

Why So Secretive? Unpacking Public Attitudes toward Secrecy and Success in US Foreign Policy

Rachel Myrick, Stanford University

To what extent does transparency in foreign policy making matter to democratic publics? Scholars and policy makers posit a normative commitment to transparency in the conduct of foreign affairs, an assumption baked into many existing models of international politics. This article tests the existence of a “transparency norm” in international security using three original survey experiments about covert action. I recover attitudes toward covert operations by holding the circumstances and outcomes of conflicts constant and manipulating whether foreign involvement was kept secret from the American public. Then, I unpack an “ends” and “means” trade-off by exploring whether there are conditions under which secrecy in national security is unacceptable to the public, regardless of policy outcomes. The findings demonstrate that democratic publics have only a weak preference for transparency: they care substantially more about the outcomes of US foreign policy rather than the process by which the policy was created.

In October 2016, weeks before the US presidential election, WikiLeaks published transcripts of speeches that Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton gave to business leaders at Goldman Sachs in 2013. In response to a question about how to address the crisis in Syria, Clinton answered, “My view was you intervene as covert as is possible for Americans to intervene.” She added, “We used to be much better at this than we are now.” Clinton was criticized for these remarks by policy makers and pundits from both political parties. After the transcripts were released, the *New York Times* described her “cold-eyed” foreign policy with the headline: “Hillary Clinton Liked Covert Action if It Stayed Covert, Transcript Shows” (Sanger 2016).

Clinton’s speeches reveal an interesting tension between the public and private faces of foreign policy makers. While covert action is ubiquitous in US foreign policy making, the subject is typically avoided by politicians in public discourse. Implicit in this avoidance is a long-standing perception that covert action is antithetical to the democratic process and unpalatable to the American public. Scholars and policy makers suggest that covert operations present a “fundamental paradox to American democracy” (Carter 2000, 1). Criticisms about the use of covert action are levied from both the

left and the right. Despite widespread perceptions of public distaste for covert action, we know very little about the extent to which democratic publics have normative preferences for transparency in the conduct of foreign policy. How do democratic citizens weigh the process by which foreign policy is created relative to the outcomes that are achieved? This project evaluates the existence and strength of a “transparency norm” in foreign affairs through three original survey experiments about US interference abroad. I find that while some evidence for this norm exists—particularly in cases when secrecy provides the US government with no clear operational advantage—citizens care substantially more about the outcomes of foreign policy rather than the process by which the policy was created.

During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars noted a waning interest in the study of secrecy in foreign policy making despite a “substantial increase in the practice of secrecy by governments, especially in the [United States]” (Gibbs 1995, 213). The political salience of this subject has only increased in the aftermath of 9/11, fueled by the expansion of executive authority to combat terrorism abroad. A recent wave of declassified intelligence documents from the Cold War era propelled novel research agendas about secrecy, deception,

Rachel Myrick (rmmmyrick@stanford.edu) is a PhD candidate in political science at Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.

This research was reviewed by the Stanford University Institutional Review Board (protocol 39510). Support for this research was provided by the Laboratory for the Study of American Values and the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at Stanford University. 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 <https://doi.org/10.1086/707308>.

The Journal of Politics, volume 82, number 3. Published online April 10, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1086/707308>
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and covert action in democratic foreign policy making (Carnegie and Carson 2018; Carson 2016, 2018; Carson and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Colaresi 2014; Cormac 2018; Downes and Lilley 2010; Downes and O'Rourke 2016; Johnson 2018; Joseph and Poznansky 2018; Lester 2015; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017; O'Rourke 2018; Poznansky 2015; Sagar 2016; Schuessler 2015; Spaniel and Poznansky 2018; Yahri-Milo 2013). This article adds to this literature by exploring the trade-offs democratic citizens make between “ends” and “means” in foreign affairs.

The primary contribution this article makes is to investigate a transparency norm in matters of international security. A large literature traces the evolution of normative commitments in international politics, most notably in relation to the legitimacy of the use of military force (Finnemore 2003; Hurd 2007; Katzenstein 1996; Ward 2001). Normative commitments play a role in preventing states from engaging in certain foreign policy actions, including the use of assassinations (Thomas 2000), nuclear weapons (Tannenwald 2007), chemical weapons (Price 1997), and land mines (Cottrell 2009; Price 1998). Certain standards of behavior—such as a preference for diplomacy and multilateralism and an aversion to the use of military force—are more robust among states with a shared liberal identity (Adler and Barnett 1998; Katzenstein 1996; Risse-Kappen 1997; Russett 1994). Recent experimental work explores the microfoundations of these normative commitments by examining whether they are reflected in the preferences of democratic citizens (Chu 2018; Grieco et al. 2011; Johns and Davies 2014; Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013; Tago and Ikeda 2015; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Wallace 2013).

While scholars have identified a general normative commitment to transparency in the conduct of foreign affairs (Birkinshaw 2006; Florini 1996; Hood 2006; Roberts 2006; Stiglitz 1999), its existence has not been directly tested. At first blush, studying public opinion toward transparency and secrecy in foreign policy making seems counterintuitive: covert actions are inherently meant to be hidden from public view. I argue, however, that there are two important reasons for investigating the extent to which Americans value transparency. First, from the perspective of policy makers, the strategic decision to undertake covert actions involves an assessment of the public's anticipated reaction to its revelation. In a general sense, policy makers may be concerned that revelation of covert action will affect the public's overarching level of trust in government. As Colaresi (2014) summarizes, “An executive, armed with substantial capabilities for secrecy and even military might, is still beholden in a democracy to the public for support. Public skepticism, instead of consent, for investment in foreign policy priorities not only decreases troop morale and security, but also decreases the probability

that political leaders proposing the investment will remain in office” (7).

In a more specific sense, when a policy maker considers whether to covertly conduct a policy, she evaluates the potential costs and benefits of the policy alongside the risks and consequences of exposure. For example, Joseph and Poznansky (2018) demonstrate that the US government avoids conducting covert operations in target states with dense information and communication technology networks, which increase the likelihood of exposure, generating domestic and foreign backlash against the United States. Concerns about public backlash to covert actions are especially salient in the contemporary media environment. Over the past decade, policy makers have faced a substantial increase in the sheer volume of “unauthorized disclosures of classified information” (Sagar 2016, 1). Consequently, understanding how the public views secrecy in foreign policy making is of critical importance.

Second, from an academic perspective, the transparency hypothesis is baked into existing models of democratic foreign policy making. Our understanding of how democratic leaders behave in international politics is predicated on the fact that they are held accountable for their actions by the electorate.¹ We anticipate that democratic citizens will punish leaders electorally for deviating from acceptable standards of behavior. Underlying recent work about secrecy, lying, and deception is an assumption that leaders will be sanctioned retrospectively to varying extents for engaging in these practices (Alterman 2004; Colaresi 2014; Mearsheimer 2011; Schuessler 2015). For example, Reiter (2012) argues that democratic leaders avoid engaging in deceptive practices in international relations because “if an attempt at deception is exposed, then they will suffer heavy domestic political costs” (595). With respect to covert action specifically, Carson and Yarhi-Milo (2017) argue that covert operations can be a credible signal of resolve to a foreign adversary precisely because of the domestic risks associated with the revelation of such activities. As the authors note, much existing research suggests that “states often use secrecy for military activity to avoid domestic political complications” (135). In this literature, however, the foundational assumption that democratic publics reward transparency and punish secrecy, deception, and covert action is not fully explored.

Following the advice of Kertzer (2017), this project takes a microfoundational approach by unpacking the circumstances

1. This logic is most clearly explicated in a large literature on “audience costs” in international relations (see, e.g., Fearon 1994; Schultz 1998, 2001; Smith 1998).

under which domestic publics punish leaders for engaging in covert action. Theoretically, intensive covert operations should pose a relatively easy test of the transparency norm in foreign affairs. We expect the public to put greater weight on secrecy around engagement in extensive—and often militarized—forms of foreign interference relative to other routine foreign policy practices. Three survey experiments test for the existence of the transparency norm and explore situations under which the American public may find covert actions unpalatable: (1) when they involve the use of force, (2) when they are initiated by the government despite widespread domestic disapproval, and (3) when they occur despite secrecy having no operational advantages. Collectively, the experimental results demonstrate that Americans weakly prefer transparency over secrecy in foreign policy making. However, under all of these circumstances, Americans are more than willing to trade secrecy for success. In other words, on the whole, the American public is willing to support covert action—even if it does not remain covert—as long as the operation is successful.

TRANSPARENCY, SECRECY, AND COVERT ACTION

The concept of transparency has “attained quasi-religious significance” (Hood 2006, 3) in theories about democratic governance. In contrast to secrecy, transparency in policy making reflects the “willingness of a government to release policy-relevant information” (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011, 1193). With respect to international security, discussions about the nature of transparency and democratic accountability primarily involve the archetypal form of secrecy: covert action. This section describes the evolution of covert action in the United States and then provides evidence for public aversion to its use as a foreign policy tool.

Covert action is conceptualized as “quiet option” or a “third option,” an alternative to conventional forms of diplomacy or direct military action. Despite its prevalence throughout American history, covert action is a “complex—and sometimes slippery—phrase” (Johnson 1989, 83). Many misperceptions around the nature of covert action, especially in its contemporary form, stem from the inherent secrecy of the intelligence community. Section 503(e) of the Intelligence Authorization Act of 1991 provides a legal definition of covert action as “an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly.” Importantly, covert action differs from clandestine action; the latter is considerably less controversial. Covert actions are not publicly acknowledged (and often actively denied) by the government that carries them out. By contrast,

clandestine activities are undertaken in secret out of tactical necessity and acknowledged by the government *ex post*.²

While covert action is typically associated with the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the Cold War, covert operations existed in various forms throughout American history. Throughout the 1800s, American presidents used covert operations to consolidate territory. For example, James Madison initiated covert actions in Spanish-occupied Florida from 1810 to 1812, John Tyler organized propaganda operations to secure the northern border between Maine and New Brunswick, and James Polk attempted covert activities to infiltrate the Pacific Southwest before later turning to direct military action (Carter 2000). By the early 1900s, increasing covert activities under William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt had strengthened US intelligence capabilities, which were centralized under the State Department during World War I.

The CIA was formally created after World War II in 1947. Presidents during the Cold War relied heavily on covert actions conducted by the CIA to stymie the specter of Communism. The Eisenhower administration set a strong precedent for an aggressive use of covert activities (US National Security Council 1953), and throughout the Cold War era, presidents initiated dozens of covert actions. While many of these activities only involved propaganda or political action, the most well-known cases—including covert actions in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Congo (1961), Cuba (1961), Indonesia (1965), Chile (1973), Angola (1975), and Nicaragua (1980)—consisted of paramilitary operations or extensive military assistance to insurgent groups. Figure 1 illustrates the locations of known CIA operations to support existing leaders and to install new leaders during the Cold War.³ The attitude of many political officials during this period is summarized by Richard Nixon, who frequently relied on covert action to achieve US objectives. Nixon wrote: “Overt economic or military aid is sometimes enough to achieve our goals. Only a direct military intervention can do so in others. But between the two lies a vast area where the United States must be able to undertake covert actions. Without this capability, we will be unable to protect important U.S. interests” (1989, 109).

By the late 1980s, scandals related to covert activities during the Reagan administration—most notably the Iran-Contra Affair—led to increasing congressional oversight of covert operations. Coupled with the fall of the Soviet Union

2. For example, a recent, well-known clandestine action undertaken by the United States is the 2011 Osama bin Laden raid conducted by US Special Forces.

3. These maps are generated using data from Berger et al. (2010) and Easterly, Satyanath, and Berger (2008).

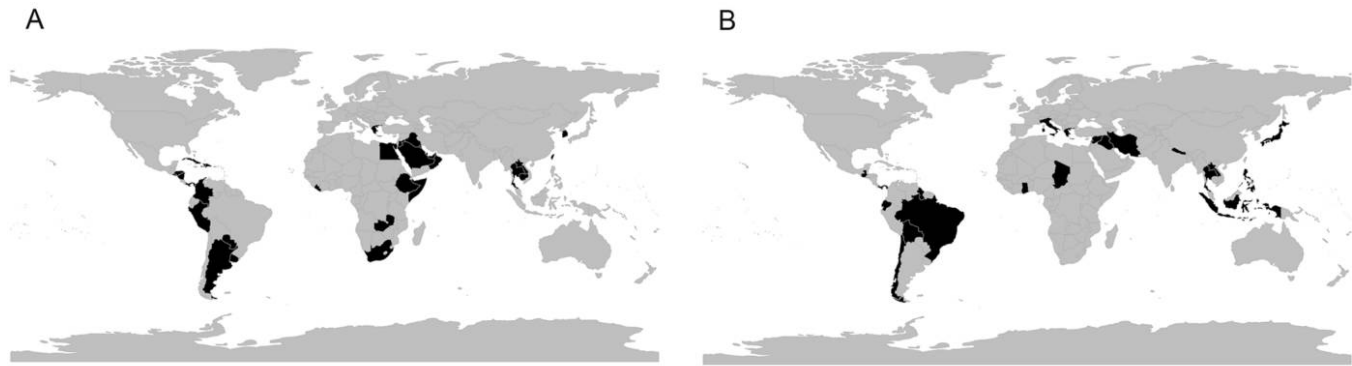


Figure 1. CIA interventions to (A) support existing leaders and (B) install new leaders, 1947–89

and the dwindling threat of Communism, the use of covert action as a foreign policy tool declined throughout the 1990s (Johnson 1989). The attacks on the World Trade Center in September 11, 2001, however, ushered in a new wave of covert activities. Weiner (2007) describes a rapid “militarization of intelligence” prompted by both an influx of funding for national security and the perceived failings of the intelligence agencies to prevent major terrorist attacks on US soil. This blurred line between military and paramilitary operations remains a hallmark of the present era of covert foreign policy.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR A TRANSPARENCY NORM

Given the classified nature of covert operations, systematic research and data collection on contemporary forms of se-

crecy in foreign policy making is difficult. Nevertheless, intense public scrutiny of current covert operations—most notably involving the use of covert activities and drone strikes in the Middle East and North Africa as tools of counterterrorism—warrants an in-depth study of public opinion on the subject.

Strictly looking at public opinion polls may lead policy makers to believe that democratic publics have a strong normative preference for transparency in the conduct of foreign affairs. While there are no systematic studies of this norm, polls reveal a consistent public aversion to the use of covert action as a tool for US foreign policy. Figure 2 displays the results of US national public opinion polls related to covert action across four decades in three different contexts.

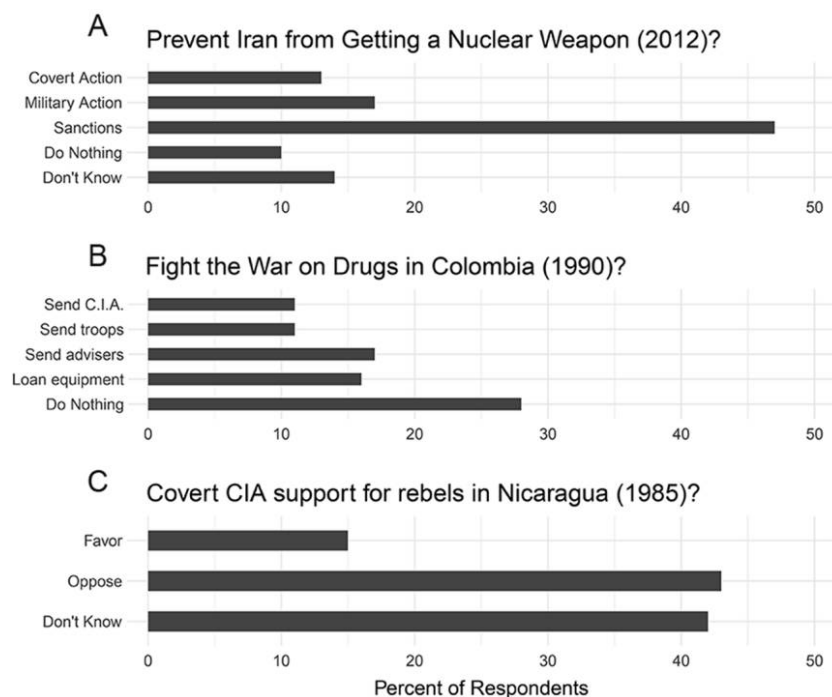


Figure 2. Public opinion polls on covert action. Results from national polls conducted by (A) United Technologies/National Journal (January 2012), (B) Gordon Black/USA Today (February 1990), and (C) Los Angeles Times (September 1985).

Importantly, while all of these questions reflect real world events, citizens are polled before the US government chooses which response to undertake. Therefore, these attitudes cannot be attributed to a post hoc evaluation of the relative success or failure of any covert activities.

Figure 2A shows results from a 2012 poll in which respondents were asked about the hypothetical use of covert action to prevent the Iranian government from acquiring a nuclear weapon (United Technologies/National Journal 2012). The survey asks 1,000 US adults: “As you may know, many in Congress and on the presidential campaign trail have said that Iran should not be permitted to produce a nuclear weapon. How far do you think the United States should go to prevent this?” Respondents were presented with four options on a scale of increasing magnitude: (1) doing nothing, (2) economic sanctions, (3) covert action, and (4) military action. Figure 2B displays the results of a 1990 national poll that asks respondents what the United States should do in order to fight war on drugs in Colombia. Respondents were asked: “Should the U.S. loan Colombia equipment such as helicopters and radar, send military advisers, send military troops to Colombia, send covert intelligence agents like the C.I.A. (Central Intelligence Agency), or do you think the U.S. should avoid any of these actions?” (Gordon Black/*USA Today* 1990). Finally, in figure 2C, a 1985 poll asked whether respondents favor or oppose the US government providing covert CIA support for rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government (*Los Angeles Times* 1985).

A cursory look at these results suggests a strong normative preference for transparency. Across all cases, there are low levels of support for covert action. For example, in the Iran case in 2012, it is striking that the American public is more supportive of direct military intervention in Iran than covert action. Extrapolating about normative commitments from public opinion polls, however, is challenging. Respondents may object to covert operations because they have a normative preference for transparency, but they also may object for a variety of other reasons. For example, respondents may believe covert activities are less likely to be successful or more likely to involve unsavory methods or objectives. Cross-sectional public opinion polls are unable to hold other elements of a given policy—including methods, costs, and outcomes—constant. This means we cannot discern whether respondents care about secrecy in foreign policy making, *per se*. Survey experiments provide an opportunity to isolate the importance of secrecy and transparency relative to other features of a policy instrument.

More generally, this discussion emphasizes the importance of controlling for expected outcomes in public opinion research. The proliferation of experimental research in in-

ternational relations has led to important insights about public opinion and foreign policy.⁴ This article underscores the importance of controlling for outcomes—or expected outcomes—when investigating normative beliefs or policy preferences. As I demonstrate in this analysis, without controlling for policy outcomes, it appears that secrecy has a negative and statistically significant impact on public opinion about a policy. However, once respondents are presented with (randomized) information about a policy outcome, this information dominates support for the policy, providing evidence that foreign policy “ends” far outweigh “means.”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Why and when might democratic publics hold normative preferences for transparency in the conduct of foreign affairs? This section develops two overarching arguments about the relative importance of secrecy and success. The first argument details why citizens of liberal democracies may have a strong aversion to secrecy and to covert action in particular. A second argument details why secrecy may be substantially less important to the American public than success. These two arguments generate contrasting theoretical expectations: holding all else constant, a strong normative commitment to transparency predicts public support for overt relative to covert operations, while a weak normative commitment to transparency predicts no major difference. After developing these two overarching arguments, I unpack different dimensions of a transparency norm by identifying three additional conditions under which covert action may be unpalatable to the public. These arguments result in five testable hypotheses.

Arguments about the existence of a transparency norm

Historically, liberal thinkers and policy makers argued that transparency is both an institutional feature of democratic government and an important liberal norm.⁵ Classic works in democratic theory, including writings of Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham, stress the importance of transparency for democratic accountability. As Bentham (1999) famously wrote, “Secrecy, being an instrument of conspiracy, ought never to be the system of a regular government” (39). Democratic leaders often invoke similar ideals. For example, when campaigning for political office, former president Woodrow Wilson proclaimed: “There is not any legitimate privacy about matters of government. Government must, if it is to be

4. See Hyde (2015) for an overview of recent experimental research in international relations.

5. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) define *norm* as a “standard of appropriate behavior for actors of a given identity” (891).

pure and correct in its processes, be absolutely public in everything that affects it" (1913, 59).

In the realm of national security, however, a legitimate need to maintain state secrets poses a dilemma for democratic states that espouse such principles of transparency.⁶ The tension between secrecy and transparency in national security is the subject of a long lineage of scholarship in history, political science, and intelligence studies. To varying extents, scholars have argued that liberal publics have a normative commitment to transparency in foreign policy and that public demand for greater transparency in national security policy has increased over time. Florini (1996) demonstrates that the push for increased transparency in foreign affairs was driven by the United States after the onset of the Cold War. This normative shift was intertwined with waves of democratization, changing norms about the use of military force abroad, and the development of new technologies that necessitated international standards for transparency. Florini concludes that in contemporary liberal states, "few governments are able to resist the demands of their populations for greater levels of accountability and democracy" (385–86). Historians and intelligence scholars trace parallel demands for oversight and accountability in the intelligence community specifically. As Lester (2015) notes, "Demands by the public for greater information have increased in recent decades, and procedures have been put into place to accede to these demands" (19). Johnson (2018) shows that shifts in public attitudes toward intelligence agencies resulted in dramatic changes from "a blind acceptance of a wide leeway for espionage activities toward advocacy of a regular spelunking by lawmakers and their staff into hidden caves of the governments secret agencies" (11).

However, a more systematic examination of the commitments that individual Americans have to transparency in foreign affairs has yet to be explored. Among democratic citizens, I argue that a normative preference for transparency in matters of international security stems from two main objections to secrecy. A first-order objection to secrecy comes from the belief that important policy decisions in democracies should be made with the consent of the public and that the public should have the ability to hold its leaders accountable for their actions. Democratic publics enjoy a variety of mechanisms to keep their leaders accountable, including public criticism, regularized elections, and—in the most extreme circumstances—impeachment. Since covert actions are not intended to be acknowledged by the government, scholars note that many Americans see them as "antithetical to our constitutional belief in government openness and account-

ability" (Daugherty 2004, 16). There is no *ex ante* public deliberation about proposed covert activities, and information about operations *ex post* is rarely immediately available to the public. This is problematic because covert operations are inherently consequential: they are designed to interfere with politics in other states.

A related, second-order objection to secrecy is made on the grounds that a lack of transparency in foreign affairs enables deception and can lead to an abuse of executive power in the long run. This is predicated on the idea that secrecy—particularly in the form of covert action—exacerbates a pre-existing asymmetry of information between the executive and the public. Fears about the misuse and abuse of covert action relate to a broader literature on presidential unilateral action and the expansion of executive power (Irons 2006; Moe and Howell 1999; Rudalevige 2008; Schlesinger 2004). For example, Schlesinger (2004) traces the development of what he terms an "imperial presidency," of which covert action is one manifestation. While Schlesinger acknowledges that states secrets are sometimes necessary, he contends that covert action is "vastly overrated" and a "dubious instrument" as a foreign policy tool that "imports bad habits into a democratic polity" (454).

To clarify, finding evidence for the existence of a transparency norm held by the American public would not mean that covert operations necessarily lead to an abuse of executive power or that they are inherently immoral. It would show, however, that democratic citizens have a normative preference for transparency in the conduct of foreign affairs. This normative commitment could stem from legitimate concerns about the erosion of public consent or fears of executive overreach. It could also, however, be shaped by misinformation, given that intelligence activities and covert actions are shrouded in secrecy. As many scholars argue, secrecy itself creates a "self fulfilling prophecy: if the United States only aids its friends secretly, than any link to the United States may seem sinister, portending much more than is the fact" (Treverton 1987, 1007).

HI (Transparency Hypothesis). The public will be significantly less supportive of covert operations relative to overt operations.

A second argument is that democratic publics privilege material outcomes over normative commitments in foreign policy making. In other words, citizens care primarily about the outcomes of a policy instrument rather than the nature of the instrument itself. According to this logic, if overtly or covertly financing a rebel group is equally costly to the United States and has the same effect on a foreign conflict, the public should be indifferent between these two instruments.

6. Colaresi (2014) refers to this as the "secrecy dilemma."

In this formulation, electoral accountability is driven by ends rather than means.

The idea that perceptions of success drive public support for US foreign policy is substantiated by existing public opinion research on the use of military force. For example, Feaver and Gelpi (2005) assert that “policymakers can tap into a large reservoir of support for the mission, even missions that entail a fairly high human price, provided those missions are successful” (97). Jentleson (1992) and Jentleson and Britton (1998) identify a “halo effect” that results from the successful use of force abroad. Before the US invasion of Panama in December 1989, average public support for US intervention was 32%. Shortly after the mission—in which the military leader of Panama, Manuel Noriega, surrendered to US forces—public support was roughly 50 points higher at 82.5% (Jentleson 1992). Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005–6) evaluate the “success hypothesis” in the context of public opinion about the Iraq War. The authors demonstrate that an individual’s belief that the United States would succeed in the Iraq War strongly correlates with the individual’s willingness to accept higher levels of casualties.

To bolster this line of argument, Eichenberg (2005) analyzes 22 episodes in which the United States used or contemplated using military force between 1981 and 2005. After aggregating public opinion data, Eichenberg demonstrates that there does not appear to be a systematic correlation between casualties and public approval. Instead, public support for a military mission is heavily shaped by perceptions of success, as illustrated by differences in *ex ante* and *ex post* public opinion of US military operations in Grenada (1983), Panama (1989–90), and Somalia (1992–93). Extending this logic to the use of covert military or paramilitary operations generates two observable implications. First, we would expect an operation’s outcome to have a much larger impact on public attitudes about government action relative to the means by which the action was taken. Second, if a similar policy is conducted covertly and reaches the same outcome as a comparable overt policy, public support for these policies should be roughly equivalent.

H2 (Outcomes Hypothesis). Holding outcomes of a conflict constant, there are no significant differences in public opinion about the use of covert relative to overt policy instruments.

Arguments about the conditional strength of a transparency norm

The first two hypotheses outline overarching arguments about the relative importance of a transparency norm in international security. However, it may also be the case that transparency is rewarded and secrecy is punished by the American public only under certain conditions. This section

describes three circumstances under which covert action may elicit widespread disapproval. First, attitudes about transparency may vary depending on the nature of the policy instrument. Specifically, the American public may be opposed to covert military operations but find it acceptable for the US government to be less transparent about other, nonmilitary policy instruments. Previous studies of US military intervention suggest that the public is sensitive to casualties sustained by American troops abroad and prefers to avoid direct military engagement where possible (Larson 1996; Mueller 1971, 1973; Schwarz 1994). Extending this logic, one could argue that covert operations involving the direct use of military or paramilitary force—and thereby risking American casualties—would be more unpopular relative to other instruments of foreign influence, such as covert financial assistance, weapons, or training programs.

H3 (Military Action Hypothesis). Secrecy in foreign policy making will be more unacceptable when it involves militarized relative to nonmilitarized action.

Second, democratic publics may be most disapproving of government actions when the government is aware of strong public opposition to a policy but proceeds with that policy in secret regardless. Previous research in political psychology demonstrates that perceptions of public opinion influence individual assessments of events (Mutz 1998). In a recent study, Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) show that an individual’s foreign policy preferences are shaped by social cues. Unified opposition to a particular policy also provides evidence of bipartisan consensus among the mass public. The tendency of congressional representatives to invoke bipartisan rhetoric in order to generate support for legislation suggests that bipartisanship increases public support for government policies (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005). Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that the perception of bipartisan consensus—even in the absence of true consensus—increases public approval of policies (Westood 2017). Extending this logic, we may expect public opposition to interact with secrecy to further decrease support for government actions. Covert actions that directly contradict the will of the public are more likely to be perceived as anti-democratic or even unethical relative to other covert activities.

H4 (Public Disapproval Hypothesis). Secrecy in foreign policy making will be more unacceptable when there is strong public disapproval of the policy.

Finally, it is possible that some Americans have more functional objections to a transparency norm. In other words,

they may believe that covert operations are more likely to be successful in achieving their objectives relative to overt operations. If this were the case, indifference between covert and overt action may not reflect an absence of a normative commitment but rather the conflicting positive effects of normative objections to secrecy and negative effects of functional objections to transparency.⁷ It follows that the American public should be less favorable to covert activities for which secrecy itself conveys no operational advantage. Specifically, if a government pursues covert activities despite knowing that secrecy will have no bearing on the outcome, this provides more explicit evidence of a deliberate attempt to deceive the public rather than to simply advance national security objectives.

H5 (No Advantage Hypothesis). Secrecy in foreign policy making will be more unacceptable when it provides no clear operational advantage.

This discussion generates five testable hypotheses. Table 1 provides a summary of hypotheses with the corresponding variables and anticipated treatment effects.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

To test these hypotheses, I designed three survey experiments each administered online in November 2018 via the Lucid Academic Marketplace to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 US adults, for a total of 3,000 respondents.⁸ Each experiment consists of two vignettes; the vignettes are presented in random order. Each vignette describes a hypothetical crisis abroad in which the US government is considering military action. The vignettes describe either a repressive dictator or an imminent civil war spillover.⁹ The two scenarios were selected for their plausibility and their generalizability across multiple continents. Given that surveys are often criticized for their realism, I assessed the plausibility of these scenarios using a convenience sample of 400 adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Over 90% of respondents described the scenarios as “somewhat realistic” or “very realistic,” with the latter being the modal response.

The three experiments have similar structure and content. First, respondents read ex ante information about a foreign policy scenario before the US government takes any

Table 1. Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Expectation of Treatment Effects
Transparency (H1)	Covert < 0
Outcomes (H2)	Covert success ≈ overt success; covert < success
Military Action (H3)	Covert × military force < 0
Public Disapproval (H4)	Covert × public disapproval < 0
No Advantage (H5)	Covert × no advantage < covert < 0

action. Embedded in the first half of each vignette are two randomly assigned treatments. Respondents are asked about the extent to which they approve or disapprove of the actions the US government plans to take. Second, respondents are provided with ex post information about the outcome. Embedded in the second half of the vignette is a third, randomly assigned treatment about the relative success of the operation. Considering this new information, respondents are again asked about the extent to which they approve or disapprove of actions taken by the US government.

All three experiments evaluate both public attitudes toward secrecy (Transparency Hypothesis, H1) and secrecy conditional on operational outcomes (Outcomes Hypothesis, H2). Each experiment also evaluates one of three conditions in which secrecy may be particularly unacceptable: (1) when it involves the use of force (Military Action Hypothesis, H3), (2) when it occurs despite public disapproval (Public Disapproval Hypothesis, H4), and (3) when it is pursued despite no clear operational advantage (No Advantage Hypothesis, H5). For example, experiment 1 evaluates the first three hypotheses. The first half of the dictator scenario reads:¹⁰

Consider the following situation:

- A dictator in [Asia/Africa/Latin America/the Middle East] is widely known for torturing and repressing his people and threatening stability in the region.
- Rebels within the country are attempting to overthrow the current government but have been unsuccessful so far.
- [Only experiment 1:] After debating different policies, the U.S. government decided to [T1: send money and weapons to assist the rebels/

7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

8. Lucid is a professional survey firm that maintains an automated marketplace used by academic researchers to field online surveys. Details about sampling and target demographic quotas are available in the appendix.

9. The location of the country was randomly assigned from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The results displayed here are pooled across different regions.

10. The full text of all three experiments is available in the appendix.

send in a small military force to assist the rebels]. [T2: The government informed the American public about the operation/The government kept the operation completely secret from the American public].

How much do you approve or disapprove of the actions taken by the U.S. government in this situation?

Then, respondents are asked whether they approve or disapprove of the government's actions (measured on a seven-point Likert scale). Embedded in the scenario are two randomly assigned treatments: (1) whether the response from the US government was military or nonmilitary ("military" treatment) and (2) whether the US government "kept the operation secret from the American public" ("covert" treatment). The covert treatment is implemented in a crossover design, such that one scenario in each experiment was kept completely secret. Next, respondents receive a third randomly assigned treatment, which tells them about the relative success of the operation ("success" treatment). The text reads:

Now consider the results:

- No American lives were lost, but there were a high number of civilian casualties.
- After one year, the operation was ultimately [T3: unsuccessful in removing the dictator from power and the situation has not stabilized/successful in removing the dictator from power and the situation has stabilized].

Considering this new information, how much do you approve or disapprove of the actions taken by the U.S. government?

Respondents are asked again, taking this new information into account, whether they approve or disapprove of the government's actions, measured on the same seven-point Likert scale. This process is repeated in the second scenario about a civil war spillover. The order in which respondents read the vignettes—dictator first or civil war first—is randomized.

Experiment 2 replicates the first experiment with minor changes in order to test the Public Disapproval Hypothesis (H4). Here, the type of intervention (military or nonmilitary) remains fixed at "send in a small military force to assist the rebels." Instead, a "public disapproval" treatment is added in which the American public overwhelmingly disapproves of government action. Otherwise, the wording, structure, and

presentation of the vignettes remains the same. Like in the original experiment, each respondent receives two vignettes, one that is covert and another that is not. The new text in the first half of each vignette now reads:

[Only experiment 2:]

- [T1: *NULL*/Public opinion polling demonstrated strong opposition (more than 80 percent) to U.S. interference in the country.]
- Ultimately, the U.S. government decided to send in a small military force to assist the rebels. [T2: The government informed the American public about the operation/The government kept the operation completely secret from the American public].

Experiment 3 also replicates the first experiment but modifies the covert treatment in order to test the No Advantage Hypothesis (H5). A new "covert (no advantage)" treatment describes secrecy as having no operational advantage but states that the US government kept the operation secret regardless. The new text in the first half of each vignette reads:

[Only experiment 3:]

- After debating different policies, the U.S. government decided to [T1: send money and weapons to assist the rebels/send in a small military force to assist the rebels]. [T2: The government informed the American public about the operation/Although military experts agreed that keeping the operation secret would not affect its outcome, the government decided to keep it completely secret from the American public].

Table 2 presents a visual summary of the three experimental designs. An "OR" indicates randomization (i.e., that the respondents receive one treatment or the other). The survey design mitigates a number of concerns that could affect the interpretation of treatment effects or affect external validity. One concern is that terms like "covert" or "clandestine" may confuse respondents. In order to minimize the use of technical jargon in this survey, the experiment simply provides information on whether the US government kept the operation secret from the American public. A similar concern is that the phrase "covert military operation" may

Table 2. Summary of Experimental Designs

	Experiment 1	Experiment 2	Experiment 3
Intervention	Military force OR money and weapons	Military force	Military force OR money and weapons
Secrecy	Informed public OR secret from public	Informed public OR secret from public	Informed public OR secret but no military advantage
Public opinion	No information	No information OR public disapproval	No information
Outcome	Successful OR unsuccessful	Successful OR unsuccessful	Successful OR unsuccessful
Hypothesis	Transparency (H1), Outcomes (H2), Military Action (H3)	Transparency (H1), Outcomes (H2), Public Disapproval (H4)	Transparency (H1), Outcomes (H2), No Advantage (H5)

connote small, stealthy operations, while the phrase “military operation” may connote large, costly interventions. To address this, in all vignettes featuring direct military intervention, the US government sends in a “small military force.”

Using this phrase also assuages a second, related concern: the extent to which the public is aware of the differences between terms like “military” and “paramilitary.” In addition to the fact that respondents might be confused by the term “paramilitary,” in contemporary contexts, the line between paramilitary and military operations undertaken by the United States is often blurred. Many of the most well-known covert operations during the Cold War were paramilitary operations

organized by the CIA. Today, however, the activities of the CIA and clandestine operations undertaken by the Department of Defense increasingly overlap (Erwin 2013).

ANALYSIS

The results of experiments 1, 2, and 3 are displayed in tables 3, 4, and 5, respectively. Each of these tables contains six regression models. In all models, the dependent variable captures how much the respondent approves or disapproves of actions taken by the US government, measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 indicates “disapprove strongly” and 7 indicates “approve strongly”), and the results are modeled

Table 3. Experiment 1: Secrecy (H1), Success (H2), and Covert Military Operations (H3)

	Before (1)	After (2)	Before (3)	Before (4)	After (5)	After (6)
Covert	-.604* (.063)	-.157* (.065)	-.591* (.063)	-.787* (.095)	-.182* (.059)	-.183 (.097)
Military			.309* (.085)	.117 (.115)	.201* (.082)	
Covert × military				.383* (.154)		
Success					1.199* (.084)	1.204* (.112)
Covert × success						-.0139 (.151)
Constant	4.170* (.044)	3.788* (.046)	4.005* (.074)	4.108* (.083)	3.072* (.084)	3.177* (.078)
Fixed effects	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗

Note. Ordinary least squares regression models with standard errors clustered by respondent in parentheses. Models 1 and 2 contain respondent-level fixed effects. *N* = 2,110.

* *p* < .05.

Table 4. Experiment 2: Secrecy (H1), Success (H2), and Public Disapproval (H4)

	Before (1)	After (2)	Before (3)	Before (4)	After (5)	After (6)
Covert	-.567* (.060)	-.287* (.061)	-.576* (.060)	-.727* (.100)	-.271* (.056)	-.224* (.096)
Public disapproval			-.310* (.081)	-.467* (.111)	-.180* (.083)	
Covert × public disapproval				.315 (.164)		
Success					1.206* (.084)	1.261* (.116)
Covert × success						-.0854 (.159)
Constant	4.189* (.043)	3.885* (.043)	4.342* (.069)	4.420* (.081)	3.366* (.086)	3.250* (.083)
Fixed effects	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗

Note. Ordinary least squares regression models with standard errors clustered by respondent in parentheses. Models 1 and 2 contain respondent-level fixed effects. *N* = 2,062.

* *p* < .05.

using ordinary least squares regression.¹¹ In each table, models 1 and 2 focus only on the covert treatment in order to test the Transparency Hypothesis (H1). Since every respondent reads two scenarios in a given experiment—one of which is covert and one of which is overt—these first two models include individual-level fixed effects in order to isolate the within-subject difference in approval of policies that are covert and overt. The remaining four models in each table display treatment effects of the three different treatments before and after information about the policy outcome is presented.¹²

The results of experiment 1 are displayed in table 3. The models show that before information about the policy outcome is presented, the covert treatment has a negative and statistically significant impact on approval of government actions. However, after additional information is introduced about the policy outcome, the covert treatment decreases in magnitude to an effect size of less than 0.1 standard deviations. In some models, this effect is no longer statistically significant. Further, the magnitude of the success treatment is roughly six times that of the covert treatment. These findings

suggest that while the public may have a normative preference for transparency, their attitudes toward actions taken by the US government are driven primarily by outcomes. These results support the Outcomes Hypothesis (H2); once outcomes are held constant, there is a much smaller difference in attitudes toward covert and overt actions.

Models 3–6 in table 3 display additional treatment effects from experiment 1. The military treatment captures whether respondents were told that the US government sent “a small military force to assist the rebels” or “money and weapons to assist the rebels.” Models 3 and 4 evaluate the Military Action Hypothesis (H3), which anticipated that the public would be more likely to disapprove of covert military or paramilitary operations as opposed to covert operations that do not involve direct military intervention. A negative, statistically significant interaction effect between covert and military would support this hypothesis. However, the treatment effects in table 3 suggest the opposite conclusion: the effect of the interaction is positive and statistically significant. However, this interaction effect, while always positive, is inconsistent across experiments and different model specifications. Holding all else constant, we have no evidence that covert operations requiring “boots on the ground” are more unacceptable to the public relative to those that involve other forms of covert assistance. If anything, these results suggest the opposite.

The results in table 4 present treatment effects from experiment 2. Overall, these results corroborate the findings from experiment 1. Across all models, when information

11. These results are consistent using (1) an ordinal dependent variable using a fixed effects ordinal logit model and (2) a binary dependent variable (with 1 indicating approval) using a conditional fixed effects logit model. For ease of interpretability, the results from ordinary least squares models are presented here. The appendix contains complete results.

12. The sampling procedure was designed to match demographic quotas representative of the US adult population (see the appendix). Results reported here are unweighted and should be interpreted as sample average treatment effects.

Table 5. Experiment 3: Secrecy (H1), Success (H2), and No Covert Advantage (H5)

	Before (1)	After (2)	Before (3)	Before (4)	After (5)	After (6)
Covert (no advantage)	-.894*	-.547*	-.893*	-1.017*	-.497*	-.364*
	(.066)	(.065)	(.065)	(.106)	(.059)	(.096)
Military			.251*	.132	.156*	
			(.078)	(.112)	(.078)	
Covert (no advantage) × military				.239		
				(.161)		
Success					1.194*	1.327*
					(.082)	(.111)
Covert (no advantage) × success						-.270
						(.152)
Constant	4.178*	3.977*	4.048*	4.110*	3.276*	3.288*
	(.046)	(.046)	(.069)	(.080)	(.080)	(.083)
Fixed effects	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗

Note. Ordinary least squares regression models with standard errors clustered by respondent in parentheses. Models 1 and 2 contain respondent-level fixed effects. *N* = 2,130.

* *p* < .05.

about the outcome of the operation is introduced, the magnitude of the covert treatment effect substantially decreases. In addition, the magnitude of the coefficient on the success treatment is roughly five times larger. Experiment 2 also tests an additional hypothesis, the Public Disapproval Hypothesis (H4). In experiment 2, all vignettes featured the same policy instrument (a small military operation), but respondents also received information about public approval of the policy. Those who received the public disapproval treatment were told that public opinion polling “demonstrated overwhelming opposition (more than 80 percent) to U.S. interference in the country.” This treatment exerted an independent, negative effect on individual approval of the policy. The effect is consistently statistically significant, suggesting that social cues may be a more important determinant of public opinion than the transparency of the policy process. However, the interaction between covert and public disapproval is not in the expected direction and fails to attain statistical significance at conventional levels. This means that while popular disapproval of an operation decreases support for US government actions, we have no evidence that covert (relative to overt) action is more unpalatable when coupled with public opposition.

Finally, table 5 displays the results of experiment 3. In experiment 3, the covert treatment was altered in order to test a No Advantage Hypothesis (H5). The revised treatment reads: “Although military experts agreed that keeping the operation secret would not affect its outcome, the government decided to keep it completely secret from the American public.” The implication from this treatment is that the US

government deliberately deceived its citizens. As anticipated, the covert (no advantage) treatment effect is larger than the covert treatment effects in experiments 1 and 2, providing support for the No Advantage Hypothesis (H5). Like in experiments 1 and 2, however, once controlling for outcomes, the magnitude of this effect decreases substantially, lending more support to the Outcomes Hypothesis (H2).

A visual representation of the main treatment effects from all three experiments is displayed in figure 3. To demonstrate the relative importance of secrecy and success, figure 4 pools responses across all three experiments. The plot shows the average ex post approval of US government actions described in the scenarios. As illustrated in the figure, the magnitude of the difference between an unsuccessful and successful operation is significantly larger than the magnitude of the difference between a covert and overt operation. In fact, across all different models, the magnitude of the success treatment effect is 2.5 to 6.5 times larger than the magnitude of the covert treatment effect. The findings from these three experiments are collectively summarized in table 6. The results strongly support the Outcomes Hypothesis (H2). While a normative preference for transparency in foreign policy exists, it exerts a significantly weaker impact on public opinion than the policy outcome.

ROBUSTNESS TO OTHER EXPERIMENTAL DESIGNS

Although replicating the main treatment effects across multiple samples generates confidence in these findings, additional concerns could arise from this experimental design.

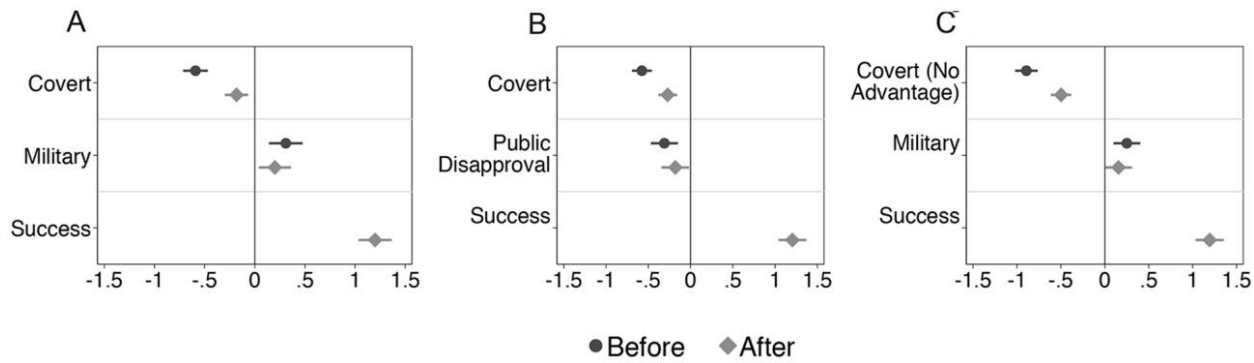


Figure 3. Main treatment effects from experiments 1 (A), 2 (B), and 3 (C)

One concern is that respondents are not closely reading the text. To assuage this concern, I removed “speeders” (the fastest 10%–15% of respondents pretreatment) from the analysis. I also included a manipulation check in experiment 2 that asked respondents to recall whether in the final vignette they read, the US government “informed the American public about the operation” or “kept the operation completely secret.” The substantive results are the same for the subset of the sample that passed the manipulation check. However, because excluding respondents on the basis of a manipulation check is a form of posttreatment bias (Aronow, Baron, and Pinson 2019), only the estimates of intention-to-treat effects are reported here.

A second concern is that the sequential nature of this experiment biases the findings toward the success treatment (T3). Since the dependent variable is measured twice within each scenario (once before receiving information about the policy outcome and once afterward), respondents may weight information about the outcome more heavily than they would if the material were presented all together. To demonstrate this is not the case, I replicated experiment 1 on a fourth sample of 1,000 US adults. In this replication, I included information about the outcome at the end of the vignette and measured the dependent variable only once. The results from this replication support the findings from the first three experiments. In fact, the effect of the covert treatment is even smaller, and the magnitude of the coefficient on the success treatment is at least four times as large. The appendix contains results from this replication, the manipulation check, and additional robustness checks.

REVISITING THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF SECRECY

The experimental findings have important implications for understanding the strategic logic of covert action. Naturally, survey experiments alone cannot provide insight into the psychology of individual leaders or the bureaucratic pro-

cesses through which high-level foreign policy decisions are made. However, it is possible to consider whether the micro-foundational evidence provided here is consistent with theoretical claims made in debates about secrecy and transparency in foreign affairs.

A first debate concerns the puzzling coexistence of covert action and liberal democracy. At the beginning of *Secrets and Leaks*, Sagar (2016, 1) poses a critical question: “Does state secrecy threaten democracy?” As previously discussed, some scholars—particularly those wary of the expansion of executive power in foreign affairs—stress the inherent threat covert action poses to democracy (Schlesinger 2004). However, others emphasize that secrecy does not necessarily pose a threat to democracy given that oversight institutions can hold leaders accountable for covert action retrospectively

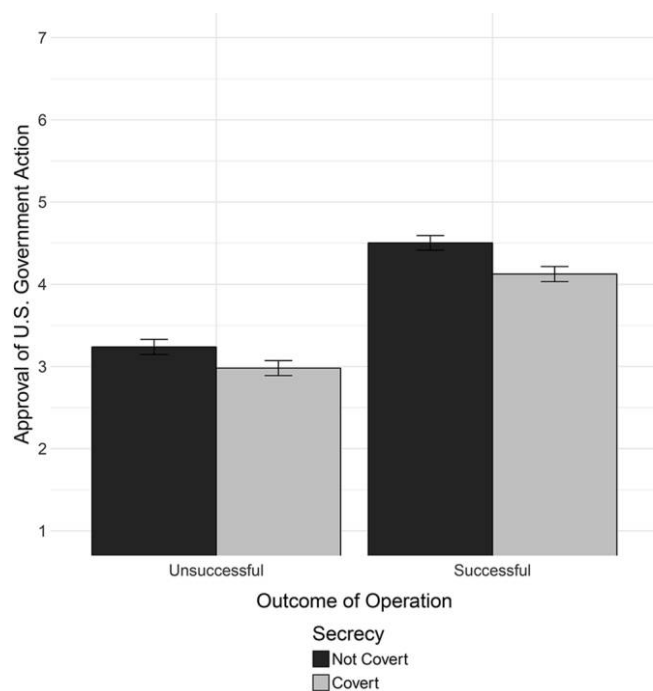


Figure 4. Average approval of government actions by secrecy and success

Table 6. Hypotheses and Results

Hypothesis	Expectation of Treatment Effects	Support
Transparency (H1)	Covert < 0	Medium
Outcomes (H2)	Covert success \approx overt success; $ \text{covert} < \text{success} $	High
Military Action (H3)	Covert \times military force < 0	None
Public Disapproval (H4)	Covert \times public disapproval < 0	None
No Advantage (H5)	Covert \times no advantage < covert < 0	Medium

(Colaresi 2014). The experimental results presented suggest an additional explanation for the coexistence of covert action and liberal democracy: a relatively weak normative commitment to transparency among the public. With respect to national security policy, democratic publics may hold leaders accountable not for the policy making process, per se, but rather the outcomes created by this process. If electoral accountability has more to do with outcomes than process, democratic leaders have incentives to engage in covert activities if they are likely to be successful, even if there is a possibility their activities will be exposed.

A second, related debate concerns a broader question of when and why democratic leaders engage in a risky strategy of lying to or deceiving their domestic audiences (Alterman 2004; Mearsheimer 2011; Reiter 2012; Schuessler 2015). If democratic leaders are more likely than autocratic leaders to both (1) be caught if they attempt to deceive their public and (2) pay significant electoral costs in the event they do so, why do we observe deception in the first place? Here, the experimental results are somewhat consistent with intuitions from Schuessler's (2015) research on deception and the use of military force in American politics. Schuessler suggests that leaders are most likely to engage in deception when their probability of success is high. As he summarizes, democratic leaders must "take a calculated risk that the outcome of the war will be favorable, with the public adopting a forgiving attitude after victory is secured" (4). The implication—which may be disheartening to advocates of transparent governance—is that secrecy, lying, and deception can be justified ex post in a wide range of situations if operational objectives are achieved.

CONCLUSION

This article explored the nature and strength of a transparency norm held by the American public. The findings from

three original survey experiments demonstrate that, while some evidence for this norm exists, it is rather weak. Instead, the public primarily evaluates foreign action abroad on the basis of policy outcomes. The implications of these results point to interesting directions for future research. In particular, one could think about how attitudes toward secrecy both with respect to policy processes and outcomes differ across domains of domestic and foreign affairs. For example, future scholarship may explore how institutional factors—such as the existence of unified or divided government or the level of partisan polarization—shape commitments to transparency in policy making. Recent research suggests that partisan attitudes influence the public's willingness to uphold commitments to constitutional checks and balances. In a series of experiments about presidential unilateral action, Christenson and Kriner (2017) show that public constraints on the expansion of executive power are weak because "partisan forces and policy assessments all but overwhelm these underlying constitutional concerns" (347). By extension, we may anticipate that citizens will criticize out-party executives for a lack of transparency but not hold in-party executives to the same standard.

Future research may also explore how transparency norms differ across individuals, leaders, and institutional contexts. Saunders (2009) shows that the policy decisions made by leaders are shaped by causal beliefs they hold about the origin of foreign threats. It is possible that beliefs about the costs of secrecy or the normative importance of transparency shape elite behavior in a similar way. With respect to institutional context, we know that the transparency of governance and the range of mechanisms available for intelligence oversight and accountability vary across liberal democracies (Baum and Potter 2015; Colaresi 2014). Whether unique historical experiences with covert action have a bearing on public attitudes toward transparency, however, remains an open question. For instance, novel scholarship on the history of covert action in the United Kingdom shows that the UK government uses covert action "regularly and with remarkable continuity" but has generally been better at "keeping covert operations covert" (Cormac 2018, 2, 267). A natural question follows as to whether the visibility of covert operations affects public support for their use.

Beyond these substantive lines of inquiry, the lack of evidence for a robust transparency norm highlights two broader points about future research on public opinion and foreign policy. First, these results demonstrate a need to unpack the microfoundations of existing models in international relations. The idea that citizens in a democracy may lack a strong normative preference for transparency is at odds with some foundational assumptions about foreign policy and the use of

force by democratic states. Second, these experiments highlight a methodological issue common in public opinion research. Measuring policy preferences *ex ante* may generate the appearance of a strong public commitment to a particular norm, but, as demonstrated in these experiments, *ex post* evaluations of foreign policies may be driven primarily by their outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Kenneth Schultz, Michael Tomz, members of the Laboratory for the Study of American Values at Stanford University, and three anonymous reviewers for invaluable feedback. A previous version of this manuscript was presented at the 2018 International Studies Association annual conference in San Francisco.

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