

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

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August 1, 2024

Abstract

Hostage taking is a thorny problem for foreign policy and international security. Around the world, thousands of people are kidnapped every year, calling into question their governments' ability to protect them. Such hostage crises put leaders in a terrible bind: leaders may refuse hostage takers' demands and suffer the political consequences of sacrificing victims' lives; or they may risk blood and treasure to recover captives, only to face backlash for failing or for making "bad" deals. Despite this pervasive dilemma, limited scholarship has explored hostage taking and the politics thereof. This article explores the political dynamics of hostage recovery. We argue that the public sees hostage recovery as government assistance that some—but not all—victims deserve. When hostages' circumstances of capture suggest that they were personally responsible for putting themselves in danger, the public will be less likely to support government efforts to bring them home—especially when the means of recovery are costly in blood or treasure. We test our theory using survey experiments embedded in large national surveys of Americans and 22 interviews with current and former senior hostage recovery personnel. Across our tests, we find robust evidence that beliefs about deservingness and cost shape public opinion on hostage recovery. Moreover, policymakers are similarly susceptible to notions of deservingness, which affects all parts of the recovery process: internal debate among policymakers, operational decisions, and messaging to the public.

The United States government has declared hostage taking to be a national emergency. In a July 2022 executive order, President Biden deemed hostage taking “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States,” which endangers “the integrity of the international political system and the safety of United States nationals and other persons abroad.”¹ Not just a contemporary dilemma, hostage taking has plagued U.S. foreign policy since the country’s founding. From the 1793 hostage taking by the Barbary Pirates,² to the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran,³ to the 2014 kidnapping and beheading of American journalists and aid workers by the Islamic State, hostage crises highlight Americans’ expectation that their government should protect them from harm.⁴ Yet hundreds of Americans have been kidnapped abroad in several dozen countries over the last two decades;⁵ according to a former director of the U.S. Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, “Not a week goes by without the kidnapping of an American citizen abroad.”⁶

¹ Joseph R. Biden, Jr. “Executive Order on Bolstering Efforts to Bring Hostages and Wrongfully Detained United States Nationals Home,” July 19, 2022. Online at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/07/19/executive-order-on-bolstering-efforts-to-bring-hostages-and-wrongfully-detained-unit#:~:text=I%20therefore%20determine%20that%20hostage,to%20deal%20with%20this%20threat>.

² Auerbach, Ann Hagedorn. “Ransom, The Untold Story of International Kidnapping.” *International Journal on World Peace* Vol 16, No. 1 (1999): 91-91.

³ Gazit, Shlomo. “Risk, glory, and the rescue operation.” *International Security* 6, no. 1 (1981): 111-135; Bowden, Mark. 2007. *Guests of the Ayatollah: The Iran Hostage Crisis: The First Battle in America’s War with Militant Islam*. Grove Press, 212.

⁴ Friedman, Jeffrey A. “Priorities for preventive action: Explaining Americans’ divergent reactions to 100 public risks.” *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 1 (2019): 181-196; <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>

⁵ Loertscher, Seth and Daniel Milton. 2015. *Held hostage: Analyses of kidnapping across time and among Jihadist organizations*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point; Gilbert, Danielle. 2023. “The oxygen of publicity: Explaining US media coverage of international kidnapping.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46(5):618–639.

⁶ FBI. 2018. “Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell Marks Third Anniversary.” URL: <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/hostage-recovery-fusion-cell-062918>.

Around the world, kidnapping presents a thorny problem for foreign policy and international security. Hostage crises threaten states' core responsibility to guarantee their citizens' safety. From the frequent airplane hijackings of the 1970s to the October 2023 kidnappings by Hamas, hostage takers force leaders to choose between costly action and costly inaction when their citizens are taken hostage. Such foreign policy choices reverberate with domestic political consequences, as leaders' hostage-recovery decisions invite protests and electoral losses.⁷ Damned if they do, damned if they don't, leaders confront the stark dilemma between the multifaceted costs of recovery and the political costs of sacrificing victims' lives.⁸

Conventional wisdom suggests that two competing principles shape the politics of hostage recovery as government protection.⁹ On the one hand, hostage politics may focus on *retrospective* protection: the public may expect their government to bring any and all hostages home. Intolerant of inaction, publics may pressure their governments to "leave no one behind." Indeed, existing research suggests that the costs of inaction are central to targeting decisions: kidnappers are more likely to target democracies *because* democratic publics care about hostage takings and pressure policymakers to respond.¹⁰ On the other hand, refusing hostage-takers' demands privileges *prospective* protection: by prohibiting ransoms or other benefits,

⁷ Clymer, Adam. "Poll Shows Iran and Economy Hurt Carter Among Late-Shifting Voters," *The New York Times*; Shurafa, Wafaa and Melanie Lindman. "Israelis stage largest protest since war began to increase pressure on Netanyahu," *Associated Press*, April 1, 2024. Online at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-03-31-2024-2dfbc154409ae6160b4e594b1b346e13>.

⁸ Gazit, 1981; Houghton, David Patrick. "The role of analogical reasoning in novel foreign-policy situations." *British Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1996): 523-552; Terris, Lesley G., and Orit E. Tykocinski. "Inaction inertia in international negotiations: The consequences of missed opportunities." *British Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 3 (2016): 701-717.

⁹ Miller, Reuben. "Acts of International Terrorism: Governments' Responses and Policies." *Comparative Political Studies* 19, no. 3 (1986): 385-414.

¹⁰ Lee, Chia-yi. "Democracy, civil liberties, and hostage-taking terrorism." *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 2 (2013): 235-248.

governments hope to prevent future hostage taking. The logic of “no concessions” focuses on the costs of action, with a refusal to be coerced, an unwillingness to reward adversaries, and a fear of incentivizing future violence.

Though diametrically opposed in how they view protection, both ideas share a common assumption: that a government should provide the same treatment to all its citizens taken hostage. In the face of these universal maxims, however, the fierce fights over bringing some hostages home is a puzzle. Not simply debates about the merits of concessions and recovery, these fights evince variation across *specific* hostage cases, with a particular focus on hostages’ circumstances of capture and the costs of recovery. Take Bowe Bergdahl, the U.S. army soldier who was kidnapped by the Taliban in 2009. Republicans and Democrats alike were outraged at the costly efforts made to recover Bergdahl, who in deserting his base walked straight into danger.¹¹ In the wake of some hostage recovery, critics highlight the “bad” or “unfair” deals to bring them home.¹² The intense debate and partisan blowback to some hostage recoveries reveal significant variation in elite reactions to and public support for hostage recovery.

We argue that perceptions of hostage “deservingness” play a central role in the recovery process, shaping both elite decisions and public opinion. In contrast to the universal principles of “no one left behind” and “no concessions” often invoked in hostage policy debates, we argue that citizens and policymakers view hostage recovery as government assistance that some, but not all, victims deserve. In evaluating hostage recovery options, people make value judgments about individual hostages—and in particular, whether their circumstances of capture suggest that the

¹¹ Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl was kidnapped in 2009 after walking off his military base in Afghanistan and later freed in a prisoner exchange for five Taliban officials. We discuss the Bergdahl case below. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/09/us/politics/griner-blowback.html?searchResultPosition=2>

¹² Terris and Tykocinski 2016.

hostage bears personal responsibility for encountering danger. Viewing hostage recovery as a form of government assistance, the public is likewise sensitive to the costs of recovery. Thus, value judgments shape the public's support and opposition to efforts to bring hostages home—especially those efforts judged as costly in blood or treasure.

We test our theory using a multi-method approach, bringing together public opinion data and policymaker interviews in the United States. First, to explore what the public thinks about the timely problem of hostage recovery, we conducted experiments embedded in two large, national surveys of the American public. Our vignette experiment varies details of a fictional kidnapping and recovery options, allowing us to test how characteristics of the victim, perpetrator, and government response affect public support for recovery. Testing the conventional wisdom, we show that public support for hostage recovery is high: in line with the principle of “leave no man behind,” a majority of respondents surveyed support hostage rescue. The public also prefers rescue options to paying a ransom, a pattern that suggests support for the “no concessions” approach. Our core result, however, is that support for recovery is conditional on perceptions of deservingness. When the circumstances of capture suggest that the hostage holds personal blame for being in a dangerous situation, support for recovery drops significantly—especially when the ransom amount is high or rescue mission is costly.

We then conducted dozens of elite interviews with current and former senior hostage recovery personnel. Our interviews—the first to gather insights from principals of the American hostage-recovery enterprise—test how the factors outlined above affect elite decision-making. Despite a recovery policy that appears to ignore the circumstances of capture¹³ (one of the key

¹³ Language in Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD-30) on Hostage Recovery Activities references “consistent implementation” and that the U.S. government will treat all hostages “equitably.” See <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/24/presidential-policy-directive-hostage-recovery-activities>.

contextual factors shaping perceptions of deservingness), our elite interviews reveal that notions of deservingness and the public’s approval of hostages matter a great deal in the hostage recovery process. Like the public, policymakers engage in evaluations of deservingness, yielding internal debates at the highest levels of government about approaches to recovery. Furthermore, policymakers work to avoid public criticism both for rescuing blameworthy victims—and for failing to recover hostages seen as more deserving in the eyes of the public.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. First, we offer a brief overview of the tools that governments use to protect their citizens kidnapped abroad. Second, we explain why hostage recovery is a fundamentally *political* issue, of interest to democratic publics and tied intimately to leaders’ fates. We explore the logic of two popular and opposing maxims for hostage recovery: the prospective logic of “no concessions” and retrospective logic of “no man left behind.” Because neither sufficiently explains observed variation in public response to hostage cases, we then offer our original theory of hostage deservingness: that public support for hostage recovery declines when the public perceives hostages as responsible for their own captivity, especially when operational costs of recovery are high. The next section describes our research design and shares results: first, presenting and analyzing results from our survey experiments, and second, assessing evidence from elite interviews. Finally, we conclude by offering avenues for future research and implications for hostage recovery worldwide.

Hostage Recovery as Protection

How do governments protect their citizens who have been kidnapped abroad?¹⁴ Hostage-

¹⁴ Following Gilbert (2023, 3), we understand kidnapping as the “forceful abduction of an individual by a non-state armed group, including terrorists, rebels, and criminals.” In this article, we focus on transnational kidnappings, in which “the hostages, the perpetrators, or the targets of demands are of different nationalities” (Kim, George, and Sandler, 2021, 621). While our article focuses on kidnappings by non-state actors, we discuss implications of our

recovery options are influenced by case-specific factors, including the location, demands, and identity of the perpetrator; still, there are several common ways that hostage crises end. As an oft-invoked but seldom studied example of coercion, hostage taking uses protracted human captivity to compel behavioral change.¹⁵ Thus, one government option is to negotiate with hostage takers, making concessions in exchange for hostages' release. Indeed, most captives come home through negotiated concessions, which both retrospectively restore protection and protect hostages from further danger, pain, and death. While concessions, including ransom payments and prisoner exchanges, work to bring captives safely home, they can be costly. Ransoms are often expensive, as kidnappers may demand tens of millions of dollars.¹⁶ Paying ransom is also sometimes impossible: kidnappers' demands may be higher than targets are willing or able to pay, and some countries' laws prohibit paying ransoms, especially to terrorist groups.¹⁷

Second, governments may protect their citizens through military rescue missions. If successful, they too have the benefit of recovering captives, plus they punish—rather than reward—perpetrators.¹⁸ However, rescue attempts represent the most dangerous time for

theory for hostage diplomacy before concluding.

¹⁵ Gilbert, Danielle. "The Logic of Kidnapping in Civil War: Evidence from Colombia." *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 116, No. 4 (2022): 1226-1241.

¹⁶ Kim, Wukki, Justin George and Todd Sandler. 2021. "Introducing Transnational Terrorist Hostage Event (TTHE) Data Set, 1978 to 2018." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65(2- 3):619–641.

¹⁷ For example, U.S. law prohibits paying ransoms to U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). Section 2339(B) of the material support statute defines paying a ransom to an FTO as material support for terrorism. See <https://casetext.com/statute/united-states-code/title-18-crimes-and-criminal-procedure/part-i-crimes/chapter-113b-terrorism/section-2339b-providing-material-support-or-resources-to-designa>

¹⁸ Dyrud, Peter J. 2021. Think twice: deterring transnational kidnapping through rescue PhD thesis Harvard University.

hostages—when they are most likely to be killed by captors or die in the crossfire.¹⁹ Like ransoms, they too cost millions of dollars. Rescues require substantial, accurate intelligence, “surprise and precision,” and put servicemembers at risk.²⁰ Rescue missions are thus seldom attempted and rarely succeed.²¹ In the first eight months of Israel’s war in Gaza, for instance, the Israeli Defense Forces only rescued seven of several hundred hostages taken on October 7, 2023. Between 2001 and 2023, the U.S. military conducted or supported several dozen publicly known rescue missions, but among those missions led by U.S. Special Forces, only six hostages were recovered alive.²² Each rescue attempt is an enormous production: According to a U.S. government official, “There may be 20 to 25 men on the ground, but there are hundreds if not thousands of people involved in the broader mission, including transit, intelligence, support, and tankers.”²³

Of course, governments may instead focus on prospective protection, preventing their citizens from being taken hostage in the first place. Governments may impose bans and warnings to limit dangerous travel. They may also adopt “no concessions” policies as deterrence by denial: Proponents of “no concessions” policies believe that refusing kidnappers’ demands is the best way to prevent future kidnapping.²⁴ However, by refusing to make concessions, leaders

¹⁹ Wright, Richard P. 2009. *Kidnap for Ransom: Resolving the Unthinkable*. Auerbach Publications.

²⁰ Gazit, 1981, 123.

²¹ Houghton, David Patrick. "The role of analogical reasoning in novel foreign-policy situations." *British Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1996): 523-552.

²² For descriptive statistics on U.S. hostage recovery missions, see Appendix.

²³ Interview 02, May 16, 2019.

²⁴ Brandt, Patrick T., Justin George, and Todd Sandler. "Why concessions should not be made to terrorist kidnappers." *European Journal of Political Economy* 44 (2016): 41-52; Gilbert, Danielle. "The Prisoners Dilemma: America Must Adapt to a New Era of Hostage-Taking," *Foreign Affairs* (August 24, 2022)..

implicitly condemn some hostages to die in captivity.

In democracies around the world, leaders talk about hostage recovery policy as a form of government protection, in line with the logics laid out above. For example, in 1985, President Reagan famously asserted: “America will never make concessions to terrorists. To do so would only invite more terrorism [. . .] Once we head down that path, there will be no end to it—no end to the suffering of innocent people, no end to the ransom all civilized nations must pay.”²⁵ More recently, President Obama’s policy directive on hostage recovery activities noted that it is “United States policy to deny hostage-takers the benefits of ransom, prisoner releases, policy changes, or other acts of concession,” which both “protects U.S. nationals” and removes “a key incentive for hostage-takers to target U.S. nationals.”²⁶ Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has likewise asserted his country’s commitment to the “no concessions” principle, adamant that paying terrorists to release citizens “further funds such groups’ illegal and often deadly activities.”²⁷ Other leaders instead emphasize their commitment to recovering all captives. In 1985, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin articulated the Israeli government’s position: “when there is no military option, and after a fundamental examination of all the possibilities, there is no alternative but to enter negotiations and to pay a price.”²⁸ The Israeli Defense Forces’ (IDF) website describes their Missing Persons Unit as “No Soldier Left Behind”: a “promise to

²⁵ Auerbach, Ann Hagedorn. 1999. “RANSOM, THE UNTOLD STORY OF INTERNATIONAL KIDNAPPING.” *International Journal on World Peace* 16(1):91–91.

²⁶ Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD-30) on Hostage Recovery Activities, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/24/presidential-policy-directive-hostage-recovery-activities>.

²⁷ “Canadian man and family held captive for years in Afghanistan will return to Canada,” *CBC*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/canadian-family-rescued-1.4351319>.

²⁸ Statement in the Knesset by Israeli Defense Minister Rabin on prisoners exchange, May 27, 1985. Online at *Jewish Virtual Library*, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/statement-in-the-knesset-by-defense-minister-rabin-on-prisoners-exchange#google_vignette.

every soldier in the IDF – wherever you are, whatever happens to you, we will find you and bring you home.”²⁹ In recent years, the U.S. government’s chief hostage negotiator has similarly stressed: “if you have a blue passport, your country’s coming to get you.”³⁰

Despite their rhetoric, governments’ stated hostage recovery policies do not always reflect hostage recovery in practice. Scholars have long noted a distinct gap between the rhetoric and practice of hostage policy, including in Germany, Israel, Italy, and the United States, countries frequently targeted by hostage taking.³¹ In short, some of the most vocal proponents of “no concessions” do, in fact, make concessions.³² Such inconsistent messaging suggests that the rhetoric itself may be important; leaders believe that the perception of their hostage policy matters.

The Politics of Recovery

Kidnappings are highly salient, newsworthy events: Transnational kidnappings attract significantly more media coverage than other forms of violence.³³ Such outsized coverage has meaningful implications for public awareness about international kidnapping. For example,

²⁹ <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/our-soldiers/no-soldier-left-behind-the-idf-s-missing-persons-unit/>

³⁰ Ambassador Roger Carstens with Amna Nawaz of *PBS Newshour*, December 12, 2022. Online at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/hostage-negotiator-recounts-brittney-griners-first-moments-after-release-from-russia>.

³¹ Miller, Reuben. "Acts of International Terrorism: Governments' Responses and Policies." *Comparative Political Studies* 19, no. 3 (1986): 385-414.

³² Bapat, Navin A. "State bargaining with transnational terrorist groups." *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2006): 213-229; Poe, Steven. "Nations' responses to transnational hostage events: An empirical evaluation." *International Interactions* 14, no. 1 (1988): 27-40; Tucker, David. "Responding to terrorism." *Washington Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1998): 103-117.

³³ Chermak, S.M. and J. Grunewald. 2006. "The Media's Coverage of Domestic Terrorism." *Justice Quarterly* 23(4):428–461; Weimann, G. and H. Brosius. 1991. "The Newsworthiness of International Terrorism." *Communication Research* 18(3):333–354.

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 by the Islamic State—the highest proportion of Americans aware of *any* news event polled in the prior five years.³⁴ In Israel, media coverage about captured soldier Gilad Shalit and negotiations for his return held the public’s attention for years; the national newspaper *Ha’aretz* published 150 articles about Shalit in January 2010 alone.³⁵ In addition to their outsized coverage, kidnappings are precisely the types of events covered in many media outlets including soft news, which is likely to reach even the relatively unaware.³⁶ Thus, although other foreign policy decisions are frequently insulated from public opinion because of public disinterest, the public is likely to be familiar with and animated by kidnapping cases.³⁷

Conventional wisdom suggests that democratic publics holds two competing views about hostage recovery, in line with government messaging on the issue. One view suggests that citizens support a “no concessions” position, opposing government satisfaction of kidnapper demands for ransom money or prisoner exchanges, regardless of price. Opposition to making concessions stresses national pride: Underpinning the “no concessions” mantra are a refusal to back down or reward bad behavior, an unwillingness to strengthen adversaries, and the belief that making concessions today will lead to more attacks tomorrow.³⁸ In the United States, a

³⁴ NBC. 2014. “NBC News/ Wall Street Journal Survey, Study #14643, September 3–7, 2014.” **URL:** https://newscms.nbcnews.com/sites/newscms/files/14901_september_nbc-wsj_poll.pdf

³⁵ Sulitzeanu-Kenan, Raanan, and Eran Halperin. "Making a difference: Political efficacy and policy preference construction." *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (2013): 295-322, 302.

³⁶ Baum, Matthew A. 2002. “Sex, Lies, and War: How soft news brings foreign policy to the inattentive public.” *American Political Science Review* 96(1):91–109.

³⁷ Almond, Gabriel A. 1950. *The American People and Foreign Policy*. Harcourt, Brace; Lippmann, Walter. 1955. *Essays in the Public Philosophy*. Little Brown.

³⁸ Bapat, Navin A. "State bargaining with transnational terrorist groups." *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2006): 213-229.

majority of Americans incorrectly believe that the U.S. follows a “no concessions” policy, in line with elite cues to that effect.³⁹

Conversely, the public might oppose abandoning hostages, focusing not on national pride, but national responsibility and solidarity.⁴⁰ The military dictum to “leave no man behind” implies that governments should recover any captive, no matter the cost. Existing research suggests that such public sentiment could be core to kidnappers’ targeting decisions. As Lee argues, hostage takers are more likely to target democracies due to the coincidence of press freedom and civil liberties: democratic publics know about—and are intolerant of—fellow citizens’ remaining in captivity.⁴¹

While democratic publics may espouse strong opinions about hostage recovery, only leaders have the power and the “exclusive” responsibility to decide whether, when, and how to bring hostages home.⁴² The fates of leaders and hostages are thus intimately intertwined, as presidents and prime ministers wrestle with the competing costs of action and inaction.⁴³ If the public opposes making concessions, then doing so could be politically costly for leaders—especially when they make “bad” or unpopular deals.⁴⁴ Conversely, if leaders refuse concessions

³⁹ Mertes, Marc, Robert Bohm and Joachim Huffmeier. 2021. “Popular Support for the No- Concessions Policy.” Available at: <https://osf.io/d9qp2/download>.

⁴⁰ Jervis, Robert. "Realism, game theory, and cooperation." *World politics* 40, no. 3 (1988): 317-349.

⁴¹ Lee 2013.

⁴² Gazit 1981, 133.

⁴³ Lee, Chia-yi. 2013. “Democracy, civil liberties, and hostage-taking terrorism.” *Journal of Peace Research* 50(2):235–248.

⁴⁴ Terris and Tykocinski 2016. For example, President Obama faced vociferous opposition after agreeing to a prisoner swap for captured army deserter Bowe Bergdahl. See Crowley, Michael. “How the Bergdahl Story Went from Victory to Controversy for Obama. *Time*, 2014. <https://time.com/2817830/bowe-bergdahl-obama/>.

or fail to recover hostages, they effectively “allow” hostages to die in captivity.⁴⁵ Because elected officials respond to public opinion out of concern for their own political prospects,⁴⁶ they may thus prioritize bringing captives home.

Such public pressure to recover hostages may encourage policymakers to launch rash rescue missions, such as “Operation Eagle Claw,” President Carter’s ill-advised attempt to recover the 52 Americans held captive in the U.S. embassy in Tehran.⁴⁷ Internal documents from the Carter administration reveal that some of the president’s closest advisors and the CIA doubted that a rescue mission would succeed, calling the possibility of rescue “self-defeating and probably suicidal.”⁴⁸ In hopes of securing a potentially monumental political victory, the Carter Administration launched a mission that even the planners expected to fail. According to contemporaneous polling, Carter was right to worry: 20% of voters in the 1980 presidential election cited the hostage crisis as Carter’s “worst failure”; 23% of those who switched their vote in the campaign’s final days said that the hostage crisis was the decisive factor.⁴⁹ The head of

⁴⁵ For example, since October 7, 2023, thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets to protest Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s inability to bring home more than 100 hostages held by Hamas. Shurafa, Wafaa and Melanie Lindman. “Israelis stage largest protest since war began to increase pressure on Netanyahu,” *Associated Press*, April 1, 2024. Online at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-03-31-2024-2dfbc154409ae6160b4e594b1b346e13>.

⁴⁶ Tomz, Michael, Jessica L.P. Weeks and Keren Yarhi-Milo. 2020. “Public Opinion and Decisions About Military Force in Democracies.” *International Organization* 74(1):119–143; Lee 2013.

⁴⁷ McDermott explains this decision through prospect theory: that President Carter was operating from the domain of loss, in which the possibility of success outweighed the highly likely costs. McDermott, Rose. “Prospect theory in international relations: The Iranian hostage rescue mission.” *Political Psychology* (1992): 237-263.

⁴⁸ Bowden, Mark. 2007. *Guests of the Ayatollah: The Iran Hostage Crisis: The First Battle in America’s War with Militant Islam*. Grove Press, 212. The publication of the contemporaneous, internal documents challenges earlier assessments that Carter’s advisors unanimously “considered it to be a clever and carefully thought out plan” (McDermott 1992, 243). See also Smith, Steve. “Groupthink and the hostage rescue mission.” *British Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (1985): 117-123; Houghton 1996.

⁴⁹ Clymer, Adam. “Poll Shows Iran and Economy Hurt Carter Among Late-Shifting Voters,” *The New York Times*, A.1, 16 November 1980. Independents were the most likely to “rally” to Carter in the immediate aftermath of the hostage taking, as well as the group most likely to abandon Carter as the crisis went on. See Callaghan, Karen J., and Simo Virtanen. “Revised models of the ‘rally’ phenomenon”: The case of the Carter presidency.” *The Journal of*

state is the only person who “cannot disavow” their role in an unsuccessful recovery attempt; leaders “must pay the full price for failure.”⁵⁰

Hostage Deservingness and Cost Sensitivity

While the “no concessions” and “no man left behind” principles push in opposite directions, both are unconditional beliefs about hostage recovery, which expect similar treatment across cases. However, if the conventional wisdom is correct, it is puzzling to observe that the public regularly discriminates across cases, celebrating the return of some hostages, while maligning others. The contrast in the public response to two contemporaneous American hostages—Captain Richard Phillips and Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl—demonstrates this dynamic.

In April 2009, U.S. Merchant Marine Captain Richard Phillips was taken hostage off the coast of Somalia, where he was held captive by Somali pirates. Under direct orders from the President of the United States, U.S. Navy SEAL Team 6 rescued Phillips in a cinematic rescue.⁵¹ The American 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.”⁵² Captain Phillips’s saga was later dramatized in the eponymous Oscar-nominated film, and the merchant marine was played by Tom Hanks.

While the response to Captain Phillips’s ordeal suggests that Americans are invested in

Politics 55, no. 3 (1993): 756-764.

⁵⁰ Gazit 1981, 134.

⁵¹ McNight, Terry and Michael Hirsh. 2012. *Pirate Alley: Commanding Task Force 151 Off Somalia*. Naval Institute Press.

⁵² Discovery. 2009. “Somali Pirate Takedown: The Real Story.” Documentary.

recovering those whose jobs put them in the line of danger, not all captured Americans garner public support. In June 2009, recently deployed Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl walked off his base in Paktika province, Afghanistan. Upon deserting, he was immediately captured by the Taliban and held by the Haqqani Network for five years.⁵³ When Bergdahl disappeared, the U.S. military immediately launched unsuccessful rescue missions, sustaining injuries and fatalities.⁵⁴ As one officer tasked with Bergdahl's rescue asked: "How does it make you feel when you've walked for 15 days straight looking for a guy who walked off?" The military knew ". . . that Bowe had left [his outpost] voluntarily, and now they felt like they were going through hell on his behalf," inflicting "major damage on morale."⁵⁵

Years after multiple unsuccessful rescue attempts, President Obama authorized a prisoner exchange, trading Bergdahl for the release of five Taliban detainees held at Guantanamo. The U.S. military 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." Bergdahl's recovery led to vociferous, bipartisan outrage at the Administration's choices and damage to Obama's approval ratings.⁵⁶

We argue that the discrepancy is more than a clash between those who prefer the costs of inaction to the costs of concessions, but rather, reveals public and elite views on who deserves help from their government. We contend that case-specific heuristics shape the politics of

⁵³ Rubin, Lyle Jeremy. 2019. "Beyond Bowe Bergdahl." **URL:** <https://www.thenation.com/article/bowe-bergdahl-american-cipher-review/>

⁵⁴ *Serial*, Season 2, <https://serialpodcast.org/season-two/>

⁵⁵ *Serial*, Season 2, Episode 2: <https://serialpodcast.org/season-two/2/the-golden-chicken/transcript>

⁵⁶ Michael 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/>.

hostage recovery. Building on insights from studies on the politics of the welfare state and support for the use of force, we argue that citizens believe that hostage recovery is government assistance that not all captives deserve.

In the domain of welfare politics, the “deservingness heuristic” is defined as a decision-making process that “spontaneously guides opinion formation whenever informational cues to the deservingness of welfare recipients are available.”⁵⁷ Scholars have shown that deservingness is tied to judgments made based on cues about recipients’ fault for their poor economic condition. Specifically, people care how welfare recipients came to be in need of financial assistance and this affects how individuals view the obligation of their government to help them.⁵⁸ 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).⁵⁹ The public responds to deservingness cues: if one induces Americans to believe the poor are less responsible for their economic condition, then Americans support redistribution at higher rates similar to Europeans.⁶⁰

The deservingness heuristic is a key predictor of support for domestic redistribution,⁶¹

⁵⁷ Petersen, Michael Bang, Rune Slothuus, Rune Stubager and Lise Togeby. 2010. “Deservingness versus values in public opinion on welfare: The automaticity of the deservingness heuristic.” *European Journal of Political Research* 50:24–52.

⁵⁸ Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Alesina, Alberto and Edward L. Glaeser. 2004. *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Alesina, Alberto and George-Marios Angeletos. 2005. “Fairness and Redistribution.” *The American Economic Review* 95(4):960–980; Bénabou, Roland and Jean Tirole. 2006. “Belief in a Just World and Redistributive Politics.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121(2):699–746.

⁵⁹ Petersen, Michael Bang, Rune Slothuus, Rune Stubager and Lise Togeby. 2010. “Deservingness versus values in public opinion on welfare: The automaticity of the deservingness heuristic.” *European Journal of Political Research* 50:24–52.

⁶⁰ Aarøe, Lene and Michael Bang Petersen. 2014. “Crowding Out Culture: Scandinavians and Americans Agree on Social Welfare in the Face of Deservingness Cues.” *The Journal of Politics* 76(3):684–697.

⁶¹ Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Fong, Christina. 2001. “Social Preferences, self-interest, and the demand

but it also affects public support for foreign policy, including foreign aid and refugee policy.⁶² More broadly, the public's judgments about intentionality and blame affect perceptions in international conflict.⁶³

We argue that deservingness plays a decisive and unacknowledged role in the politics of hostage recovery. Building on findings from these other fields, we argue that the deservingness heuristic affects individuals' beliefs about how government resources should be expended for hostage recovery. Our theory of hostage deservingness understands hostage recovery activities as government aid for individual victims of violence. First, governments must decide to allocate resources to assist hostages—through rescue missions or ransom payments—in the same way that governments decide to allocate resources to assist the poor. Second, as with views on poverty and personal responsibility, 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 the result of bad luck. Hostages will be viewed as more deserving if their capture is seen as the result of bad luck rather than bad judgment.

These views are heightened because hostage takings often feature single or identified victims. Hostage crises are subject to 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

for redistribution.” *Journal of Public Economics* 82(2):225–246; Alesina, Alberto and Paula Giuliano. 2011. Preferences for Redistribution. In *Handbook of Social Economics*, ed. Jess Benhabib, Alberto Bisin and Matthew O. Jackson. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: North-Holland pp. 93–132.

⁶² Baker, Andy. 2015. “Race, Paternalism, and Foreign Aid: Evidence from US public opinion.” *American Political Science Review* 109(1):93–109; Bayram, A Burcu and Marcus Holmes. 2020. “Feeling their Pain: Affective Empathy and Public Preferences for Foreign Development Aid.” *European Journal of International Relations* 26(3):820–850; Fraser, Nicholas AR and Go Murakami. 2022. “The Role of Humanitarianism in Shaping Public Attitudes Toward Refugees.” *Political Psychology* 43(2):255–275.

⁶³ Chu, Jonathan A, Marcus Holmes and David Traven. 2021. “Inferring Intentions from Consequences: How Moral Judgments Shape Citizen Perceptions of Wartime Conduct.” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 8(2):203–207.

nameless victims.⁶⁴ Thus, kidnapping victims receive outsized attention, focusing the public on particular individuals. Public outreach by hostage families relies on this notion: By launching social media campaigns that highlight the plight of their loved one, families hope the public will pressure their government to respond.⁶⁵ However, attention to single victims may make individual hostages' characteristics and choices more salient in the minds of the public and more influential to public opinion about how to bring them home.

In addition to deservingness, we argue that cost sensitivity—related to the operational cost of hostage recovery efforts—should affect public opinion about hostage recovery. Casualty sensitivity is a relatively good predictor of support for military interventions abroad. For example, scholars have tested how casualties accumulated over the course of a war affect approval for wartime efforts.⁶⁶ Public opinion trends suggest that support for war tends to degrade over time as casualties rise. Casualties further affect other political outcomes such as approval of the president and vote choice.⁶⁷ The controversy over “expensive” hostage deals—whether releasing notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout for Brittney Griner or allowing Iran to access \$6 billion in oil profits in exchange for releasing five hostage Americans—suggests that the public is sensitive to the perceived cost of hostage recovery. Given the operational costs of

⁶⁴ Schelling, Thomas C. 1968. “The life you save may be your own.” *Problems in public expenditure*, pp.127-162; Slovic, Paul. 2007. “If I look at the mass I will never act”: Psychic numbing and genocide. *Judgment and Decision making*, 2(2), pp.79-95; Gilbert 2023.

⁶⁵ Gazit 1981; Dias, Elizabeth. 2017. “The Art of the Hostage Deal.” *Time*. URL: <https://time.com/4876077/the-art-of-the-hostage-deal/>; Rezaian, Jason. 2018. “Opinion: A hostage in [T]ehran goes free (for now).” *Washington Post*. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/08/23/a-hostage-in-tehran-goes-free-for-now/>.

⁶⁶ Mueller, John E. 1971. “Trends in popular support for the wars in Korea and Vietnam.” *The American Political Science Review* 65(2):358–375.

⁶⁷ Karol, David and Edward Miguel. 2007. “The Electoral Cost of War: Iraq Casualties and the 2004 US Presidential Election.” *The Journal of Politics* 69(3):633–648.

hostage recovery options in terms of both blood and treasure, we extend the casualty sensitivity logic to hostage recovery. We argue that the public will be less supportive of costly assistance: either large rescue missions that risk many soldiers' lives, or large concessions.

Finally, we theorize that cost sensitivity and deservingness interact in interesting ways. First, researchers have argued that casualty sensitivity is conditional on beliefs about the "rightness or wrongness" of a war.⁶⁸ Researchers show that the public is more tolerant of the human costs of war when the war effort is viewed as righteous. Applying this logic to hostage recovery, individuals may support more costly efforts to bring hostages home if that hostage is viewed as more deserving. Conversely, the public may be more price sensitive if they assign blame to the hostage for his or her situation.

Second, operational costs and the size of ransom demanded may condition the salience of deservingness cues. Indeed, prior research shows that situational factors interact with core values to shape public opinion about foreign policy.⁶⁹ Here we consider how the deservingness heuristic evolved as a mechanism for humans to allocate resources in an efficient way that protects the group from exploitation. Humans have always needed to regulate mutual assistance in groups to protect against those who would be a drain on group resources. As Petersen et al. state, "...the compassionate motivation to share with needy nonfamily could not have evolved without defenses against opportunists inclined to take without contributing."⁷⁰ We go further to suggest that the need for these defenses may be particularly acute when the resources required for

⁶⁸ Gelpi, Christopher, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler. 2006. "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq." *International Security* 30(3): 7-46.

⁶⁹ Herrmann, Richard K, Philip E Tetlock and Penny S Visser. 1999. "Mass public decisions on go to war: A cognitive-interactionist framework." *American Political Science Review* 93(3):553-573.

⁷⁰ Petersen, Michael Bang, Daniel Sznycer, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby. 2012. "Who deserves help? Evolutionary psychology, social emotions, and public opinion about welfare." *Political psychology* 33(3): 395-418.

helping are large as opposed to small. Thus, deservingness considerations may be highly consequential to individual decision-making when the resources required to help are large (i.e. when rescue missions are costly and ransoms demanded are large). However, if the person in need requires only minimal assistance, individuals may worry less about whether they are deserving of help.

Hypotheses

Our theory of hostage deservingness and cost sensitivity generate several hypotheses linking case-specific factors to public opinion on hostage recovery. First, we hypothesize that perceptions of hostage deservingness will influence individual support for recovery efforts:

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

Second, we predict that cost sensitivity will shape individual support for recovery efforts:

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

Finally, we predict that deservingness and cost will interact, with deservingness having the largest effect for the most expensive recovery options:

H3: The public will be less sensitive to blame for capture when hostage recovery is cheap and more sensitive to blame for capture when hostage recovery is more costly.

In contrast, conventional wisdom predicts that the public will view all cases of hostage recovery similarly. If the conventional wisdom is correct, then individual factors about hostages and recovery options would be uncorrelated with support for recovery. On the one hand, if the public believes strongly in the “no man left behind” principle, then we would expect the public to be highly supportive of recovering hostages, regardless of method (ransom vs. rescue):

H4a: The public will be highly supportive of both recovery through rescue or paying a ransom.

We would further expect factors such as cost and deservingness to have little effect on public support for hostage rescue and ransom payment:

H4b: Perceptions of responsibility for capture and operational costs are uncorrelated with support for recovery through rescue or paying a ransom.

On the other hand, if the “no concessions” rhetoric has been internalized by the public, we can expect that most respondents will oppose paying ransoms, regardless of cost or other variables. We should also observe a significant difference in opinion between the two key policy options to recover hostages: respondents should be significantly more supportive of rescue attempts relative to paying ransoms:

H5a: The public will be more supportive of hostage rescue than paying ransoms to recover a hostage.

Finally, given the specificity of the rhetoric to apply to terrorist perpetrators (i.e., “We

don't negotiate with terrorists") rather than other non-state actors, we predict that ransom payment support will be lowest for the former perpetrator type:

H5b: The public will be less supportive of paying ransoms to terrorist perpetrators relative to other non-state actor perpetrators.

Research Design and Results

To test our hypotheses, we use a multi-method design that focuses on the politics of hostage recovery in the United States. First, we use survey experiments to explore American public opinion about hostage recovery. We join recent work that sees value in understanding public opinion about important issues in international security.⁷¹ To do so, we embed experiments in two large national surveys of Americans fielded in 2016 and 2020. The 2020 experiment replicated and extended the findings from the 2016 experiment. Because both experiments show support for our hypotheses, we focus in the main text on the more recent data and report the findings from 2016 in the Appendix.⁷²

⁷¹ See, for example: Sagan, Scott D. and Benjamin A. Valentino. 2017. "Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans Really Think about Using Nuclear Weapons and Killing Noncombatants." *International Security* 42 (1): 41–79; Quek, Kai and Alastair Iain Johnston. 2018. "Can China Back Down? Crisis De-escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition." *International Security* 42 (3): 7–36; Mattes, Michaela and Jessica LP Weeks. 2019. "Hawks, doves, and peace: An experimental approach." *American Journal of Political Science* 63(1):53–66; Myrick, Rachel. 2019. "Do External Threats Unite or Divide? Security Crises, Rivalries, and Polarization in American Foreign Policy." *International Organization* 75(4): 921–958; Carpenter, Charli and Alexander H. Montgomery. 2020. "The Stopping Power of Norms: Saturation Bombing, Civilian Immunity, and U.S. Attitudes toward the Laws of War." *International Security* 45(2): 140–169; Kertzer, Joshua D., Brian C. Rathbun and Nina Srinivasan Rathbun. 2020. "The Price of Peace: Motivated Reasoning and Costly Signaling in International Relations." *International Organization* 74(1):95–118; Tomz, Michael R and Jessica LP Weeks. 2020. "Human rights and public support for war." *The Journal of Politics* 82(1):182–194; Tomz, Michael, Jessica L.P. Weeks and Keren Yarhi-Milo. 2020. "Public Opinion and Decisions About Military Force in Democracies." *International Organization* 74(1):119–143; Dill, Janina and Livia I Schubiger. 2021. "Attitudes toward the Use of Force: Instrumental Imperatives, Moral Principles, and International Law." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(3):612–633; Kostyuk, Nadiya and Carly Wayne. 2021. "The microfoundations of state cybersecurity: Cyber risk perceptions and the mass public." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6(2):ogz077.

⁷² We note here that the evidence presented in our article is consistent with a rigorous incrementalism approach in which we fielded a large, exploratory pilot survey in 2016 and a main survey in 2020 that replicated and extended the findings from the 2016 study.

One potential shortcoming of public opinion research is that it rarely tests a causal link between public preferences and policymaker response.⁷³ Our design addresses that shortcoming by explicitly probing that link, unveiling pathways through which perceptions of deservingness shape hostage-recovery decisions. Thus, for the second part of our design, we conducted 22 interviews with political elites and practitioners involved in U.S. hostage recovery and policy-making. We use these interviews to uncover whether elites rely on similar factors as the public in their decision-making and whether public opinion affects how they make and implement hostage recovery policy. We discuss the design and results of the survey experiments first and then turn to our interviews.

Survey Experiment

The 2020 experiment was embedded in a 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.⁷⁴

The 2020 experiment 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

⁷³ But see Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020.

⁷⁴ The 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.

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* and only used 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.⁷⁵

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 the following short vignette detailing the kidnapping:

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:

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

⁷⁵ Although there are a number of randomized elements of the scenario, the survey experiment is a vignette experiment and not a conjoint experiment. Our theoretical interest is in the effects of the deservingness and cost sensitivity treatments, not in the average marginal component effects often estimated for conjoint experiments.

In the case of the hiker who was there for personal reasons, we manipulated whether 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 and support for paying a ransom. Importantly, 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 several questions later were asked about their perceptions of the hostage's blame. In the 2020 survey, the blame question preceded the rescue and ransom policy approval questions. We find that the order of the blame question does not change the treatment text's effects on the dependent variables.

For the rescue and ransom policy approval questions, we included randomized text

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.⁷⁶ 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* 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.

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

⁷⁶ Another 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.

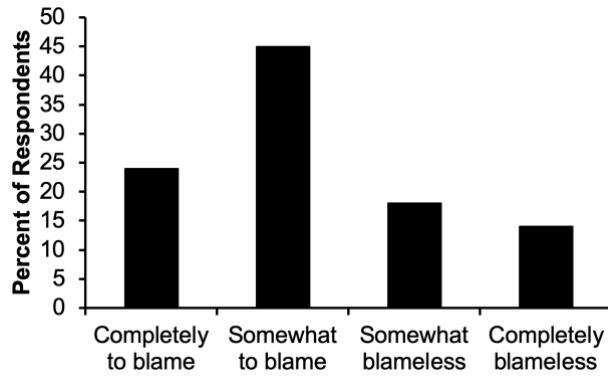
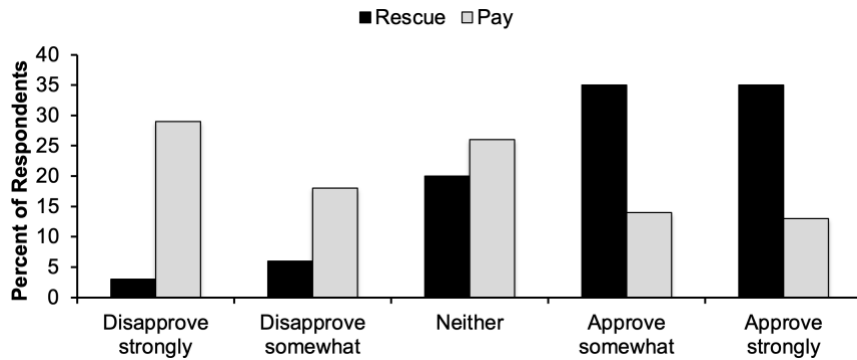


Figure 2: **Distribution of dependent variables**



Turning to the dependent variables, we see in Figure 2 that there is significant variation in support for rescue and ransom payment. Nearly three-fourths of the sample approve somewhat or strongly of the rescue mission to recover the captured American. On the other hand, only around a quarter of respondents approved of paying the ransom either somewhat or strongly. Again, these distributions pool respondents across treatments. As we will show 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.

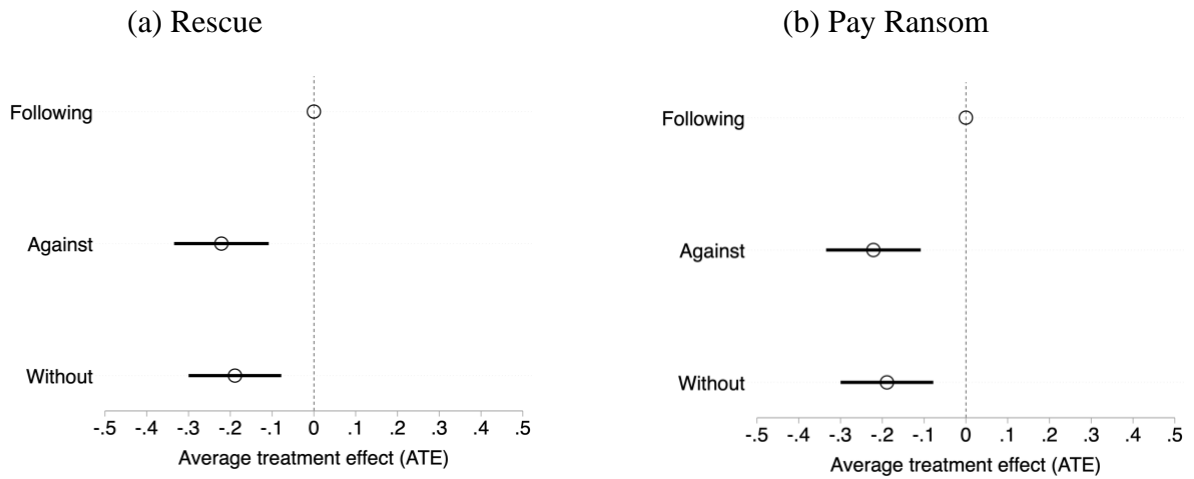
Nevertheless, we view the descriptive pattern in Figure 2 as consistent with both the “no

man left behind” and “no concessions” mentalities. The fact that averaging across the deservingness and costs treatments we still see high support for rescue missions (around 70 percent approve somewhat or strongly) suggests that Americans have bought in considerably to the idea that the government should work to bring home captured Americans. On the other hand, the low support of ransom payments (less than 30 percent of the public approve somewhat or strongly) suggests that the “no concessions” approach has also been internalized by the American public, such that they would strongly prefer to bring Americans home through rescue operations rather than pay ransoms to armed groups. We view these patterns as support for H5a that the public will be more supportive of rescue than ransom but go against H4a that the core value of “no man left behind” would lead Americans to want to recover hostages regardless of the method. Interestingly, we also find that although we randomized whether the perpetrator was a terrorist or a rebel group, this treatment had no effect on support for rescue or paying a ransom. This goes against H5b that paying a ransom would be least supported when the perpetrator is a terrorist organization.

Results of Experiment

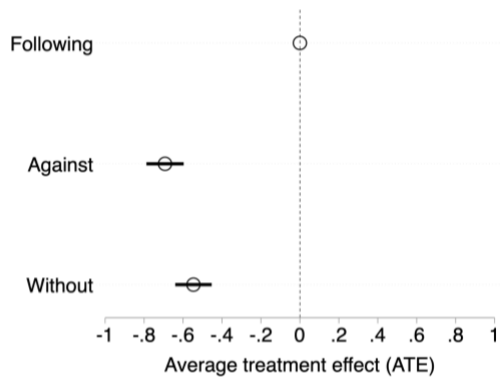
Recall that we hypothesized that individuals would be more supportive of government attempts to recover the captured American if they were perceived to be less responsible for their situation (H1) and recovery was less costly (H2). We also anticipated an interaction between deservingness and cost sensitivity, with Americans being more willing to recover undeserving hostages when the costs are low, but more sensitive to deservingness considerations when costs are high (H3). Our experimental evidence reported below supports these hypotheses.

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



Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to these figures.

Figure 4: **ATE of Deservingness Treatment on Perceived Hostage Deservingness**



Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to this figure.

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 model, “following orders” is the baseline category.⁷⁷ 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.

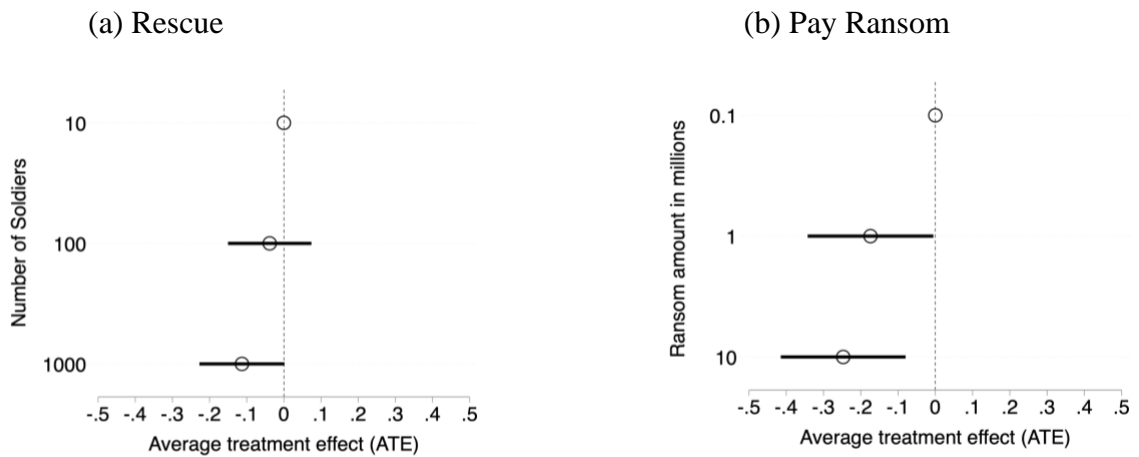
Figure 4 provides evidence of the mechanism. We show that the deservingness treatment affects how respondents assign blame to the hostage. By telling respondents in the scenario that the kidnapped American had defied orders or the U.S. State Department, respondents are much more likely to say that the hostage is to blame for their situation. Like 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 5 displays the average treatment effect for the recovery cost

⁷⁷ Recall that for the hiker treatment the equivalent of following orders was “with the State Department’s permission.”

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 one policymaker 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.⁷⁸

Figure 5: ATE of Costs on Support for Rescue and Ransom Payment



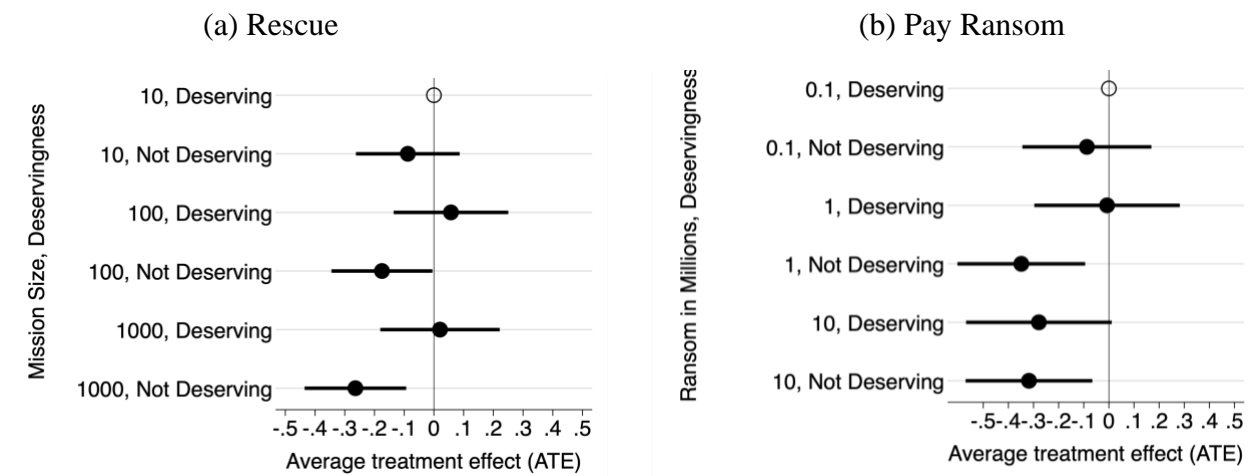
Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to these figures.

⁷⁸ Interview 02, May 16, 2019.

For the ransom outcome of *Pay*, the ransom amount demanded by the captors has a larger effect. As shown in Figure 5, compared to the baseline of \$100,000, respondents are much less willing to pay higher amounts. However, our respondents 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 paying ransom. 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.⁷⁹

Figure 6: ATE of Deservingness and Cost on Support for Rescue and Paying

Ransom



Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to these figures.

Next, we examine the hypothesis that operational costs and the size of ransom demanded condition the effect of hostage deservingness on public support for recovery. 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

⁷⁹ Interview 01, December 13, 2018.

the hypothesis. Figure 6 shows the average treatment effect on support for the rescue mission and ransom payment outcomes by the deservingness treatment and the cost treatment. In terms of the effect of deservingness, for low-cost rescue missions, the difference in support for deserving and not deserving hostages is negligible. Those described as going against orders or the State Department's travel warning were only slightly less likely to inspire support for rescue than those described as following orders. As the mission size for the rescue operation increases, costing more and putting more lives at risk, the difference between deserving and undeserving hostages increases. While support for rescue missions of deserving hostages stays relatively consistent across the size of mission, support rapidly declines for undeserving hostages as mission size increases. This results in increasingly large and significant treatment effects of the deservingness treatment as mission size grows. These results provide significant support for H3. Thus, it appears that for low-cost missions, the more salient norm guiding individual thinking is "no man left behind" as support remains high and stable regardless of the deservingness cues. However, the deservingness heuristic becomes more important as costs grow.

The conditioning power of costs on the deservingness heuristic is also quite interesting for the ransom outcome. At both high and low costs, deservingness has little effect on support for paying ransom. As can be seen in the figure, when the ransom amount is high, support decreases, but it does so equally for both deserving and undeserving hostages. We might interpret these differences across cost in light of the conventional wisdom described above associated with hostage recovery. At low ransom amounts, support is relatively higher regardless of deservingness due to the principle of "no man left behind." Conversely, support is relatively lower at high ransom amounts regardless of deservingness due to the principle of "no concessions" kicking in when demands are too extreme. The deservingness treatment has its

largest, and only significant, effect at the middle treatment of \$1 million. This is important for its proximity to real-world ransom demands: the biggest effect of the deservingness treatment on support for rescue is at \$1 million—the most realistic ransom demand amount. Finally, we do not find evidence in favor of hypothesis H4b that hostage deservingness and costs are unrelated to support for recovery. This alternative hypothesis suggested that the U.S. public might ignore the circumstances of capture and support bringing home any hostage, following the principle of “no man left behind.” While there is some evidence that when recovery is less costly, circumstances of capture are ignored, we find that deservingness weighs heavily on the minds of citizens for larger missions and more costly ransoms.

Interview evidence

To investigate how the principles and cost sensitivity described above affect elite decision-making, we draw on evidence from 22 in-depth interviews with policymakers and servicemembers responsible for hostage recovery. We demonstrate in several ways that perceptions of deservingness—and the public’s view of hostage recovery—matter for the hostage recovery process. Through interview evidence, we show that policymakers are both independently susceptible to the same deservingness perceptions as the public, and that they think about—and respond to—public pressures on hostage issues.

Between January and July 2023, we interviewed principals and senior staff from all relevant entities across the U.S. federal government tasked with hostage recovery policy and operations, spanning political parties, military branches, and the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. These include the Hostage Response Group: the officials in the White House’s National Security Council that make high-level hostage recovery decisions; the Hostage

Recovery Fusion Cell: an interagency, operational body housed at the FBI; and the office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs: the State Department’s chief diplomat for hostage cases. We also interviewed senior Congressional staff responsible for hostage recovery legislation, as well as senior military officers who participated in hostage recovery missions. We conducted interviews by phone, Zoom, and in person.⁸⁰ Given the sensitive nature of this subject, and the fact that many interview participants are currently serving in government, we guaranteed all interview participants confidentiality as a condition for participating. Moreover, due to the small size of these offices and the limited number of officials who have ever served in these roles, we do not specify whether quotes are attributed to current or former officials, nor which office they served, as the combination would almost certainly identify individual participants.

Responsibility to protect: “It’s the highest priority.”

While the preceding experiments provide robust evidence that perceptions of deservingness and cost affect the public’s view of hostage recovery, U.S. policy does not officially account for the circumstances of capture in recovery decisions. As the 2015 Presidential Policy Directive on Hostage Recovery Activities notes, “The United States is committed to achieving the safe and rapid recovery of U.S. nationals taken hostage outside the United States,” and “will use every appropriate resource to gain the safe return of U.S. nationals who are held hostage.” In this sense, hostage recovery is aligned with the expectation that beyond its borders, the “primary duty”⁸¹ and “highest priority” of the U.S. government is “to

⁸⁰ Interviews conducted under [withheld for peer review] IRB# 00032606. See Appendix 6 for further details on how interview subjects were identified, selected, and contacted; a sample of interview questions; and a list of interviews by format and date.

⁸¹ Interview 15, February 15, 2023.

protect the lives and serve the interests of U.S. citizens abroad.”⁸² Senior officials describe hostage recovery as a duty to—and contract with—the American people: “The reason you have a government is to provide security... It’s a contract that we as Americans have with our government: that we believe that our government will take care of us.”⁸³ Policymakers saw hostage recovery as a government service and “an actual, directly tangible thing that the President can do for the American people: bringing loved ones back home.”⁸⁴ Another echoed: “It’s really important for Americans to know that their country has their back, and they have every right to demand that from their government.”⁸⁵ Officials agreed: “the whole point of having an American passport is the fact of knowing you’ll be safe abroad, that the full force of the U.S. government will try to get you home.”⁸⁶

As a mission meant to convey both a “reflection of American values,” and “national security interest,”⁸⁷ hostage recovery decisions are supposed to revolve only around available intelligence and determinations of safety—what officials call “risk to force (the guys going in) and risk to mission (the hostage).”⁸⁸ Accordingly, policymakers stress their commitment to leaving no one behind. As one policymaker stressed, regardless of circumstance, “We’re going to

⁸² <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/emergencies/what-state-dept-can-cantdo-crisis.html>. According to interview participants, the State Department’s duties include protecting Americans from the “Five D’s” they may face abroad: death, detention, disease, destitution, and disaster. Author correspondence with interview participant 13, June 1, 2023.

⁸³ Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

⁸⁴ Interview 20, April 4, 2023.

⁸⁵ Interview 03, January 20, 2023.

⁸⁶ Interview 20, April 4, 2023.

⁸⁷ Interview 10, January 27, 2023.

⁸⁸ Interview 02, May 16, 2019.

work the case just as hard. . . we're going to provide 100% of our efforts to get the person home."⁸⁹ Especially in difficult and controversial cases, some argued, "that was a flag we needed to plant: everybody comes home."⁹⁰

This begs the question: if circumstances of capture are irrelevant in U.S. hostage recovery policy and law, how do perceptions of hostage deservingness matter to decisionmakers? In what follows, we show that notions of deservingness (and the public's approval of hostages) matter a great deal in the hostage recovery process. Specifically, individual policymakers are similarly susceptible to notions of deservingness, yielding substantial internal debate about recovery options. Moreover, policymakers are responsive to public opinion, adapting their messaging to avoid backlash from recovering less sympathetic hostages or failing to recover those seen as more deserving.⁹¹

Elite perceptions of deservingness: "Who goes hiking in Afghanistan?"

Just like the American public, some government officials are susceptible to judgments of deservingness and blame, and they frequently affirmed so in interviews.⁹² These admissions were particularly striking coming from the decisionmakers tasked with hostage recovery, who simultaneously stressed that circumstances of capture are irrelevant, yet criticized individual

⁸⁹ Interview 14, February 6, 2023.

⁹⁰ Interview 16, March 3, 2023.

⁹¹ Despite the public assumptions that the United States has a "no concessions" policy, most policymakers we spoke to fully accepted that negotiations and concessions are crucial tools in hostage recovery efforts. Nevertheless, a minority of interview participants made comments in line with a "no concessions" framework. One policymaker stated, incorrectly and in contravention to PPD-30, that "our law says we don't negotiate with hostage-takers." (Interview 04, January 23, 2023). Others highlighted perceived risks of making concessions: "We can't continue to incentivize hostage taking" (Interview 19, April 4, 2023).

⁹² Only two interview subjects resolutely and consistently rejected that the circumstances of capture could ever matter: Interview 09, January 27, 2023; Interview 16, March 3, 2023.

hostages by name. As one senior official said, “Austin Tice⁹³—someone can make the case that he shouldn’t be in Syria. Someone could make the case that Sam Goodwin⁹⁴ shouldn’t be in Syria as an adventure tourist. James Foley⁹⁵—God rest his soul—was kidnapped before once in north Africa. What was he doing going back?”⁹⁶ Communicating frustration regarding Sam Goodwin and Otto Warmbier,⁹⁷ a policymaker said,

Of course we did what we could to help, but in my head, you’re like, *what the hell were you doing in Syria? You were trying to visit every country in the world? How stupid!* There’s an element of frustration—you had no business going there [. . .] How many warnings does the U.S. government have to give not to travel to North Korea? People do this black-market tourism, and the families are like, ‘Help us!’ But in the back of your mind, you’re like, *what the hell?! What were you doing going there?* So you say it in private, you say it behind closed doors: this person had no business going there.⁹⁸

Even when dedicated to hostage recovery, policymakers find it difficult to ignore hostages’ circumstances of capture. One admitted that recovery was more difficult for hostages who had disobeyed State Department travel warnings: “It’s hard to be supportive when they’re

⁹³ Austin Tice was abducted in Syria in 2012 while traveling as a freelance journalist. At the time of writing, it is believed that he is still held by the Syrian government.

⁹⁴ Sam Goodwin was detained by the Syrian government in 2019 while he was attempting to visit every country in the world.

⁹⁵ James Foley was kidnapped in Syria in 2012 while traveling as a freelance journalist. He was the first American beheaded by the Islamic State.

⁹⁶ Interview 04, January 23, 2023.

⁹⁷ Otto Warmbier was detained in North Korea in 2016 while on a guided tour.

⁹⁸ Interview 18, March 21, 2023.

going over to a Syria or a Yemen, right? And now a Russia and Iran, where we have travel warnings galore.”⁹⁹ Another stressed, “You don’t want to blame the victim, but they made a conscious choice—a lot of people would say, a stupid choice.”¹⁰⁰ Although it is U.S. policy to ignore circumstances of capture, we found that the vast majority of relevant policymakers and staff actively brought up those circumstances in interviews.

Servicemembers tasked with hostage recovery were also frustrated and resentful of hostages perceived as willingly courting danger. Asked about U.S. military efforts to recover Bergdahl, several expressed their personal disagreement with the repeated, futile missions to bring him home. “You try not to be upset, try to be as professional as possible, but you start asking the questions.”¹⁰¹ Though they followed orders to try to recover Bowe Bergdahl, Dilip Joseph,¹⁰² and others, they thought about hostage deservingness—particularly as it related to high costs of rescue efforts. “What are these people thinking, making these decisions? [Hostage recovery] is your job. . . but at the back of your mind, you realize that when people make these decisions, they put themselves in situations where they need to be rescued, and we end up putting our own lives on the line.”¹⁰³

Variable perceptions of deservingness bubbled up among senior officials, yielding frequent, internal debates. In contrast to the assumption that the policy ignores circumstances of capture, interview participants noted that such circumstances “came up a lot.”¹⁰⁴ In presenting a

⁹⁹ Interview 09, January 27, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 13, February 3, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Interview 06, January 24, 2023.

¹⁰² Dilip Joseph was kidnapped in Afghanistan in 2012 while working for an international aid organization. He was rescued by the Navy SEALs in a 2012 operation in which operator Nicholas Cheque was killed.

¹⁰³ Interview 19, April 3, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Interview 22, July 11, 2023.

case to colleagues, “we would hear strong comments about agency: *We told him not to go to Syria. He was told not to go, but he went anyway.*”¹⁰⁵ Staff working on these cases “definitely saw personalities that didn’t want to be helpful.” Specifically, several people suggested that negative perceptions of deservingness slowed recovery efforts for captured hiker Caitlan Coleman:¹⁰⁶

I think if she had been by herself, or if her husband didn’t have a history of very strange things. . . I think that would have had a different outcome. Here would be a woman with a small child. You know: *let’s get her out faster. We really need to work harder.* I think we did work pretty hard in her case, but I know that in some instances, having him there became a problem.¹⁰⁷

In accordance with expectations of social desirability bias, policymakers always emphasized that it was some *other* individual, office, or agency bringing up the circumstances of capture. Different interview participants alternately attributed such views to the Department of Defense, Department of State, and FBI; from within the White House and among cabinet officials: “I could name them, but I won’t. It’s not necessary.”¹⁰⁸

Finally, in line with our theory, judgments regarding hostages’ deservingness became especially salient as a function of high recovery costs. As one interview participant explained, “most of these comments [about circumstances of capture] come up when people had another

¹⁰⁵ Interview 03, January 20, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ American hiker Caitlan Coleman and her Canadian husband Joshua Boyle were kidnapped while hiking in Afghanistan.

¹⁰⁷ Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Interview 04, January 23, 2023.

policy agenda: they didn't want to expend the military resources to go get them. They'll say, *well, this person shouldn't have been hiking there and they got taken, and so we shouldn't expend our resources to return 'em.*"¹⁰⁹ After unsuccessful rescue attempts, executive branch agencies debated the merits of expending government resources to bring home blameworthy hostages. As one official recalled, "[the Department of Defense] is now, like, livid, and they would throw that in our face—*why are we wasting our resources here? Why are we spending all of these high-value assets to go after somebody that got themselves in a predicament they shouldn't have?*"¹¹⁰ Still, interview participants assured us that despite "anger" and "angst," the naysayers "always got rebuked"¹¹¹ or "were forced to be supportive."¹¹² Even when efforts were invisible to the public, officials emphasized that the government "still moves mountains to attempt hostage recovery and often succeeds."¹¹³ But those efforts are accompanied by internal disagreement and external political costs.

Policymaker responsiveness: "It polls really, really well."

Beyond their own perceptions of deservingness, policymakers affirm that public opinion on hostage recovery is consequential, and they respond to it in several ways. First, policymakers agreed that the White House was responsive to public attention, approval, and pressure for hostage recovery. President Trump, for instance, "enjoyed" hostage recovery as "a metric, a

¹⁰⁹ Interview 22, July 11, 2023.

¹¹⁰ Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

¹¹¹ Interview 08, January 27, 2023.

¹¹² Interview 16, March 3, 2023.

¹¹³ Correspondence with interview participant 08, September 24, 2023.

success that you can show,” something “demonstrable.”¹¹⁴ Across presidential administrations, policymakers believe that hostage issues were “ingrained in the psyche of the American public.”¹¹⁵ Bringing home innocent American hostages is seen as a tremendous political win: “Having the hostage come off an airplane at Andrews Air Force Base, and having the president stand at the foot of the plane, and welcome them home, with his wife and the vice president, and shake their hand: it polls really, really well.”¹¹⁶ Explaining presidential engagement, an official said, “it’s partly because the public cares about these issues, and when they care, they want to see a president who cares.”¹¹⁷ Another stressed that “it’s one place where policy meets people; it’s the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae.”¹¹⁸ Interview participants suggested that presidential attention varies with public attention across cases: “it was not the U.S. government’s highest priority—unless it looks like it’s going to be a political win for the administration.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, the officials who work on hostage issues want to encourage public attention, which “definitely makes the administration engage on a case.”¹²⁰

However, this public attention comes with twin risks: the White House suffers when it fails to recover sympathetic hostages *and* for recovering hostages seen as less deserving. On the one hand, failure to recover deserving hostages is “humiliating” for the White House.¹²¹ The

¹¹⁴ Interview 22, July 11, 2023.

¹¹⁵ Interview 04, January 23, 2023.

¹¹⁶ Interview 05, January 23, 2023.

¹¹⁷ Interview 08, January 27, 2023.

¹¹⁸ Interview 21, May 4, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

¹²⁰ Interview 15, February 15, 2023.

¹²¹ Interview 20, April 4, 2023.

1979 Iran hostage crisis looms large in the minds of policymakers: “that took down a presidency, it took down Jimmy Carter’s presidency, and nobody else ever wanted to be caught out like that.”¹²² The Obama Administration’s failure to recover several hostages kidnapped by the Islamic State was seen in a similar light, “because of how public it was, and understanding how the public reacted. There were videos that ISIS posted on YouTube, there were [photos] on the front pages of every major newspaper.”¹²³

On the other hand, some policymakers fear or avoid association with hostages judged poorly by the public. Referring to Bowe Bergdahl, one interview participant said, “nobody wants to be on the frontlines advocating for a deserter who caused political suffering and death of his squadmates and people trying to rescue him.”¹²⁴ Policymakers feared making unpopular prisoner exchanges, not wanting “to have another kind of Bergdahl fiasco where they do a trade and they look bad for it.”¹²⁵ Policymakers expressed that the public’s judgment makes hostage recovery more difficult, hampering their ability to “float strategies and negotiation tactics to get their release, because people were judging them, essentially, for what they may have done to get themselves captured.”¹²⁶ Officials were especially worried about deservingness as it intersects with the cost of recovery efforts: “if we go in there, and a number of SEALs get killed or something, and we’ve got to go face the American public over somebody who did something stupid, I’m sure that had to weigh in the backs of peoples’ minds.”¹²⁷

¹²² Interview 11, January 30, 2023.

¹²³ Interview 08, January 27, 2023.

¹²⁴ Interview 13, February 3, 2023.

¹²⁵ Interview 16, March 3, 2023.

¹²⁶ Interview 03, January 20, 2023.

¹²⁷ Interview 11, January 30, 2023.

Finally, policymakers work to shape the narrative around hostage deservingness in order to minimize public scorn. Interview participants explained how the White House itself would try to “raise the awareness on certain cases” to persuade the public “to, you know, not judge the person adversely for the circumstances that led to their capture.”¹²⁸ Officials and staff would coach families on how to talk about their loved one,¹²⁹ with the purpose of making sure they would “avoid being judged like Bowe Bergdahl.”¹³⁰ As one policymaker explained, “We have typically advised families to try to build a sympathetic narrative around the person. That’s really important. I think it’s being able to depict them as somebody who’s not an unnecessary risk-taker, who’s doing something noble, like humanitarian work, journalism, or something innocent,” to see the circumstances of capture as “just wrong place, wrong time.”¹³¹ They minimize cues related to blame, because “we’re not in the business of showing people’s faults from the podium.”¹³² Beyond coaching families, policymakers actively shape the public conversation on hostage recovery, emphasizing their commitment to “leave no man behind” and downplaying blame:

We decided pretty early on that we’re going to make it very clear—and we started to build it into speeches and talking points—that Americans are adventurous. We don’t have exit controls on Americans. We value the American spirit, and hikers, journalists, ex-military—they are contributing to the fabric of life by traveling and

¹²⁸ Interview 07, January 23, 2023.

¹²⁹ Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

¹³⁰ Interview 13, February 3, 2023.

¹³¹ Interview 07, January 26, 2023.

¹³² Interview 21, May 4, 2023.

exploring. So we did very consciously try to build a narrative, that you see now, even with other leaders repeating our words: that the only thing that matters is the color of your passport.¹³³

In sum, our interviews provide evidence of both direct and indirect pathways through which perceptions of deservingness affect hostage recovery. The indirect effect of deservingness manifests in the ways that policymakers think about the public's attention to hostages. Policymakers consider hostage recovery as alternately popular and a source of pressure. They actively alter their language—producing elite cues—and actions to minimize the public's tendency to judge controversial hostages. But our interviews also show the direct effects of deservingness on the hostage recovery process. Policymakers are unable to ignore hostages' circumstances of capture, leading to frequent, internal debates about whether and how quickly to bring them home. Some interview participants suggested that debates and disagreements affected rescuer morale and the urgency (or lack thereof) of recovery in certain cases, contributing to variation in how cases were prioritized.

Generalizability

Our study explores the politics of hostage recovery with a focus on kidnappings of American citizens. However, as we note throughout, kidnapping is a global threat faced by many countries. Therefore, it is important to consider the implications of our theory and results for understanding the politics of hostage recovery in other countries and for other forms of hostage taking. How might our theory of hostage deservingness travel to other empirical contexts? Our research suggests several fruitful avenues for future research.

¹³³ Interview 03, January 20, 2023.

First, does “deservingness” matter for other forms of hostage taking? While kidnapping remains an important threat to international security, a new form of hostage taking is on the rise. In cases of what is alternately known as “hostage diplomacy,” “arbitrary” or “wrongful detention,” or “state-led hostage taking,” autocratic governments use their criminal justice systems to take foreigners hostage. States including China, Russia, Iran, and Venezuela have increasingly held western captives for foreign policy leverage under the color and guise of law.¹³⁴ We can imagine competing ways that our findings might apply to such cases.

On the one hand, we might expect many of the same dynamics to apply, as public opinion varies across hostage recovery deals. For example, in 2022, critics were livid about the deal to recover WNBA star Brittney Griner from her “wrongful detention” in Russia, calling the trade for Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout “unconscionable,” “weak,” and an “unpatriotic embarrassment.”¹³⁵ As in the case of kidnappings, public support may vary based on hostage deservingness—their perceived recklessness in traveling to hostile countries—and the cost of recovery efforts. On the other hand, by definition, hostage diplomacy cases emerge when someone is arrested by a foreign government. Thus, all cases have a built-in “guilty” charge, even if the charge is exaggerated or entirely fabricated, rendering less variation in hostages’ circumstances of detention. Of course, the public may not consider all foreign crimes—from assault, to drug trafficking, to espionage—to impute equal guilt; the veracity of such charges should vary across accusing governments. Future work should explore how the deservingness heuristic explains public opinion in hostage diplomacy cases, as many of our interview

¹³⁴ Gilbert, Danielle and Gaëlle Rivard-Piché. 2021; Lau, Beatrice. ““ Hostage Diplomacy”-A Contemporary State Practice outside the Reach of International Law?.” *Geo. J. Int’l L.* 53 (2021): 343.

¹³⁵ Nicholas Reimann, “ ‘Unpatriotic Embarrassment’: Republicans Slam Biden’s Deal to Free Brittney Griner as Paul Whelan Stays in Russia,” *Forbes*, December 8, 2022. Online at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicholasreimann/2022/12/08/unpatriotic-embarrassment-republicans-slam-bidens-deal-to-free-brittney-griner-as-paul-whelan-stays-in-russia/?sh=16224dc15399>

participants asked us to do.

Second, does our theory of hostage deservingness travel to other countries? 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.¹³⁶ In these countries, a culture of protest against the government maintains public pressure until hostages are brought safely home. After the Hamas kidnappings of October 7, 2023, Israeli hostage families put relentless pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu to make costly sacrifices needed to free their loved ones. Prior work has suggested that public opinion might correlate with variation in a sense of “national solidarity”; where such solidarity is higher, the public will be more likely to demand hostages’ safe return.¹³⁷ Future work should investigate these dynamics, exploring hostage policy in comparative context. We suspect the analogy to welfare policies could travel elsewhere, generating a greater expectation of government intervention to recover hostages in countries with more robust social welfare programs, and lower expectation where individual responsibility is culturally paramount.

Conclusion

As Israel’s former Director of Military Intelligence wrote in the pages of *International Security*, hostage recovery “shares with full-scale war the Clausewitzian dictum that it, too, be an extension of politics by other means.”¹³⁸ This article explores those politics. In unpacking the

¹³⁶ Simon, Joel. 2019. *We Want to Negotiate: The Secret World of Kidnapping, Hostages and Ransom*. Columbia Global Reports; Gilbert and Rivard Piché 2021.

¹³⁷ Jervis 1988.

¹³⁸ Gazit, 1981, 113.

public and elite perception of hostage recovery, this article offers novel insights into a widespread and understudied element of international violence. We develop a theory of hostage deservingness and show that individuals' beliefs regarding a hostage's responsibility for putting herself in danger affects overall support for recovery options. Understanding hostage recovery as government assistance—and a finite resource—we also uncover a novel interaction between operational costs and deservingness: the public becomes more sensitive to deservingness as the costs of recovery grow.

In so doing, this article makes novel empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions to the study and practice of international security. First, to our knowledge, this represents the first scholarly examination of the domestic politics of international hostage recovery.¹³⁹ Hostage taking is a persistent problem for international security, occurring across regions, conflicts, and over time. It is also a problem for domestic politics. Understanding public sentiment and concomitant policymaker response contributes to our knowledge about an understudied problem in coercive international politics.

Second, our multi-method research design introduces original data and unique insights on how domestic public opinion shapes leader behavior. As a powerful and highly newsworthy form of violence, kidnapping captures the public's imagination. Because of the central role of the public in pressuring policymakers during hostage crises, it is critical to understand public opinion and its influence on elite decision-making. Our elite interviews mitigate a typical weakness of public opinion research in connecting public sentiment with policymaker response. They are also

¹³⁹ To the best of our knowledge, three prior studies use survey experiments that invoke a hostage taking to test other aspects of public opinion on foreign policy. See Terris and Tykocinski (2014), which uses an experiment about hostage recovery to test “inaction inertia,” and Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Halperin (2013) to test how the public's view of their influence on decision-making affects their policy preferences. In a survey experiment of the British public, Davies and Johns use a fictional hostage scenario and its consequences to study audience costs. See Davies, Graeme and Robert Johns, “Audience costs among the British public: The impact of escalation, crisis type, and prime ministerial rhetoric,” *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2013): 725-737.

the first to draw on insights from current and former principals of the American hostage-recovery enterprise, a novel and vital research population, working at the highest levels of government on an emerging and evolving threat.

Finally, we broaden the theoretical discussion of government protection by demonstrating a new empirical context in which the deservingness heuristic shapes public support for government expenditures. We build on work in several literatures across the social sciences, including research on public support for social welfare programs, foreign aid, and refugee policy, which identify the role of deservingness in policy outcomes.¹⁴⁰ Beyond the novel application of deservingness, we expand upon the theory to show the conditions under which deservingness is more and less salient. Our theoretical insight that deservingness and cost sensitivity interact can apply to other public policies important to international security, from immigration to climate mitigation: as government spending on programs increases, the deservingness of recipients may grow increasingly important in the eyes of the public.

These findings explain the public pushback in cases of “undeserving” victims, like Pfc. Bergdahl. 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 rescue mission? “Because he’s got a mom,” the SEAL testified. “Plus, it’s my job; that’s what we’re told to do.”¹⁴¹ Yet, as our research suggests that the perceived deservingness of a hostage can affect how that job is performed and the approval of elected leaders responsible for recovery efforts.

¹⁴⁰ Baker, 2015; Bayram and Holmes, 2020; Fraser and Murakami, 2022.

¹⁴¹ Alex Horton, “At Bergdahl sentencing, a former Navy SEAL sheds tears re-counting death of military dog,” the *Washington Post*, 25 October 2017, On-line at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/10/25/at-bergdahl-sentencing-former-navy-seal-sheds-tears-recounting-death-of-military-dog/>.

Our work demonstrates that the American public largely supports hostage recovery missions, but that support declines for more costly recoveries and victims perceived as less deserving. In the face of an ever-evolving threat, other target governments are re-assessing their politics to prevent and resolve hostage-taking violence. Kidnappers may leverage public outrage to exact increasingly painful concessions. Understanding hostage politics is thus essential for hostage safety and survival.