

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who supports hostage recovery? Explaining individual variation in American support for bringing hostages home

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Abstract

What explains how the public views government responses to hostage crises? Existing research has explored how incident-level factors shape public opinion of hostage recovery, but we know less about which Americans support recovery – and why. In this article, we explore how individual-level factors shape public support for bringing captives home. We argue that support for hostage recovery reflects partisan, ideological, and emotional factors. Drawing on two large, national surveys of the American public, we show how Americans' partisanship, broader foreign policy attitudes, and other personal traits predict willingness to support a range of hostage recovery activities, including negotiations, ransom payment, prisoner exchanges, and military rescue missions. We find that foreign policy internationalists are much more likely to support recovery compared to isolationists, though 'militant' and 'cooperative' internationalists prefer different recovery options. While broad, bipartisan majorities support recovery efforts, Republicans are significantly less supportive of making concessions to bring captive Americans home – partisan differences that are exacerbated when recovery is proposed by an out-party president. Finally, we show that respondents with children are more supportive of recovery than non-parents, a result we attribute to the emotional pleas made by captives' parents. This paper explores the domestic politics of international threat, revealing the individual determinants of support for recovery.

Keywords: foreign policy; hostage recovery; internationalism; kidnapping; partisanship; public opinion

This is a political convention. But needing our only son – and all of the cherished hostages – home, is not a political issue. It is a humanitarian issue.

– *Jon Polin*, Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, 21 August 2024

Introduction

On the morning of 7 October 2023, Palestinian militants invaded southern Israel from the Gaza Strip. In their attack coordinated across air, land, and sea, Hamas fighters streamed into Israel, killing more than 1,200 people. Hamas and its partners also kidnapped 251 people from over twenty

countries – including twelve American citizens – and brought them into captivity in Gaza.¹ Among the hundreds taken were two young Israeli-American men: 23-year-old Hersh Goldberg-Polin, kidnapped from the Nova Music Festival, and 21-year-old Omer Neutra, a tank commander in the Israeli Defense Forces.

In the year after October 7, Hersh's and Omer's parents became highly recognisable advocates for bringing their sons and all hostages home. Both met regularly with senior US officials, including the president of the United States, to share their sons' plights. Both were given prime-time speaking slots at presidential nominating conventions in the summer of 2024, where they were met with rapt attention and standing ovations. In the convention halls in Milwaukee and Chicago, thousands of Republican and Democratic delegates and attendees chanted 'Bring them home! Bring them home!' for minutes on end.

That both convention halls erupted in shared chants might suggest that hostage recovery represents a rare US policy issue with bipartisan support. Instead, the two conventions put in stark relief the variation in how the American public thinks about the *purpose* and *form* of hostage recovery. At the Democrats' convention, 'Bring them home!' signalled support for hostage recovery through negotiations. Hersh's parents, Jon and Rachel, were outspoken proponents for negotiation, pushing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to agree to life-saving concessions to end the hostage crisis.² The Polins thanked those people still pushing for a negotiated ceasefire and hostage deal: 'You keep us breathing in a world without air.' At the Republicans' convention, conversely, 'Bring them home!' signalled the desire to use military force to punish hostage takers and rescue captives. Proponents of military rescue may find more in common with remarks from Ronen and Orna Neutra, who emphasised their anger, not anguish, to the crowd: 'Where is the outrage?' the Neutras asked. 'This was and is an attack on Americans.'³

The presidential conventions illustrate the political dynamics of hostage crises. While hostage taking presents a problem for foreign policy, hostage *recovery* presents a problem for domestic politics. As they make difficult foreign policy decisions, leaders are routinely criticised – and sometimes punished – for their action or inaction in bringing captives home. Existing research has explored how governments respond to hostage crises,⁴ and how the public reacts in turn.⁵ Bringing these dynamics together, recent work has explored how variation across hostage crises, including the hostages' circumstances of capture and the cost of recovery options, affect public support for

¹ Antony J. Blinken, 'Anniversary of October 7th Attack', U.S. Department of State (2024), available at: <https://www.state.gov/anniversary-of-october-7th-attack/>.

² Nectar Gan, 'Hersh Goldberg-Polin: The "happy-go-lucky" Israeli-American who became a symbol of Israel's enduring hostage heartbreak', CNN (1 September 2024), available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/01/middleeast/israel-gaza-hostage-polin-goldberg-profile-intl-hnk/index.html>.

³ Joanne Slater, 'These parents of a U.S. hostage in Gaza took their story to the RNC', *Washington Post* (18 July 2024), available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/07/18/gaza-hostage-family-rnc/>.

⁴ Steve Smith, 'Groupthink and the hostage rescue mission', *British Journal of Political Science*, 15:1 (1985), pp. 117–23; Reuben Miller, 'Acts of international terrorism: Governments' responses and policies', *Comparative Political Studies*, 19:3 (1986), pp. 385–414; David Patrick Houghton, 'The role of analogical reasoning in novel foreign-policy situations', *British Journal of Political Science*, 26:4 (1996), pp. 523–52; Lesley G. Terris and Orit E. Tykocinski, 'Inaction inertia in international negotiations: The consequences of missed opportunities', *British Journal of Political Science*, 46:3 (2016), pp. 701–17; David E. Banks, 'The diplomatic presentation of the state in international crises: Diplomatic collaboration during the US–Iran hostage crisis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 63:4 (2019), pp. 1163–74; Danielle Gilbert and Lucy Montgomery, 'Full court press: The negotiations to bring wrongfully detained WNBA Star Brittney Griner home', *Dispute Resolution Research Center, Northwestern Kellogg* (2025), available at: <https://teachwithkellogg.com/product/full-court-press/>.

⁵ Karen J. Callaghan and Simo Virtanen, 'Revised models of the "rally phenomenon": The case of the Carter presidency', *The Journal of Politics*, 55:3 (1993), pp. 756–64; Debra Javeline and Vanessa Baird, 'Who sues government?: Evidence from the Moscow Theater hostage case', *Comparative Political Studies*, 40:7 (2007), pp. 858–85; Chia-yi Lee, 'Democracy, civil liberties, and hostage-taking terrorism', *Journal of Peace Research*, 50:2 (2013), pp. 235–48; Nick Ackert and Richard J. Samuels, 'Kidnapping politics: The sorcerer's apprentice effect' (this issue); Nina C. Krickel-Choi and Minseon Ku, 'The emotional politics of sovereignty: On kidnappings, dignity, and state persons' (this issue).

recovery.⁶ However, we know less about which members of the public support hostage recovery policies – and why.

In this paper, we explore the individual-level variation in support for bringing hostages home. We argue that support for hostage recovery reflects the intersection of two different – and sometimes contradictory – attitudes: individuals’ general views about foreign policy and their partisanship. Drawing on two large, national samples of the American public, we test how Americans’ partisanship and broader foreign policy attitudes predict their willingness to support a range of hostage recovery activities, including negotiations, ransom payments, prisoner exchanges, and military rescue missions.

We find that three key factors shape Americans’ support for hostage recovery. First, compared to isolationists, foreign policy internationalists – individuals who want their government to have an active role in world affairs – are much more likely to support all forms of hostage recovery. However, variation in Americans’ *type* of internationalism – whether *militant* or *cooperative* – also matters in shaping support for various recovery options. Second, while broad, bipartisan majorities support recovery in general, there are crucial partisan differences regarding recovery options. Compared to Republicans, Democrats are much more likely to support life-saving concessions and less likely to support military rescue missions – a gap exacerbated when the policy is proposed by a president of the opposite party. Finally, we show that respondents with children are more likely than those without children to support some recovery options – a pattern we link to the emotional pleas often made by the parents of captives abroad.

In explaining the public’s view of hostage recovery, our work makes important contributions to scholarship and policy. First, kidnapping is a persistent and pervasive threat to civilians worldwide. Despite kidnapping’s centrality to inter- and intra-state conflict, few scholars have explored its consequences for international security.⁷ Our work thus joins a small but growing body of literature that explores the dynamics of hostage taking and recovery, contributing to broader understandings of armed groups’ pattern of political violence and implications for international security.

Second, our work contributes to a robust literature on how individual-level attitudes shape public opinion on key issues in international security. This body of research has examined public preferences regarding the use of force,⁸ decision making during international crises,⁹ the role of moral values in foreign policy attitudes,¹⁰ public reactions to cybersecurity threats,¹¹ and nuclear weapons.¹² Our research applies insights from these works to the domain of hostage recovery, a uniquely personal and emotionally charged foreign policy issue that combines questions of state

⁶Danielle Gilbert and Lauren Prather, ‘Blaming the victim? Hostage deservingness and the politics of hostage recovery’, unpublished working paper (2025).

⁷But see Lee, ‘Democracy, civil liberties, and hostage-taking terrorism’; Danielle Gilbert and Gaëlle Rivard Piché, ‘Caught between giants: Hostage diplomacy and negotiation strategy for middle powers’, *Texas National Security Review*, 5:1 (Winter 2021/2022), pp. 11–32; and all others in this issue.

⁸Michaela Mattes and Jessica L. P. Weeks, ‘Hawks, doves, and peace: An experimental approach’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 63:1 (2019), pp. 53–66; Michael R. Tomz and Jessica L. P. Weeks, ‘Human rights and public support for war’, *The Journal of Politics*, 82:1 (2020), pp. 182–94; Joshua D. Kertzer, Brian C. Rathbun, and Nina Srinivasan Rathbun, ‘The price of peace: Motivated reasoning and costly signaling in international relations’, *International Organization*, 74:1 (2020), pp. 95–118, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000328>}.

⁹Rachel Myrick, ‘Do external threats unite or divide? Security crises, rivalries, and polarization in American foreign policy’, *International Organization* 75:4 (2021), pp. 921–958; Michael Tomz, Jessica L. P. Weeks, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, ‘Public opinion and decisions about military force in democracies’, *International Organization*, 74:1 (2020), pp. 119–43, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000341>}.

¹⁰Janina Dill and Livia I. Schubiger, ‘Attitudes toward the use of force: Instrumental imperatives, moral principles, and international law’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 65:3 (2021), pp. 612–33.

¹¹Nadiya Kostyuk and Carly Wayne, ‘The microfoundations of state cybersecurity: Cyber risk perceptions and the mass public’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:2 (2021): ogz077.

¹²Ben Clements and Catarina P. Thomson, ‘The “ultimate insurance” or an “irrelevance” for national security needs? Partisanship, foreign policy attitudes, and the gender gap in British public opinion towards nuclear weapons’, *European Journal of International Security*, 7:3 (2022), pp. 360–81.

responsibility, use of force, international cooperation, and humanitarian concern. In doing so, we extend the literature on public opinion and international security by highlighting how partisan, ideological, and emotional factors shape support for specific government responses to transnational hostage crises. We also contribute to the literature by increasing our understanding of public expectations about the role of government in protecting them from harm.¹³

Finally, our work offers novel real-world implications for the complex politics of hostage recovery. Existing research suggests that hostage takers are more likely to target democracies *because* elected leaders face added pressure to respond.¹⁴ Recent work shows that policymakers are responsive to public pressure on hostage recovery.¹⁵ This article shows how that pressure is far from uniform and instead varies with other political concerns among the target population – crucial ramifications for democratically elected leaders facing hostage crises.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide a brief background on how the US government brings hostages home, showing that different recovery options vary widely in both process and outcome. Second, we outline the individual-level factors that we expect to shape support for hostage recovery efforts. Next, we explain our research design for examining public opinion on hostage recovery and offer findings from large surveys of the American public. Drawing on these findings, we then discuss the implications for the politics and policy of hostage recovery.

Background: Hostage recovery options

Hundreds of Americans are kidnapped abroad every year. According to the US Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, the inter-agency government body tasked with hostage recovery operations, there is a ‘persistent threat’ of Americans being kidnapped abroad.¹⁶ The government’s ‘commitment to the safe and rapid recovery of U.S. nationals held hostage overseas’ depends on executive agencies, which ‘coordinate their efforts to leverage all instruments of national power to safely recover’ American hostages.¹⁷ What does that mean in practice? In other words, what can a government do when one of their citizens is taken hostage?

Kidnapping – the most common form of hostage taking – functions as coercion: perpetrators take and hold a human captive in order to compel behaviour change from a third-party target.¹⁸ Kidnappers present an explicit threat: *if you do not do what we want, the hostage will suffer continued captivity, pain, and even death*. Hostage takers thus offer their targets a grim choice: make concessions and win the hostage’s freedom, or do not, and suffer accordingly. Kidnapping thus clearly illustrates what scholars mean when they say that coercion requires the ‘cooperation’ of the target;¹⁹ kidnappers give the target a painful choice for how to respond.²⁰

Thus, some options for hostage recovery rely centrally on cooperating with an adversary. Target governments can respond to hostage taking by negotiating with kidnappers for hostages’ release. For the US government, such negotiation is express policy. In 2015, the Obama White

¹³Jeffrey A. Friedman, ‘Priorities for preventive action: Explaining Americans’ divergent reactions to 100 public risks’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 63:1 (2019), pp. 181–96.

¹⁴Lee, ‘Democracy, civil liberties, and hostage-taking terrorism.’

¹⁵Gilbert and Prather, ‘Blaming the victim?’

¹⁶Kidnapping is violent abduction and subsequent detention by non-state actors for illicit purposes. Kidnapping can be differentiated from other forms of hostage taking because it is necessarily clandestine: kidnappers hold their victims in a new, typically unknown location. In this article, we focus on transnational kidnappings, in which ‘the hostages, the perpetrators, or the targets of demands are of different nationalities’ (Wukki Kim, Justin George, and Todd Sandler, ‘Introducing transnational terrorist hostage event (TTHE) data set, 1978 to 2018’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 65:2–3 [2021], pp. 619–41 [p. 621]).

¹⁷HRFC, *Worldwide Hostage and Detention Threats* (United States Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, 2024), p. 1.

¹⁸Danielle Gilbert, ‘The logic of kidnapping in civil war: Evidence from Colombia’, *American Political Science Review*, 116:4 (2022), pp. 1226–41.

¹⁹Thomas C. Schelling, ‘Arms and influence’, in Thomas Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo (eds), *Strategic Studies* (Routledge, 2008), pp. 96–114; Tami Davis Biddle, ‘Coercion theory: A basic introduction for practitioners (Spring 2020)’, in 3:2 (2020), pp. 94–109.

²⁰Karl Gustafsson, ‘Deterrence through captivity’ (this issue).

House released Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD-30) on ‘Hostage Recovery Activities’. PPD-30 emphasised the government’s willingness to communicate with anyone – including hostage takers – if it could help bring hostages home. For instance, PPD-30 allows the government to ‘assist private efforts to communicate with hostage-takers’. Moreover, the US government ‘may itself communicate with hostage-takers, their intermediaries, interested governments, and local communities to attempt to secure the safe recovery of the hostage.’²¹ After the October 7 hostage takings by Hamas, for instance, the US government helped facilitate negotiations between the Israeli government and Hamas by bringing in government intermediaries from Egypt and Qatar – countries able to communicate effectively with parties on both sides.

Before or after negotiations, government targets can also accede to hostage takers’ demands. More often than not, kidnappers demand ransom payments, though they may also demand prisoner exchanges or other policy concessions;²² such demands are often satisfied. Indeed, most hostages are freed after the target makes concessions to the hostage taker. Despite the conventional wisdom that the United States has a ‘no concessions’ policy and the re-assertion of such a policy as recently as 2015,²³ the US government regularly makes or condones concessions made by others. Technically, the prohibition on concessions applies only to government-made ransom payments to designated foreign terrorist organisations – a small fraction of kidnapping cases.²⁴ In other words, the oft-repeated US ‘no concessions’ policy would not and has not stopped countless American families, companies, or even the US government itself from making concessions to win hostages’ release.²⁵

Conversely, a target government may refuse to cooperate with hostage-taking coercion. In the wake of a kidnapping, the government may elect not to intervene. The government may worry that hostage recovery would undermine broader foreign policy aims; that extraordinary assistance to a small number of individuals would invite moral hazard; or that hostage recovery falls outside the purview of government responsibility. If the government does not act, the hostage’s family or employer may work on their own to recover a captive, sometimes relying on the extensive private market of security consultants and kidnap and ransom insurance to do so.²⁶

Finally, the government may decide to respond – but not cooperate. Target governments may threaten hostage takers with severe consequences, like sanctions or military force, or implore other parties to do so.²⁷ Target governments can engage force, using military rescue missions to recover captive citizens.²⁸ In the 1980s, the US military established the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) headquarters and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to coordinate multiple branches of the military in joint operations overseas, including

²¹‘Presidential Policy Directive – Hostage Recovery Activities: Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-30’, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (White House Archives: President Barack Obama) (24 June 2015), available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/24/presidential-policy-directive-hostage-recovery-activities>).

²²Gilbert, ‘The logic of kidnapping in civil war’.

²³Marc Mertes, Robert Böhm, and Joachim Hüffmeier, ‘Popular support for the no-concessions policy in terrorist hostage takings’, *Collabra: Psychology*, 10:1 (2024), pp. 1–24.

²⁴Danielle Gilbert, ‘“No Concessions”? A Closer Look at U.S. Hostage Recovery Policy’, *War on the Rocks* (27 February 2019), available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/no-concessions-a-closer-look-at-u-s-hostage-recovery-policy/>).

²⁵Danielle Gilbert, ‘The Prisoners Dilemma: America Must Adapt to a New Era of Hostage-Taking’, *Foreign Affairs* (2022), available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/prisoners-dilemma-america-adapt-hostage-taking>); Danielle Gilbert, ‘The oxygen of publicity: Explaining US media coverage of international kidnapping’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46:5 (2023), pp. 618–39.

²⁶Anja Shortland, ‘Governing kidnap for ransom: Lloyd’s as a “private regime”’, *Governance*, 30:2 (2017), pp. 283–99; Anja Shortland, *Kidnap: Inside the Ransom Business* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

²⁷Danielle Gilbert, ‘Trump Wants to Punish Countries that Wrongfully Detain U.S. Citizens’, *Good Authority* (30 September 2025), available at: <https://goodauthority.org/news/trump-wants-to-punish-countries-that-wrongfully-detain-u-s-citizens/>; Callum Sutherland, ‘Trump threatens “all hell will break out against Hamas” if they don’t accept Gaza deal by new deadline’, *Time Magazine* (2025), available at: <https://time.com/7323101/trump-warning-hamas-gaza-peace-deal-deadline/>).

²⁸Roger Petersen, ‘How the emotions of anger and contempt affect hostage recovery policy: Attica prison and Gaza in comparison’ (this issue).

the hostage recovery missions by the Army's Delta Force and the Navy's SEALs. Since then, US Special Forces have engaged in hostage recovery missions, alone or in tandem with partner military forces. Such missions' purpose is twofold: first, recover captives alive, and second, punish perpetrators. Achieving the first goal is extremely difficult, requiring accurate, up-to-date intelligence; effective tactics; and risk-mitigation plans. As such, military rescues are rare and seldom succeed.²⁹

Theory

Hostage takings are highly salient events in international security. Transnational kidnappings in particular attract outsized media coverage compared to other forms of violence.³⁰ Such salience has meaningful implications for public interest in hostage recovery and for American citizens' awareness when a fellow citizen is kidnapped abroad. For example, according to a September 2014 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll, 94 per cent 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.³¹

Public attention – and desire to act – is paradoxically magnified by the fact that hostage takings often feature single victims. Hostage crises are subject to a 'collapse of compassion', an inverse relationship that postulates that as 'the number of people in need of help increases, the degree of compassion people feel for them ironically tends to decrease'.³² Studies have repeatedly shown that the public pays more attention to – and is more willing to help – a single, named individual than a larger group of nameless victims. The fewer the victims and more detailed their stories, the more attention audiences pay to their suffering.³³ Hostage advocacy campaigns rely on this heightened compassion for individual kidnap victims.

Beyond their extensive media coverage, kidnappings often feature prominently in what scholars call 'soft news' outlets, which have a broader reach and can inform even those members of the public with limited awareness of foreign policy issues.³⁴ Thus, although some foreign policy decisions are insulated from public opinion because of American disinterest,³⁵ the public is likely to be familiar with – and animated by – hostage recovery.

We thus begin from the assumptions that hostage taking is a particularly prominent international security issue, and that hostage recovery is a salient instance of a government's foreign policy approach. One form of hostage recovery described above – hostage rescue missions – entails the use of military force abroad. Public opinion about hostage recovery may thus reflect broader foreign policy preferences, including opinion about the use of force abroad. To understand variation in public support for government policies to bring hostages home, we start with the factors that scholars identify as shaping American public opinion about foreign policy and the use of force. In this section, we outline some of the key takeaways from this literature and draw implications for understanding public opinion about hostage recovery.

²⁹ Gilbert and Prather, 'Blaming the victim?'

³⁰ S. M. Chermak and J. Grunewald, 'The media's coverage of domestic terrorism', *Justice Quarterly*, 23:4 (2006), pp. 428–61; G. Weimann and H. Brosius, 'The newsworthiness of international terrorism', *Communication Research*, 18:3 (1991), pp. 333–54.

³¹ NBC News/ Wall Street Journal Survey, Study #14643, Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies (3–7 September 2014), available at: http://newscms.nbcnews.com/sites/newscms/files/14901_september_nbc-wsj_poll.pdf.

³² C. Daryl Cameron and B. Keith Payne, 'Escaping affect: How motivated emotion regulation creates insensitivity to mass suffering', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100:1 (2011), p. 1.

³³ Thomas C. Schelling, 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own', in Samuel B. Chase (ed.), *Problems in Public Expenditure* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1968), pp. 127–162; Paul Slovic, "'If I look at the mass I will never act': Psychic numbing and genocide', *Judgment and Decision Making*, 2:2 (2007), pp. 79–95; Gilbert, 'The oxygen of publicity'.

³⁴ Matthew A. Baum, 'Sex, lies, and war: How soft news brings foreign policy to the inattentive public', *American Political Science Review*, 96:1 (2002), pp. 91–109.

³⁵ Gabriel A. Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (Harcourt, Brace, 1950); Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (Little Brown, 1955).

Key factors associated with public opinion about foreign policy

First, scholars point to the internationalist/isolationist spectrum as an important disposition for understanding foreign policy opinions. This spectrum captures whether an individual wants their government to have an active role in world affairs or prefers their government to focus on problems at home. This disposition acts as a heuristic for individuals with little foreign policy knowledge or interest. It is an easy mental shortcut that individuals can rely on to make sense of specific foreign policy issues. If individuals have an internationalist disposition, they may feel more favourably towards extroverted foreign policy options. Conversely, if individuals have a more isolationist disposition, they may oppose foreign policy actions that divert the government's attentions beyond a country's border.

Whether this disposition is fixed or movable is sometimes debated in the literature. Researchers show that Americans' level of internationalism increases when they are co-partisans with the president.³⁶ Such a shift stems from individuals' assuming that a co-partisan president would be more likely to pursue a foreign policy in line with their beliefs and values than would an out-party president. Recent work also shows that there are a number of individual-level determinants of internationalism/isolationism, ranging from domestic perceptions of the country's economic outlook to perceptions of the international security environment.³⁷ Various moral foundations and ideology have been linked to internationalism.³⁸

In addition to sorting on an internationalist/isolationist scale, scholars further distinguish subtypes of internationalism along two main continua. First, individuals may be more inclined to support a cooperative approach to internationalism or a militant type of internationalism. In general, militant internationalism is associated with more support of the use of force, while cooperative internationalism is associated with increasing relational ties with other countries through trade or international organisations.³⁹ The other dimension along which scholars have sought to characterise people's internationalist beliefs is the unilateral/multilateral dimension. Some individuals may prefer an extroverted foreign policy that is primarily pursued unilaterally, and others may prefer a foreign policy that engages other countries.⁴⁰

We expect internationalism to affect how individuals think about options for recovering hostages during a crisis. First, because internationalists tend to support a wide range of foreign policy activities, foreign policy internationalists may be more supportive of the policies and practices that lead to individuals travelling to foreign countries in the first place.⁴¹ Given that soldiers, aid workers, or employees of international firms can work in dangerous places, they are thus regular victims of kidnapping.⁴² If the public opposes sending individuals to dangerous foreign countries in the first place, they may be more likely to oppose expensive or risky options for bringing them home. Additionally, internationalists are more supportive than isolationists of the actions required for recovery: international negotiation, bargaining, and the use of force. This does not mean that some isolationists would not support hostage recovery given the risk to a co-national, but

³⁶Robert Urbatsch, 'Isolationism and domestic politics', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54:3 (2010), pp. 471–92; Joshua D. Kertzer, 'Making sense of isolationism: Foreign policy mood as a multilevel phenomenon', *The Journal of Politics*, 75:1 (2013), pp. 225–40.

³⁷Kertzer, 'Making sense of isolationism'.

³⁸Joshua D. Kertzer et al., 'Moral support: How moral values shape foreign policy attitudes', *The Journal of Politics*, 76:3 (2014), pp. 825–40.

³⁹Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, 'The structure of foreign policy attitudes among American leaders', *The Journal of Politics*, 52:1 (1990), pp. 94–125; Eugene R. Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Duke University Press, 1990).

⁴⁰Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism*.

⁴¹Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, 'How are foreign policy attitudes structured? A hierarchical model', *American Political Science Review*, 81:4 (1987), pp. 1099–120.

⁴²Rachel Briggs, *The Kidnapping Business* (Foreign Policy Centre London, 2001); Marianne Moor and Simone Remijnse, *Kidnapping Is Booming Business: A Lucrative Political Instrument for Armed Groups Operating in Conflict Zones* (IKV Pax Christi, 2008).

rather, that on average, internationalists should demonstrate higher and more consistent support for hostage recovery.

Beyond disagreement between internationalists and isolationists, we expect that different *types* of internationalists would disagree regarding hostage recovery. Hostage recovery can take the form of more militant action such as a rescue attempt as well as more cooperative action like concessions and negotiation. Such actions could be taken unilaterally or in collaboration with other states. Specifically, we expect that cooperative internationalists may be more supportive of actions to bring hostages home that include negotiated concessions to hostage takers. Militant internationalists, conversely, would be more likely to oppose such a response. The reverse could be true for rescue operations: militant internationalists would likely be more supportive of using armed force to rescue hostages, while cooperative internationalists should be more likely to oppose it. Similarly, we would expect multilateralists to be more supportive of coordinated action with allies or the countries where the hostage is held, while unilateralists would find such coordination unnecessary or constraining.⁴³

Negotiating with – and making concessions to – hostage takers is especially interesting to study, as it represents a hard test for cooperation. As scholars of international relations have repeatedly shown, cooperating with others is difficult in general; it is especially difficult to cooperate in the absence of trust. Targets should have little reason to trust hostage takers. Thus, we offer a hard case for the effects of cooperative internationalism on support for particular foreign policy outcomes. This discussion leads us to our first set of hypotheses.

H1: Compared to internationalists, isolationists will be more likely to oppose hostage recovery.

H2a: Higher levels of militarism will be associated with more support for military rescue to recover hostages.

H2b: Higher levels of militarism will be associated with less support for negotiations, ransom payment, and prisoner exchanges.

H3a: Higher levels of cooperative internationalism will be associated with less support for military rescue to recover hostages.

H3b: Higher levels of cooperative internationalism will be associated with more support for negotiations, ransom payment, and prisoner exchanges.

The preceding discussion about internationalism as a key predictor of foreign policy attitudes and the potential for it to shape attitudes towards hostage recovery should also take into account the role of partisanship, as partisanship and ideology may map onto different dimensions of internationalism. Democrats and liberals tend to rely on different moral foundations from Republicans and conservatives.⁴⁴ Moral foundations theory posits that individuals' political orientations are grounded in distinct sets of moral intuitions.⁴⁵ Liberals, for example, tend

⁴³We recognise that internationalist orientations may not be mutually exclusive; individuals may blend militant, cooperative, unilateral, or multilateral tendencies. Such hybrid profiles – for instance, multilateral militant internationalists – may have distinct implications for support for different recovery tools. Our study focuses on the most relevant dimensions in the existing literature, but future work could profitably explore whether combinations of these orientations offer additional explanatory power.

⁴⁴Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek, 'Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96:5 (2009), p. 1029.

⁴⁵We acknowledge that the relationship between ideology and moral foundations is more complex than a simple mapping onto partisan categories. Work in coalitional psychology, including critiques of moral foundations theory, suggests that liberals

to prioritise the individualising foundations of care/harm and fairness/cheating, which emphasise empathy, protection from suffering, and justice. Conservatives, by contrast, are more likely to endorse binding foundations such as loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, which emphasise group cohesion, tradition, and moral purity. These different moral emphases may lead liberals to support foreign policies consistent with cooperative internationalism, while conservatives may favour more assertive and punitive approaches aligned with militant internationalism.⁴⁶

Such moral foundations have abiding real-world implications for foreign policy preferences. For instance, liberals and Democrats tend to prioritise humanitarian outcomes, development, and diplomacy.⁴⁷ Moreover, Democrats emphasise the government's responsibility to protect its citizens from harm. These general preferences may connect to preferences for hostage recovery: a strong desire to bring captives home, and a preference for using diplomatic means to do so.

Republicans, conversely, tend to prefer a different set of foreign policy responses, which connect to hostage recovery. For instance, Republicans tend to be sceptical of negotiations and compromise.⁴⁸ Refusing to negotiate for hostages, in particular, has been a traditional Republican talking point. Indeed, it was a Republican president, Ronald Reagan, who most famously articulated the United States' purported 'no concessions' policy. In response to a 1985 hostage crisis, Reagan affirmed:

America will never make concessions to terrorists – to do so would only invite more terrorism – nor will we ask nor pressure any other government to do so. Once we head down that path there would be no end to it, no end to the suffering of innocent people, no end to the bloody ransom all civilized nations must pay.⁴⁹

Despite the fact that Reagan and every subsequent US president has engaged in hostage negotiations,⁵⁰ the 'no concessions' rhetoric has endured.⁵¹

Beyond the Republican association with the 'no concessions' rhetoric, other ideological tendencies may contribute to partisan policy preferences for hostage recovery. First, Republicans tend to be more fiscally conservative than Democrats, and thus may be more reluctant to support expensive policy options.⁵² Second, Republicans are more likely to prefer 'tough-on-crime' stances, such as mandatory minimum sentences.⁵³ Such tough-on-crime stances could contribute to a refusal to reward – and preference to punish – bad behaviour.

We expect these differences to be reflected in responses to hostage crises. We hypothesise that Democrats and liberals will be more supportive of a broader spectrum of recovery policies that

and conservatives may not differ in the foundations they value so much as in how they deploy moral justifications within political coalitions (e.g., Peter K. Hatemi, Charles Crabtree, and Kevin B Smith, 'Ideology justifies morality: Political beliefs predict moral foundations', *American Journal of Political Science*, 63:4 [2019], pp. 788–806). We draw on moral foundations theory heuristically here to illustrate broad tendencies rather than to claim fixed psychological types.

⁴⁶Kertzer et al., 'Moral support'; Carroll Doherty and Samantha Smith, *5 Facts about Republicans and National Security* (Pew Research Center, 2015).

⁴⁷John Glenn, *6 Foreign Policy Takeaways from the 2020 Democratic Party Platform* (U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, 2020).

⁴⁸James M. Glaser and Jeffrey M. Berry, 'Compromising positions: Why republican partisans are more rigid than democrats', *Political Science Quarterly*, 133:1 (2018), pp. 99–125.

⁴⁹Ronald Reagan, 'Presidential News Conference', 18 June 1985, available at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/presidents-news-conference-17>}.
⁵⁰Gilbert and Montgomery, 'Full court press'.

⁵¹Mertes, Böhm, and Hüffmeier, 'Popular support for the no-concessions policy in terrorist hostage takings'.

⁵²Peter L. Francia et al., 'Limousine liberals and corporate conservatives: The financial constituencies of the democratic and republican parties', *Social Science Quarterly*, 86:4 (2005), pp. 761–78.

⁵³Alma Cohen and Crystal S. Yang, 'Judicial politics and sentencing decisions', *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 11:1 (2019), pp. 160–91; Isabel Laterzo-Tingley and Leah Christiani, 'The "tough-on-crime" left: Race, gender, and elections of law-and-order democrats', *Research & Politics*, 11:3 (2024), p. 20531680241261765.

include negotiation and concessions, while Republicans and conservatives will be more supportive than Democrats of military operations – and less supportive of ransom payments – to bring hostages home.⁵⁴

H4a: Compared to Democrats, Republicans will be more supportive of military rescue to recover hostages.

H4b: Compared to Democrats, Republicans will be less supportive of negotiations, ransom payment, and prisoner exchanges to recover hostages.

Additionally, we expect that like with internationalism, individuals may be more supportive of hostage recovery if their co-partisan is president. The public may trust their co-partisan to pursue hostage recovery in a way that reflects their ideology. Moreover, individuals may want their co-partisan to gain political capital for bringing hostages home, while being more ambivalent about such a political victory for an out-party president.

H5: Individuals will be more supportive of recovery options when their co-partisan pursues them than when an out-party president pursues them.

Lastly, the hypotheses discussed above come from theory of public opinion about hostage recovery under the general umbrella of international security crises and public opinion about foreign policy. However, issue-specific patterns could also explain variation in support for hostage recovery. To this end, we draw on the examples laid out in the beginning of this manuscript. Often, when an American is held captive overseas, the person's parents, children, and other family members advocate publicly for their release.⁵⁵ These public appeals frequently invoke the emotional hardship of knowing a loved one is in danger abroad. Such appeals are particularly effective due to the 'collapse of compassion' described above – the public is drawn to the plight of individual victims and their grieving families.

We argue that the appeal to emotions and the perspective of parents generates empathy among Americans, particularly those who themselves have children. Those who can more closely identify with the experience of having children – and perhaps imagine the pain of having one's own child in danger – may have more willingness to support government options to bring hostages home. This theory draws on a number of perspective-taking and perspective-getting studies in political science and psychology that show the effectiveness of such techniques for generating support for myriad foreign policy issues such as accepting refugees, open migration, and support for foreign and humanitarian aid.⁵⁶

H6: Compared to individuals without children, parents will be more supportive of hostage recovery.

Research design

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two surveys with large, national samples: the first in November 2020 and the second in January 2025. The 2020 survey included 1,895 respondents

⁵⁴While military rescue missions may cost millions of dollars, their precise price would not be readily apparent in the way that the price of a ransom payment would. Moreover, ransom payments are not just money spent, but rather money paid to an adversary.

⁵⁵P. Anh Nguyen and Todd H. Hall, 'Between power and powerlessness: Families and politicised captivity' (this issue).

⁵⁶A. Burcu Bayram and Marcus Holmes, 'Feeling their pain: Affective empathy and public preferences for foreign development aid', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 820–50; Scott Williamson et al., 'Family matters: How immigrant histories can promote inclusion', *American Political Science Review*, 115:2 (2021), pp. 686–93; Claire L. Adida et al., 'When hearts meet minds: Complementary effects of perspective-getting and information on refugee inclusion', *Political Science Research and Methods* 13:4 (2025), pp. 798–814, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2025.1>.

recruited by Dynata, and the 2025 survey included 2,677 respondents recruited by Prolific. Dynata uses quota-based sampling to approximate national demographic distributions, and Prolific similarly allows researchers to recruit using demographic quotas from its online panel. In both waves, quotas were set on age, gender, and race to achieve broad national coverage. In our surveys, we presented respondents with a fictional, hypothetical scenario in which an American was captured abroad.⁵⁷ We randomised a range of pertinent details of the scenario, varying the captive's gender and profession; where the captive was taken; and whether the captors were 'rebels' or 'terrorists.'⁵⁸

We then offered respondents a range of possible policy options for recovering the captive. In the 2020 survey, respondents could indicate their support for negotiating in response to ransom demands; paying ransom demands (randomised at \$100,000, \$1 million, and \$10 million); and launching a rescue mission (randomised at requiring 10, 100, or 1,000 soldiers).⁵⁹ In 2025, we added an option for exchanging one, two, or ten prisoners to win the American's release.⁶⁰

Additionally, the timing of our 2025 survey uniquely allowed us to test H5 about the role of partisanship and the president in public opinion about hostage recovery. By fielding our survey the week of 13 January 2025, we took advantage of the transition period between US presidential administrations. In that survey, we varied whether the recovery options were proposed by 'President Biden' or 'President-elect Trump' At the time that participants took the survey – the last week of the Biden administration, and mere days before Trump took office – we considered this variation a plausible design to explore how respondents reacted to one or the other proposing hostage recovery options.

In all surveys, we asked respondents whether they supported the recovery option (approve strongly; approve somewhat; neither; disapprove somewhat; disapprove strongly). Finally, respondents were asked a battery of demographic and other questions, identifying their interest in politics, political party, internationalism, ideology, employment, income level, race, gender, age, parental status, and education level.

⁵⁷The 2020 and 2025 surveys follow a 2016 pilot survey, in which we described the plight of an American who 'went missing' abroad. In 2020 and 2025, we updated and clarified the language to specify for respondents that the missing person had been actively taken by a perpetrator. This design is consistent with a rigorous incrementalism approach; each of our surveys replicated and extended the prior findings. Because all surveys show support for our hypotheses, we focus in the main text on the 2020 and 2025 data and report the 2016 findings in the Appendix.

⁵⁸These features of the scenario are randomised to control for important characteristics of kidnappings, such as the geographic location, the identity of the captors, and the gender and profession of the captured American; they constitute control variables in regression models. In other words, when we analyse the effects of type and cost of recovery option, we average over the other randomised elements of the scenario. Given that 'no concessions' rhetoric often applies explicitly to terrorist kidnappers (i.e., 'We don't negotiate with terrorists') rather than other non-state actors, we could imagine that support for paying ransom would be lower when the kidnappers are described as 'terrorists'.

⁵⁹In terms of ecological validity, kidnappers have demanded ransoms representing each of these amounts (see, for instance Kim, George, and Sandler, 'Introducing transnational terrorist hostage event (TTHE) data set, 1978 to 2018'; Gilbert, 'The oxygen of publicity'). On average, \$10 million is a larger ransom amount than is typical, while \$100,000 is relatively lower than normal amounts. Regarding 'mission size', we offered options of 10, 100, and 1,000 soldiers. While it's highly implausible that 1,000 servicemembers would have their 'boots on the ground' for a recovery mission, thousands are involved in each mission. Gilbert and Prather ('Blaming the victim?') cite a policymaker on this point: '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'.

⁶⁰While the vast majority of hostages are released in exchange for ransom payments, some hostages are released in exchange for prisoners. In between our 2020 and 2025 surveys, two trends have made prisoner swaps more salient. First, the 2023–5 prisoner exchanges between the Israeli government and Hamas served to recover the majority of the hostages taken on October 7. Second, several high-profile cases of state hostage-taking were resolved through prisoner swaps (Gilbert and Rivard Piché, 'Caught between giants'; Gilbert and Montgomery, 'Full court press'). Since 2014, prisoner exchanges to free Americans held hostage have included trading one, two, and five prisoners held in US custody. In Israel, conversely, the government has traded tens, hundreds, or thousands of Palestinian detainees to free Israelis held hostage.

Findings

Our findings showcase various correlates of support for hostage recovery options. We present results from the 2020 and 2025 studies in the paper and the results from the 2016 pilot study in the Appendix. As noted above, in our 2020 survey, we included a number of experimental variations in the hostage crisis vignette in addition to measuring several demographic background characteristics of the respondents in our sample. We include control variables for treatment assignment as well as important demographic characteristics of the respondent. We report coefficients and standard errors for all demographic variables. We do not report the coefficients on the treatment variables in the results tables, because they serve as vignette-level controls rather than quantities of substantive interest; our focus in this section is on the individual respondent-level predictors of support for recovery.

The evidence presented in [Table 1](#) shows that several demographic variables are significantly correlated with support for hostage recovery consistent with our hypotheses. Across all of the recovery options, internationalists are much more likely to support recovery compared to isolationists (H1).⁶¹ All other demographic variables have inconsistent patterns across the recovery options. Most notable in this respect is political party. Political party is measured as a five-category variable. In the regression model, *Party: Democrat* is the baseline and thus does not appear in the table. The results show a relatively bipartisan consensus when it comes to supporting rescue missions and negotiating with hostage takers (H4a not supported), with Republicans and Democrats supporting both at equal rates. As we hypothesised, *Paying ransoms* is where Republicans and Democrats diverge, with Republicans being significantly less likely than Democrats to support paying ransoms (H4b supported). Finally, we show that individuals who have children are more supportive of all recovery options, but only the coefficient on the rescue outcome is significant at traditional levels (H6).

Next, we turn to the 2025 results. In [Table 2](#), we display the results from a regression model that most closely replicates the 2020 study. We see that H1 is once again partially supported with *Isolationism* negatively correlated with support for rescue, but not significantly related to any of the other recovery options.⁶² H4a and H4b are also supported as Republicans are more supportive of military rescue but less supportive of negotiating or paying ransoms to bring the hostage home. Finally, H6 is also partially supported. While individuals with children are not different from those without children in their support of rescue, negotiations, or prisoner exchanges, they are much more supportive of paying ransoms to bring hostages home.

To further test our more specific hypotheses about different types of internationalism and the role of co-partisanship in shaping views on hostage recovery, we report the results from two additional models in [Tables 3](#) and [5](#). First, in [Table 3](#) we disaggregate ‘internationalism’ into separate measures of the militant and cooperative versions of internationalism. We find strong support for the hypotheses associated with H2 and H3. Militarism is significantly associated with support for each recovery option in the direction predicted by H2a and H2b.⁶³ For a military

⁶¹*Internationalism* was measured using a binary indicator with 1 coded if the respondent said they thought the US government should take an active role in world affairs and 0 coded if the respondent said the US government should focus more on issues at home.

⁶²Isolationism is a variable constructed as a scale (alpha = 0.84) ranging in value from 1 to 4 averaging responses to five questions that asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statements: 1) The US should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own; 2) We should not think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems; 3) The US needs to play an active role in solving conflicts around the world; 4) America's conception of its leadership role in the world must be scaled down; 5) Our allies are perfectly capable of defending themselves and they can afford it, thus allowing the United States to focus on internal rather than external threats to its wellbeing.

⁶³Militarism is a variable constructed as a scale (alpha = 0.81) ranging in value from 1 to 4 averaging the responses to six questions asking how much the respondent agrees or disagrees with the following statements: 1) The United States must demonstrate its resolve so that others do not take advantage of it; 2) American military strength is not the best way to ensure world peace; 3) There is considerable validity in the domino theory that when one nation falls to communism, others nearby will soon follow a similar path; 4) Going to war is unfortunate but sometimes the only solution to international problems;

Table 1. 2020 correlations with demographic variables.

	Rescue	Negotiate	Pay
<i>Political interest</i>	0.14*** (0.030)	0.07* (0.044)	0.03 (0.042)
<i>Party: Republican</i>	0.04 (0.065)	-0.05 (0.095)	-0.25*** (0.091)
<i>Party: Independent</i>	-0.05 (0.066)	-0.18* (0.096)	-0.35*** (0.093)
<i>Party: Other</i>	0.18 (0.312)	-0.46 (0.428)	-0.72* (0.415)
<i>Party: None</i>	-0.50*** (0.150)	-0.36 (0.229)	-0.08 (0.221)
<i>Internationalism</i>	0.23*** (0.052)	0.33*** (0.076)	0.28*** (0.073)
<i>Ideology</i>	0.04*** (0.010)	0.02 (0.014)	0.03** (0.014)
<i>Full-time employed</i>	0.08 (0.057)	0.18** (0.083)	0.38*** (0.080)
<i>Income</i>	-0.00 (0.010)	-0.01 (0.014)	-0.00 (0.014)
<i>White</i>	0.16*** (0.059)	0.02 (0.086)	-0.03 (0.083)
<i>Woman</i>	0.05 (0.051)	0.01 (0.073)	0.08 (0.071)
<i>Age</i>	-0.00 (0.002)	-0.01*** (0.002)	-0.03*** (0.002)
<i>Parent</i>	0.13** (0.052)	0.05 (0.075)	0.09 (0.073)
<i>Education</i>	-0.07*** (0.025)	-0.04 (0.037)	-0.03 (0.036)
Constant	3.87*** (0.281)	3.45*** (0.422)	4.54*** (0.410)
Observations	1,895	1,411	1,412
R-squared	0.13	0.11	0.27

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The OLS models include, but do not report, indicators for all experimental treatments including deservingness, size of rescue mission, size of ransom, profession of hostage, order of recovery options presented, gender of the kidnapped American, whether the captor was a rebel or terrorist group, and the location of the kidnapping. The models also include, but do not report, the respondents' state of residence. Summary statistics tables are included in the Appendix.

rescue, individuals with higher levels of militant internationalism are much more supportive than those with lower levels of militant internationalism. For the outcomes more associated with

5) Rather than simply countering our opponents' thrusts, it is necessary to strike at the heart of an opponent's power; 6) The United States should take all steps including the use of force to prevent aggression by any expansionist power.

Table 2. 2025 correlations with demographic variables.

	Rescue	Negotiate	Pay	Exchange
<i>Political interest</i>	0.04 (0.031)	0.03 (0.033)	-0.02 (0.033)	0.08*** (0.032)
<i>Party: Republican</i>	0.13* (0.065)	-0.21*** (0.068)	-0.12* (0.068)	-0.05 (0.066)
<i>Party: Independent</i>	0.14 (0.085)	-0.26*** (0.089)	-0.07 (0.089)	-0.21** (0.086)
<i>Isolationism</i>	-0.13*** (0.040)	0.03 (0.042)	0.04 (0.042)	-0.06 (0.041)
<i>Ideology</i>	0.06*** (0.012)	-0.02 (0.012)	-0.01 (0.012)	-0.03*** (0.012)
<i>Full-time employed</i>	0.11** (0.053)	-0.04 (0.056)	-0.02 (0.055)	-0.01 (0.054)
<i>Income</i>	-0.01 (0.009)	-0.01 (0.009)	-0.03*** (0.009)	-0.02*** (0.009)
<i>White</i>	0.05 (0.053)	-0.18*** (0.056)	-0.14** (0.056)	-0.16*** (0.054)
<i>Gender: Man</i>	0.23*** (0.049)	-0.15*** (0.051)	-0.27*** (0.051)	-0.16*** (0.050)
<i>Gender: Non-binary</i>	-0.01 (0.233)	0.20 (0.244)	-0.15 (0.244)	-0.14 (0.236)
<i>Age</i>	-0.00 (0.002)	-0.01*** (0.002)	-0.02*** (0.002)	-0.00 (0.002)
<i>Parent</i>	-0.01 (0.055)	0.01 (0.058)	0.16*** (0.058)	0.03 (0.056)
<i>Education</i>	-0.00 (0.027)	-0.01 (0.029)	0.05* (0.029)	0.04 (0.028)
Constant	3.29*** (0.302)	3.60*** (0.317)	3.48*** (0.317)	3.95*** (0.306)
Observations	2,677	2,677	2,677	2,677
R-squared	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.11

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The OLS models include, but do not report, indicators for all experimental treatments including deservingness, size of rescue mission, size of ransom, profession of hostage, order of recovery options presented, gender of the kidnapped American, whether the captor was a rebel or terrorist group, and the location of the kidnapping. The models also include, but do not report, the respondents' state of residence. Summary statistics tables are included in the Appendix.

concessions – negotiation, paying ransom, and exchanging prisoners – the inverse relationship is present. Individuals with high levels of militant internationalism are more opposed to these recovery options than individuals with low levels of militant internationalism.

With respect to those who align more with cooperative internationalism, we show largely the reverse pattern.⁶⁴ H3a is not supported as there is no significant relationship between our measure

⁶⁴Cooperative internationalism is a variable constructed as a 64 scale (alpha = 0.81) ranging in value from 1 to 4 averaging the responses to five questions asking how much the respondent agrees or disagrees with the following statements: 1) The United

Table 3. Results from regression models with disaggregated internationalism types, 2025 survey.

	Rescue	Negotiate	Pay	Exchange
<i>Political interest</i>	0.03 (0.031)	0.02 (0.032)	-0.04 (0.032)	0.07** (0.031)
<i>Party: Republican</i>	0.12 (0.083)	-0.21** (0.088)	-0.01 (0.088)	-0.14* (0.085)
<i>Party: Independent</i>	0.14** (0.064)	-0.17** (0.068)	-0.06 (0.068)	0.01 (0.065)
<i>Militarism</i>	0.53*** (0.048)	-0.22*** (0.051)	-0.13*** (0.051)	-0.09* (0.049)
<i>Coop. Internationalism</i>	0.02 (0.039)	0.21*** (0.042)	0.25*** (0.042)	0.34*** (0.040)
<i>Ideology</i>	0.02* (0.012)	0.02 (0.013)	0.02 (0.013)	-0.00 (0.013)
<i>Full-time employed</i>	0.10* (0.052)	-0.03 (0.055)	-0.02 (0.055)	-0.02 (0.053)
<i>Income</i>	-0.01 (0.009)	-0.01 (0.009)	-0.03*** (0.009)	-0.02** (0.009)
<i>White</i>	0.10** (0.052)	-0.18*** (0.056)	-0.13** (0.056)	-0.13** (0.054)
<i>Gender: Man</i>	0.18*** (0.048)	-0.13** (0.051)	-0.26*** (0.051)	-0.15*** (0.049)
<i>Gender: Non-binary</i>	0.09 (0.232)	0.19 (0.247)	-0.17 (0.247)	-0.13 (0.237)
<i>Age</i>	-0.00* (0.002)	-0.00** (0.002)	-0.02*** (0.002)	0.00 (0.002)
<i>Parent</i>	-0.04 (0.054)	0.01 (0.058)	0.16*** (0.058)	0.03 (0.055)
<i>Education</i>	0.02 (0.027)	-0.03 (0.029)	0.04 (0.029)	0.03 (0.027)
<i>Constant</i>	1.66*** (0.317)	3.44*** (0.337)	3.01*** (0.337)	2.76*** (0.323)
<i>Observations</i>	2,674	2,674	2,674	2,674
<i>R-squared</i>	0.12	0.09	0.13	0.14

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The OLS models include, but do not report, indicators for all experimental treatments including deservingness, size of rescue mission, size of ransom, profession of hostage, order of recovery options presented, gender of the kidnapped American, whether the captor was a rebel or terrorist group, and the location of the kidnapping. The models also include, but do not report, the respondents' state of residence.

of cooperative internationalism and support for a military rescue. However, for the other three outcomes, the pattern is in the expected direction supporting H3b: individuals that support a more cooperative style of internationalism are more supportive of actions that require cooperation with the perpetrators.

We also dig further into the mechanism explaining the differences between militant internationalists' and cooperative internationalists' approaches to hostage recovery. Recall that the moral foundations underpinning militant internationalists' outlook on foreign policy could lead them to seek out more assertive and punitive actions, which could lead them to have more support than cooperative internationalists for recovery that aligns with these moral values. In Table 4 we use two additional questions from our 2025 survey as our dependent variables to understand how respondents think about punishing hostage takers as a goal of recovery. *Punish 1* is a variable ranging from 1 to 4 that asks respondents how much they agree or disagree with the statement: 'Bringing hostages home is more important than punishing hostage takers.' The other outcome also asks about whether punishment ought to be a goal of recovery; we measure it similarly, via agreement with the following statement: 'Hostage recovery should be used to punish hostage takers.' As the results show, respondents with higher levels of militarism are more likely to agree with *Punish 2*, while respondents with higher levels of cooperative internationalism are more likely to agree with *Punish 1*. Together these results demonstrate the value of distinguishing between different types of internationalism. The simple isolationist/internationalist divide masks important variation in the approach to foreign policy that Americans prefer their government to take. These differences in approaches map on to the different recovery options available to the government and goals those options can achieve when an American is held captive abroad.

Finally, in Table 5, we report coefficients from regression models that interact respondents' partisanship with the partisanship of the US president. Recall that in our 2025 survey, we included a treatment that randomly assigned respondents to read that either President Biden or President-elect Trump had proposed the recovery option. We interact an indicator variable for treatment assignment with binary indicators for each response option for party identification: Democrat, Republican, or Independent.⁶⁵ If our hypothesis is supported, we should see that Democrats are more supportive of recovery options when President Biden proposes them and Republicans are more supportive of recovery options when President-elect Trump proposes them.

Because interaction models are difficult to interpret in regression tables, we display the treatment effect of the president treatment by respondents' party identification for each recovery option in Figure 1. We restrict Figure 1 to Democrats and Republicans because H5 explicitly hypothesises co-partisanship effects, requiring focusing on respondents who hold a partisan identification that maps onto the party of the sitting president. Independents and respondents reporting no partisan affiliation are heterogeneous in their political orientations and cannot be classified as co-partisans. For Democrats, the results support H5: for each recovery option, Democrats are less supportive of hostage recovery if the vignette they received said President-elect Trump proposed the recovery plan relative to President Biden. We also see evidence that Republicans respond to the president treatment. For all outcomes except for prisoner exchange, Republicans are more likely to support recovery if they read about President-elect Trump proposing the recovery plan, relative to President Biden.⁶⁶

States needs to cooperate more with the United Nations; 2) It is essential for the United States to work with other nations to solve problems such as overpopulation, hunger, and pollution; 3) Promoting and defending human rights in other countries is of utmost importance; 4) Helping to improve the standard of living in less developed countries is of utmost importance; 5) Protecting the global environment is of utmost importance.

⁶⁵Party: Democrat is once again the baseline category. For this analysis, we exclude individuals who said their party was 'Other' or 'None'.

⁶⁶Partisanship is highly salient in recent US politics, so co-partisan effects of this kind are expected in most periods. The presidential transition in 2025 may have modestly increased partisan engagement, potentially amplifying the size – but not the presence – of the effects we detect.

Table 4. Results from regression models on punish hostage takers outcomes with disaggregated internationalism types, 2025 survey.

	Punish 1	Punish 2
<i>Political interest</i>	0.05*** (0.020)	0.02 (0.022)
<i>Party: Republican</i>	0.01 (0.041)	0.03 (0.046)
<i>Party: Independent</i>	-0.04 (0.054)	-0.03 (0.060)
<i>Militarism</i>	-0.05 (0.031)	0.46*** (0.034)
<i>Coop. internationalism</i>	0.30*** (0.025)	-0.07** (0.028)
<i>Ideology</i>	0.00 (0.008)	0.03*** (0.009)
<i>Full-time employed</i>	-0.06* (0.033)	0.05 (0.037)
<i>Income</i>	-0.02*** (0.006)	0.01 (0.006)
<i>White</i>	0.04 (0.034)	0.07* (0.037)
<i>Gender: Men</i>	-0.09*** (0.031)	0.06* (0.034)
<i>Gender: Non-binary</i>	0.21 (0.148)	-0.13 (0.163)
<i>Age</i>	-0.00*** (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)
<i>Parent</i>	0.00 (0.035)	-0.11*** (0.038)
<i>Education</i>	-0.02 (0.017)	-0.01 (0.019)
Constant	2.60*** (0.204)	1.68*** (0.225)
Observations	2,490	2,490
R-squared	0.13	0.16

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The OLS models include, but do not report, indicators for all experimental treatments including deservingness, size of rescue mission, size of ransom, profession of hostage, order of recovery options presented, gender of the kidnapped American, whether the captor was a rebel or terrorist group, and the location of the kidnapping. The models also include, but do not report, the respondents' state of residence.

Table 5. Results from regression models with interaction between partisanship and Trump treatment indicator, 2025 survey.

	Rescue	Negotiate	Pay	Exchange
<i>Political interest</i>	0.03 (0.030)	0.02 (0.032)	- 0.04 (0.032)	0.07** (0.031)
<i>Party: Republican</i>	- 0.06 (0.102)	- 0.47*** (0.108)	- 0.15 (0.108)	- 0.18* (0.104)
<i>Party: Independent</i>	0.06 (0.087)	-0.42*** (0.092)	-0.20** (0.093)	-0.15 (0.089)
<i>Treatment: Trump</i>	-0.22*** (0.074)	-0.27*** (0.079)	-0.12 (0.079)	-0.06 (0.076)
<i>Party: Republican*Trump</i>	0.34*** (0.111)	0.49*** (0.118)	0.25** (0.118)	0.06 (0.114)
<i>Party: Independent*Trump</i>	0.14 (0.114)	0.48*** (0.121)	0.27** (0.121)	0.29** (0.116)
<i>Militarism</i>	0.53*** (0.048)	-0.22*** (0.051)	-0.13*** (0.051)	-0.09* (0.049)
<i>Coop. internationalism</i>	0.03 (0.039)	0.21*** (0.042)	0.25*** (0.042)	0.34*** (0.040)
<i>Ideology</i>	0.02* (0.012)	0.02 (0.013)	0.02 (0.013)	-0.00 (0.013)
<i>Full-time employed</i>	0.10** (0.052)	-0.04 (0.055)	-0.02 (0.055)	-0.02 (0.053)
<i>Income</i>	-0.00 (0.009)	-0.01 (0.009)	-0.03*** (0.009)	-0.02** (0.009)
<i>White</i>	0.11** (0.052)	-0.18*** (0.056)	-0.12** (0.056)	-0.13** (0.053)
<i>Gender: Male</i>	0.19*** (0.048)	-0.13** (0.051)	-0.26*** (0.051)	-0.15*** (0.049)
<i>Gender: Non-binary</i>	0.07 (0.232)	0.15 (0.246)	-0.19 (0.247)	-0.15 (0.237)
<i>Age</i>	-0.00* (0.002)	-0.00** (0.002)	-0.02*** (0.002)	0.00 (0.002)
<i>Parent</i>	-0.04 (0.054)	0.03 (0.057)	0.17*** (0.058)	0.03 (0.055)
<i>Education</i>	0.02 (0.027)	-0.03 (0.028)	0.03 (0.029)	0.03 (0.027)
Constant	1.71*** (0.317)	3.53*** (0.336)	3.06*** (0.337)	2.79*** (0.324)

(Continued)

Table 5. (Continued.)

	Rescue	Negotiate	Pay	Exchange
Observations	2,674	2,674	2,674	2,674
R-squared	0.13	0.10	0.13	0.14
R2	0.13	0.10	0.13	0.14

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The OLS models include, but do not report, indicators for all experimental treatments. The models also include, but do not report, the respondents' state of residence.

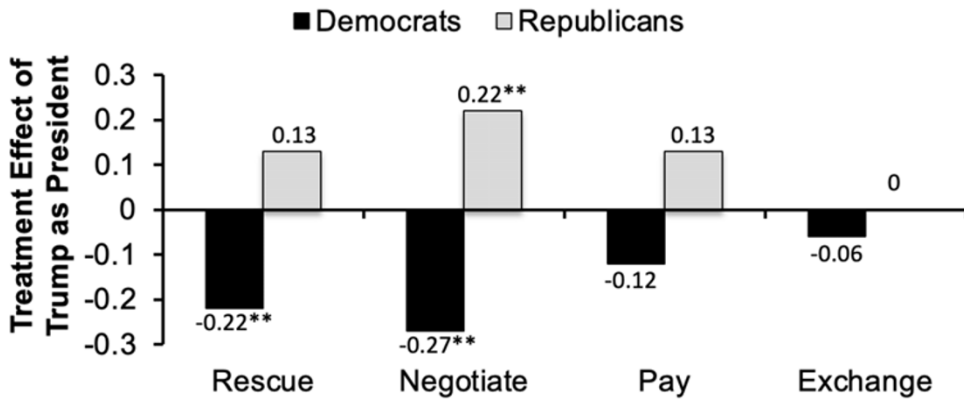


Figure 1. Effect of Trump as president treatment on support for recovery options by respondent partisanship.

Discussion

The results of our surveys provide repeated, robust evidence for the correlates of support for hostage recovery. What do our findings imply for the politics of hostage recovery more broadly? In this section, we discuss the implications of our surveys for partisan responses to in- and out-party presidents and for the politics of hostage recovery in countries beyond the United States.

First, our results help explain the political dynamics at play when different American presidents have tried to bring hostages home. In particular, Figure 1 provides insight to the real-world asymmetry in public opinion for hostage deals made by Democratic and Republican presidents. In recent years, US presidents of both political parties have engaged in negotiations and made public, controversial concessions to bring hostages home.⁶⁷ Presidents Trump and Biden have engaged in negotiations and prisoner swaps with autocratic states including Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea to recover Americans held captive abroad. However, compared to President Trump, President Biden received disproportionate criticism for making hostage deals.

As our study has shown, Republicans are significantly less supportive of negotiating with – and making concessions to – hostage takers. Such Republican opposition is exacerbated when told that an actual Democratic president, Joe Biden, pursued those cooperative options. Thus, it is no surprise that we have seen precisely these dynamics play out in the real world. When former President Joe Biden made deals to recover American hostages, Republicans forcefully criticised him for doing so. None were more forceful in their opposition than President Trump himself, who has called

⁶⁷ Gilbert and Rivard Piché, ‘Caught between giants.’

Biden's hostage deals 'bad', 'unfair', 'extortion' and 'an embarrassment'.⁶⁸ Republicans dislike negotiating with or making concessions to hostage takers in general, and they like those policies even less when pursued by an out-party president.⁶⁹

When a Republican president pursues cooperative hostage recovery options, however, such criticism is muted. There are three possible reasons for this more muted response. First, Republicans' opposition to negotiations and concessions is mitigated when told that such policies were pursued by their in-party president; they are less likely to criticise Trump for making exactly the same kinds of policy decisions as Biden. Moreover, Democrats are more supportive of cooperative hostage recovery policies in general. While Democrats' support for such policies is reduced significantly when proposed by Trump, Democrats remain more favourable than not to hostage deals. Finally, Democrats could resist criticising hostage recovery deals for fear of being called unpatriotic.

A final point worth raising is the persistent and bipartisan support for hostage rescue missions – the public's clearly preferred option for hostage recovery. Like the existence of a 'no concessions' policy, we consider the support for military rescue to stem from popular misconceptions about US hostage recovery – perhaps one driven more by Hollywood than Washington. Despite rescue missions' public popularity, they are rare events with very high failure rates.⁷⁰ Given the difficult-to-achieve conditions that are required for success, rescue missions cannot be considered the optimal option to bring most hostages safely home. Nevertheless, leaders have – in spite of their better judgement – succumbed to public pressure and pursued rash rescue missions. None is more notorious than 'Operation Eagle Claw', President Jimmy Carter's ill-advised attempt to recover fifty-two Americans held in the US Embassy in Tehran. Carter's advisors knew that the mission was unlikely to succeed, calling it 'self-defeating and probably suicidal'.⁷¹ The allure of a possible victory convinced the president to ignore the factors that security personnel consider to be crucial prerequisites to launch a rescue mission: the ability to minimise 'risk to force (the guys going in) and risk to mission (the hostage)'.⁷²

Our study explores support for hostage recovery among a population of American respondents. Extrapolating beyond the United States, to what extent might these same dynamics travel to other countries, and in particular, to other Western, democratic targets of hostage-taking violence?

On the one hand, we would expect some of the factors shaping individual-level preferences in the United States to similarly explain public opinion in other Western democratic countries. Individuals' broad preferences regarding internationalism and isolationism, as well as militant and cooperative internationalism, should be expected to correlate with hostage recovery preferences beyond the United States. Individuals' political ideology on a liberal/conservative spectrum should also travel. After October 7, for example, liberal Israelis were much more supportive of recovering hostages through prisoner exchanges with Hamas, while conservative populations and politicians opposed making concessions for hostage recovery.

On the other hand, however, there is reason to believe that the baseline of public support for hostage recovery would be higher in other targeted states. In countries including France, Israel, and Canada, hostage crises spur major public protests,⁷³ maintaining public pressure until hostages are brought safely home. Public opinion regarding hostage recovery might correlate with variation in

⁶⁸ See, for example, Jonathan Weisman and Ken Bensinger, 'Blowback over Griner's release exposes depth of America's divisions', *New York Times* (9 December 2022); Edith Olmsted, 'Trump makes Russia prisoner swap all about him in bonkers response', *The New Republic* (1 August 2024), and 'Trump trashes freeing of American hostage in unhinged speech', *The New Republic* (1 October 2024).

⁶⁹ Such asymmetry is akin to the 'ratification' premium in Sarah E. Kreps, Elizabeth N. Saunders, and Kenneth A. Schultz, 'The ratification premium: Hawks, doves, and arms control', *World Politics*, 70:4 (2018), pp. 479–514.

⁷⁰ Gilbert and Prather, 'Blaming the victim?'

⁷¹ Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The Iran Hostage Crisis: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam* (Grove Press, 2007), p. 212.

⁷² Gilbert and Prather, 'Blaming the victim?', p. 44.

⁷³ Joel Simon, *We Want to Negotiate: The Secret World of Kidnapping, Hostages, and Ransom* (Columbia Global Reports, 2019).

a sense of ‘national solidarity’; where such solidarity is higher, the public will be more likely to demand hostages’ safe return.⁷⁴ Moreover, we expect that the public in countries with more robust social welfare systems would have a greater sense of collective responsibility for citizens’ safety, whereas countries with a deeper emphasis on individual responsibility would have less support for government assistance.⁷⁵ Finally, the public may be more supportive of military responses for a more physically proximate hostage-taking threat, or regarding an adversary with a history of kidnapping co-nationals. All of these factors could raise the floor for support and decrease the degree to which partisan and ideological tendencies influence opposition to recovery. Future work should investigate these dynamics, exploring hostage policy in comparative context.

Conclusion

In this article, we explore variation in public opinion about hostage recovery. Hostage crises are salient foreign policy events, and public reactions play a central role in how elected governments approach the resolution of said crises. We theorise that the public views these crises through a similar lens as other foreign policy issues, particularly international security and issues of the use of force. We test several hypotheses drawn from the literature on foreign policy public opinion as well as examining the role of emotions and empathy in shaping parents’ support for various recovery options in light of the emotional pleas victims’ family members often make.

The evidence supports our hypotheses to a strong degree. We use surveys fielded to national samples of Americans over multiple presidential administrations to test the hypotheses. The data reveal that internationalism – including subtypes of militarism and cooperative internationalism – as well as partisanship, the partisan identity of the president, and having children shapes the way respondents view hostage crises. Like other foreign policy issue areas, internationalists, and especially militant internationalists, are more likely to support hostage recovery via military rescue, while internationalists, and especially cooperative internationalists, are more likely to support bringing hostages home through the use of concessions like ransom payments or prisoner exchanges. Partisanship also shapes views on hostage recovery; though Democrats and Republicans support rescue missions and negotiations at equal rates, Republicans are much less likely to support paying ransoms to bring hostages home. Moreover, whether the president is a co-partisan also fundamentally alters the respondents’ support for various hostage recovery options: both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to support recovery options if they were proposed by a president of their own party, and they are more likely to oppose recovery options proposed by an out-party president. Together, these results provide insight into the politics of hostage recovery and the factors that inform Americans’ views on the resolution of hostage crises.

Our findings resonate with the reception that the Israeli-American hostage families received during the 2024 presidential nominating conventions. Americans are indeed broadly supportive of bringing hostages home, but the method of recovery, purpose of recovery, and leader managing the recovery matter a great deal. With hostages’ parents at the podium, Democrats seemed more likely to support a solution achieved through negotiated concessions, whereas Republicans cheered for a forceful response.

These findings have vital implications for the politics of hostage recovery – an empirical phenomenon in which public opinion matters a great deal to real-world outcomes. As past work has demonstrated, hostage takers are more likely to target democracies than non-democracies, precisely because of the relationship between policymakers and the public. Citizens in democracies, with access to free press and intolerant of limits to civil liberties, are more likely to pressure their governments to respond when a fellow citizen has been taken hostage.⁷⁶ Recent work has demonstrated the existence of such policymaker responsiveness in both Israel and the United States;

⁷⁴Robert Jervis, ‘Realism, game theory, and cooperation’, *World Politics*, 40:3 (1988), pp. 317–49.

⁷⁵Gilbert and Prather, ‘Blaming the victim?’

⁷⁶Lee, ‘Democracy, civil liberties, and hostage-taking terrorism.’

democratically elected leaders care about public opinion on foreign policy, and they adapt their behaviour accordingly, including on hostage recovery.⁷⁷ Our findings suggest that target governments will have a harder time garnering public support for some hostage recovery activities, like ransom payments, than for others, like military rescue missions. They also suggest that enterprising perpetrators might compound their hostage-taking damage through provoking controversies in partisan politics, exacerbating the domestic political dilemma of hostage recovery.

This article demonstrates how some individual characteristics among the public shape support for hostage recovery. Beyond our findings, we expect that several other factors at the heart of hostage crises would shape the politics of hostage recovery – each of which provides a promising avenue for future research. First, our work focuses on foreign policy attitudes, partisanship, and parenthood as relevant factors shaping public opinion about hostage recovery. But we anticipate that other individual traits, like gender or national attachment, would correlate with hostage recovery preferences. Second, future work should explore how the public responds to different forms of hostage-taking violence. This paper explores public opinion about one type of hostage taking: kidnapping by non-state armed groups. However, in recent years, a new form of hostage taking has risen in prominence, as autocratic states like Russia, China, and Iran increasingly use their criminal justice systems to hold Americans hostage.⁷⁸ As successive US administrations have negotiated with adversarial states to win prisoners' release, future work should explore public opinion about this new and shifting form of hostage taking.

Third, future work should investigate how perpetrators' identities affect the politics of hostage recovery. Prior work has shown that – despite the US government's well-known mantra that they 'won't negotiate with terrorists' – the American public is not any less supportive of making concessions to 'terrorists' than other non-state kidnapers.⁷⁹ But future work could explore how specific, named perpetrators might illicit a different response. Existing work suggests that experimental designs relying on abstract or hypothetical actors yield different results than those based on real people.⁸⁰ We don't know, for instance, whether respondents had any real-world hostage crisis or recovery dynamics in mind when answering survey questions, which could shape their beliefs about the risks of recovery options or chances of success. Scholars could thus test the dynamics of public opinion during a real, ongoing hostage crisis, to explore how findings change between hypothetical and real-world scenarios.

Finally, future work might explore how variation across particular hostages and hostage crises shapes public opinion about bringing captives home. Prior work has shown that American support for hostage recovery is shaped by the circumstances of capture: the American public is less supportive of hostage recovery when the public believes that hostages were personally responsible for putting themselves in danger.⁸¹ But future work should continue to explore other aspects of hostage 'deservingness' – including how characteristics like race, gender, and profession shape public support across cases. A large body of work identifies a 'missing white woman syndrome' in domestic abduction cases: young, white, female victims of abductions receive far more media coverage than their male or non-white peers.⁸² Scholars of public opinion and foreign policy should explore

⁷⁷ Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo, 'Public opinion and decisions about military force in democracies'; Gilbert and Prather, 'Blaming the victim?'

⁷⁸ Gilbert and Rivard Piché, 'Caught between giants'; Carla Ferstman and Marina Sharpe, 'Iran's arbitrary detention of foreign and dual nationals as hostage-taking and crimes against humanity', *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 20:2 (2022), pp. 403–35; Kylie Moore-Gilbert, 'Evaluating Australia's consular management of cases of wrongful and arbitrary detention', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 60:3 (2025), pp. 273–289.

⁷⁹ Gilbert and Prather, 'Blaming the victim?'

⁸⁰ Jared McDonald, 'Avoiding the hypothetical: Why "mirror experiments" are an essential part of survey research', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 32:2 (2020), pp. 266–83; Ryan Brutger et al., 'Abstraction and detail in experimental design', *American Journal of Political Science*, 67:4 (2023), pp. 979–95.

⁸¹ Gilbert and Prather, 'Blaming the victim?'

⁸² K. Gilchrist, "'Newsworthy" victims: Exploring differences in Canadian local press coverage of missing/murdered Aboriginal and white women', *Feminist Media Studies*, 10:4 (2010), pp. 373–90; S. Min and J. C. Feaster, 'Missing children

how such traits translate to international violence. Such future work would provide insights on the domestic politics of international security, showing how hostage-taking violence reverberates through target states.

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