest, and zero the lowest. Each bar represents the level of support for the given treatment, with the 95% confidence interval plotted. The larger bar represents responses from the observational study after the war occurred.

tential national priorities. The exercise was designed to see how respondents would evaluate complex trade-offs between different things, each of which they might individually desire. Support for reclaiming the secessionist regions was a top priority for over 30% of respondents and is one of the top three priorities for most the sample. This result holds even once the sample is partitioned to account for those who disapprove of the president or the subsections most likely to hold cosmopolitan or liberal values. The second prioritized goal, which a majority of respondents put in their top three issues, is forging better military relations with the West.²⁷ The least-prioritized issue, for a plurality of respondents, was repairing relations with Russia.

It is difficult to say whether these extreme beliefs persist in Georgian society, and there is circumstantial evidence that they do not. In a nationally representative Caucasus Barometer survey conducted one year later, when asked to name the most important problem facing Georgia, most people chose “unemployment,” not “territorial reunification.” Our strong suspicion is that respondents understood that the data being collected would be analyzed by specialists in Western embassies; their decisions to declare strong support for their president’s foreign policy goals in a wartime setting could thereby be understood as a signal of national resolve.²⁸ But in any case, by holding the sample characteristics broadly constant, questions about hypothetical wars presented as survey vignettes elicited systematically lower evaluations of leader performance than questions about leader performance after an actual war.

War in conflict zones versus televised war in Tbilisi

These data can also be used to ask a more broadly theoretically interesting question: Do respondents living in proximity to conflict zones respond differently than voters for whom war is a more distant hypothetical? Though Georgia is a relatively small country, the pre-war survey data included 299 respondents from the regions of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti and Shida Kartli (which lie on the border with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively). Figure 6 shades these regions in light-gray scale. These regions were known to be the areas most likely to see violence in the event of an actual war. When

the war broke out a few months later, they are the regions where Russian troops held territory for a few tense days. Citizens living in territories adjoining the conflict zones were more likely to experience the war directly—to see bullets or hear explosions—than citizens in the capital or living far from the conflict.²⁹ Is the thought experiment, or the lived experience, notably different for respondents on the front-lines than for respondents residing in Tbilisi?

Figure 7 includes data from both the pre-war survey (the two groups of columns on the left) and post-war survey (the two groups of columns on the right) side by side. Both samples are broken down into two subsets—respondents living in regions with potential for actual war (on the right) and respondents living in all other parts of the country (on the left). The dependent variable is a scaled indicator of support for the president’s wartime behaviors, scaled just like figure 5 above. We then compare responses to different experimental primes separately within each subsample, showing means and 95% confidence intervals for to allow easy comparison of the independent effect of each treatment on the different subgroups. The word “treatment” applies more accurately to the pre-war experiment, of course: the groups in the post-war samples are determined based on self-reported “narrative track” (see the section on post-modern fog of war above). The variation in sample sizes makes it clear that the reader should have expectation that the treatments are distributed randomly nor that the subsamples are balanced. Still, a quick glance at the figure reveals the “Rally ’Round the Flag” effect quite dramatically: The lowest reported support for the post-war samples (Init, Win in the conflict zone) is higher than the highest reported support in the pre-war sample (Target, Win in the conflict zone).

A comparison of the first two groups of columns in figure 7—the cleanly identified pre-war experimental data—shows that the two samples respond to identical survey primes differently. Three trends are salient. First, the survey prime that solicits the most favorable evaluation of the leader’s actions conditional on victory is different for constituencies who could imagine the war with more clarity. The “initiation bump” reported in the second section is an artifact of the preferences of the large number of Georgians who do not reside in conflict zones. The small number of Georgians in the conflict area strictly prefer winning to losing but prefer that Russia have fired first.

Second, the survey prime that solicits the least favorable evaluation of the leader’s actions conditional on defeat is

27. Elsewhere on the survey, most Georgians candidly agreed with the statement that “good relations with the West are just a means to the end of reclaiming the territories. If I had the choice, I would never give up on the dream of national reunification.”

28. Fearon (1994b) usefully distinguished between “ex-ante” and “ex-post” signals of resolve; taking advantage of a Western-funded survey to demonstrate strong social support for the president’s wartime bargaining position would clearly fall into the latter category.

29. It should be emphasized that everyone in this sample has a more credible claim to “have lived through a war” than many participants in North American college experimental laboratories.

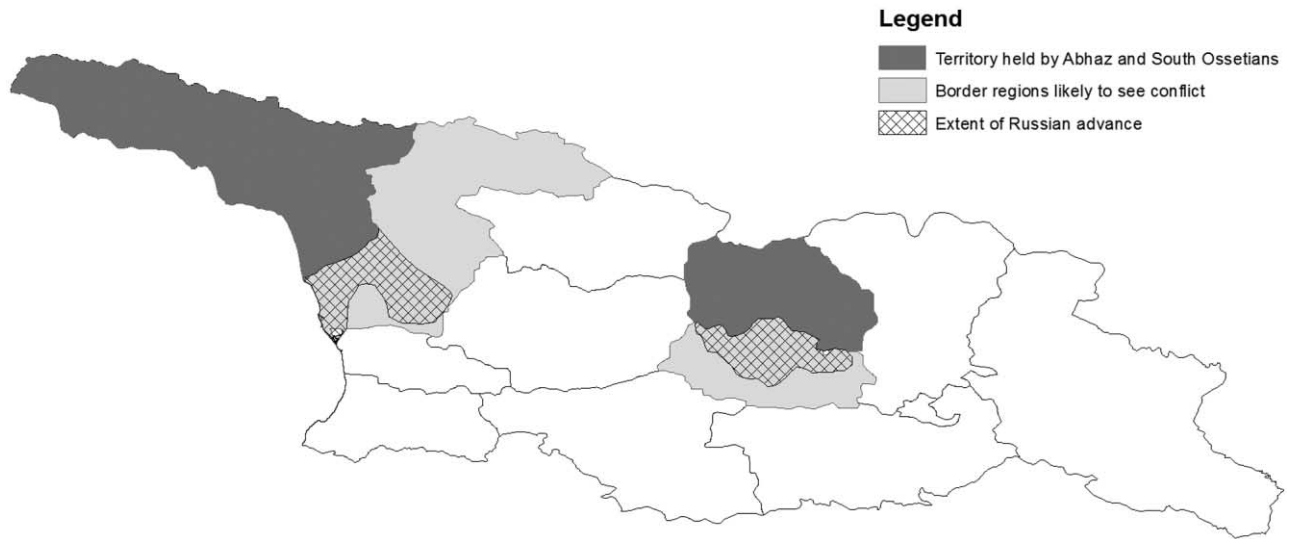


Figure 6. Where a conflict might occur, and where it actually did occur

different between subsamples, as well. Georgians in the conflict zone are most critical of leaders who do nothing and then lose; Georgians who are not in the conflict zones are most critical of leaders who escalate and then lose. Our interpretation of this trend is that respondents in conflict areas, who could imagine the scenario vividly, would punish a leader

who did nothing in response to Russian moves that created a refugee crisis, even if the Georgian military is defeated in the end.

Third, the highest and lowest evaluations in the sample come from individuals living in conflict zones, suggesting higher salience of these questions to the subsample that could imagine actually paying the costs of war. Citizens who could anticipate living through a real war really care that their side win it. The effect of asking samples to imagine losing a war is statistically and substantively stronger than for the subsample residing a safe distance from the conflict zones.

In the post-conflict survey, for both the sample proximate to the conflict and the sample relatively distant, self-reported narratives emphasized that Georgia was the target of Russian aggression and that Georgians had been victorious (Target, Win) correlated with the highest levels of overall support for Saakashvili's actions. Interestingly, in both samples the second-highest level of support comes from those who's accounts of the conflict emphasize that Georgia was attacked first and was basically defeated (Target, Loss). Our interpretation of this is, again, a kind of residual effect of the "Rally 'Round the Flag" phenomenon: Georgian state media had emphasized a patriotic narrative of tiny Georgia standing up to a bully. Once this story is articulated, cognitive consistency might lead to higher evaluations of presidential behaviors. Figure 7 also shows a divergence in trends between samples that are quite interesting. One salient overall trend is that the respondents residing in conflict zones were far less likely to report believing that Saakashvili initiated the war and Georgia won it (only 11 respondents volunteered narratives of this sort). Another is that this subsample really cared about who started the fighting in a way that contradicted priors estab-

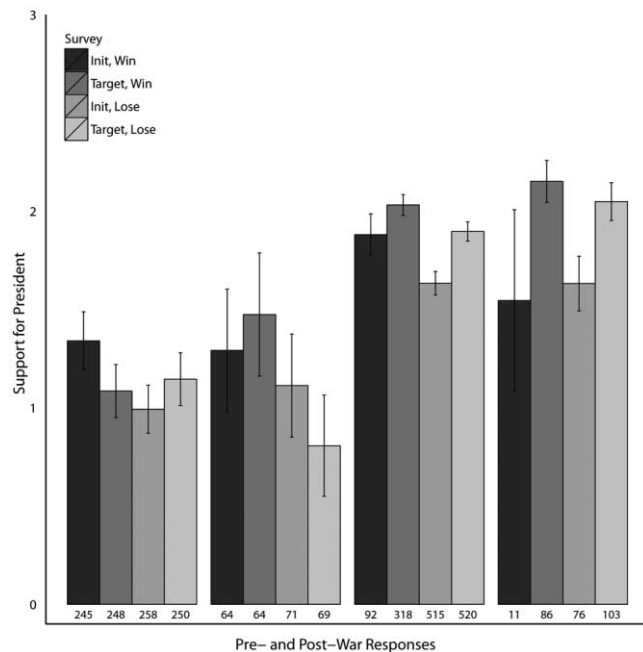


Figure 7. Respondents in conflict zones care about initiation. The vertical axis is a rescaled value of support for the president, with three being the highest, and zero the lowest. Each bar represents the level of support for the given treatment in the pre-war experiment, and the equivalent groups for the post-war observational study, with the 95% confidence interval plotted. The numbers below each bar reflect the number of respondents fitting into each treatment.

lished by the pre-war experiment. Though we should be cautious in making causal inferences from what facts are emphasized in spontaneous storytelling exercises, there does seem to be a correlation between poor evaluation of Saakashvili's overall performance and self-reported beliefs that Saakashvili initiated the conflict whether or not the respondent went on to emphasize military victory or defeat.

Why is this important? Because different psychological and emotional processes are clearly at play when the "treatment" is exposure to a vignette of shells falling near someone's home (even if that vignette is assisted by the high-value media production of the 24-hour news cycle) than when the treatment is actual shells falling near someone's home.

CONCLUSION: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The kinds of data that we present in this article are unusual and unlikely to be replicated. This raises questions about the scope conditions of our findings. The contribution of this study to scholarly understanding the August 2008 war can be summarized in two points:

1. On surveys conducted before the war, most Georgians were supportive of brinksmanship and escalation by their leadership. We identify a statistically significant "initiation bump": Georgian voters strictly prefer a military victory to defeat, not surprisingly, but conditional on victory a substantial majority of our sample preferred for their leader to have escalated the conflict first. When the vignette ended in a military defeat, there was no statistically significant difference in respondent preferences between a leader who escalated aggressively and a leader who did not.
2. After the conflict escalated, surveyed Georgians patriotically "rallied 'round the flag," reporting strong support for the leadership's intransigent bargaining position and overwhelming approval for their leader's actions in crisis. We understand the groundswell of support for the leadership as an "ex-post signal of resolve," to use the language of Fearon (1994b), from the Georgian electorate.

The inference we draw from these trends is that electoral concerns would not have constrained perfectly informed Georgian elites in foreign-policy bargaining. Saakashvili had good instincts for his electorate's mood on these matters and excellent instincts for how to shape it in war. The balance of the data suggest that Georgian domestic sentiment was quite receptive to war initiation, conditional on a reasonable probability that the Georgian military could succeed—evi-

dence of second-image causal explanations for the August war. Though Saakashvili was ejected from power by Georgian voters in 2012, it was almost certainly not because Georgia fought a war with Russia in 2008.

What unit-level theories are consistent with these data? First and foremost, we are partial to the the Mansfield and Snyder (2007) "new democracies" hypothesis: that noninstitutionalized ("new") democracies are particularly dangerous agents in international affairs. Leaders of these kinds of states may have electoral incentives to escalate international conflicts with an expectation of increasing their domestic support base. None of the data in this article refute that hypothesis. A dyad containing two new democracies—like the Georgia-Russia dyad or the Ukraine-Russia dyad—might be especially dangerous.

Second, as the epigraph suggests, social understandings of war might simply be different for voters in small states that paired in a conflict dyad with a big neighbor than for voters residing in great powers. In certain conflict dyads, the median voter residing in the weaker state may have a strict preference for military escalation.³⁰ Many Georgians in the study knew what they wanted as a strategic outcome—to get the lost territories back. A demonstrated willingness for their leader to "stand up to a bully" was a litmus test for their approval. Prior to the war, many Georgians understood and supported Saakashvili's entrepreneurial efforts to reform domestic institutions in a Western mode to maximize the probability of European or American intervention in the event of a crisis.³¹

Third and finally, certain states' agents are willing and able to cynically manipulate historical memory with 24-hour news cycle artifacts, films, doctored photographs with faked geotags, school curricula with skewed readings of the historical record, and the like.³² If the Georgian state has the capacity to do these things, other comparatively weak states in the international system will have this capacity in the future as well. Human memory is known to be fallible, known to be prone to nationalist reimagining. A practical

30. This may be true in the stronger state as well, but, as of yet, we lack comparable empirical data on Russians' beliefs just prior to and immediately after the August war. Our heterogeneous findings suggest that the political problem will be especially acute if the actual costs of war are not shouldered by the median voter a situation that occurs whenever the fighting takes place far from the urban metropolises where most voters reside.

31. For additional data supporting this, see Driscoll and Maliniak (forthcoming).

32. The authors of this article would quickly concede that this may be a unit-level characteristic of states that does not actually vary across units in the contemporary interstate system. For empirical evidence that states' ability to project "soft power" is an inseparable component of their war-making capacity, see Warren (2014).

result is that after a war citizens experience fundamental ontological disagreements about the experience they have all just had—even when the country is small and the war is short. But if leaders understand that they can sow real confusion about the historical record with a few years of institutional preparation, it has discouraging implications for theories suggesting that democratic citizens will constrain elite foreign policy decision making.

This study suggests three more general points relevant to ongoing studies of public opinion and war initiation using laboratory and survey experiments:

1. After the conflict escalated, surveyed Georgians disagreed on basic facts of what happened—such as who won and who started it. Different segments of the audience disagreed about the basic facts necessary to evaluate leader performance, yet everyone surveyed had a story to tell about the causes of the war. Since the phenomenon of interstate war in a noisy, media-saturated environment is likely to repeat itself, it is important for scholars to begin to grapple with the fact that beliefs within modern electorates are quite heterogeneous, with individuals increasingly self-selecting into like-minded media bubbles on completely different “narrative tracks.” There may be no easy fix for this inference problem, but this study highlights that many survey and laboratory experiments (including our own pre-war study) just imagine the problem away, providing subjects with all of the information relevant to the study.
2. There were systematic differences between the survey behaviors of individuals who could easily imagine escalation to violent war near their homes and the survey behaviors of individuals whose homes were located in areas remote from the risk of violent escalation and watched the war on television. Since direct exposure to violence has been shown to have a causal effect on electoral voting patterns, it is not surprising that direct exposure to violence can change survey behaviors.³³ But it is notable that even with similar samples, the events of real wars inspire different evaluations of leaders than hypothetical wars in survey vignettes. For the subsample of our study living in proximity to the zones of conflict, the lowest support in the pre-war experiment for this subsample was “Target, Loss,” but the lowest sup-

port based on self-reported post-war narrative track was “Initiate, Win.” This suggests to us that many things happen in real wars—such as children fleeing in terror from neighborhood schools—that are relevant to voters’ evaluation of leaders’ handling of the crisis that produced the wars that are not easily captured in survey vignettes. In principle, a well-funded behavioral laboratory could simulate many of the horrors of war, but the exercise would be ethically dubious.

3. Many scholars are working to advance a research agenda exploring how and whether domestic audiences can constrain the foreign policy behaviors of states. But it is not clear how to approach the task of aggregating findings across the highly heterogeneous set of insecure nonconsolidated democracies. What makes a large sample of Georgian voters attractive to scholars interested in war initiation is that the sample has thought very carefully about the outcome: a conventional war with Russia. We are confident that most participants in our study have thought about whether they want their country to threaten war, or engage in it, with orders of magnitude more seriousness than most US Internet-survey respondents asked to formulate opinions in the context of an extended vignette. But a highly informed and opinionated sample is not an unqualified good. Relatively early in the research design, the researchers involved in this study confronted the practical trade-off between the desire to randomize all of the things that might be theoretically interesting to the discipline and the constraints imposed by shared local understandings that are not subject to randomization. This article is compelling because researchers were prescient enough to ask a set of questions that bore a striking resemblance to the actual sequence of events leading to the 2008 war. The practical trade-off is that the answers they received may be highly particular to Georgia.

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33. See Getmansky and Zeitzoff (2014).

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