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Whitney Hua
University of Southern California

Thomas Jamieson
University of Nebraska at Omaha, tjamieson@unomaha.edu

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Whose lives matter? Race, public opinion, and military conflict

Whitney Hua, Political Science, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Thomas Jamieson, School of Public Administration, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, USA https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2716-5476

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how race affects attitudes towards conflict beyond the water’s edge. While prior literature largely assumes that all casualties affect voters’ attitudes similarly, we argue that attitudes toward casualties are importantly shaped by racial-group identities. More specifically, we argue that domestic responses to international events – namely American casualties in military conflict – are conditioned by individuals’ attitudes and biases toward the race of fallen soldiers. Using a novel survey experiment, we find that while people become more supportive of conflict when informed of any soldier’s death, support for escalating conflict only increases when the fallen soldiers have Pakistani and African American names. Our results suggest that people are more resistant to conflict when casualties of the war effort are perceived as belonging to their racial in-group, and less averse to those perceived as belonging to their racial out-group. This research is theoretically significant as it speaks to the fields of American politics; public opinion; international relations; and race, ethnicity, and politics. Further, this study demonstrates the need for scholars of public opinion and foreign policy to pay greater attention to race in future research, and highlights the importance of taking heterogeneity of racial-group identities seriously in social science.

KEYWORDS
public opinion, political psychology, international relations, experiments, race and ethnic politics

1. Introduction

Voters care about casualties, particularly when they hit close to home. This can have costly electoral repercussions for not only incumbent presidents (Karol and Miguel 2007) but also incumbent legislators as well (Grose and Oppenheimer 2007; Kriner and Shen 2007). Beyond hometown casualties (i.e., fallen soldiers who are identified as being from one’s hometown), public attitudes toward casualties and conflict
should similarly be impacted if voters feel another form of shared identity that may perhaps hit even closer than home.

In this paper, we theorize that attitudes toward conflict beyond the water’s edge are importantly shaped by race. In particular, we argue that domestic responses to international events – namely American war casualties in war – are conditioned by individuals’ attitudes and biases toward the race of dead soldiers. Our results demonstrate that prejudice indeed spills over beyond the water’s edge – specifically, racial biases amongst the public affect their sensitivity to military casualties. We find that racial biases can strengthen and lessen the empathy displayed toward military casualties, conditional on the race and ethnicity of the soldier.

Our study provides two main contributions to the study of public opinion and conflict. First, we argue that it is important to develop and test theories regarding the influence of race on public opinion and foreign policy. The American discipline of International Relations was founded on the study of interracial dynamics (Vitalis 2015; Zvogbo and Loken 2020); yet, the subfield of public opinion and foreign policy still largely fails to acknowledge and address race in a meaningful way.1 Particularly when it comes to studies regarding attitudes toward casualties, scholars often assume that all casualties regardless of racial and ethnic identity uniformly influence public opinion. Despite the fact that soldiers of color are more likely to be killed in action (Kriner and Shen 2010), the effects of military casualties by race on public opinion remain notably unexplored.

In this paper, we argue that the racial and ethnic identity of who dies matters. By integrating insights from racial and ethnic politics literature, we are better able to address how domestic publics form attitudes towards foreign policy and conflict. We build our case through a novel online survey experiment that varies the identity of soldiers killed in action. This allows us to estimate how racial and ethnic identity conditions individuals’ responses to casualties of war. We find that people are more supportive of conflict after all soldiers’ deaths, but support for the escalation of conflict only increases after fatalities of soldiers with Pakistani and African American names. We also find evidence that suggests people are more resistant to conflict when casualties of the war effort are perceived as belonging to their racial in-group, yet less averse when those killed are in their racial outgroup. Our findings demonstrate the importance of considering how structural racial and social hierarchies at home may condition the formation of public attitudes regarding foreign policy abroad.

A second contribution of this paper is that we dis-aggregate public opinion by racial–ethnic groups in the study of international relations, moving beyond its tradition of treating race as a control or dummy variable in models of public opinion. We argue that it is important to dis-aggregate public opinion about foreign policy by racial–ethnic groups to understand how people respond to military casualties overseas. By focusing on co-ethnic responses in a study of 1763 participants, we hope to address the
persisting blind-spot in experimental political research that continues to develop and test theories on a primarily white electorate. Our study importantly contributes empirical support for the notion that one's racial and ethnic identity matters in all political affairs, and that race should not be glossed over in public opinion studies of foreign policy. By utilizing a more inclusive empirical approach that takes into consideration the influence of race and ethnicity in shaping political perceptions, scholars can develop a more nuanced and comprehensive account of how US citizens form opinions and think about foreign policy.

2. Public opinion about military conflict

Previous research suggests that people have little political knowledge (Carpini, Michael, and Keeter 1996), and possess even less knowledge and interest in learning about international affairs (Holsti 1992). To make sense of a complex world in the absence of political knowledge, people often adopt information shortcuts when thinking and forming opinions about international affairs.

Generally, such cognitive shortcuts allow people to make decisions in line with their preferences without devoting effort into acquiring full information about each political choice (Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). With regards to support for military conflict or war, scholars have found consistent evidence that casualties influence public attitudes towards foreign policy. People are shown to react adversely to deaths (Mueller 1973; Gartner and Segura 1998, 2000), and are more supportive of conflict when the expected number of casualties is low (Mueller 1973; Gartner and Segura 2000; Huddleston and Weller 2017). Additionally, people also respond to what the stakes, clarity of objectives, and likelihood of success are for the conflict (Larson 1996; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Eichenberg 2005) – e.g., people support conflict when they perceive themselves as likely to come out on top (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Eichenberg 2005). Throughout this literature, however, there is an underlying assumption that people weigh all casualties equally when there is reason to believe that this may not be the case.

By studying casualties as aggregate figures, previous scholarship neglects to consider how identification with fallen soldiers may affect individual attitudes towards military conflict. If one identifies or shares some connection with the people killed in conflict, they might be less willing to conflict in the face of its costs. This is perhaps supported by the “proximate casualties” hypothesis, which finds that popular support for wars is more negatively impacted by deaths of Americans from nearby areas than by the deaths of those who lived farther away (Gartner and Segura 2000; Kriner and Shen 2010). Hometown casualties, for example, are associated with lower election returns for incumbent presidents (Karol and Miguel 2007) and incumbent legislators
(Grose and Oppenheimer 2007; Kriner and Shen 2007), as people are likely to more strongly identify and emotionally connect with deceased soldiers whose hometowns are the same or nearby their own. While the mechanism driving the relationship between geography of military losses and support for war remains underspecified (Althaus, Bramlett, and Gimpel 2012), this research suggests that people do not weigh all casualties equally.

The intuition of favoring those who share important commonalities with us, such as our hometown, ties into social psychological research on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987), and in-group bias (Druckman 1994; Brewer 1979; Brewer and Kramer 1986; Tajfel 1982). In particular, social identity theory asserts that inclusion and membership to a social group structures individuals’ self-evaluation and importantly drives their perceptions of the world (Huddy 2001). While scholars of public opinion and foreign policy acknowledge the dynamics of social group identity in shaping support for military conflict, this acknowledgment is usually limited to an overly broad conceptualization of social identity that is nationalistic and applied uniformly to all members of the public.

The American public is often treated as a unitary whole, in which people’s attitudes about conflict are homogeneous across race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. This is a problematic approach given that there is reason to expect systematic differences in public opinion across these groups. As Masuoka and Junn (2013, 2) convincingly argue: “a person’s position in the American racial hierarchy … creates systematic variation in group identity and sense of belonging, which in turn influence attitudes.”

3. Race and public opinion about military conflict

Attitudes towards conflict are likely to be influenced by people’s race and their level of identification with the victims of the conflict. We expect that the victim’s identity conditions people’s sensitivity to conflict, especially in their support for escalating the conflict, given the implicit assumption that further casualties of soldiers who are similar to the fallen soldier are likely to occur.

We identify a number of possible mechanisms that could drive this effect – working independently, or in conjunction, to reduce casualty sensitivity for some racial groups at the bottom of the racial hierarchy; increase tolerance of casualties in racial out-groups; and decrease tolerance of casualties in racial in-groups. While we do not directly test these mechanisms in this study due to resource constraints, we hope future research will explore further the different mechanisms and determine what affects attitudes about foreign policy.
3.1. Racial hierarchy

To understand the context in which interracial relations and biases are established, we must first acknowledge the structural role of the US racial order in perpetuating racialized institutions and practices that often drive misguided friction between racial minority groups. The global racial hierarchy has long been understood as one that is anchored by anti-Blackness and white supremacy (e.g., Wilderson 2010), yet it remains less clear where other growing communities of color may fit within the order (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2010; Masuoka and Junn 2013).

Regarding the positionality of the four largest racial and ethnic groups in the US (i.e., white, Asian, Latinx, and Black Americans), Masuoka and Junn (2013) conceptualize the hierarchy not as diamond-shaped, in which Asian and Latinx Americans share equal status between whites and Blacks; but rather as a racial prism where Asians are positioned higher and closer to whites than Latinx. Within a capitalist labor system that works to differentiate and set racial categories hierarchically (Glenn 2002), the placement of varying racial groups in the social order is determined relative to others by those in power. As racialized desirability for entry and citizenship is assigned in relative terms (Masuoka and Junn 2013), a particular group cannot be considered “desirable” for inclusion into American capitalist society without conversely solidifying the subordinated status of other immigrant groups whose labor is deemed comparatively less valuable.

From a social psychological perspective, Zou and Cheryan (2017) put forth a “racial position model” that positions each of the four racial groups in their own discrete quadrant that’s determined across two axes: their perceived (1) inferiority – superiority; and (2) cultural foreignness – Americanness. Both Latinx and Asian Americans, for example, are seen as culturally foreign relative to white and Black Americans – they differ, however, on the inferiority – superiority axis in which Asians are viewed and treated as relatively superior to Latinx and Blacks despite being still inferior to whites (Zou and Cheryan 2017). By taking into consideration the varying contexts in which racial identities are shaped, and how distinct racialized beliefs and opinions develop from these identities, we can better address how race affects attitudes about foreign policy in varying ways across racial–ethnic subgroups.

3.2. Dehumanization

Another possible mechanism is the explicit dehumanization of racial out-groups, which can affect sensitivity to casualties from these groups (Kteily and Bruneau 2017). Prior studies have demonstrated that dehumanizing the enemy or opponent serves as a necessary precondition to mobilize subjects against them in military conflict (Hunt 1997; Van Belle 1997). Other research demonstrates that explicit dehumanization is
associated with attitudes towards anti-refugee policies in Europe (Bruneau, Kteily, and Laustsen 2018), as well as support for the death penalty – particularly when participants learn it disproportionately affects African-Americans (Jardina and Piston 2016).

Further, the inadequacy of initial COVID-19 responses in imperial countries is demonstrative of their explicit prioritization of the economy over the lives of those in underserved communities, which have been disproportionately and greatly affected by the pandemic (Van Belle and Jamieson 2020). In this context, the dehumanization of those living in these neglected communities, particularly persons of color, is also likely to motivate individuals’ insensitivity towards casualties both at home and abroad who are identified as belonging to racial out-groups.

3.3. Implicit bias

Further, implicit bias could shape responses to military death in varying ways if the fallen soldier is perceived to be from a racial in- or out-group. While casualty insensitivity might be driven by explicit racial prejudice, automatic, nonverbal responses might shape people’s reactions without them being cognizant of it taking place (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998; Kinder and Ryan 2017). These “introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feelings toward an attitude object” likely shape individuals’ responses to information about casualties from conflict (Greenwald and Banaji 1995, 6).

Implicit bias affects attitudes unconsciously or through an interaction with prior beliefs (Winter 2008), affecting attitudes about immigration (Perez 2010, 2016) and political candidates (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002), among other policies. Given the explanatory power of implicit bias in shaping domestic political attitudes, it is likely to play a comparable role in affecting attitudes toward politics overseas such as sensitivity to casualties, as well as support for continuing or escalating military campaigns.

3.4. Racial resentment

Racial resentment to explain relative ambivalence towards out-group casualties. Racial resentment refers to a scale developed by Kinder and Sanders (1996) that captures the essence of modern, symbolic and cultural racism. Previous research suggests that “racial resentment is strongly associated with white Americans’ opposition to race-targeted policies,” with greater explanatory power “than other important political attitudes like ideology, party identification, and attitudes toward the size of the federal government as well as that of older and more traditional racial attitudes, such as old-fashioned racism, negative stereotypes, and antiblack affect” (Tesler 2016, 24). Until
this point, racial resentment has been used to predict policy preferences and election results in domestic politics, but little is known about how racial resentment translates into public opinion about foreign policy.

3.5. Grievability

Another mechanism through which we might observe differences in people’s responses to military casualties of different races and ethnicities relates to the extent to which the soldiers’ lives are grieveable. In contemporary politics, violence against the Other is frequently justified by the pursuit of security, but this necessarily involves prioritizing the value of certain lives above others (Butler 2010, 2006; Yancy and Butler 2015). For example, “the callous killing of Tamir Rice and the abandonment of his body on the street is an astonishing example of the police murdering someone considered disposable and fundamentally ungrieveable” (Butler quoted in Yancy and Butler 2015).

When some life is not considered grieveable, “violence against those who are already not quite living ... leaves a mark that is no mark” (Butler 2006, 36). This premise is likely to hold true for those serving abroad, just as it characterizes the experiences of people whose lives are not valued within the United States. As such, people are likely to be less sensitive to, and more tolerant of military casualties among people who are not considered grieveable.

3.6. Ethnocentrism

Further, ethnocentrism could explain casualty sensitivity within in-groups, and insensitivity to racial out-groups (Kinder and Kam 2010, 8). While might assume that Americans consider all fallen soldiers from the US to be their in-group and that there would be no variation in response to US casualties from different racial groups, tests of the “proximate casualties” hypothesis provides strong empirical evidence that this is not the case. Instead, information about fallen American soldiers who were additionally classified as belonging to the survey respondent’s community of residence led to a greater negative response to the military conflict even after controlling for cumulative national casualties (Gartner and Segura 2000; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997). As Nobles (2000, 22) described, race “create[s] boundaries of membership, assign[s] meaning and value to such membership, and invariably shape[s] the distribution of political power and the experiences of national citizenship.”

Building on prior research on ethnocentrism (Kinder and Kam 2010), people might be predisposed to react adversely to racial in-group casualties and be less supportive of escalating the military conflict that caused them. We consider especially likely when in-group attachments demand their attention and when they are encouraged to view the issue through ethnocentric terms (Kinder and Kam 2010, 37–41). When this is the case,
we expect that people will respond adversely when people from their in-group are presented as those bearing the costs of overseas military conflict. When primed, deaths of members of the racial in-group could prompt increased casualty aversion.

3.7. Linked fate

Identification with the killed soldier could also explain why people become more casualty averse when presented with a death of someone in their in-group. This could be “because the social, economic, and political realities of whites and blacks differ substantially because of race, racial interests continue to override class interests” (Dawson 1994, 8). More specifically, if people “believe that their own self-interests are linked to the interests of the race,” they are likely to be sensitive to casualties in their own in-group (Dawson 1994, 77).

As a result, perceptions of group interests could be shaped by linked fate, where one’s life prospects are indelibly attached to the rest of their social group (Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Vargas, Sanchez, and Valdez 2017; Schildkraut 2017). If people perceive their fate to be linked with others in their racial group, it is likely that this will influence their responses to in-group casualties of war. We expect that people will become more conflict averse when they are confronted with in-group casualties.

3.8. Hypotheses

We generate the following hypotheses:

**H1:** When presented with an in-group casualty, individuals will be less supportive of escalating the military conflict than those presented with an out-group casualty.

**H2:** When presented with an in-group casualty, individuals will be less supportive of escalating the military conflict than when presented with an out-group casualty.

We expect that racial attitudes do not stop at the water’s edge. Especially when considering casualties of military conflict, people who are prejudiced against out-groups at home may not be as sensitive to or affected by military deaths of perceived out-group members as they are to those in their in-group.

4. Data and methods

Previous research has examined aggregate figures of casualties against public support for war, demonstrating consistent findings that support for military conflict decreases as the number of casualties increase. However, one shortcoming of using this observational data is that it is very difficult to disentangle and isolate the causal processes that drive the changes in people’s opinions about war. The observational
data also assumes that the public is aware of the number of people killed in conflicts abroad when other research has consistently demonstrated that people know little about international affairs (Holsti 1992). To remedy these problems and to directly test people's responses to in-group and out-group casualties, we conduct an online survey experiment.

The experiment was conducted on a sample of residents of the United States. Participants were presented with an altered newspaper article that details news of a US soldier's death in an overseas military conflict in Niger. We chose the conflict in Niger as the topic of the treatment conditions due to its relative obscurity and low public salience in spite of its recency, with the hope of minimizing the likelihood of respondents' possessing strong preconceived beliefs and/or biases prior to the study. Other American military operations such as in Syria or Afghanistan, for example, are comparatively much more well-known with many individuals already likely to have prior information and opinions. The treatment article was based on several articles that appeared in recent years in the New York Times and Los Angeles Times (Bulos 2016; Callimachi et al. 2018; Gibbons-Neff 2019). Elements of the articles were modified to include different names and racial identities of the dead soldier. The full text of the treatments and the full experimental design materials are available to view in the Appendix.

4.1. Sample

We recruited a sample of 1763 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) through the vendor TurkPrime. We limited our sample to MTurk workers who were US residents, who had completed at least 100 HITs previously, who had a prior approval rate of at least 98%, and who were aged 18 years or older.

Our convenience sample, like many MTurk samples, differs from the broader US population on several dimensions; however, we consider our sample sufficient to test the effects of our treatments on our outcomes of interest. Prior studies have found that MTurk participants respond to treatments similarly to other samples (Casler, Bickel, and Hackett 2013; Mullinix et al. 2015), and that MTurk samples not only perform better than other commonly used samples in social science (Hauser and Schwarz 2016; Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Huff and Tingley 2015), they also do not differ from national probability samples in ways that are immeasurable (Levay, Freese, and Druckman 2016). While our sample restricts our ability to generalize the results to the broader national population, our design allows us to evaluate the effects of our treatments on individual attitudes about conflict.

Given prior recommendations for adequate and fair compensation for MTurk workers (Jamieson 2019), we paid participants $1.30 upon completion of the survey. We
expected the study to take between 6 and 7 min to complete, so this was expected to provide participants with an hourly rate of approximately $12/hour. The average time to complete the study was 6 min and 21 s with 74.2% of participants completing the survey in 7 min or less, meeting our expectations and ensuring that the majority of participants earned a reasonable wage for their time.

4.2. Procedure

Figure 1 presents the general procedure of the experiment. All participants were required to indicate that they were at least 18 years old to be eligible for the study. If eligible, participants are then asked to complete a battery of pre-treatment questions to collect their demographic information.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of seven experimental conditions, resulting in approximately 250 participants for each treatment group. Participants in the control condition proceeded to questions relating to the dependent variables, receiving no article. Participants in the placebo group received news about breaking in baseball gloves, and all other participants were assigned to receive a treatment condition formatted as a news article regarding the ongoing US military conflict in Niger.
The text in the treatment article was held constant across all treatment groups, and varied only by the name of the fallen soldier. More specifically, we varied the racial group identity of the soldier killed in battle for each treatment group by changing the soldier’s printed name in the news article. Previous research demonstrates that using names that are practically unique to racial groups signals the race of that person (Broockman 2013). To derive the names used for our experiment, we drew upon both the 2004 census data and prior research (Perez and Hirschman 2009). The five different treatment names featured are: Connor Miller (White); Tyrone Washington (African American); Javier Juarez (Latino/Hispanic); (4) Duc Nguyen (Asian American/Vietnamese); and (5) Misbah UlHaq (Greater Middle Eastern/Pakistani).

After exposure to the treatment, the placebo, or the control condition, we asked participants a series of questions to measure their comprehension and attention to the treatment conditions (Kane and Barabas 2019). Participants were then presented with questions designed to estimate our set of dependent variables. We first asked participants: “To what extent do you support or oppose the U.S. military conflict in Niger?” They are presented with a 7-point scale to record their response that indicates whether they (1) strongly oppose; (2) oppose; (3) somewhat oppose; (4) neither support nor oppose; (5) somewhat support; (6) support; or (7) strongly support the conflict. We recoded this variable to range from 0 to 1 for the analysis. As an additional measure, we also asked respondents to evaluate the extent to which they would support or oppose a policy plan to escalate US military involvement in Niger using the same aforementioned 7-point response scale.

Following the dependent variable questions, we included policy statements relating to whether people born outside the US should be able to serve in the military, and whether non-citizens serving in the US military should be granted citizenship. Participants were then asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 (Disagree) to 5 (Agree). The post-treatment survey concludes with a final set of demographic questions followed by a debriefing that explains the purpose of the study and how we adapted a New York Times article for the purposes of the study. Participants then received a code to input on MTurk to be compensated for their time.

5. Results

Our experimental findings demonstrate broad support for our hypotheses, although results from the subgroup analysis reveal the nuances of casualty sensitivity for racial ingroups and out-groups. In this section, we report the average treatment effects on our two primary dependent variables – i.e., respondents’ support for military conflict in Niger and their support for escalation of the conflict. We also present the results of our analysis for each of our dependent variables at the subgroup-level to further examine
how respondents’ racial and ethnic identity, as well as their party affiliation, influence their sensitivity to casualties. The results of the subgroup analysis highlight the heterogeneity of treatment effects on participants’ casualty tolerance by their racial–ethnic group. Finally, we present results for respondents’ agreement with the following two policy statements relating to US soldiers: (1) whether foreign-born individuals should be able to serve in the US military; and (2) whether non-citizens serving in the US military should be granted citizenship.

5.1. Support for conflict

Figure 2 displays the average treatment effects of our experimental conditions on support for the conflict in Niger. In short, we find that exposure to the experimental treatments is associated with greater support for the US military conflict in Niger. Relative to the control condition, the White treatment increased support by 0.473 ($p = 0.000$), the Asian treatment by 0.357 ($p = 0.007$), the Latino treatment by 0.264 ($p = 0.062$), the Middle Eastern treatment by 0.422 ($p = 0.002$), and the African American treatment by 0.437 ($p = 0.001$).

These results are somewhat unexpected given that casualties are generally associated with reduced support for conflict. This may be attributed to the fact that the conflict in
Niger was not very salient at the time of the survey, with American military operations in Syria and Afghanistan attracting much more news coverage and debate. Respondents may, therefore, have had more difficulty connecting with the lesser-known conflict beyond the hypothetical, despite the actuality of American intervention in Niger is still ongoing since 2013. This does, however, make our findings all the more compelling when we look at the subgroup-level. Even with the general increase of support for conflict after exposure to the treatment, we find that respondents do not necessarily increase their support equally across treatment groups, indicating that respondents are more willing to risk certain lives over others.

We now turn to our subgroup-level analysis where an interesting dynamic emerges. As we see in the results presented in Figure 3, white participants increase their support for conflict after exposure to all treatment conditions, with the exception of the Latino treatment. In contrast, Asian participants increased their support for the conflict only after exposure to the Middle Eastern ($p = 0.029$) and African American treatments ($p = 0.027$) – both of which signal racial–ethnic groups positioned lowest to the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

**Figure 3.** Support for conflict by treatment and participant racial–ethnic identity. Dependent variable: support for the US military conflict in Niger.

Note: *$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$, ****$p < .001$. 
On the other hand, African American participants increased their support for the conflict after exposure to the White ($p = 0.016$), Asian treatments ($p = 0.046$) and Latino treatments ($p = 0.060$). Latinx respondents’ attitudes did not increase after exposure to any of the treatments, but exposure to the placebo is associated with reduced support for conflict.

As racial affect shapes partisan identity (Knuckey 2005; Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Westwood and Peterson 2020), we next analyze how respondents’ racial and partisan identity in combination affect support for conflict after exposure to the treatments. Figure 4 reveals that support for conflict increased after exposure to out-group fatalities for several subgroups, especially among political Independents and Republicans.5

Figure 4. Support for conflict by treatment, participant racial–ethnic identity and party. Dependent variable: support for the US military conflict in Niger. Note: *$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$, ****$p < .001$.

Interestingly, we find that respondent support for conflict generally increased after out-group fatalities only, with the sole exception of White Republicans. Specifically, the results show that White Republicans are the only partisan racial–ethnic group that responded to an in-group fatality with increased support for conflict ($p = 0.024$). While this could reflect a general willingness to retaliate for in-group fatalities, it is worth noting that this result is not found among other subgroups. Latinx Republicans, for example, generally decrease support for conflict after exposure to the Latino treatment.
(p = 0.067). Overall, the results demonstrate considerable heterogeneity in responses when we account for both race and party ID in the subgroup analysis.

5.2. Support for conflict escalation

Figure 5 presents the average treatment effects of our experimental conditions on the support for escalating the conflict in Niger. While support for conflict generally increased across all treatments, support for escalating the conflict was more in line with our expectations, in which support only increased following exposure to treatment conditions with casualty names signifying racial–ethnic identities positioned at the bottom of the US racial hierarchy.

In particular, we find that participants who received the Middle Eastern treatment increased their support for escalating the conflict by 0.290 (p = 0.082), and those who received the African American treatment increased their support by 0.348 (p = 0.011). When faced with a decision about whether to escalate a conflict that would potentially risk even more US casualties, our findings suggest that participants are more supportive of escalation when the casualties are of Pakistani and African American soldiers than they are when the deaths are soldiers from other racial–ethnic groups. These findings broadly match what one might expect from the model of racial hierarchy with casualties
from individuals from groups at the lower end of the hierarchy prompting less casualty sensitivity than the deaths of other soldiers.

In Figure 6, these results are dis-aggregated to illustrate how racial and ethnic identity of participants affected the treatment effects. The figure shows that there are clear implications of a participant’s racial identification with how they reacted to the treatments. First, Whites were supportive of escalation of the conflict only after exposure to the Middle Eastern ($p = 0.030$) and African American treatments ($p = 0.022$). Asian participants’ support for escalation followed a similar pattern with support for escalation increasing by 1.189 ($p = 0.014$) after receiving the Pakistani treatment, by 1.198 ($p = 0.018$) after receiving the African American treatment, as well as increasing by 0.783 after exposure to the White treatment ($p = 0.054$).

In contrast, Latinx and African American participants did not increase their support for escalation after exposure to any treatment. Latinx participants were also less likely to support escalation after exposure to the Middle Eastern treatment ($p = 0.062$). In sum, our results suggest that individuals do not support escalation when casualties of soldiers belong to their own racial in-group. Additionally, we find that Whites and Asians support escalation specifically following the deaths of soldiers with Pakistani and African American identities.
American names. Again, these results broadly match expectations from the model of racial hierarchy, with Middle Eastern and African American deaths leading to less casualty sensitivity than deaths of other soldiers.

**Figure 7.** Support for escalation by treatment, participant racial–ethnic identity and party. Dependent variable: support for escalation of the US military conflict in Niger. Note: *p < .1, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

The subgroup analysis by both race and party ID sheds further light on these results, revealing that in-group fatalities appear to have little influence on support for escalation in either direction (**Figure 7**). However, political affiliations matter in responding to out-group casualties.

While several subgroups increased support for conflict escalation after exposure to out-group casualties, we find different effects among Latinx-identifying participants. Specifically, exposure to White (p = 0.100) and Pakistani fatalities (p = 0.035) reduced support for escalation among Latinx Democrats. Support for conflict escalation increased, however, among Latinx Republicans after exposure to the African American treatment (p = 0.086); and among Latinx Independents after exposure to the White treatment (p = 0.000).

In sum, while we find that out-group fatalities moved support among some individuals, the results indicate heterogeneity even within racial and ethnic subgroups based on party ID.
5.3. **Attitudes about foreign-born soldiers**

When it comes to support for a ban on foreign-born soldiers serving in the US military, our results indicate no direct effects of any of the treatments for this policy. Similarly, we find no effect of our treatments on agreement with the statement that non-citizens serving in the US military should be granted citizenship. However, the subgroup analysis in Figure 8 reveals important heterogeneity among responses.\(^8\)

**Figure 8.** Attitudes about US soldiers by treatment and participant racial–ethnic identity. Note: *\(p < .1\), *\(p < .05\), **\(p < .01\), ***\(p < .001\).

First, we find that Whites are less supportive of the notion that people born outside the US should not be allowed to serve in the US military by 0.296 after exposure to the White treatment (\(p = 0.014\)), and by 0.228 after exposure to the Asian treatment (\(p = 0.061\)).

Similarly, after exposure to the White treatment, participants identifying as White increase their agreement with the statement that argued non-citizens who serve in the US military should be granted citizenship by 0.253 (\(p = 0.016\)). However, this sympathy is not reflected in support after exposure to any of the other treatments, suggesting support for this policy is primed by reading the report of a soldier who died who was like them. Importantly, participants from other racial and ethnic groups do not respond similarly to Whites to in-group casualties.
In contrast, exposure to the Latino treatment actually increased support for the ban on foreign-born soldiers among African American participants ($p = 0.092$), with the treatment perhaps priming opposition among these individuals to an alternative path to citizenship through serving in the US Military.

Figures 9 and 10 report the results of our subgroup analysis with the addition of party ID on support for a ban on foreign-born soldiers and support for citizenship for US soldiers. First, Figure 9 demonstrates that no treatment led to increased support for a ban on foreign-born soldiers across Democrat or Republican subgroups.

**Figure 9.** Support for a ban on non-US born soldiers by treatment, participant racial–ethnic identity and party. Dependent variable: support for a ban on non-US born soldiers. Note: *$p < .1$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Support for the ban is shown to also increase among Asian and African American Independents after exposure to out-group casualties across several racial out-groups. Counter to our expectations, we also see increased support for the ban among Independent African Americans after exposure to the African American treatment ($p = 0.002$).
There are also some cases where we find decreased support for the ban, such as among White Republicans after exposure to the Middle Eastern treatment ($p = 0.021$). While it is unclear why these treatments worked on reducing support for the policy, one possible explanation is that news of fatalities of soldiers fighting for the country reduced racial animus by confounding stereotypes.

The analysis of our next variable of interest – i.e., support for citizenship for noncitizen soldiers – again demonstrates the complexities of public opinion about foreign policy.

Among the heterogeneous results, there are two items worth addressing further. First, there were no statistically significant treatment effects at $p < 0.05$ across Democratic subgroups, indicating that their support for this policy are less likely driven by our experimental interventions. In contrast, several Independent and Republican racial–ethnic subgroups responded to out-group fatalities with increased support for citizenship after exposure to the White and Middle Eastern treatments. However,
treatment effects were not always in the expected direction. For example, support for citizenship declined among Asian Independents following exposure to the Latino ($p = 0.009$) and the Middle Eastern treatments ($p = 0.009$).

Second, only White Republicans responded to in-group casualties by increasing support for citizenship for US soldiers ($p = 0.008$), suggesting that White fatalities may motivate support for policies they might otherwise oppose. This could be driven by White linked fate, which prior research suggests is a powerful motivator of political action among White Republicans (Berry, Ebner, and Cornelius 2021).

Overall, these results suggest that not all lives have the same effect on public opinion. Despite in-group fatalities driving greater support for citizenship among White Republicans, out-group casualties did not prompt the same response, with the exception of White Republicans’ response to the Middle Eastern treatment. Interestingly, support for citizenship even declined after some out-group fatalities – an unexpected result but one worthy of further attention in future studies.

6. Discussion

A striking feature of the backlash to athletes kneeling during the national anthem amid the broader Black Lives Matter movement was a common refrain that it was important to “respect the troops” fighting for the flag. Yet, our results show that all lives do not matter equally for participants in our study. Instead, we find that public perception of conflict is driven by the same structural racial inequities that characterize life within the US, with Black and Middle Eastern lives not prompting the same reconsideration of policy as other lives, especially for White and Asian participants.

The results from our experiment demonstrate that support for the conflict in Niger generally increased after most treatments. Subgroup analysis suggests that while Whites supported conflict more after exposure to all but the Latino treatments, Asian and African American participants supported conflict only after racial out-group casualties.

Perhaps more importantly, support for escalating the conflict amid the likelihood of increased casualties only increased following exposure to information about casualties from groups at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in the US. Further, subgroup analysis demonstrates that White and Asian participants increased their support for escalation following deaths of soldiers in racial out-groups, which was not true for Latinx and African American participants.

Finally, when we turned to attitudes about a ban on foreign-born soldiers and citizenship for US soldiers, we found few effects of the treatments with one notable exception. White participants decreased support for a ban on non-US born soldiers and increased their support for citizenship for US soldiers after exposure to the White
treatment. However, they did not have the same reaction to fatalities among other racial out-groups.

When examining the role of Party ID and racial identification in conditioning treatment effects on attitudes about soldiers, only White Republicans responded to in-group fatalities by increasing support for citizenship for US soldiers. However, some out-group casualties did influence support for citizenship - but this sometimes led to reduced support for rewarding soldiers for their service with US citizenship.

Collectively, our findings build a nuanced understanding of race and casualty sensitivity, showing that racial identities matter for support for conflict, escalating the conflict, and policies relating to US citizenship and service in the military. This reinforces the need for research to further consider the varying effects of racial–ethnic identity on how Democrats and Republicans think about politics both at home and abroad. We hope our study marks a preliminary first step in this line of research, and that future scholarship builds upon the findings presented here.

Following this, it is important to note several limitations of this paper that may motivate potential avenues for research. First, we hope future scholarship explores the different mechanisms introduced in the theory section to explain variation in individuals’ responses to military casualties. While our primary purpose in this paper was to demonstrate that race matters for weighing foreign policy in the wake of military casualties, further work is needed to test competing mechanisms in explaining how and why race matters in foreign policy attitudes. Scholars can rely on previously validated batteries in studies to test the effects of mechanisms such as implicit bias, linked fate, dehumanization, ethnocentrism, and racial resentment, or develop their own to study what drives differences and subgroup variation in treatment effects. A large and substantive research agenda lies ahead to understand what mechanisms explain the variation in our results.

Second, we note that because our study was fielded in December 2019 shortly before COVID-19 spread throughout the world, our paper does not directly address the ongoing pandemic. The results, however, shed light on much of the American public’s acceptance of the disproportionate casualties among people of color from the virus. We hope the experimental findings of our study might contribute to this emerging area of enquiry that may have previously been considered as non-partisan.

Third, it is important to acknowledge that our sample comprised of participants recruited from MTurk is not a representative sample of the population. While often considered a limitation, it is striking that we find treatment effects even in a sample generally considered more politically liberal, less religious, and better educated than the broader population. In many ways, our sample and our “weak” treatments with only the names varied make this study a difficult test of our theoretical expectations. Future work using national probability samples can reassess and further investigate the magnitude
of these treatment effects, which we expect will be larger with a more representative sample.

In sum, the arguments and empirical evidence in this paper demonstrate that race matters in public opinion about foreign policy. This paper contributes empirical support for the notion that one’s racial identity matters in all political affairs and that race should not be glossed over in public opinion studies of foreign policy. Ultimately, by utilizing a more inclusive empirical approach that treats the American public as formed by distinct racial groups, scholars can develop a better understanding of how racial and ethnic identity shape public perceptions of politics not only at home, but also beyond the water’s edge.

Notes
1. A notable exception is Gartner and Segura (2000)’s influential study, which uses observational data.
2. The full design of the experimental protocols, including the text of the treatments, questions, and coding of all variables is presented in the Appendix.
3. We report the results of these factual manipulation checks in the Appendix.
4. All results are presented in Table C2 in the Appendix.
5. Full results are presented in Tables C4–C6 in the Appendix.
6. Full results are reported in Table C8 in the Appendix.
7. Full results are presented in Tables C10–C12 in the Appendix.
8. Tables C13 and C19 report the full results in the Appendix.
9. Full results are presented in Tables C16–C18 and C22–C24 in the Appendix.

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