The Institutionalization of Foreign Policy Constraint: Cost Perception and Public Opinion

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**Introduction**

In The Perpetual Peace, Kant argued that republican forms of government would be more peaceful because the executive would be held accountable by the people, who bear the costs of war. This simple logic has proven to be very attractive and convincing, generating both scholarly research agendas like the democratic peace and democratic effectiveness literatures, and public policies like Clinton’s Engagement and George W. Bush’s regime changes.

This simple story, however, conceals a large number of assumptions and possible mechanisms, which call its reliability into question.

The Kantian logic can be simplified thus:

The public expects costs from a proposed action, and therefore does not support the action. The leader then anticipates being held accountable for the unpopular action, and does not do it.

Significant bodies of research raise questions about all three steps of this logic. First, the public may or may not perceive costs to military actions, depending largely on (theoretically) manpower systems, (empirically) the type of financing used (Caverley 2014; Capella Zielinski 2015; Kreps; \*\*\*), and their level of information combined with the geographic distribution of casualties (\*\*\*). Second, rather than focusing solely on costs, publics appear to make fairly reasonable cost-benefit analyses about military actions abroad (\*\*\*), and are often willing to support even costly actions if they consider them legitimate or expect success (Jentleson; Jentleson and Britton; Gartner and Segura; Feaver and Gelpi; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler; Eichenberg\*\*\*). Moreover, it appears likely that partisan identity and cues from partisan elites strongly affect how the public interprets even the facts they know and believe (\*\*\*), such that support is not necessarily tied either to real OR perceived costs. Third, the audience costs literature, particularly with respect to presidential systems, indicates that executives may have several reasons to doubt that they will actually be held accountable for undertaking a military action that was initially unpopular (\*\*\*).

One of the less-understood aspects of this logical chain is how exactly manpower policies affect public cost perceptions and public support for military operations. This paper will address this question, and will argue that different forms of manpower are likely to have differing and significant effects on public cost perceptions and support before a military operation has commenced, less likely to affect cost perception or support during the conflict, and very unlikely to matter at all in retrospective approval.

There is a fairly widespread belief – among the U.S. public, elites, and scholars – that conscription would lower public support for military operations by raising public perceptions of cost. Conscription, it is believed, is the mechanism by which the state distributes the burden of military service to both a larger and more equitable or representative portion of the population. As the risk to the median resident increases, public support for military operations should go down, and the executive should be more cautious and prudent about the use of force.

The evidence on this, however, is mixed. Some studies have tested whether conscription actually acts as a constraint on leaders, and tend to find that it does not (although these studies have yet to deal with the potential endogeneity problems involved) (Choi and James 2003; Pickering 2011). Some have tested whether the prospect of conscription lowers public support for a hypothetical military operation, and find that, at least in the U.S. context, it does (Horowitz and Levendusky 2011). Only one study, to this author’s knowledge, has attempted to test the actual relationship between expectation of conscription and cost perceptions, and that study found that, while an expectation of conscription does cause the public’s expectations of both aggregate and personal costs to increase, only expectations of aggregate costs were negatively associated with support for the mission; expectations of personal cost were not associated with support, at all. Furthermore, expectations of cost arising from an expectation of conscription explained only part of the lower support; it appeared that the idea of conscription caused people to express lower support through some mechanism other than cost perception (Blankshain, Cohn, and Kriner 2017).

All of these studies have looked simply at “conscription” vs voluntarism or vs reserve mobilization, but there are almost countless variations on manpower policies (Toronto and Cohn 2020). This paper, therefore, will attempt to untangle what precise aspects of manpower systems might matter for public cost perception, and how that might relate to public support for military activity.

**Conscription and Public Support for Military Operations**

The expectation that conscription should lower support for military operations is based on several proposed mechanisms, many of which could operate together.

First, there is the expectation that conscription would broaden the potential cost of military service and risk to a larger number of people, thus causing more people to fear being personally affected (self-interest).

Second, it could reach a more representative cross-section of the population, causing demographics that usually avoid military service to fear being directly affected (self-interest). This is often discussed in terms of putting the children of the wealthy and politically powerful (e.g., Congress-members) at risk. This mechanism, however, could work both ways, depending on the relative representativeness of conscription and voluntarism. If Conscription shifted the burden FROM the poor and politically disenfranchised TO the wealthy and powerful, it would give the wealthy and powerful a self-interest motivation to reduce support for the operation, but might give the rest of the public reason to INCREASE their support (analogous to progressive vs. regressive taxes). If, on the other hand, conscription shifted the burden FROM a relatively representative cross-section TO the poor and politically disenfranchised, it should have the opposite effect.

Third, the use of conscription could signal a larger, more serious conflict, implying the likelihood of higher aggregate costs to the country, both in terms of lives and finances. This could either be because conscription signals that the conflict will be on a larger scale than it would otherwise be, or because people expect conscript militaries to be less effective and suffer more casualties. Another way in which this could affect support is by affecting the public’s expectation that the country will succeed in achieving its war aims – although this is a difficult path to plot.

Fourth, conscription could signal to people that the conflict is less legitimate or existential – the classical U.S. political assumption being that, when a true military emergency arises, the people will volunteer to meet it.

There are two other possible mechanisms not usually mentioned, but sometimes implied. First is the possibility that U.S. Americans simply view conscription as an illegitimate form of governmental intrusion and object to it, apart from whatever it might signal about costs. Senator Robert Taft articulated this thus: “[conscription] is absolutely opposed to the principles of individual liberty which have always been considered a part of American democracy” (Nixon 1982, 604).

Second is the possibility that Americans view conscription itself as costly, apart from the likelihood of casualties or being affected personally, because they view it as a significant departure from “normal”.

Implicit in nearly all of these expectations is the idea that conscription necessarily implies a larger, more representative military than voluntarism does. The assumption that conscription means a larger military is understandable in the US context, given that conscription in the US experience has always been a policy of manpower supplementation. The assumption that conscription is always more equitable than voluntarism, however, is less supported by the US experience, and more closely associated with a different form of conscription: institutionalized peace-time conscription. Even in institutionalized systems, equity is not guaranteed; political choices determine whether conscription aims more at equity or more at the minimization of opportunity costs.

What if the conscription-voluntarism dichotomy is only one of the aspects of manpower policy that matters?

**Conscription**?

It seems clear that we cannot untangle the role that manpower policy in general and conscription in particular plays in state aggression or public support for military operations until we disaggregate different forms of conscription and voluntarism, and how a conscription system in a given country compares to what a volunteer system would look like. Three issues in particular seem critical: is conscription a standing institution or a contingent, opportunistic measure (Toronto and Cohn 2020)? Is the baseline force large or small? And, does conscription make the distribution of the defense burden more or less equitable? In other words, the status quo or baseline matters significantly.

States with standing institutional conscription are those where people in the designated universe of the eligible are mustered and selected on a regular basis, regardless of whether they spend their time simply training or doing actual service, and regardless of the actual participation ratio (such systems can range from nearly universal participation to levels so low that they are effectively voluntary). States with so-called voluntarism nearly always maintain the option of conscripting people for military service if the government recognizes a need. Thus all institutionalized conscription systems also involve volunteer professionals, and all volunteer systems can theoretically conscript. What is likely to matter for our purposes is: which systems require active mobilization of the public for a military operation, and which do not? This depends more on the baseline size of the military, not whether the default manpower method is conscription or not.

*Institutionalized vs. Contingent Conscription (voluntarism), and Size of Baseline Force*

Looking first at the dimensions of voluntarism and size, we get a simple 2x2 (hypothesized probability of MID initiation included for context):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Large baseline force** | **Small baseline force** |
| **Institutional Conscription** | **Conscript Army model**  e.g., Russia, Turkey  MIDs: Highest probability | **Reserve model**  e.g. Denmark, Switzerland  MIDs: Low probability |
| **Voluntarism (contingent conscription)** | P**rofessional Military model**  e.g. USA, France  MIDs: High probability | **Militia model**  e.g. USA in 19th/early 20th c  MIDs: Lowest probability |

Highlighted are the models that generally require public mobilization for military operations: the ones with small baseline forces.

*Equity*

While it is widely assumed that conscription of any kind is more equitable than voluntarism of any kind, this is not necessarily the case. Manpower systems are always significantly affected by domestic politics (Toronto and Cohn 2020). Governments make conscious choices about how to distribute the defense burden, based partly on the nature and severity of external threats, but also based on the need to maintain political legitimacy, reduce the severity of internal threats to the regime, and conform to the economic realities of the society (Cohn and Toronto 2017; Toronto and Cohn 2020).

Conscription systems – both institutionalized and contingent – nearly always restrict the universe of the eligible on grounds of sex, age, and physical fitness.[[1]](#footnote-1) They may also specifically (or informally/effectively) exclude certain groups based on ethnicity, religion, language, occupation, family status, educational attainment/status, etc.[[2]](#footnote-2) Under institutionalized conscription, then, a state can create a force that is more or less inclusive and representative.

Volunteer systems may restrict who can volunteer for service – especially on the grounds of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, height, weight, physical disability, mental/emotional disability, cognitive ability, etc., but will be under pressure to loosen exclusions to meet manpower requirements. Whether a volunteer force is more or less representative and equitable depends largely on two things: how closely military pay tracks median wages for comparable civilian jobs \* the level of economic inequality in the state, and the extent to which military service is seen as socially acceptable. When military pay is close to median pay and there is low socio-economic inequality, the military is likely to be fairly representative (though probably politically conservative), so long as military service is seen as socially acceptable. If it is not socially acceptable, such a society is unlikely to be able to recruit on a volunteer system and will probably need to use institutionalized conscription (Cohn and Toronto 2017). If pay tracks and there is high inequality, but service is seen as socially acceptable, the military will probably be fairly representative, though skewed slightly lower SES and politically conservative. If pay tracks and there is high inequality, but service is not high status, the military is likely to be extremely skewed toward low-SES members. If pay does not track, under nearly any circumstances, a volunteer military is likely to be extremely skewed toward low-SES members.

When volunteer systems do implement conscription, they also have choices. They can shape who gets conscripted. Generally, they want to maximize necessary and effective manpower while minimizing both economic and political disruption, which means paying attention to opportunity costs. Contingent conscription systems can spread the burden more equitably, or they can concentrate it on those with the lowest opportunity costs and the lowest political power to negotiate for exemptions.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Conscription system equitable** | **Conscription system inequitable** |
| **Baseline equitable** | **Equitable systems**  Equitable institutionalized conscription systems  Equitable voluntary systems w equitable contingent conscription | **E-I systems**  [institutionalized conscription systems unlikely to be here]  Equitable voluntary systems w inequitable contingent conscription |
| **Baseline inequitable** | **I-E systems**  [institutionalized conscription systems unlikely to be here]  Inequitable voluntary systems w equitable contingent conscription | **Inequitable systems**  Inequitable institutionalized conscription systems  Inequitable voluntary systems w inequitable contingent conscription |

*Timing*

Another aspect of the problem that requires more detailed investigation is how the manpower system affects support at different times. The literature on public support for military operations has tended to lump together issues of prospective support (i.e., support for a possible action), support during an action, and support after the action is over. But support at these different time periods likely is due to different causes, and has different effects.

**Prospective** support, which would seem most likely to affect **MID initiation**, is affected according to the literature by beliefs about mission legitimacy (Jentleson \*\*\*; Jentleson and Britton \*\*\*); expectations about costs (personal and/or aggregate, casualties and/or fiscal) (\*\*\*); whether the president is of the respondent’s party or not and what other party elites are cuing (\*\*\*); whether there is elite consensus or dissensus (\*\*\*); and whether the proposed action is multilateral or unilateral (\*\*\*).

Support **during** an action, which would seem most likely to affect **MID duration**, is affected according to the literature by a brief Rally effect (\*\*\*), although that may attenuate with higher polarization (Baum and Potter \*\*\*); news about casualties, although the effect is short-lived (\*\*\*); news about military events on the ground, as they may affect expectations of success (\*\*\*); cues from partisan elites (\*\*\*); and changes in elite consensus/dissensus (although, again, this effect may attenuate as polarization increases). What does not seem to matter much is actual casualty numbers, as these are interpreted through a partisan lens (\*\*\*) and mediated through beliefs about the mission’s legitimacy and expected success (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler; Feaver and Gelpi).

Support for an action **after the fact**, which would seem most likely to affect whether a **leader is held accountable** or not, appears to stem almost entirely from whether the action was perceived as successful or not, which is probably mediated by cues from partisan elites (\*\*\*).

In this paper, I intend to test only how manpower systems matter for cost perceptions and public support. I leave effects on MID initiation, MID duration, and leader accountability for others.

**Hypotheses (still in conceptual form!)**

*Cost perceptions*

Conscript army model – while a standing conscript army does not require public mobilization and does not present ideological dissonance, it does present the probability of feeling personally affected and possibly the likelihood of large-scale conflict.

Reserve model – this model does require public mobilization, but without the problem of ideological dissonance, presents the probability of feeling personally affected, and the possibility of large-scale conflict.

Professional military model – assuming the state chooses not to engage in conscription, this model does not require public mobilization, does not interfere with personal liberty, has a low likelihood of feeling personally affected, [not sure about large-scale conflict – country dependent?]. If this model DOES use it’s option to conscript, that would require public mobilization, would interfere with an expectation of personal liberty, has a higher likelihood of feeling personally affected, and probably signals large-scale conflict.

Militia model – this model does require public mobilization, but does not necessarily interfere with the notion of personal liberty, as the call to mobilize is usually on voluntary terms, has a medium to high likelihood of being personally affected, and probably signals large-scale conflict.

Equitable systems -

E-I systems

Inequitable systems

I-E systems

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Cost Perceptions |
| Conscript Army model | Prospect theory | Low |
| Liberty | n/a |
| Self-interest | High |
| General cost sensitivity | High |
| Reserve model | Prospect theory | Medium |
| Liberty | n/a |
| Self-interest | High |
| General cost sensitivity | High |
| Professional Military model – no conscription | Prospect theory | Low |
| Liberty | Low |
| Self-interest | Low |
| General cost sensitivity | ? |
| Professional Military model – conscription | Prospect theory | High |
| Liberty | High |
| Self-interest | Medium |
| General cost sensitivity | High |
| Militia model | Prospect theory | High |
| Liberty | Low |
| Self-interest | Medium-High |
| General cost sensitivity | High |

*Public Support*

* *Before the Action*
* *During the Action*
* *After the Action*

**Method**

**Findings**

**Discussion**

**Conclusion**

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1. Although many countries maintaining conscription are now moving to include women. Age and fitness standards are usually flexible in order to meet manpower needs at acceptable costs under different circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Older systems that allowed the purchase of substitutes have mostly disappeared. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)