

No Man Left Behind?
Hostage Deservingness and the Politics of Hostage
Recovery

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Abstract

Kidnappings of soldiers, journalists, aid workers, and other civilians by armed groups happen every day. Yet, the politics of hostage recovery remains relatively understudied by international relations scholars. Whether and how governments choose to recover their citizens varies widely, as does public sentiment about bringing hostages home. To explain this variation, we develop a theory of hostage deservingness and detail how perceptions of deservingness affect support for a range of recovery options. We argue that deservingness is determined by the circumstance of capture—particularly whether hostages are perceived to be to blame for their capture. We test the argument using experiments embedded in two large, national surveys of the American public. The results of the experiments demonstrate that public support for hostage recovery depends on the public’s perceptions of who’s to blame for the hostage’s capture. When hostages are described as not to blame for their capture, support for rescue and ransom payment is at its highest. However, when capture occurs under circumstances that suggest the hostage bears responsibility, support for rescue and ransom payment decreases, especially when recovery is costly. These findings suggest a disconnect between public opinion and current U.S. government policy, which dictates circumstance of capture should be ignored. This predicts potential backlash for policymakers in recovering less sympathetic hostages, or failing to recover those seen as more deserving.

Armed groups kidnap thousands of soldiers, journalists, aid workers, and other civilians each year. In the last two decades alone, hundreds of Americans have been kidnapped abroad in several dozen countries (Loertscher and Milton 2015; Gilbert 2020; Kim, George and Sandler 2021).¹ According to the former director of the U.S. Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, “Not a week goes by without the kidnapping of an American citizen abroad” (FBI 2018). Kidnappers demand ransom payments, prisoner swaps, policy change, and press coverage in exchange for hostages’ lives. The vast majority of kidnapped Americans are released after concessions are made to the kidnappers; some die, fewer are rescued, and even fewer escape.²

While kidnapping and hostage recovery are highly salient foreign policy events, they are understudied in international relations (Loertscher and Milton 2018). One notable gap is our understanding of how the public views these events. Existing work suggests that kidnappers are more likely to target democracies because democratic publics care about hostage takings and pressure policymakers to respond (Lee 2013). However, little is known about what the public actually thinks about hostage taking and recovery. Does the public support hostage recovery, and would that support matter?

Motivated by recent hostage recovery controversies, this article explores two unexplained gaps in the politics of hostage recovery. First, though all hostages are victims of political violence, hostages can be polarizing: some appear to earn public sympathy, while others receive public scorn. Why does the public react this way, and how does this reaction translate

¹For instance, the Transnational Terrorist Hostage Event (TTHE) Dataset records 1,974 hostage-taking incidents between 1978 and 2018. This comprises nearly 17% of all transnational terrorist incidents over the four decades of the International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE) data (Kim, George and Sandler 2021). These data only represent a fraction of international kidnappings, as they are limited to hostage-taking incidents in which the perpetrator is a terrorist group.

²For more information, see descriptive statistics on kidnappings in SI.

to individual attitudes towards government efforts to bring hostages home?³ Second, while public opinion may be divided and take into account characteristics of the hostage and the context of the hostage taking, U.S. policy specifies that the circumstances of a hostage's initial capture are not supposed to be taken into consideration for recovery decisions. Are there political ramifications to this distance between policymaking and the public?

We develop a theory of hostage deservingness and explain how deservingness affects the politics of recovery efforts. Existing research suggests that hostage-taking incidents receive outsized media attention, and that hostage takers attack democracies in large part because of the perceived pressure on leaders to bring hostages home (Lee 2013). We argue that this pressure is conditional on the public's perception of the hostage and costs of recovery. We test the theory using experiments embedded in two large, national surveys of the American public (a pilot fielded in 2016 and a final survey in 2020). We examine two key factors that we hypothesize will influence support for recovery policies. We focus first on the deservingness of the hostage, which we conceptualize as the worthiness of a hostage of government support based on perceptions of who's to blame for the hostage's capture. Second, we contrast deservingness with the cost sensitivity of the public in terms of the operational costs of a rescue mission and the amount of ransom demanded. Finally, we hypothesize an interaction between the two with cost sensitivity decreasing for hostages perceived as more deserving.

We find that public support for hostage recovery is highly dependent on the public's perception of who's to blame for the hostage's capture. In general, support for hostage rescue missions is high and preferred to paying a ransom. A majority of respondents surveyed support hostage rescue. However, that support is conditional on the factors we suggest. The

³Our work joins other recent scholarship that seeks to understand individual attitudes about important issues in international security. See, e.g., Mattes and Weeks (2019); Myrick (2019); Kertzer, Rathbun and Rathbun (2020); Tomz and Weeks (2020); Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo (2020); Dill and Schubiger (2021); Kostyuk and Wayne (2021).

public exhibits the greatest support for recovering Americans who were captured while “just following orders” or granted permission to travel by the State Department. However, when the circumstances of the kidnapping suggest that the hostage holds personal blame for being in a dangerous situation, support for rescue plummets—especially when the ransom amount is high or the rescue mission is costly.

Our theory and findings make several important contributions to the study and practice of international politics. First, we bring together several literatures across the social sciences, including research on public support for social welfare programs, that note a pattern of the use of deservingness as a heuristic to explain a range of social outcomes. Our work is also part of a growing literature that focuses on deservingness in the field of international security. Second, to our knowledge, this represents the first scholarly examination of what the public thinks about hostage taking and recovery—a powerful and highly newsworthy form of international violence (Lee 2013; Kim, George and Sandler 2021). A growing literature explores why armed groups kidnap (Forest 2012; Shortland 2019; Gilbert 2022); how the media covers hostage-taking incidents (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2013; Fattal 2014; Gilbert 2020); and the determinants of hostage-taking success (Sandler and Scott 1987; Gaibullov and Sandler 2009; Loertscher and Milton 2018). While debates about ransom payments or negotiating with terrorists abound, little is known about what the American public thinks about these incidents and the potential impact on recovery options. In the United States—as well as other countries such as France (Simon 2019) and Israel (Sherwood 2010)—kidnapping events garner tremendous public attention, thus it is essential to understand more about how the public thinks about these attacks. While we do not suggest that hostage recovery decisions should be dictated by the public, whether Americans believe a hostage is more or less deserving of recovery can affect the political calculus of leaders tasked with bringing them home under public scrutiny (Lee 2013). Third, our findings suggest a disconnect between public opinion and stated policy on this issue: While our results show that the public is appar-

ently discerning about differences in hostage deservingness, official U.S. doctrine makes no distinction among hostages in this way. We suggest that this is a design feature, not bug, of policies meant to provide assurance to Americans taking risky assignments abroad, and to deter would-be hostage takers from capturing Americans. Still, our work shows that officials face political consequences for rescuing blameworthy victims—or for failing to recover hostages seen as more deserving.

A Tale of Two Hostages

The contrast in the public response to the recovery of hostages Captain Richard Phillips and Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl exemplifies these dynamics. In April 2009, U.S. Navy SEAL Team 6 parachuted into the pirate-laden waters off the coast of Somalia to recover U.S. Merchant Marine Captain Richard Phillips, held hostage for four days in a small lifeboat by three Somali pirates (McNight and Hirsh 2012). Under direct orders from the President of the United States, the SEALs took simultaneous shots from the back of the nearby *USS Bainbridge* missile destroyer, killing all three pirates and ending Phillips’s captivity. The public hailed Phillips as a hero; President Obama said shortly after the operation, “I share the country’s admiration for the bravery of Captain Phillips and his selfless concern for his crew. His courage is a model for all Americans” (Discovery 2009). Four years later, Captain Phillips’s saga was dramatized in the eponymous Oscar-nominated film, in which the merchant marine was played by Tom Hanks.

While the response to Captain Phillips’s daring rescue suggests that Americans are invested in recovering upstanding professionals whose job responsibilities put them in the line of danger, not all captured Americans garner this level of public support.⁴ Several months

⁴Reporting suggests that Captain Phillips was not a “perfect” victim, despite being heralded as a hero: Crew from the *Maersk Alabama* sued their employer over the captain’s

later, in June 2009, recently deployed Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl walked off his base in Paktika province, Afghanistan. Ostensibly hoping his desertion would provide the opportunity to report management problems to senior leadership, Bergdahl was instead captured by the Taliban and held by the Haqqani Network for five years (Rubin 2019). When Bergdahl disappeared, the U.S. military immediately launched around-the-clock search and rescue teams to recover him, including an unsuccessful Navy SEAL mission in which one SEAL lost part of his leg and a service dog was killed.⁵

Throughout these rescue attempts, the circumstances of Bergdahl's capture featured prominently in the minds of those involved. Describing the rescue on the popular podcast, *Serial*, Command Sergeant Major Ken Wolfe stated, "The other battalions within the organization were looking for him too. And so, you know, how does it make you feel when you've walked for 15 days straight looking for a guy who walked off?" The reporter and podcast host, Sarah Koenig, replied that the military "...also knew, or were at least pretty confident, that Bowe had left [his outpost] voluntarily, and now they felt like they were going through hell on his behalf...Most of the people I talked to about this time, they said this search inflicted such major damage on morale, which can be a delicate thing to maintain in the best of times."⁶

Years after multiple unsuccessful rescue attempts, President Obama authorized a prisoner exchange, trading Bergdahl for the release of five Taliban detainees held at Guantanamo.

alleged negligence and forsaking protocol. See Erich Fuchs, "This Lawsuit Supposedly Tells the 'True Story' of Captain Richard Phillips' Pirated Ship," *Business Insider*, 11 October 2013, Online at <https://www.businessinsider.com/lawsuit-against-maersk-line-over-captain-phillips-ship-2013-10>.

⁵*Serial*, Season 2, <https://serialpodcast.org/season-two/>

⁶From transcript of *Serial*, Season 2, Episode 2, found here: <https://serialpodcast.org/season-two/2/the-golden-chicken/transcript>

The public's outrage at the swap stemmed at least in part from the fact that Bergdahl was a deeply unpopular victim. The U.S. military had charged Bergdahl with "desertion with intent to shirk important or hazardous duty," as well as "misbehavior before the enemy by endangering the safety of a command, unit, or place." Nevertheless, President Obama was steadfast in his support for bringing Bowe Bergdahl home, stating "The United States has always had a pretty sacred rule, and that is we don't leave our men or women in uniform behind... regardless of the circumstances, whatever those circumstances may turn out to be, we still get an American soldier back if he's held in captivity. Period. Full stop. We don't condition that." Obama's celebration of Bergdahl's recovery and warm embrace of the Bergdahl family was highly controversial, and it led to vociferous, bipartisan criticism of his Administration's choices.⁷ It also affected the president's approval ratings. A June 2014 *Pew/USA Today* poll suggests that while the American public supports hostage recovery efforts in general, they disapproved of Obama's handling of the Bergdahl case.⁸ Donald Trump capitalized on this during the 2016 presidential campaign, calling Bergdahl a "no-good traitor who should have been executed"; President Trump later described the decision not to give Bergdahl the death penalty as "a complete and total disgrace to our Country and to our Military" (Diaz 2017).

Public Opinion and the Politics of Recovery

There are several reasons to think that the American public cares about hostage taking and recovery. First, transnational kidnappings are highly salient, newsworthy events. As

⁷Michael Crowley, "How the Bergdahl Story Went from Victory to Controversy for Obama," *Time*, 3 June 2014, Online at <https://time.com/2817830/bowe-bergdahl-obama/>.

⁸<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2014/06/09/obama-bergdahl-opinion-poll/10234425/>

Chermak and Grunewald (2006) and Weimann and Brosius (1991) have shown, transnational kidnappings attract significantly more media coverage than other forms of violence. This has meaningful implications for what that public knows about Americans kidnapped abroad. For example, according to a September 2014 *NBC/ Wall Street Journal* poll, 94% of Americans were aware of the kidnapping of journalist Jim Foley and his subsequent beheading at the hands of his Islamic State captors—the highest proportion of Americans aware of any news event polled in the prior five years (NBC 2014). Moreover, kidnappings are precisely the types of events covered in many types of media including soft news, which is likely to reach even the relatively unaware (Baum 2002). Thus, although other foreign policy decisions are frequently insulated from public opinion because of American disinterest in the subject (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955), the public is likely more familiar with kidnapping cases.

Second, there are several features of transnational kidnappings that have been shown to affect the amount of media coverage a case receives, including whether the kidnapping is framed as terrorism, the total number of hostages taken, and whether or not there was a rescue attempt (Gilbert 2020). As Gilbert argues, hostage crises generate a “collapse of compassion,” in which the public pays more attention to—and is more willing to help—a single, named individual than a larger group of nameless victims (2020). Public outreach by hostage families relies on this notion: By launching social media campaigns⁹ or online petitions that highlight the plight of their loved one¹⁰ they hope the public will put political pressure on the U.S. government to do something about the case.

Third, hostage takers depend on the public’s attention when making targeting decisions.

⁹Elizabeth Dias, “The Art of the Hostage Deal,” *Time*, 27 July 2017, Online at <https://time.com/4876077/the-art-of-the-hostage-deal/>.

¹⁰Jason Rezaian, “Opinion: A hostage in Tehran goes free (for now),” the *Washington Post*, 23 August 2018, Online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/08/23/a-hostage-in-tehran-goes-free-for-now/>.

Democracies are more often the targets of hostage takings. Importantly, as Lee (2013) demonstrates, hostage takers target democracies because of two national characteristics related to public opinion. First, hostage takers are more likely to target countries with higher levels of press freedom. Second, hostage takers are more likely to target countries with a larger commitment to civil liberties. As Lee writes, “the limit to the hostages’ personal freedom and the threat to the hostages’ lives are therefore difficult for the audience in democracies to bear” (2013, 238). Together, these features imply that hostage takers target countries where they believe (1) the media will cover the event, increasing public attention; and (2) the public will care enough about the hostage’s freedom to pressure the government to negotiate. Moreover, regular elections pressure officials to do what they can to bring hostages home. Lee continues,

When a hostage crisis happens in democracies, the public is unlikely to accept sacrificing hostages, and therefore a rational decisionmaker who faces pressure from constituents usually sees rescuing hostages as a higher priority. In other words, democratic leaders who are concerned about their political prospects have to link their personal interests to the hostages’ interests because the latter receive more public attention (2013, 238).

By focusing on the plight of an individual victim, presidents may be seen as compassionate and effective. They likely see political benefits in bringing a hostage home—suggested by the fanfare of Oval Office or Rose Garden events to mark a hostage’s return. Applying Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo (2020): elected officials may feel pressured to bring hostages home because contravening public opinion could result in heavy political costs (“responsiveness”) or because the public makes future election decisions on foreign policy compatibility (“selection”).

This public pressure to recover hostages may compel policymakers to launch rash rescue missions. There is perhaps no episode that embodies these dynamics more than the

ill-advised actions taken by President Jimmy Carter to try to recover the 52 Americans held captive in the U.S. embassy in Tehran. On November 4, 1979, an armed mob took over the American embassy, initially taking 63 diplomats, marines, and embassy visitors hostage. Over the course of the next 444 days, the Carter administration searched for ways to resolve the crisis and bring the American captives home. By the spring of 1980, military planners had presented Carter with options for a rescue mission. Internal documents from the Carter administration reveal that the President's advisors unanimously doubted that a rescue mission would succeed:

Rescuing the hostages, furnishing the episode with a Hollywood ending, appeared to be nothing more than a fantasy. . . the Secretary of State was dead set against any military effort to rescue their colleagues. . . even the men secretly planning hard to create that option. . . set the probability of success at "zero." Experts called it self-defeating and probably suicidal (Bowden 2007, 211-212).

Nevertheless, the White House continued entertaining plans for a military rescue, focusing entirely on the political—rather than operational—costs and benefits:

Rescue was enormously appealing. For the beleaguered White House, the prospect of a precise, relatively bloodless liberation from this dilemma was a joy to contemplate. Success would demonstrate remarkable daring, capability, and resolve. . . Americans would rejoice. Carter's second term would be virtually assured. Yet as delightful as success was to contemplate, failure was correspondingly calamitous. The jury-rigged mission plan contrived by the Pentagon's plotters would be, without a doubt, one of the boldest and most complex military missions in American history. Potential disaster lurked at every step. . . Any one of these entirely plausible setbacks could mean the deaths of all or many of the hostages, and possibly the loss of the entire American force (Bowden 2007, 409–

By launching a rescue mission that even the planners expected to fail, the Carter Administration clearly violated the only two official considerations in launching a rescue mission—“risk to force (the guys going in) and risk to mission (the hostage)”¹¹—in order to secure a potentially monumental political victory.

As the Bergdahl case suggests, however, policymakers may also face backlash when they recover an unpopular hostage. We do not suggest that policymakers *should* consider characteristics of the hostage or the public’s support in recovery calculations; hostage situations present complicated challenges to national security beyond the public’s purview. However, those presidents who have acted in contravention of the public’s wishes have suffered political consequences.¹² Given these political ramifications, we posit that it is valuable to understand what the public actually thinks about hostage taking and recovery.

No Man Left Behind?

What explains variation in public support for hostage recovery? We argue that as Americans learn about hostage taking and recovery they will rely on certain cues or heuristics about the hostage to inform their opinion on whether the government should expend resources on a rescue attempt or pay a ransom demanded as a condition of release. The real world examples discussed throughout our manuscript as well as the literature on public opinion and international conflict more generally point to at least two key features of a kidnapping scenario that influence public opinion: the hostage’s deservingness (defined below) and the

¹¹Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

¹²In addition, hostage recovery decisions might also introduce audience costs. Some percentage of Americans may know vaguely of the government’s “no concessions” policy and may thus oppose making concessions to kidnappers as hypocrisy.

operational costs of bringing them home. We discuss each in turn.

First, we build on a large body of work explaining support for government expenditures like welfare to argue that the deservingness heuristic affects individuals' beliefs about how government resources should be expended for hostage recovery. Specifically, research on public opinion about domestic welfare programs finds that judgements about how recipients came to be in need of financial assistance affects how individuals view the obligation of their government to help them. In the context of domestic welfare programs, scholars note that this heuristic follows from individual evaluations of the extent to which the poor are responsible for their economic condition (Gilens 1999; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Bénabou and Tirole 2006). People make both backward-looking and forward-looking judgments by asking how individuals came to be poor (backward-looking) and whether they will attempt to improve their economic condition in the future (forward-looking) (Petersen et al. 2010).

The deservingness heuristic has been shown to be a key predictor of support for domestic redistribution in a wide variety of contexts (Gilens 1999; Fong 2001; Alesina and Giuliano 2011).¹³ Scholars have also demonstrated that variation in these beliefs contribute to the difference between the United States and Europe in the size of the welfare state (Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote 2001; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005). Americans on average tend to believe the poor are more responsible¹⁴ for their condition, while Europeans tend to think poverty is more the result of bad luck.¹⁵

¹³Judgments about intentionality and blame have also been shown by scholars to affect perceptions in international conflict (Chu, Holmes and Traven 2021).

¹⁴For recent work on the cognitive building blocks of perceptions blame, see, for example, Malle (2006), Malle, Guglielmo and Monroe (2014), and Quillien and German (2021).

¹⁵Recent research has also shown that if one induces Americans to believe the poor are less responsible for their economic condition, then Americans support redistribution at rates

We can build on this logic to theorize about hostage deservingness. First, governments must decide to allocate resources to assist hostages in the same way that governments decide to allocate resources to assist the poor. Governments can spend significant resources on rescue missions and ransom payments, and can also pursue less expensive options such as engaging in negotiation. Second, like when individuals evaluate poverty-stricken individuals' responsibility for their economic situation, individuals may vary in the extent to which they think a hostage used bad judgment or was otherwise responsible for their own capture, or instead, if their capture was not their fault or the result of bad luck. Hostages will be viewed as more deserving if their capture is the result of bad luck rather than bad judgment. We expect perceptions of hostage deservingness to then influence individual support for recovery efforts. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: The more hostages are perceived as responsible for their capture, the less the public will support their recovery through rescue or negotiating and paying a ransom.

Next, we consider the idea of cost sensitivity, related to the operational costs of hostage recovery. This builds on the idea of casualty sensitivity found to be a relatively good predictor of support or opposition to military interventions abroad. Scholars have looked for example at how casualties accumulated over time during the course of a war affect approval for wartime efforts (Mueller 1971). Public opinion trends suggest that support for war tends to degrade over time as casualties rise. Others have argued that cumulative casualties cannot be separated from simple time trends and have thus argued that marginal increases or decreases in casualties should be explored. These researchers find that Americans are also sensitive to recent casualties with support for military involvement decreasing in the presence of large recent increases in casualties (Gartner and Segura 1998). In addition to approval or

similar to Europeans (Aarøe and Petersen 2014).

disapproval of a given conflict, scholars have also shown that casualties affect other political outcomes such as approval of the president and vote choice (Karol and Miguel 2007).

Policymakers have several costs to consider when deciding whether they should negotiate or make concessions in exchange for hostages' safe return. Ransoms can be expensive, as kidnapers may demand millions—if not tens of millions—of dollars Kim, George and Sandler (2021). These concessions can strengthen the kidnapping organization, whether by bolstering their coffers through ransom money or augmenting their ranks with released prisoners. Making concessions can also increase future risk to other Americans. If the kidnapers learn from precedent that hostage taking works, they may be more likely to kidnap again in the future (Brandt, George and Sandler 2016).

Military rescue missions seem to be an attractive alternative to making concessions. If successful, they too have the benefit of recovering the captive, plus they punish—rather than reward—the perpetrator. However, rescue missions also present staggering operational costs. Rescue attempts represent the most dangerous time for a hostage—when she is most likely to be killed by her captors or die in the crossfire (MacWillson 1992; Wright 2009). Like ransoms, they too cost millions of dollars. They require substantial, accurate intelligence and legal permissions to conduct operations in other countries, and they put U.S. servicemembers at risk. For these reasons, rescue missions are seldom attempted and rarely succeed: Between 2001 and 2015, for instance, the U.S. military conducted several dozen known rescue missions, but only four hostages were recovered alive.¹⁶

On the rare occasions that rescues are attempted, they are conducted by the military's special forces, including the Navy's SEALs and Army's Delta Force. According to a former FBI Special Agent, each rescue is an enormous production: "There may be 20 to 25 men on the ground, but there are hundreds if not thousands of people involved in the broader

¹⁶For descriptive statistics on U.S. hostage recovery missions, see SI.

mission, including transit, intelligence, support, and tankers.”¹⁷ Due to these operational costs, some family members of hostages oppose a rescue mission being launched for their loved one. “Some families are vehemently opposed, particularly those families of NGO or religious/ humanitarian workers, who can’t imagine putting someone else’s life in danger. But ultimately, it’s up to the U.S. government and a determination of U.S. national security, regardless of what the family wants.”¹⁸

Given the expensive nature of hostage recovery options, we extend the cost sensitivity logic to hostage recovery. We argue that on average Americans will be less supportive of large rescue missions that risk many soldiers’ lives and will be less willing to pay large ransoms.

H2: The public will have higher support for less costly recovery options (small rescue missions and negotiating small ransom payments) and lower support for more costly recovery options.

Finally, we theorize here that hostage deservingness will condition how cost sensitive the American public is to recovery efforts. This follows from the research cited above, which shows that individuals are willing to support a larger welfare state apparatus when they believe the poor are the victims of bad luck rather than to blame for their financial circumstances. More directly, researchers have argued that casualty sensitivity is conditional on beliefs about the “rightness or wrongness” of a war (Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2006). The public may be more tolerant of the human costs of war when the war effort is viewed as righteous. This suggests that Americans may support more costly efforts to bring hostages home if that hostage is viewed as more deserving. On the other hand, Americans may be more price sensitive if they assign blame to the hostage for his or her situation. This leads to the following conditional hypothesis.

¹⁷Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

¹⁸Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

H3: The public will be less cost sensitive when hostages are perceived to not be responsible for their capture and more cost sensitive when hostages are assigned blame.

Although our theory centers the power of hostage deservingness in explaining support or opposition to hostage recovery and how recovery is implemented, an alternative hypothesis is that the U.S. public is more aligned with U.S. doctrine in ignoring circumstance of capture in making recovery decisions. Such an alternative would be consistent with prior work, which suggests that intolerance for captivity and limits to civil liberties would drive strong support for all hostage recovery (Lee 2013). The official U.S. government policy is indeed unequivocal: The United States does not differentiate among hostages on the basis of how they ended up in captivity. According to a former FBI agent who worked on hostage recovery, “Comparing someone like Jessica Buchanan who was working with a humanitarian organization to Bowe Bergdahl who walked off his base... it doesn’t matter.”

Moreover, the public may acknowledge that they cannot possibly know all of the true details of a hostage’s circumstances and capture and thus opt to support any recovery efforts.¹⁹ Thus, a plausible null hypothesis to our theory of deservingness is that circumstance of capture plays no role in explaining public support for hostage recovery.

H4: Perceptions of responsibility for capture are uncorrelated with support for recovery through rescue or negotiating and paying a ransom.

¹⁹For example, there have been several Americans taken hostage with ambiguous links to the U.S. government, with suggestions that they were captured spies. See, for example, the cases of Robert Levinson, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/us/politics/robert-levinson-cia-iran.html>, or Paul Whelan, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/02/681564973/whelan-doesnt-fit-the-profile-of-a-spy-former-cia-officer-says>.

Research Design

We test our theory of hostage deservingness using experiments embedded in nationally representative surveys of Americans fielded in 2016 and 2020. The findings from a large, pilot survey fielded in 2016 are reported in the Appendix. We replicate and extend those findings from the pilot in the 2020 survey.²⁰ Thus, we focus here on the results of the experiment embedded in a 2020 survey measuring Americans' political attitudes fielded just before the November 2020 election. The survey firm, Dynata, recruited a sample of respondents based on demographic data from the U.S. census. Respondents completed the survey online and received a small amount of compensation. Around 2,000 respondents completed the survey.²¹

The experiment in the 2020 study builds on the 2016 pilot in important ways. The pilot experiment randomized elements of a hypothetical scenario that describes an American *missing* abroad. In contrast, our 2020 experiment focuses more precisely on the scenario of an American *captured* abroad. Several features of the scenario are randomized to control for important characteristics of kidnappings, such as the geographic location, the identity of the captors, and the gender and profession of the captured American. These are randomized independent of our core treatments of *Deservingness* and *Cost*, but also included as control variables in regression models. In other words, when we analyze the effects of the deservingness and cost sensitivity treatments, we average over the other randomized elements of the scenario. We note here that although there are a number of randomized elements of the scenario, the survey experiment is a vignette experiment and not a conjoint experiment.

²⁰We did not preregister the pilot survey in 2016 as it was exploratory in nature. Because we replicated the 2016 pilot in 2020, we did not preregister the 2020 survey experiment.

²¹The Appendix includes descriptive statistics of the survey sample as well as balance tests that demonstrate the three main experimental treatments were balanced across demographic variables.

Our theoretical interest is in the effects of the deservingness and cost sensitivity treatments.

Respondents were first told that they would be reading about a situation that could happen in the future. When they clicked to the next screen in the survey, they were asked to read a short vignette detailing the kidnapping. Here is the text of the scenario:

A [*rebel/terrorist*] group captured an American [*soldier/aid worker/journalist/hiker*] in [*Colombia/Syria/Somalia/Afghanistan*]. Intelligence officials say [*he/she*] is being held in the [*rebel/terrorist*] group's stronghold...

An additional sentence was included in the scenario for all respondents that randomized the deservingness of the captured American. For the three treatment conditions in which the American was described as a professional, *Deservingness* manipulated whether the American was following orders or not. Here is that text:

- [*He/She*] traveled to the dangerous area [*following the orders/without the knowledge/against the orders*] of [*his/her*] superiors.

In the case of the hiker who was there for personal reasons, we manipulated whether or not the hiker had permission from the U.S. State Department:

- The hiker [*received permission from the U.S. State Department to hike/did not contact the U.S. State Department before hiking/was warned by the U.S. State Department not to hike*] in the dangerous area.

After reading the scenario, respondents were asked how much the captured American was to blame for their situation and asked about their approval or disapproval for different policy options to bring them home. The question about blame read:

- To what extent do you think the captured [*soldier/aid worker/journalist/hiker*] is to blame for [*his/her*] situation? Completely to blame, Somewhat to blame, Somewhat blameless, Completely blameless

After the question about blame, we asked about support for a rescue operation, support for

negotiating a ransom, and support for paying the full amount of a ransom.²² For the rescue and ransom policy options, we included randomizations related to costs. For rescue, the mission was described as using a nearby unit of either 10, 100, or 1,000 soldiers to rescue the captured American. For the ransom, respondents read that the rebel or terrorist group was demanding \$100 thousand, \$1 million, or \$10 million in ransom to release the prisoner.²³ Respondents were given a five-point scale ranging from disapprove strongly (coded as 1) and approve strongly (coded as 5).

The distribution of responses for the question measuring deservingness beliefs and our dependent variables of *Rescue*, *Negotiate*, and *Pay* can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. With respect to deservingness, the modal response was to say that the captured American was “somewhat to blame” for their circumstance, with nearly 50 percent of respondents selecting this option. Another 25 percent said the captured American was “completely to blame”. When looking at the other end of the spectrum, respondents appear evenly split between believing the captured American was “somewhat” or “completely” blameless. It should be noted that the figures of the distributions of this variable and the dependent variables pool together respondents in different treatment groups. As we show below, the deservingness treatment significantly affects whether respondents believe the captured American is to blame for their situation.

²²It is important to note here that in our pilot survey the order of questions was different. In the pilot, the respondents received the scenario, then a question about support for rescue, and then the question about blame. In the 2020 survey, the blame question preceded the rescue and ransom questions. We find that the order of the blame question does not change the treatment text’s effects on the dependent variables.

²³Another treatment group read that the rebel or terrorist group had not made contact and the ransom demands were unknown. For simplicity, we do not use this treatment group in the analysis that follows.

Figure 1: **Distribution of beliefs about deservingness**

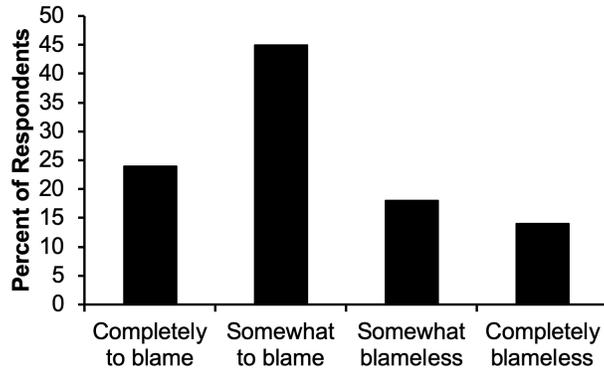
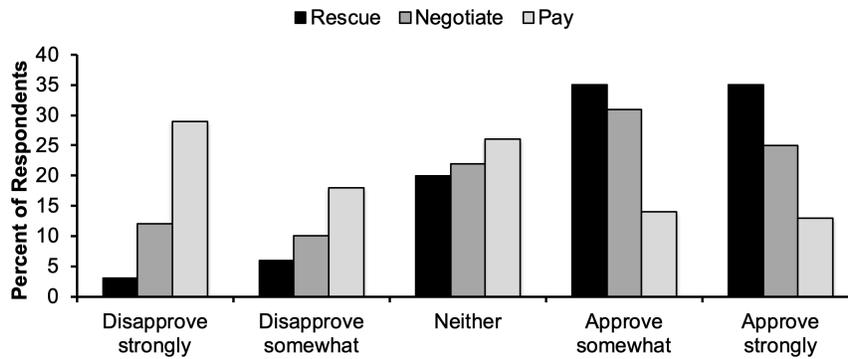


Figure 2: **Distribution of dependent variables**



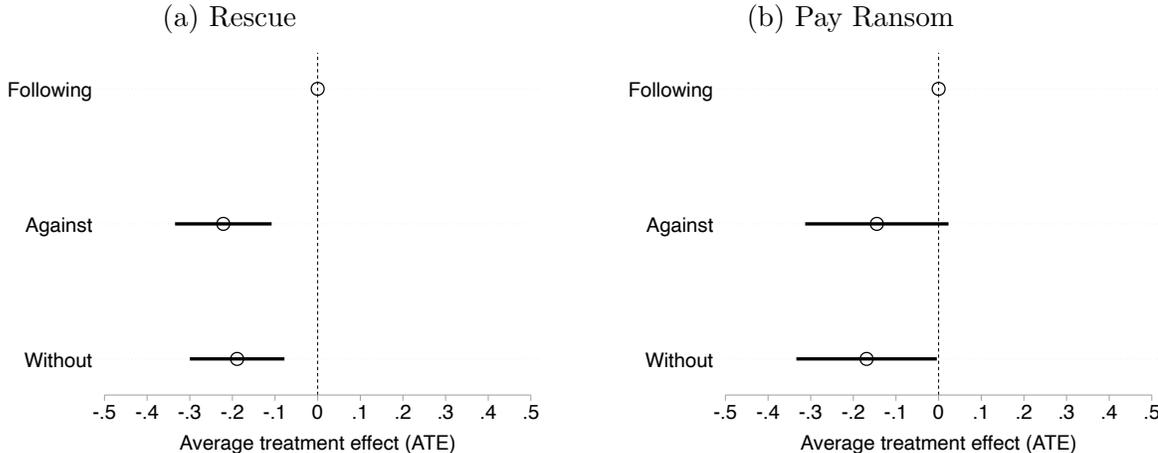
Turning to the dependent variables, we see in Figure 2 that there is significant variation in support for the different policy options. Nearly three-fourths of the sample approve somewhat or strongly of the rescue mission to recover the captured American. The next supported policy option is to negotiate the ransom with a little over half of respondents approving of this option. The least supported response by the government to a captured American is for the U.S. to pay the full amount of the ransom. Only around a quarter of respondents approved of this option either somewhat or strongly. Again, these distributions pool respondents across treatments. As we will see in the following sections, support for

these policy options depends substantially on the perceived deservingness of the hostage and the costs to bring the hostage home.

Findings

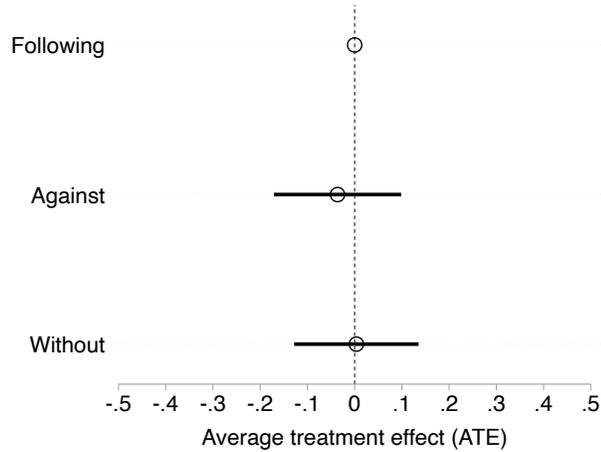
Recall that we hypothesized that individuals would be more supportive of government attempts to recover the captured American if they were perceived to be less responsible for their situation and recovery was less costly. We also anticipated an interaction between deservingness and cost sensitivity, with Americans being less willing to support costly missions as the perceived deservingness of the hostage declines. Our experimental evidence reported below supports these hypotheses for the rescue and pay the ransom outcomes, but is ambiguous for the negotiate outcome.

Figure 3: ATE of Deservingness on Support for Rescue and Ransom Payment



We first examine the effects of the deservingness treatment on our rescue and ransom outcomes. Figure 3 shows the average treatment effects from OLS models regressing *Rescue* and *Pay* on the deservingness treatment and controlling for the other treatments. In each

Figure 4: **ATE of Deservingness on Support for Negotiating Ransom**

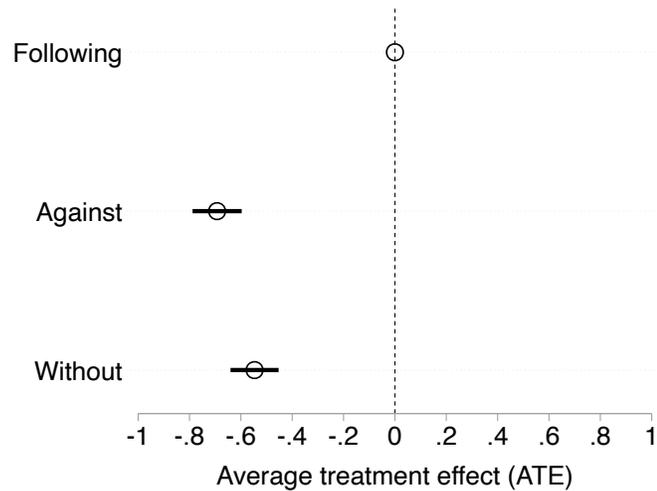


model, “following orders” is the baseline category.²⁴ The other two treatment conditions, which describe situations in which the captured American has either not told the relevant authorities or has acted against them, have strong, nearly identical, negative effects on support for a rescue mission and for paying the full amount of the ransom. Interestingly, when we look at Figure 4 the deservingness treatment does not affect support for negotiating the ransom amount. This may be related to the perceived costs of these options. While a rescue mission and paying the full amount of the ransom are costly, the public presumably perceives negotiation as less costly than either of those options. As we will see below, deservingness matters less when the costs of the recovery option are low.

Figure 5 provides evidence of the mechanism. We show that the deservingness treatment affects how respondents assign blame to the hostage. By telling respondents in the scenario that the kidnapped American had defied orders from the U.S. State Department, respondents are much more likely to say that the hostage is to blame for their situation. Like

²⁴Recall that for the hiker treatment the equivalent of following orders was “with the State Department’s permission.”

Figure 5: **ATE of Deservingness on Perceived Deservingness**

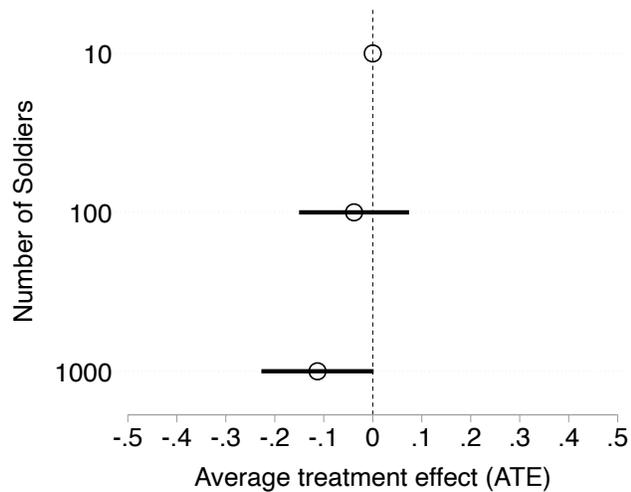


the results for the various recovery options, respondents do not distinguish between the scenario in which the hostage actively disobeyed versus simply acting without the knowledge of the authorities. For both the recovery policies and perceptions of deservingness, these two treatment conditions have equally negative effects on support and blame. Thus, for ease of interpretation in our interaction models that follow, we create a binary indicator for deservingness where respondents receiving the “following orders” treatment or “with the State Department’s permission” treatment are labeled as “deserving” and coded as 1 and the other two categories are labeled as “not deserving” and coded as 0.

Turning to cost sensitivity, we hypothesized that individuals would be less supportive of more costly recovery options and more supportive of relatively less costly options. To test the hypothesis, we independently randomize the size of the mission and the amount of ransom demanded by the captors. Figure 6 displays the average treatment effect for the rescue cost treatment. Compared to a mission of 10 soldiers, respondents are relatively less supportive of missions of 100 or 1,000 soldiers. However, there is no statistically significant

difference between a mission of 10 or 100 soldiers, while the mission of 1,000 soldiers is significantly different from the baseline of 10 soldiers. The size of the treatment effect is also relatively smaller in magnitude than the deservingness treatment and smaller than the cost treatment for the ransom outcomes. Overall, mission size has a significant, but substantively relatively smaller effect on support for rescue. For ecological validity, it should be noted that each of these mission sizes in some way captures the number of servicemembers working on a typical hostage rescue. As a former FBI special agent with intimate knowledge of these cases explained, hostage rescues involve around two dozen special forces operators on the ground, but hundreds or thousands of servicemembers in supporting roles to pull off a successful rescue mission.²⁵

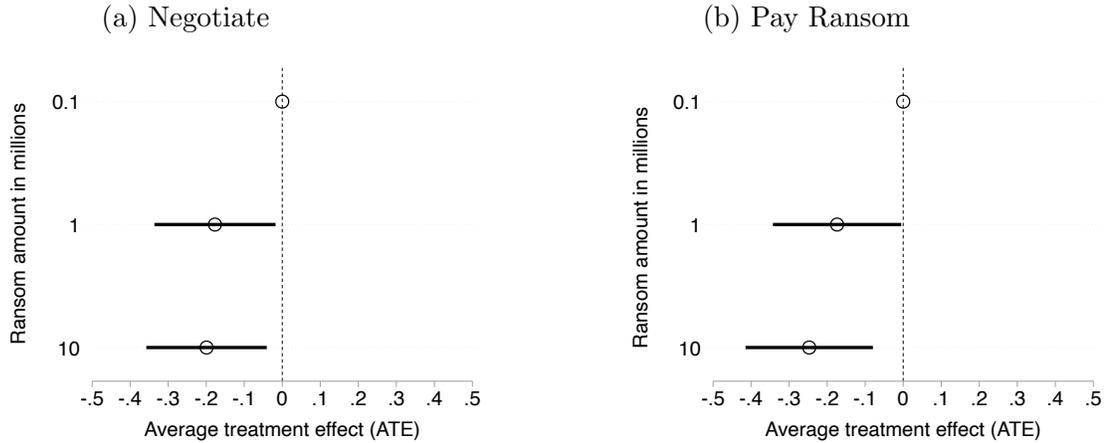
Figure 6: **ATE of Costs on Support for Rescue**



For the ransom outcomes of *Negotiate* and *Pay*, the ransom amount demanded by the captors has a larger effect. As shown in Figure 7, compared to the baseline of \$100,000, respondents are much less willing to negotiate and much less willing to pay the full amount

²⁵Author interview with former FBI special agent, May 16, 2019.

Figure 7: ATE of Costs on Support for Ransom Negotiation and Payment

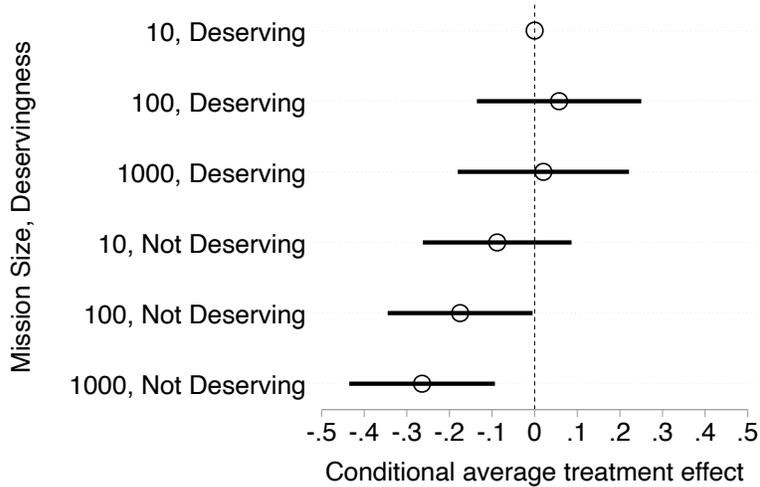


of the ransom. Our respondents also do not seem to differentiate much between the demand of \$1 million and the demand of \$10 million, both have about the same effect on support for these policy options. In terms of ecological validity, \$10 million is a much larger ransom amount than is typical, while \$100,000 is relatively lower than normal amounts.²⁶

Next, we examine the hypothesis that hostage deservingness conditions the cost sensitivity of the public. To do so, we include an interaction term in our OLS models between the binary indicator for the deservingness treatment described above and the cost treatments. We find significant support for the hypothesis. Figure 8 shows the predicted levels of support for the rescue mission by the deservingness treatment and the cost treatment. In terms of the cost sensitivity of respondents, for hostages we label as “Deserving” who were following orders when captured or had permission to travel from the State Department, the costs of the rescue mission have no effect on public support. It is only for hostages we label as “Not Deserving” because they either went against orders or did not inform the authorities where we see costs mattering. Support for the rescue mission decreases significantly as the costs increase for these hostages. Interestingly, we also find that costs condition the effect

²⁶Author interview with former FBI special agent, May 16, 2019.

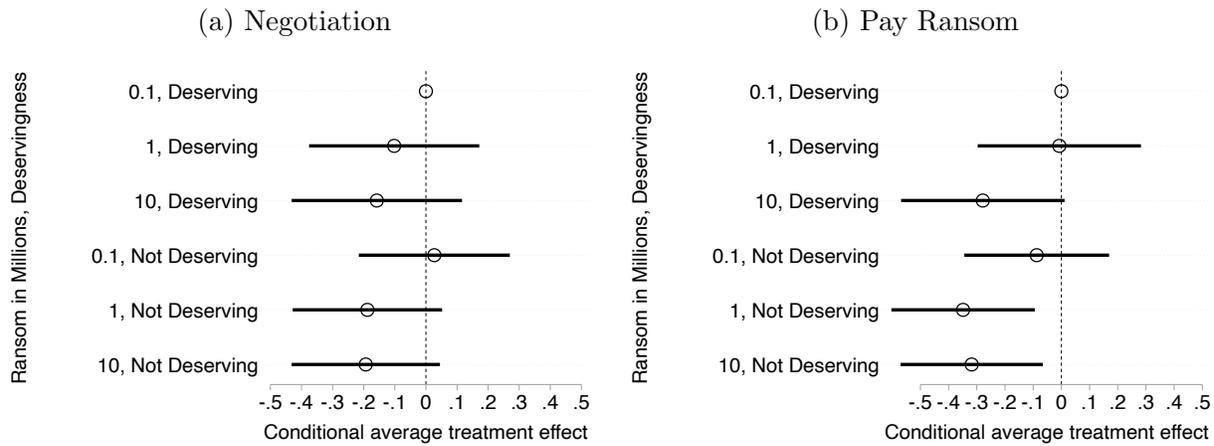
Figure 8: CATE of Deservingness and Cost on Rescue



of deservingness. Based on these results for rescue as well as the results below for ransom, we also find that the deservingness cue is less important for recovery options that are less costly. In the case of rescue, the deservingness of the hostage does not matter for small rescue missions. Specifically, for a mission size of "10", there is no statistically significant difference in support for rescuing a deserving and undeserving hostage.

The conditioning power of the deservingness heuristic on cost sensitivity is also quite interesting for the ransom policy outcomes. Again we see that deservingness has little impact on the *Negotiate* outcome. For negotiation, the primary consideration appears to be the ransom amount. On the other hand, deservingness does condition the effect of the ransom amount on support for payment of the ransom. When the hostage is described as following orders, there is no difference in support for payments of \$100 thousand or \$1 million dollars. Cost sensitivity kicks in however at \$10 million where support for payment declines for even deserving hostages. This is in contrast to hostages described as not deserving where there is

Figure 9: **CATE of Deservingness and Cost on Support for Negotiating and Paying Ransom**



a significant drop in support for ransom payment at \$1 million. In fact, the deservingness treatment has its largest effect size at this level of ransom amount. When the ransom amount is small, support for payment is relatively higher regardless of the deservingness treatment and when the ransom amount is quite large, support for payment is relatively lower regardless of the deservingness treatment. This is particularly interesting for its proximity to a real-world ransom demand amount: the biggest effect of the deservingness treatment on support for rescue has the largest gap at \$1 million—the most realistic ransom demand amount.

Finally, we note here that we do not find evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis that hostage deservingness is unrelated to support for recovery. The alternative hypothesis we specified suggested that the U.S. public could be agnostic on the circumstance of capture and support bringing home any American abroad regardless of how they came to be captured. While there is some evidence that when the mission or ransom demanded is less costly, circumstance of capture is ignored, we find that it weighs heavily on the minds of citizens for larger missions and more costly ransoms.

These findings provide evidence that the deservingness heuristic strongly influences Amer-

ican support for hostage recovery and plays a powerful role in conditioning the resources they support expending to bring hostages home. The Appendix includes additional results that show that these effects are robust to additional control variables. We also provide in the Appendix additional correlates of support for hostage recovery including how individual characteristics such as partisanship shape support for recovery efforts.²⁷

All together, the findings presented here and in the Appendix demonstrate that hostage deservingness has a strong and consistent effect on costly recovery policies. Costs do matter, but significantly less so when the hostage is viewed as deserving. As we discuss throughout the paper and revisit below, the political calculations for U.S. lawmakers are not as straightforward as current recovery policy, which bluntly forbids considering circumstance of capture. Our results suggest the deservingness heuristic will likely affect the magnitude of public pressure for hostage recovery, the resources and priority placed on recovery, and the public response to political leaders when Americans are brought home.

Discussion

After the 2002 kidnapping and killing of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, an updated policy altered which types of hostages the United States government attempts to recover. The policy of “Mission First, People Always,” allows explicit U.S. government intervention, provisions for negotiating with kidnappers, and the ability to order rescue missions for *any* American citizen kidnapped abroad—not only U.S. government personnel,

²⁷For example, we find a bipartisan consensus when it comes to supporting rescue missions and negotiating ransoms, however paying the ransom amount causes partisans to diverge with Republicans being significantly less supportive than Democrats.

as it had previously done.²⁸ As recovery policy evolved, so did an essential component of the U.S. government’s approach to evaluating kidnapping crises: the U.S. government now explicitly states that it will attempt to recover all American citizens, *regardless* of circumstance of capture. Specifically, the government officially ignores how the victim came to be kidnapped and focuses on the operational considerations of hostage recovery. This feature of U.S. policy exists in tension with what we have demonstrated above, which is that the public uses circumstance of capture as a cue about hostages’ deservingness of recovery.

This stated policy of ignoring the circumstances of capture likely serves two important functions for protecting Americans abroad. First, it could deter would-be hostage takers. If armed actors know that holding any American could incur a raid, they might be less likely to kidnap in the first place. This serves as both deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment: Not only would the kidnappers be denied whatever concessions they had desired; they would also be at serious risk of death at the hands of U.S. special forces (Snyder 1959). Second, this blanket policy provides assurance for Americans considering working abroad: If you are captured, you will not be left behind. This may be especially important for those accepting particularly dangerous positions in the military, aid work, or journalism.

The policy of ignoring circumstance of capture may also have operational costs. If individuals tend to be influenced by deservingness cues, but U.S. policy ignores circumstance of capture, then this could affect morale among those tasked with implementing the policy. For example, in addition to the morale effects during the Bergdahl rescue missions, another recent Afghanistan hostage provoked resentment among FBI agents responsible for planning her rescue. As the *Washington Post* reported, Caitlin Coleman’s “decision to travel to one of the world’s most dangerous places, when [she] was already six months pregnant, raised

²⁸“Personnel Recovery Strategic Communication Guidance, (30 January 2008)” Online at http://dtic.mil.dpmo/laws_directives/documents/stratcomm_guidance.pdf

questions about whether [Coleman and her husband, Joshua Boyle] harbored support for the Taliban.” According to an FBI official working on the case, officials “set aside” the circumstances of capture while they planned the rescue. “Still,” he relented, “no one just goes hiking in Afghanistan.”²⁹ Some may tow the policy line; as one former FBI agent stated, “We know that Americans will often say [of a hostage] ‘Well, they shouldn’t have been hiking there in the first place.’ But once someone is captured, that person now represents the United States, and we won’t let captors push the U.S. around.” That attitude pervades military thinking on the subject. He continued, “We’ll sustain 10 casualties, but it doesn’t matter: We have to get an American out.”³⁰ Yet, as illustrated by the reporting on the Bergdahl recovery mission, deservingness loomed large in the minds of those carrying out the mission and affected the morale of those involved.

Conclusion

In exploring the public perception of a widespread and understudied element of international violence, this paper makes important empirical and theoretical contributions to literatures on security studies and public policy. It represents a first attempt to understand the variation in public support for hostage recovery missions. We develop a theory of hostage deservingness and show that individuals’ beliefs regarding a hostage’s responsibility for putting herself in

²⁹Missy Ryan, “No one just goes hiking in Afghanistan: American woman gave birth as a Taliban hostage. Now she seeks to end her mystery,” the *Washington Post*, 23 August 2019, Online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/no-one-just-goes-hiking-in-afghanistan-american-woman-gave-birth-to-three-kids-as-a-taliban-hostage-she-now-seeks-to-end-the-mystery-surrounding-her-saga/2019/08/23/d036c346-8939-11e9-98c1-e945ae5db8fb_story.html

³⁰Author interview with former FBI Special Agent, May 16, 2019.

danger affects overall support for recovery options. We further show that beliefs about a hostage's deservingness affect how sensitive Americans are to the costs of bringing a hostage home.

While this variation is at odds with official U.S. policy on hostage recovery, it explains the public pushback in cases of “undeserving” victims. This is reflected in the recent media interest in pregnant American hiker Caitlan Coleman and her Canadian husband Joshua Boyle, who were kidnapped while hiking in Afghanistan, and in the well known case of Bowe Bergdahl. For the moment, however, the U.S. military is publicly resolute in deciding to launch these missions. The Navy SEAL who lost his leg while searching for Bergdahl testified at Bergdahl's court martial hearing that the military knew Bergdahl had deserted his post when they went looking for him. Why did they still conduct the research and rescue mission? “Because he's got a mom,” the SEAL testified. “Plus, it's my job; that's what we're told to do.”³¹ Yet, as research on this case has shown, the perceived deservingness of a hostage can affect how that job is performed and the approval of elected leaders responsible for recovery efforts.

This study demonstrates that the American public largely supports hostage recovery missions and that support plummets for more costly recoveries and less “deserving” victims. Considering the United States in comparative perspective, a puzzle remains: Given the high levels of support for bringing captured Americans home, why do individual hostage crises not receive *more* attention and advocacy? For several close U.S. allies, including France, Israel, and Canada, hostage crises spur major public protests (Simon 2019; Gilbert and Rivard-Piché 2021). In these countries, a culture of protest against the government maintains

³¹Alex Horton, “At Bergdahl sentencing, a former Navy SEAL sheds tears recounting death of military dog,” the *Washington Post*, 25 October 2017, Online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/10/25/at-bergdahl-sentencing-former-navy-seal-sheds-tears-recounting-death-of-military-dog/>.

public pressure until hostages are brought safely home. Future work should investigate these dynamics, exploring why some populations seem more concerned with hostage recovery than others. We suspect the analogy to welfare policies could travel to this comparative context, generating a greater expectation of government intervention in states with more robust social welfare programs, and lower expectation where individual responsibility is culturally paramount. Understanding these dynamics is an important next step in assuring hostage safety and survival, as kidnappers may leverage public outrage to exact increasingly painful concessions.

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