

## **Too Pacifist in Peace, Too Bellicose in War: Political Information and Foreign Policy Opinion**

### **Abstract**

Scholars of public opinion and foreign policy recognize that the general public is poorly informed about international affairs, but they disagree about whether and how this fact affects the policies that it will support. Some argue that the lack of information has little effect, at least in the aggregate, while others hold that political information mediates attention to elite cues. Drawing on the work of older writers such as Walter Lippmann and Gabriel Almond, we propose a third line of argument in which political information has a direct effect on the policy options individuals support. Low levels of political information give rise to a pattern of complacency toward likely international threats in times of relative peace, and a contrasting tendency to support violent and aggressive policy options during acute crises. We test this argument using survey data from two relevant historical settings: the American entry into World War II and the response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

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Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans who felt threatened were markedly less likely to support civil liberties (Davis and Silver 2004) and more likely to express support for the torture of detainees (Conrad et al. 2018).<sup>1</sup> Concerns about the public's response to dramatic events and its implications for democratic governance have a long pedigree (e.g., Stouffer 1955). Well explored in the context of domestic politics, the issue has received somewhat less attention in the context of foreign policy-making. In this paper, we take on this task. We argue that the public exhibits a pattern of overreaction and underreaction in response to international events and that ignorance and apathy are key drivers of individual-level variation in these responses.

Scholars generally acknowledge that the American public knows little about politics in general and foreign policy in particular (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Kinder and Sears 1985; Bennett 2003). Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996, 70-1) examination of factual questions used to assess political knowledge on the American National Election Study (ANES) indicated that only 40 percent of Americans knew the purpose of NATO in 1988, 58 percent could define the Cold War in 1950, and only 39 percent could define free trade in 1953. Other examples of this information deficit are abundant and not difficult to find. As Ole Holsti (1996, 51) noted in his otherwise optimistic assessment of the role of public opinion in foreign policy, there is "overwhelming evidence that the American public is on balance poorly informed about international affairs." What scholars continue to debate is whether this lack of information makes a difference. Does the low level of public information about foreign policy evident in examples like these really matter? How, if at all, does it affect the policies that the public will support?

Two relatively optimistic answers to these questions prevail in current research on foreign policy. Some scholars suggest that public opinion would not look substantially different if people were better informed. At the individual level, basic belief structures or cognitive shortcuts may compensate for the lack of specific knowledge about policy (e.g., Holsti 1996, 47-51). At the aggregate level, individual errors arising from the lack of information may cancel each other out, yielding a reasonable and prudent central tendency (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1993, 41; Jentleson 1992). Other scholars argue that the lack of information plays a mediating role in

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<sup>1</sup> Davis and Silver (2004) also find that at the individual level, the link between threat perception and support for civil liberties is mediated by trust in government, race, and ideology.

shaping public opinion. Better-informed individuals pay more attention to the elite cues that usually shape public opinion (e.g., Zaller 1992; 1994; Berinsky 2009).

We will test a third, darker possibility, that lack of information has a direct effect on individual opinion. During periods of relative calm, support for policies dealing with potential threats will be lower among less informed individuals. By contrast, in periods of acute crisis, less informed individuals will support aggressive and violent policy options at higher rates than better informed people. We test these tendencies using survey data from two relevant historical settings: the American entry into World War II and the response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In both instances, we find support for our argument.

The pattern we find among the less informed has potentially important implications. It suggests that information plays a different role than it is assigned in most recent research on public opinion and foreign policy, though one that was quite prominent in earlier work. Writers such as Walter Lippmann, Gabriel Almond, and others writing in the decades around World War II worried that an uninformed public would be complacent in the face of real but distant security threats and overreact to these same threats once they could no longer be ignored. They also worried that elites would exploit or pander to these tendencies in public opinion. Prudent or not, political leaders who oppose conciliatory policies in wartime, or proactive policies to anticipate future threats in peacetime, will find it easier than their opponents to mobilize support among the uninformed. Unchecked, this process could lead to a foreign policy that is "too pacifist in peace, too bellicose in war" (Lippmann, 1955, 20).

### **Political Information and Foreign Policy Opinion**

Scholars have long struggled with how to regard evidence that many in the public know and care less about politics than democratic theory suggests they should (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Converse 1964; Holsti 1992; Shapiro and Page 1988; Visser, Holbrook, and Krosnick 2008). This debate is most extensive in research on American politics.<sup>2</sup> In the study of public

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars of American politics have argued that lack of information has direct effects on individual opinion about policy issues (e.g., Althaus 1998; Gilens 2001). However, the mechanisms they propose to account for these effects are quite different than the one we consider

opinion and foreign policy, two perspectives predominate in current scholarship. The first holds that information makes little difference. The second suggests that political information serves mainly as a mediator for the impact of elite cues. Both views contrast sharply with earlier scholarship holding that the effects of information in public opinion on foreign policy were both direct and important, as well as highly problematic.

The view that the public's low level of information makes little difference rests on at least two mechanisms that mitigate its effects. First, at the individual level, people may be able to use information shortcuts to compensate for their lack of specific knowledge about many issues. In a prominent review of research from the 1980s and 1990s, Holsti (1996, 47) suggests that the public "may use a limited number of beliefs to make sense of a wide range of facts and events." Image theory is one important example of how such cognitive shortcuts might work in the context of foreign policy (Herrmann 2013). Wittkopf (1986; 1990) and others argue that these shortcuts lead people to coherent views about foreign policy in spite of their lack of information. It is worth noting that not everyone is so optimistic about the likely effect of heuristics and information shortcuts on individual judgment (Kahneman 2011; Caplan 2007).

Second, at the aggregate level, many argue that the central tendency in public opinion responds consistently to events and conditions even if individuals do not always do so. Page and Shapiro (1992, 15-17, 26) provide one of the more extensive accounts of how this process works. Even if the lack of information leads individuals to express inconsistent opinions from time to time, these opinions nevertheless have a central tendency that reflects the individual's underlying interests and real preferences. In surveys of large number of individuals, these occasional inconsistencies will tend to cancel one another out, yielding an aggregate view that reflects the interests and preferences of the public as a whole. Page and Shapiro (1992, 172-284) have applied this perspective extensively to public opinion on foreign policy issues. Other have adopted similar positions. For instance, though he does not discuss aggregation processes explicitly, Jentleson (1992; 1998) holds that aggregate opinion responds consistently to the principal policy objective offered in military interventions.

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here, which is unique to foreign policy. The literature on public opinion and foreign policy has largely neglected the implications of these ideas as well.

A different line of argument about political information in foreign policy opinion holds that it matters, but mainly because it mediates elite cues. This account of the role of information draws on a more extensive and varied debate in the literature on American politics. Zaller (1992; 1994) and Berinsky (2009) argue that those who know more about politics and policy are better able to attend to the positions of elites with whom they sympathize. When there is elite consensus on an issue, they expect more informed respondents' positions to converge around this position, an outcome they call the "mainstream effect." Low-information respondents will be less likely to take this position because they are less likely to perceive the elite consensus. On the other hand, when elites disagree, Zaller and Berinsky expect high-information followers of these elites to diverge as well, the "polarization effect." Low-information respondents will again be less likely to know the elite positions and will be less polarized as a result.

A third way of thinking prevailed before 1980. Writers including Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, and Gabriel Almond argued that lack of information about international affairs has a direct and substantial one on the shape and dynamics of public opinion. They held that the views of less-informed individuals differ systematically from those of their better-informed peers and that reliance on information shortcuts is liable to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the problem. In this telling, elites are as likely to follow (ill-informed) public opinion as they are to lead it by providing cues to better-informed citizens. These earlier ideas, often under-theorized and rarely tested empirically, have parallels in more recent thinking on information-processing and survey responses. One of the tangible consequences of low information that these earlier writers identified is a pattern of overreaction and underreaction to threats in international affairs.

### **Overreaction and Underreaction in Public Opinion**

Foreign policy is a response to events that unfold continuously. World politics is punctuated by dramatic events and crises, but the causes of these events can be found in the periods of relative calm that lie between them. Actions undertaken during these periods may thus be just as important as responses to crises. Foreign policy is also complex, involving a heterogeneous array of international actors. States have a range of shared and conflicting interests on many issues, so foreign policy normally embodies a mixture of conflict and cooperation. Informed, and in the

minds of older writers appropriate<sup>3</sup>, public opinion on foreign policy thus requires a level of continuous engagement and deep knowledge that is outside the reach of most people (e.g., Almond 1950, 25; Lippmann 1922, 37-40, 48).

What worried many Mid-Century writers was that a pattern of response to international events and conditions would emerge from episodic attention to these issues and failure to grasp their complexities. George Kennan (1985 [1951], 59) used a memorable metaphor to describe the dynamics of public opinion about foreign policy in the United States:

But sometimes I wonder whether in this respect a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin: he lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath--in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat.

Others described a similar pattern of overreaction and underreaction to world events. For example, Almond (1950, 54) described the American character as "prone to cyclical withdrawal-intervention problem," which "suggests at least two serious dangers for foreign policy decision-making: (1) possible overreaction to threat; (2) possible overreactions to temporary equilibria in world politics."<sup>4</sup> Such a cyclical process was also at the heart of Lippmann's (1955, 16) "malady of democratic states."<sup>5</sup> He described it as a type of status quo bias.

[t]he rule to which there are very few exceptions--the acceptance of the Marshall Plan is one of them--is that at critical junctures when the stakes are high, the prevailing mass opinion will impose what amounts to a veto upon changing the course on which the government is at the time proceeding. Prepare for war in time of peace? No. It is bad to raise taxes, to unbalance the budget, to take men away from their schools or their jobs, to provoke the enemy. Intervene in a developing conflict? No. Avoid the risk of war. Withdraw from the area of the conflict? No. The adversary must not be appeased. Reduce your claims on the area? No.

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the mid-Century writers we cite here had strong opinions about the correct foreign policy, but one does not have to accept their substantive claims reach the conclusion that informed and uninformed people may respond differently to international events and conditions.

<sup>4</sup> Klingberg's (1952) argument concerning cycles of "introversion" and "extroversion" in American foreign policy is similar in some respects but focused on patterns of policy choice and elite consensus more than it did on public opinion.

<sup>5</sup> The pattern in public opinion was one element of Lippmann's "malady of democratic states." Another equally important part was the tendency of democratic elites to exploit or pander to problematic tendencies in public opinion when making policy.

Righteousness cannot be compromised. Negotiate a compromise peace as soon as the opportunity presents itself? No. The aggressor must be punished. Remain armed to enforce the dictated settlement? No. The war is over (19-20).

These writers were describing essentially the same phenomenon in different ways. All linked it to public ignorance and apathy about foreign policy issues. Though they did not fully develop a theoretical account of the process producing this pattern, their work contained ideas about how political knowledge might be implicated in it.

It is important to recognize that while overreaction and underreaction constituted a single pattern in the minds of these writers, there are really two distinct conjectures here. Political information plays a central role in each one. First, in peacetime, less informed respondents should support policies to deal with potential threats less than more informed respondents do. Second, during periods of acute crisis or war, less informed respondents should support aggressive or violent policies more than more informed respondents do.

Both conjectures are plausible in light of current thinking about the role of information in forming opinions and answering survey questions. Recent research suggests that people do not usually have pre-formed opinions that they simply recite in response to a question, but instead compose answers at the time the question is asked. Tourangeau, et al. (2000, 178-85) posit a belief-sampling process with several stages. When confronted with a survey question, respondents first attempt to retrieve considerations relevant to it from memory. An individual's political knowledge determines the range of considerations they have available. These include "a haphazard assortment of beliefs, feelings, impressions, general values, and prior judgments about an issue." Each may support a particular response to the survey question. If they have time, respondents may disregard considerations they see as irrelevant, invalid, or redundant. Respondents then engage in a process of judgement to arrive at an answer, which involves averaging across all the remaining considerations. They will select the response that comes closest to the outcome of this averaging process.<sup>6</sup>

Consider first the implications of the belief-sampling model for the conjecture that in peacetime, less informed respondents should support policies to deal with potential threats less

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<sup>6</sup> Zaller (1992, 40-52) suggests a very similar process, and Tourangeau et al. (2000, 179) cite his definition of a consideration when presenting their model.

than more informed respondents do. Survey questions about relatively remote threats generally concern whether the nation should depart from the status quo, taking the threat more seriously, or undertaking potentially costly new steps to deal with it. In logic of the belief-sampling model, whether individuals select a response option implying such a departure from the status quo depends in large part on whether they can access considerations that support doing so. More informed individuals are more likely to know about the threat or policy that is the subject of the question, and to have heard of reasons why a departure from the status quo might be justified. Not all of them will support it, of course, because some will have pre-formed attitudes opposing such a step or will access more considerations that militate against it. The difference between informed and uninformed respondents arises from the fact that many less-informed individuals will retrieve few considerations of any sort. Indeed, they may find none at all in the case of international conditions they have not thought about before. In this case, they may select a response option that reflects the status quo simply because they can find no reason to move away from it. In this respect, the logic of the belief-sampling model resembles Lippmann's argument that individuals with little information about an ongoing problem in world politics --most of the public, in his view--would be reluctant to support an active policy for dealing with it.

The information conditions prevailing during a war or an acute crisis suggest a different outcome, one consistent with the conjecture that less informed individuals will support aggressive and violent policy options at higher rates than better informed people do. The war or crisis will provide everyone, even those with relatively little political information, with a set of considerations that support violent or aggressive policy options. The key issue in this case is whether respondents can retrieve other considerations that weigh against these policy options, such as concern about casualties, the postwar settlement, or enemy retaliation. In the process of averaging across the accessible considerations proposed in the belief-sampling model, these considerations will move respondents away from the most extreme and violent response options. The more of these considerations an individual can access, the less likely he or she is to support a proposed violent or aggressive option over a more moderate alternative. More informed people will thus reject the most extreme or violent option more often than less informed people will.

To sum up, the public's episodic interest to international affairs suggests that it might respond differently to foreign policy depending on whether there is an ongoing crisis or emergency sufficient to compel its attention. This is one element of the pattern of overreaction

and underreaction that mid-Century writers noted. This pattern will be more evident among the less informed members of the public than among the more informed ones. In periods of what Almond (1950, 54) called "temporary equilibria in world politics," the relatively uninformed public will have little basis for supporting policies to deal with what will appear to be remote contingencies, particularly if the proposed policies appear expensive or dangerous. On the other hand, once a crisis or emergency has aroused its attention, the relatively uninformed public may know little beyond the fact that the country is at war with a foreign enemy. Without knowing about additional policy considerations that suggest otherwise, they will be drawn toward policies that inflict the greatest harm on this enemy. These processes imply two hypotheses about information.

H1. During temporary equilibria in world politics, less informed respondents should support policies to deal with potential threats less than more informed respondents do.

H2. During periods of acute crisis or war, less informed respondents should support aggressive or violent policies more than more informed respondents do.

In principle, it is possible that elite leadership could compensate for shortcomings in public opinion arising from inattention and lack of information. If the public forms its opinions in response to cues from trusted elites who represent their interests, public opinion might not display the pattern of overreaction and underreaction we have proposed here. Mid-Century writers discussed this possibility. Ironically, given their reputation as elitists, they were pessimistic about it. Almond (1950, 8) suggested that deference to elites could represent a reasonable division of labor if elites "were governed by codes of conduct which minimized [these] elements of distortion and panic in the stream of communication." However, he argued that elites were not so scrupulous in reality, and were often subject to some of the same problematic tendencies as the uninformed public (Almond 1950, 56-7; 85-6). Lippmann (1922, 48-9) similarly included weak elite communication and efforts to manipulate the public among the barriers to public understanding. Necessary secrecy and the need for specialized knowledge could block even sincere efforts to comprehend foreign policy. To make matters worse, elites are frequently tempted to exploit the public's limitations for political advantage, perhaps exploiting the difficulty of comprehending relatively remote threats or pandering to the impulse to punish the enemy during wartime.

## Research Design

Testing the hypotheses set out in the last section poses several research design challenges. The first concerns the precise meaning of the acute crises and temporary equilibria in world politics that we mention in our hypotheses. Mid-Century writers were clear about the effect of the acute crises they discussed: these events would cause otherwise uninterested individuals to reassess the importance of world politics and foreign policy, prompting them to pay attention. What they were unclear about was what precisely made an event dramatic enough to shift the public mood from underreaction to overreaction. They were understandably preoccupied with major declared wars and appear to have viewed them as the principal cause of such a shift. There have been no declared wars since 1941, however, so war declarations cannot be used to mark the transition between equilibrium and acute crisis. Instead, we have identified two historical moments that featured sudden, external events that had profound policy implications: the periods before and after Pearl Harbor and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The second challenge concerns data availability. Our argument suggests a dynamic process in individual opinion, as some people move from holding relatively complacent attitudes to a willingness to support aggressive and violent policies; this shift should be smaller among those with greater political information. The optimal test of this argument would examine whether the same respondents' shift in attitudes depends on their level of information. It would require panel data that spanned both a period of acute crisis and one of temporary equilibrium. Unfortunately, we have not been able to locate such data. While an experimental design might seem attractive for this purpose, an event comparable to the onset of a war probably cannot be simulated. We will instead test the comparative statics implied by our argument: that informed and uninformed individuals differ in the way we have hypothesized in presence or absence of an acute crisis.

Our dependent variable will be individuals' willingness to support various foreign policy options for dealing with international threats. The nature of the policy options included in each survey depended on the historical context as well as the interests of pollsters at the time. For each of the two periods, our precise hypotheses differ depending on the questions available to us. We

will discuss the survey items from each period in detail immediately before presenting the results.

A third challenge concerns measuring our key independent variable, the level of political information. Mid-Century writers were less generous toward the public than more recent accounts of public opinion typically are, and their language harsher. Where they would refer to "ignorance" and "apathy," more recent writers might discuss "low information" or "low political interest," as we do here. The underlying concepts are not fundamentally different, though. Like most other research on this topic, we measure respondents' level of political information using a series of factual questions about politics. These questions do not necessarily concern the crisis at hand. Low political information refers to more than just the absence of a few immediately relevant facts, but also the lack of background information and a conceptual knowledge needed to make sense of these facts.

We will not rely on measures of education to indicate political information, in spite of the fact that they are more readily available than batteries of factual questions. Of course, education is closely related to political information and is even used as a proxy for it in some research. Our concern is that education indicates many things besides political knowledge and awareness. The highly educated have greater human capital, higher incomes, and may be more cosmopolitan, all of which have been linked to foreign policy attitudes in previous research (see Hainmueller and Hiscox 2006). Providing the highly educated with somewhat greater levels of political information may not be its most important effect.

Political information is correlated with a range of individual-level characteristics that might influence foreign policy opinion. In our empirical analysis, we will control for partisanship, race, gender, age, and income because we do not want our measure of political information to proxy the effect of these variables. Because education is so closely related to political information, we will not control for it here.

As we noted earlier, Zaller (1992; 1994) and Berinsky (2009) offer a different treatment of political information. In their work, its principal effect is to mediate elite cues: those with more information are better able to discern these cues and respond to survey questions in ways that reflect their preferred elites' positions. Our argument does not necessarily compete directly with theirs. In principle, both theoretical processes could be going on. In some of the historical

contexts we will examine, they are observationally equivalent. In instances where our expectations diverge from theirs, we will comment on what the empirical evidence tells us.

## **Empirical Analysis**

Our empirical analysis focuses on two periods punctuated by the beginning or end of acute crises: American entry into World War II and the 9/11 terrorist attack. The first of these periods inspired much of the thinking from which we have constructed our theoretical argument. The latter tests these claims on more recent events that these writers did not have in mind.

### ***World War II***

We examined two surveys taken within a year of American entry into the war in December 1941, one on January 28, 1941, the other on March 12, 1942, both by the Office of Public Opinion Research (1941; 1942). The sampling procedures used in these surveys did not produce a random sample of the U.S. population. We used the weights developed by Berinsky and Schickler (2011) in our analyses to compensate for these problems. Our choices were limited mainly by the availability of information items. Fortunately, though this was not the norm in surveys conducted at the time, the two surveys we used each had a battery of factual questions about world politics. The 1941 survey had five such questions. The March 1942 survey had three.

We found two questions on each survey that asked respondents to evaluate major foreign policies. In the 1941 survey, administered before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, these questions focused on assistance to Britain and the prospect of American entry into the war.

If the British are unable to pay cash for war materials bought in this country, should our government lend war materials to the British, to be paid back in the same materials and other goods after the war is over?

- Yes
- Qualified answer
- Give, not lend
- No
- No opinion

Which of these two things do you think is more important--

- That this country keep out of war, or
- That Germany be defeated, even at the risk of our getting into the war?
- No choice

Both these questions bear on hypothesis 1, that less informed respondents should express less support for policies to deal with potential threats during periods of temporary equilibrium, in this case the period of American non-belligerence in World War II. We thus expect the respondent's level of information to be positively associated with policies to deal with potential threats by assisting the British and defeating Germany even at the risk of war.

The 1942 survey included two questions that provided especially good tests of the hypotheses about the effect of information during times of acute crisis.

If Hitler offered peace now to all countries on the basis of not going farther, but of leaving matters as they are now, would you favor or oppose such a peace?

- Favor
- Oppose
- No opinion

If we win the war, how do you think we should treat the people of Germany?  
[Open-ended responses coded into several categories.]

These questions allow us to test hypothesis 2, that, during a war or acute crisis, low-information respondents should support aggressive and violent policies more than better informed respondents do. If so, the level of information should be positively associated with accepting the peace offer, rejecting the policy of unconditional surrender. It should be negatively associated with support for punishing the German people after the war. This is a difficult test. While there was near-unanimous agreement for punishing Nazi leaders, 74% of respondents opposed punishing the German people as a whole. However, 12% favored punishment of some sort, illustrating Lippmann's (1955, 23-4) fear that the mobilized wartime public "would not tolerate the calculated compromises that durable settlements demand."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The categories we coded as calling for punishment were "Put them in their place--keep them in subjection--like conquered nation--don't treat them very good," "Treat them harshly--give them a dose of their own medicine," and "Lock them up, shoot them, etc."

We estimated the effect of information on responses to these questions using a multinomial logit model. This model avoids artificially imposing an order on the policy options. It also permits us to model the "no opinion" and "no choice" responses. These answers are strongly correlated with political information, and simply dropping them could bias our estimates of the effect of information (Kleinberg and Fordham 2018; Berinsky 2004). The coefficients on political information for each response category indicate its effect on the probability of selecting each option compared to the omitted modal category. In each model, we control for presidential approval (in lieu of party identification, which was not available), gender, race, age, and social class.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 presents the results. For reasons of space, it reports only the coefficient estimates concerning political information, which test our hypotheses. Responses to the prewar questions support hypothesis 1. Low-information respondents were not overwhelmingly isolationist in January 1941, but they were statistically significantly more likely to oppose costly or risky policy options. They were also much more likely to offer no opinion. Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities of offering each response for two otherwise similar high-information and low-information respondents. All respondents tended to support lending to the British, but those with little information were substantially less likely to do so. By contrast, high-information respondents were more likely to volunteer that the aid should take the form of a gift rather than a loan. Turning to the question on the most important goal, low-information respondents were roughly evenly split between keeping out of war and defeating Germany. On the other hand, high-information respondents were almost four times more likely to prefer defeating Germany, even at the risk of war.

The questions asked after Pearl Harbor provide only partial support for hypothesis 2, concerning wartime support for aggressive and violent policies. Figure 2 displays the predicted probabilities of selecting each response category on these two questions for otherwise identical high-information and low-information respondents. As the results concerning the treatment of the German people indicate, low-information respondents were indeed more likely to support the

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<sup>8</sup> These surveys did not ask respondents about family income, but instead had the interviewers rate their social class as wealthy, above average, average, below average, poor, or on various types of government assistance. We recoded the government assistance categories as "poor," producing a five-category social class variable.

extreme option of collective punishment. However, low-information respondents were also more likely to favor a compromise peace with Germany than high-information respondents.

These results offer several points of comparison with the expectations generated by Berinsky's (2009) and Zaller's (1992; 1994) argument about information and support for war. The results concerning the German peace offer support their position. As we noted earlier, they held that information made people better able to respond to elite cues. These cues, rather than patterns arising directly from political information, account for the differences between low-information and high-information respondents. American leaders nearly unanimously endorsed a policy of unconditional surrender in 1942. The stronger support for this option among high-information respondents might thus reflect the "mainstream effect," in which those better aware of the elite consensus adopt identical positions in opposition to acceptance of any German peace offer. If one could show that elites generally opposed punishing the German people, the results of that question would also be consistent with this account of information.

While the results concerning the German peace offer support Zaller's and Berinsky's account of information, those from the 1941 questions do not. Elites were divided about whether to aid Britain and risk entering the war before Pearl Harbor. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to oppose intervention before the Japanese attack (Berinsky 2009, 87-8). Zaller's and Berinsky's account of information thus suggests that high-information respondents should be divided along party lines, the "polarization effect." We estimated an alternative model that tested this effect using an interaction term. Table 1 reports the difference in the Bayesian Information Criterion statistic for this model and the one reported in Table 1. In every case, the comparison strongly favored the simpler model without the interaction term. This result by no means decisively falsifies the polarization effect in general. However, the simpler treatment of information better fits the data in this case.

### ***Terrorism and the 9/11 Attacks***

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were arguably the most dramatic and visible intrusion of the international system into American life since Pearl Harbor. It offers an opportunity to test whether the pattern of complacency and overreaction among the less informed applied outside the historical setting that first suggested it. Did Americans regard the threat of

terrorism before and after 9/11 in the same way they did the threat from Germany and Japan before and during World War II? Before 9/11, we expect that low-information respondents will be less willing to support policies for handling the possible threat of terrorism. After the attacks, we expect that they should endorse aggressive or violent policy options at higher rates than better-informed respondents do.

As in our analysis of World War II era surveys, the greatest data-collection issue we confronted was identifying surveys that included both questions about the threat of international terrorism and a battery of factual questions to assess political information.<sup>9</sup> We found two surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center that met these criteria. The first, conducted April 6-May 6, 1999, was intended primarily to assess opinions about the end of the 20th Century (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 1999). However, it also included a battery of factual questions about politics and the following item about international terrorism:

And now a few more items... (First,) is/are [five items, presented in random order] a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat at all? How about...international terrorists?<sup>10</sup>

- Major threat
- Minor threat
- Not a threat at all
- Don't know/refused

The second survey was conducted January 9-13, 2002, and included a range of questions about possible responses to international terrorism (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2002). Not surprisingly, surveys items about terrorism were far more common after the 9/11 attacks than they were beforehand. We selected six questions about policies linked to the threat of terrorism in order to test whether low-information respondents were more likely to support violent and aggressive options. These questions covered a range of such policies, including the

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<sup>9</sup> We are reluctant to use political interest or attentiveness as a substitute for political information in this case because we suspect that even less-informed persons who would normally be inattentive might report following the news in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Attentiveness and information might thus diverge and not capture the same underlying concept during this period.

<sup>10</sup> The other four items included along with international terrorists were anti-government groups, racial conflict, special interest groups in politics, and environmental problems.

military operation in Afghanistan, which was widely supported by elites from both parties, the possible invasion of Iraq, which was supported mainly by Republicans, and several hypothetical options others that were not widely discussed by elites from either party.

This variation in elite support for these policies is useful because it permits us to compare our expectations about information with those of Berinsky (2009) and Zaller (1992; 1994). Our hypothesis is the same for all these questions: we expect low-information respondents to prefer the more aggressive and violent option in the face of the ongoing terrorist threat. Their expectations differ depending on the state of elite opinion. When there is elite consensus, as in the case of the occupation of Afghanistan, they expect a "mainstream effect" in which more informed respondents, being more aware of this consensus, to be more likely to support the policy. This is the opposite of what we expect. In the case of Iraq, where Democrats were relatively critical and Republicans were relatively supportive of military action, they expect a "polarization effect," with high-information Democrats less supportive than low-information Democrats, and high-information Republicans more supportive than low-information Republicans. In the absence of elite signals, their theoretical argument offers little basis for expecting an information effect.

The question on the war in Afghanistan was as follows:

Do you think the United States should keep military forces in Afghanistan in order to maintain civil order there, or should the United States not do this?

- Yes, keep forces in Afghanistan
- No
- Don't know/refused

The survey included two variants of a question about an invasion of Iraq, which was already being publicly discussed in January 2002, but would not take place for more than a year.

As part of the U.S. war on terrorism, would you favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule?

- Favor
- Oppose
- Don't know/refused

As part of the U.S. war on terrorism, would you favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule, even if it meant that U.S. forces might suffer thousands of casualties?

- Favor
- Oppose
- Don't know/refused

The survey also included two additional questions about military action against countries other than Iraq: Somalia and Sudan. Both had certainly played host to terrorists at various points in time. However, unlike Iraq, military action against them was not then seriously contemplated.

Would you favor or oppose the U.S. taking military action to destroy terrorist groups in Somalia?

- Favor
- Oppose
- Don't know/refused

Would you favor or oppose the U.S. taking military action to destroy terrorist groups in Sudan?

- Favor
- Oppose
- Don't know/refused

A sixth question presented respondents with a menu of four policy options for dealing with international terrorism and asked the importance of each one. This question is especially useful because respondents either had seen, or knew they would see, an array of policies for reducing international terrorism when they evaluated the military option, which we expect low-information respondents to prefer.

As I read from a list tell me how important each of the following is as a way to reduce terrorism in the future...Take military action to wipe out facilities of countries attempting to build nuclear weapons.

- Very Important
- Fairly Important
- Not too Important
- Not at all Important
- Don't know/refused

The other options did not involve military force. They were "decrease American dependence on oil imported from the Middle East," "encourage more democracy in Mideast countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia," and "increase foreign aid to countries that help the U.S. combat terrorism."

Table 2 presents the results concerning international terrorists in 1999, as well as those concerning the use of force in Afghanistan and Iraq from the 2002 survey. For reasons of space, we once again present only the coefficient estimates and standard errors for the political information variable even though the model also included controls for partisanship, race, gender, age, and income. Turning first to the pre-9/11 attitudes, we find evidence to support hypothesis 1, that low-information respondents are reluctant to endorse costly policy options in the absence of an acute crisis. Because the question does not attach a specific policy to the threat of international terrorists, it is a relatively difficult test of this hypothesis. It requires respondents to infer that rating something as a "major threat" implies a greater need for potentially costly action than rating it as a "minor threat" or "not a threat at all." Even so, low-information respondents showed a preference for the "not a threat at all" response over the "major threat" option. As usual, low-information respondents were much more likely to express no opinion. Those low-information respondents who did offer an opinion were more than five times more likely than the most informed respondents to say terrorists posed "no threat at all."

The 2002 survey item about Afghanistan involved a policy that was already underway and enjoyed elite support from both parties. Hypothesis 2 holds that low-information respondents should be more likely to support this military operation. As the results presented in Table 2 indicate, this was indeed the case. Figure 3 displays the results graphically. High-information respondents were closely divided on the wisdom of keeping American troops in Afghanistan. Low-information respondents were almost twice as likely to support the effort as to oppose it. This is the reverse of the "mainstream effect" that Zaller and Berinsky proposed for cases like this one, where a policy enjoys elite support from both parties.

One of the two items on military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power supports our hypothesis: the one that omits mention of American casualties. Low-information respondents were quite a bit more likely to favor military action, and less likely to oppose it, than were high-information respondents. Party identification made a substantial difference in this instance, with Republicans more supportive of the proposed military action than Democrats were. However, in spite of the fact that one might expect a party polarization effect here, we do not find one. As the difference in BIC statistics reported in Table 2 indicates, the data do not support an alternative model that estimates divergent information effects for Republicans and Democrats. In fairness, it is possible that the party divisions that would emerge later in the Iraq War were not yet entirely

clear in early 2002. To the extent that such elite divisions were absent, failure to find a polarization effect is not surprising.

The information effect disappears when the question added the possibility that "U.S. forces might suffer thousands of casualties." Highly informed respondents answered both variants of the question in much the same way. The statement about casualties greatly reduced support for military action among low-information respondents, though. This outcome suggests either that low-information respondents did not consider the possibility of American casualties when answering the question that did not mention it. Even though the results concerning this question do not support the specific hypothesis we set out, they are consistent with our argument that low-information respondents form their attitudes on the basis of fewer considerations than high-information respondents do. The addition of a single additional consideration--a rather obvious and realistic one about potential American casualties--was sufficient to change the opinion of low-information respondents, but not those with a greater level of information.

Table 3 summarizes the multinomial logit results concerning several hypothetical policies for dealing with the threat of terrorism. Figure 4 depicts the predicted probability of each response for high-information and low-information persons, holding the other variables at their modal values. Once again, we expect low-information respondents to express more support for violent or aggressive policy options than more informed respondents do. The first two questions concern the use of force against states that were not widely discussed as likely targets. The last concerns support for military action to "wipe out facilities of countries attempting to build nuclear weapons," the most violent of four policy options respondents evaluated together. With the exception of the third item, which some might have interpreted as a veiled reference to military action against Iraq, these questions are too hypothetical to expect either a mainstream or a polarization effect.

The results concerning military action against Somalia and Sudan provide partial support for our hypothesis. Low-information respondents were more likely to approve the proposed military action against Sudan, but not Somalia. Information had no effect at all in the latter case. Once again, the data provide no support for a model permitting a polarization effect for Democrats and Republicans using an interaction term. As we have noted, this result is less

surprising than it was in the case of Iraq, because neither party had staked out a clear position on military action against these two countries.

Analysis of the item concerning military action to prevent the development of nuclear weapons provides clearer support for our hypothesis. Less-informed respondents were most likely to rate this extreme policy option as "very important," while "not too important" was the modal response for the most informed respondents. Interestingly, more informed respondents were also somewhat more likely to choose the "don't know" option, perhaps reflecting the fact that the question did not specify a potential target. One wonders if low-information respondents' failure to consider the potential costs of military action, evident in their response to the two questions on the Iraq War in the same survey, affected their responses here. Though party identification made a difference in responses to this question, with Republicans rating it as more important than did Democrats or independents, there was once again no support for a model estimating a polarization effect.

Overall, the evidence analyzed here supports the notion that the patterns in public opinion evident before and after Pearl Harbor were repeated before and after the 9/11 attacks. On one hand, during temporary equilibria in world politics, less informed respondents tended to oppose policies for dealing with likely threats. Such respondents were less willing to aid the British or risk American entry into World War II before Pearl Harbor. They also tended to regard terrorism as a less serious threat before the 9/11 attacks. On the other hand, during periods of acute crisis, less informed respondents tended to support aggressive and violent policy options more than more informed respondents did. During World War II, the less informed were more likely to favor punishing the German people as a whole rather than just Nazi leaders. After 9/11, the less informed were more supportive of maintaining American troops in Afghanistan and in taking military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power in 2002. They were also more likely to endorse proposals to take military action against countries that were not much discussed as possible targets, and to view military action against possible nuclear proliferators as a very important policy option for dealing with international terrorism.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars agree that there is a widespread lack of information about world politics among the general public. Our findings suggest that this fact may have more important consequences than some recent research about public opinion and foreign policy has suggested. First, lack of information does not simply produce greater variation around the same central tendency. The uninformed have systematically different views on some key issues than more informed respondents do. Cognitive shortcuts do not appear to reduce the divergence between more and less informed respondents that we found. Indeed, a reliance on heuristics such as an enemy image in time of war may contribute to the tendency among the uninformed to support more aggressive and violent policy options. Nor will aggregation obviate the pattern of overreaction and underreaction that we found.

Second, our findings suggest that information does not merely mediate elite cues. The direct effect of political information tested here thus differs from that proposed by Zaller (1992; 1994) and Berinsky (2009). In some cases, our expectations were observationally equivalent to theirs. Where our expectations differed, we almost always found support for our proposed direct effect. We found no evidence of a mainstream effect in support for the war in Afghanistan during 2002. We found no evidence of a polarization effect in attitudes toward intervention in World War II before Pearl Harbor or proposed military action against Iraq in 2002. We did find evidence of a mainstream effect in opposition to a hypothetical peace offer from Nazi Germany in 1942, but this was the only instance where the data we examined supported the Zaller-Berinsky account of information when their expectations differed from ours. These results do not mean that elite leadership is unimportant or that information does not mediate its effects. It may simply be that the direct effect of information overshadows its mediating effect in the cases we have examined here.

Our findings have broader implications for the study of public opinion and foreign policy. They cast doubt on whether "isolationism" is the principled opinion typically examined in recent research on the topic (e.g., Wittkopf 1990; Fordham 2008; Page and Shapiro 1992). Most of this work focuses on a specific attitude: that the country would be better off if it "stayed out of world affairs" or "just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the

world."<sup>11</sup> These questions and much of the research about them treats isolationism as a logically coherent cluster of policy positions (Wittkopf 1990), or perhaps a basic predisposition from which individuals deduce other policy views (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). By contrast, our findings suggest that isolationism may be in part a reflex arising from ignorance and indifference. We should observe it primarily before the onset of acute crises or wars. Separating principled isolationists from the merely uniformed is an important task for future research.

The pattern of overreaction and underreaction in public opinion has some important implications for policymaking in a democracy. It poses a problem not because the policy positions they lead less-informed respondents to support are always incorrect. In some instances, remote threats really are irrelevant. In others, violent or aggressive policy options may be a reasonable choice. The trouble is that these tendencies are blind to circumstances. With little information, people's policy preferences arise out of reflex, not careful consideration. If they are correct or appropriate, it is the result of chance.

It is possible that elites could moderate these tendencies, pushing back against excessive complacency during periods of relative calm, and against violent impulses in times of acute crisis. Mid-Century writers had little faith in elites on this score. They pointed out that politicians have incentives to pander to public opinion, or to manipulate it. This is not a comforting thing to contemplate in a democracy. However, as Dahl (1966, 299) put it, "it is the best evidence we have, it cannot be brushed aside and it cannot be rewritten to fit our hopes." The malady of democratic states is just as important today as it was when Lippmann began worrying about it in the 1930s. Only deeper knowledge or better elites will overcome the problem, and neither appears on the horizon at the moment.

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<sup>11</sup> The Chicago Council of Global Affairs has used first of these formulations since the 1970s. The American National Election Study has used the second since the 1950s.

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**Table 1.**  
**Multinomial Logit Results on Effect of Political Information, 1941-42**

<b>OPOR Survey, 28 January 1941</b>			
If the British are unable to pay cash for war materials bought in this country, should our government lend war materials to the British, to be paid back in the same materials and other goods after the war is over?		Which of these two things do you think is more important--that this country keep out of war, or that Germany be defeated, even at the risk of our getting into the war?	
Response option	Coefficient for political information	Response option	Coefficient for political information
Yes	Omitted category	Defeat Germany	Omitted category
Give, not lend	1.21 (0.52)*	Keep out of war	-1.34 (0.20)*
Qualified answer	0.08 (0.41)	No choice	-1.59 (0.36)*
No	-0.56 (0.22)*		
No opinion	-2.42 (0.38)*		
Difference in BIC statistic	-26.57		-8.53
<b>OPOR Survey, 26 March 1942</b>			
If Hitler offered peace now to all countries on the basis of not going farther, but of leaving matters as they are now, would you favor or oppose such a peace?		If we win the war, how do you think we should treat the people of Germany? [Open-ended responses coded into several categories.]	
Response option	Coefficient for political information	Response option	Coefficient for political information
Oppose	Omitted category	Do not punish them	Omitted category
Favor	-1.92 (0.29)*	Punish them	-0.52 (0.25)*
No opinion	-1.36 (0.44)*	No answer	-0.79 (0.25)*
Difference in BIC statistic	-15.55		-13.66

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  in a two-tailed test. All multinomial logit models included controls for age, race, gender, social class, and support for the president. The difference in the BIC statistic compares the model to an alternative that includes an interaction term for political information and support for the president.

**Table 2.**  
**Political Information and Attitudes in 1999 and 2002**

<b>April 6-May 6, 1999: And now a few more items... (First,) is/are [five items, presented in random order] a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat at all? How about...international terrorists?</b>	
Response option:	Coefficient for political information:
Major threat	Omitted base category
Minor threat	0.21 (0.27)
Not a threat at all	1.74 (0.59)*
Don't know/refused	-3.44 (1.09)*
Difference in BIC statistic: -36.95	
<b>January 9-13, 2002: Do you think the United States should keep military forces in Afghanistan in order to maintain civil order there, or should the United States not do this?</b>	
Response option:	Coefficient for political information:
Yes, keep forces in Afghanistan	Omitted base category
No	0.54 (0.18)*
Don't know/refused	-0.24 (0.38)
Difference in BIC statistic: -20.76	
<b>January 9-13, 2002: As part of the U.S. war on terrorism, would you favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule?</b>	
Response option:	Coefficient for political information:
Favor	Omitted base category
Oppose	0.82 (0.30)*
Don't know/refused	-0.23 (0.40)
Difference in BIC statistic: -19.24	
<b>January 9-13, 2002: As part of the U.S. war on terrorism, would you favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule, even if it meant that U.S. forces might suffer thousands of casualties?</b>	
Response option:	Coefficient for political information:
Favor	Omitted base category
Oppose	0.23 (0.26)
Don't know/refused	-0.59 (0.40)
Difference in BIC statistic: -19.24	

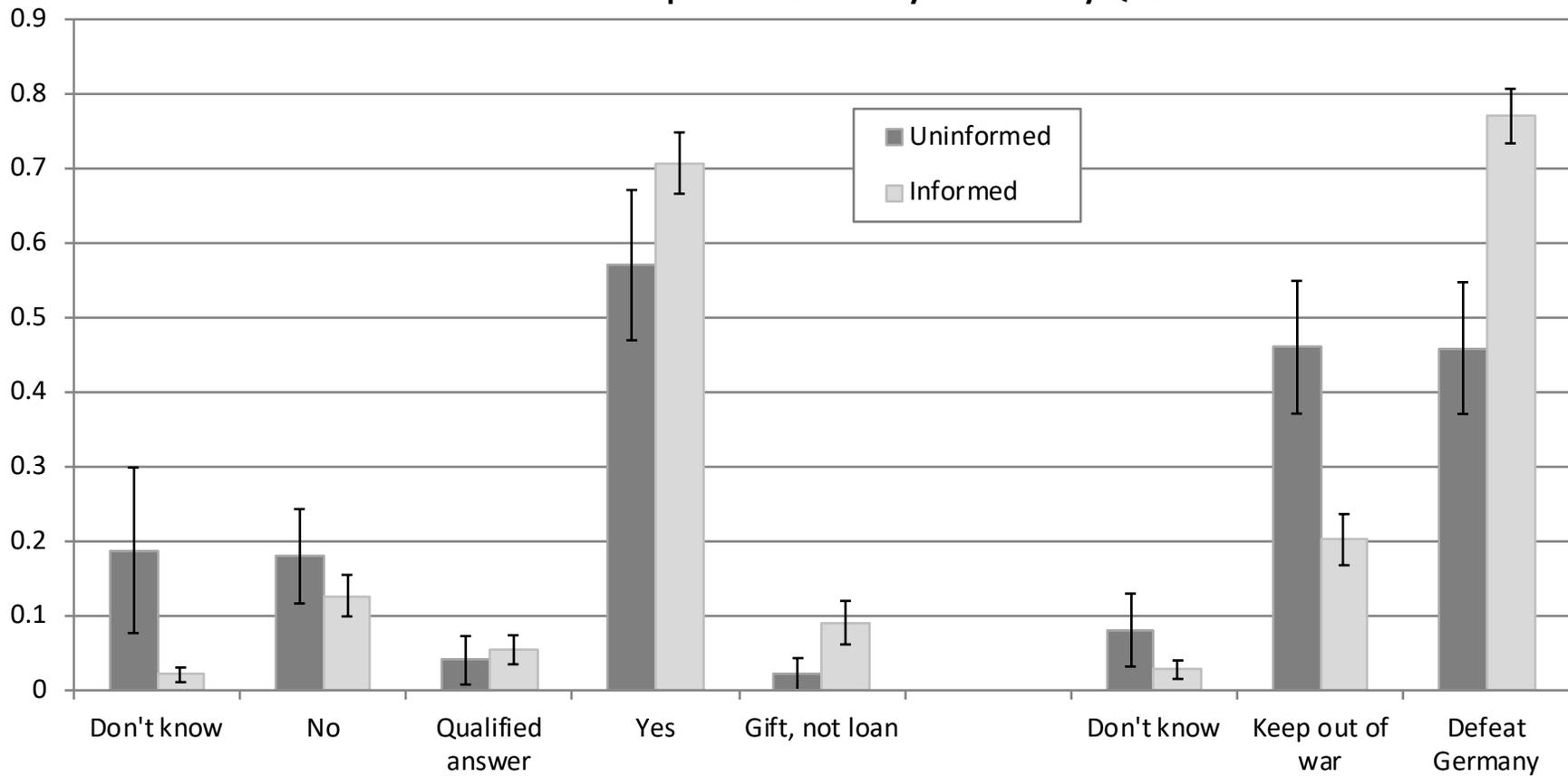
Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  in a two-tailed test. Estimates are from multinomial logit models that include controls for age, race, gender, social class, and Democratic and Republican party identification. The difference in the BIC statistic compares the model to an alternative that includes an interaction term for political information and support for the president.

**Table 4.**  
**Political Information and Hypothetical Policy Options, 2002**

<b>January 9-13, 2002: Would you favor or oppose the U.S. taking military action to destroy terrorist groups in Somalia?</b>	
Response option:	Coefficient for political information:
Favor	Omitted base category
Oppose	0.36 (0.32)
Don't know/refused	-0.57 (0.33)
Difference in BIC statistic: -12.76	
<b>January 9-13, 2002: Would you favor or oppose the U.S. taking military action to destroy terrorist groups in Sudan?</b>	
Response option:	Coefficient for political information:
Favor	Omitted base category
Oppose	0.72 (0.32)*
Don't know/refused	0.09 (0.35)
Difference in BIC statistic: -17.82	
<b>January 9-13, 2002: As I read from a list tell me how important each of the following is as a way to reduce terrorism in the future...Take military action to wipe out facilities of countries attempting to build nuclear weapons.</b>	
Response option:	Coefficient for political information:
Very Important	Omitted base category
Fairly Important	0.42 (0.27)
Not too Important	1.55 (0.38)*
Not at all Important	0.42 (0.56)
Don't know/refused	1.20 (0.52)*
Difference in BIC statistic: -45.23	

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  in a two-tailed test. Estimates are from multinomial logit models that include controls for age, race, gender, social class, and Democratic and Republican party identification. The difference in the BIC statistic compares the model to an alternative that includes an interaction term for political information and support for the president.

**Figure 1.**  
**Information and Responses to January 1941 Survey Questions**

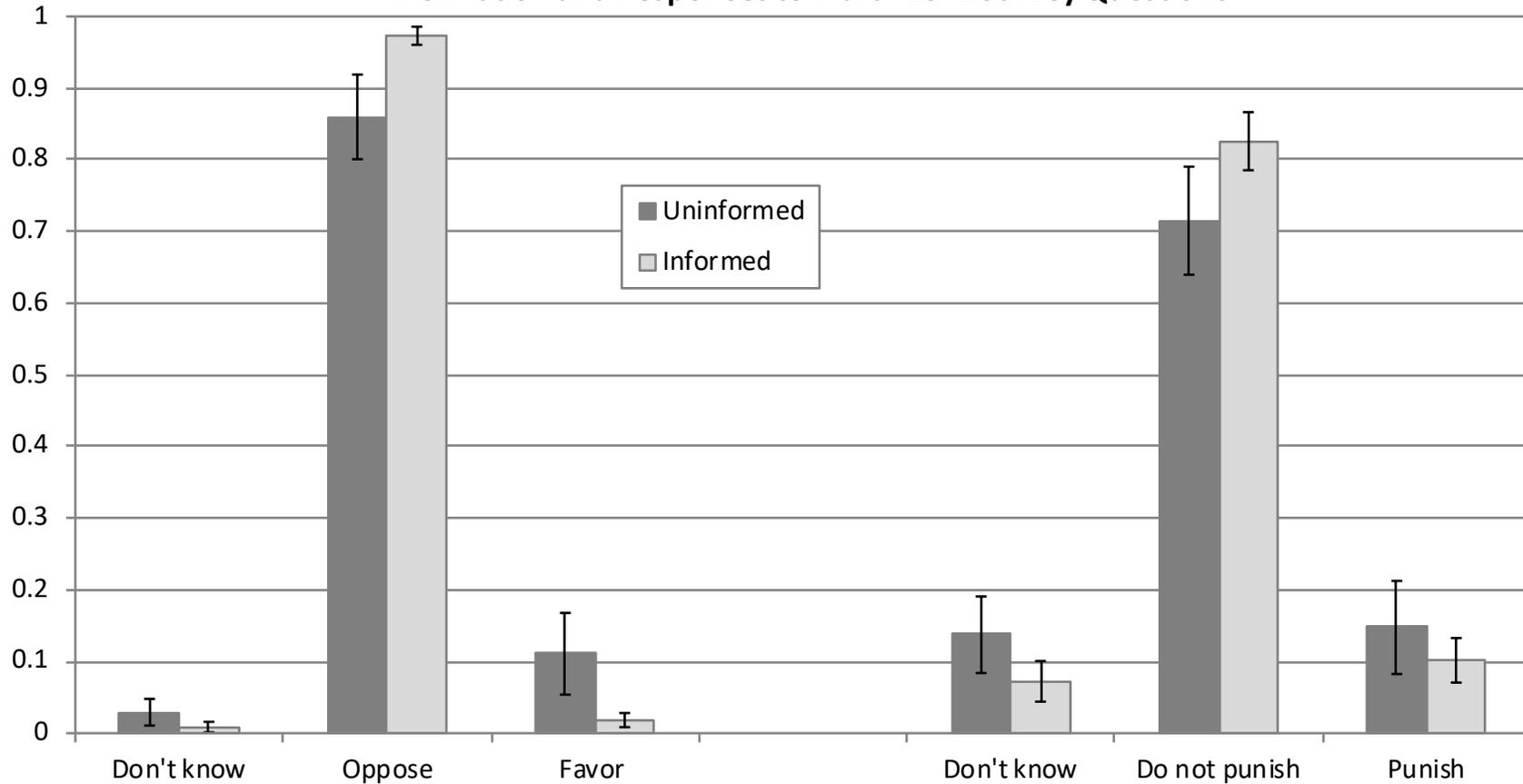


If the British are unable to pay cash for war materials bought in this country, should our government lend war materials to the British, to be paid back in the same materials or other goods after the war is over?

Which of these two do you think is more important--that this country keep out of war, or that Germany be defeated, even at the risk of our getting into the war?

Figure 2.

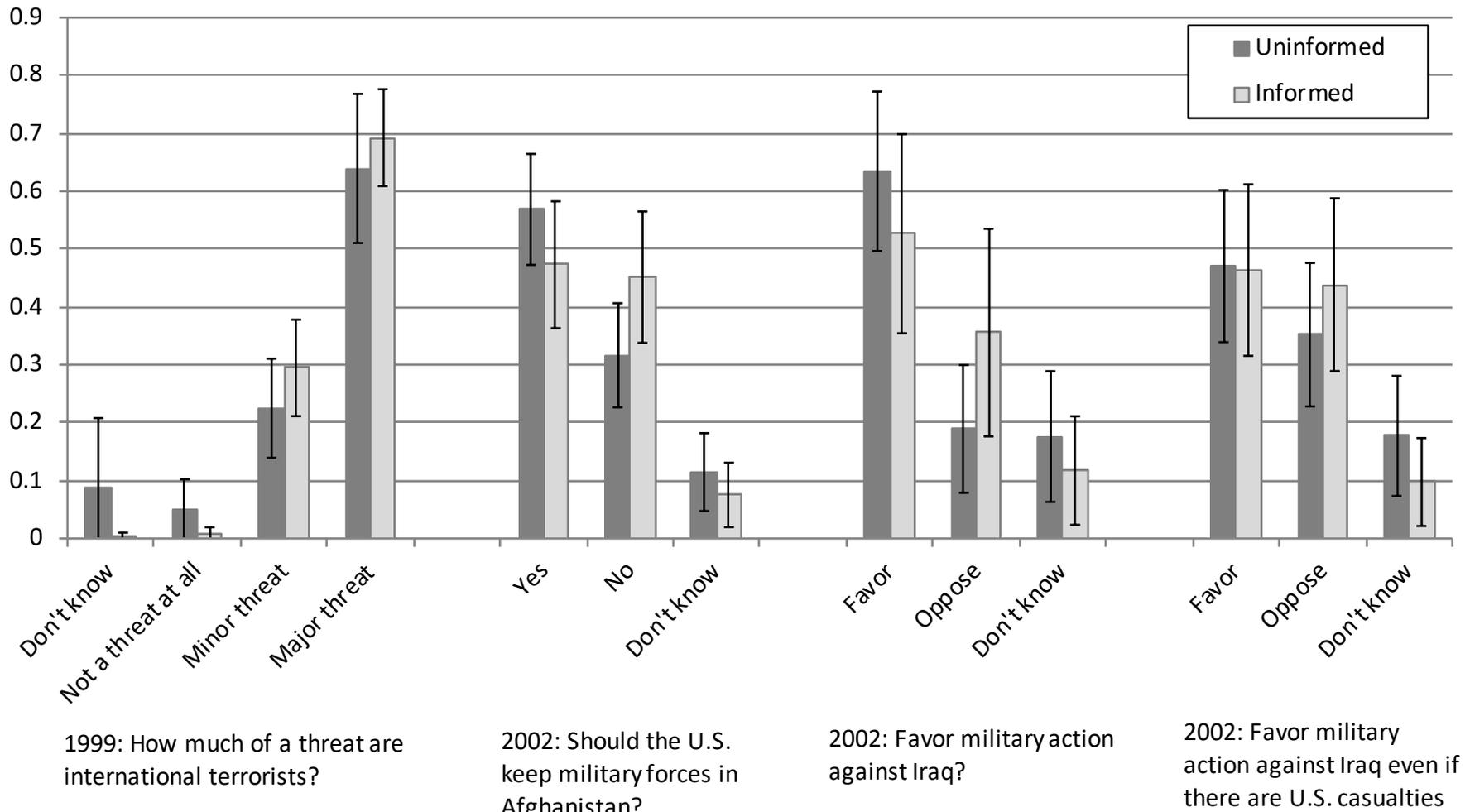
Information and Responses to March 1942 Survey Questions



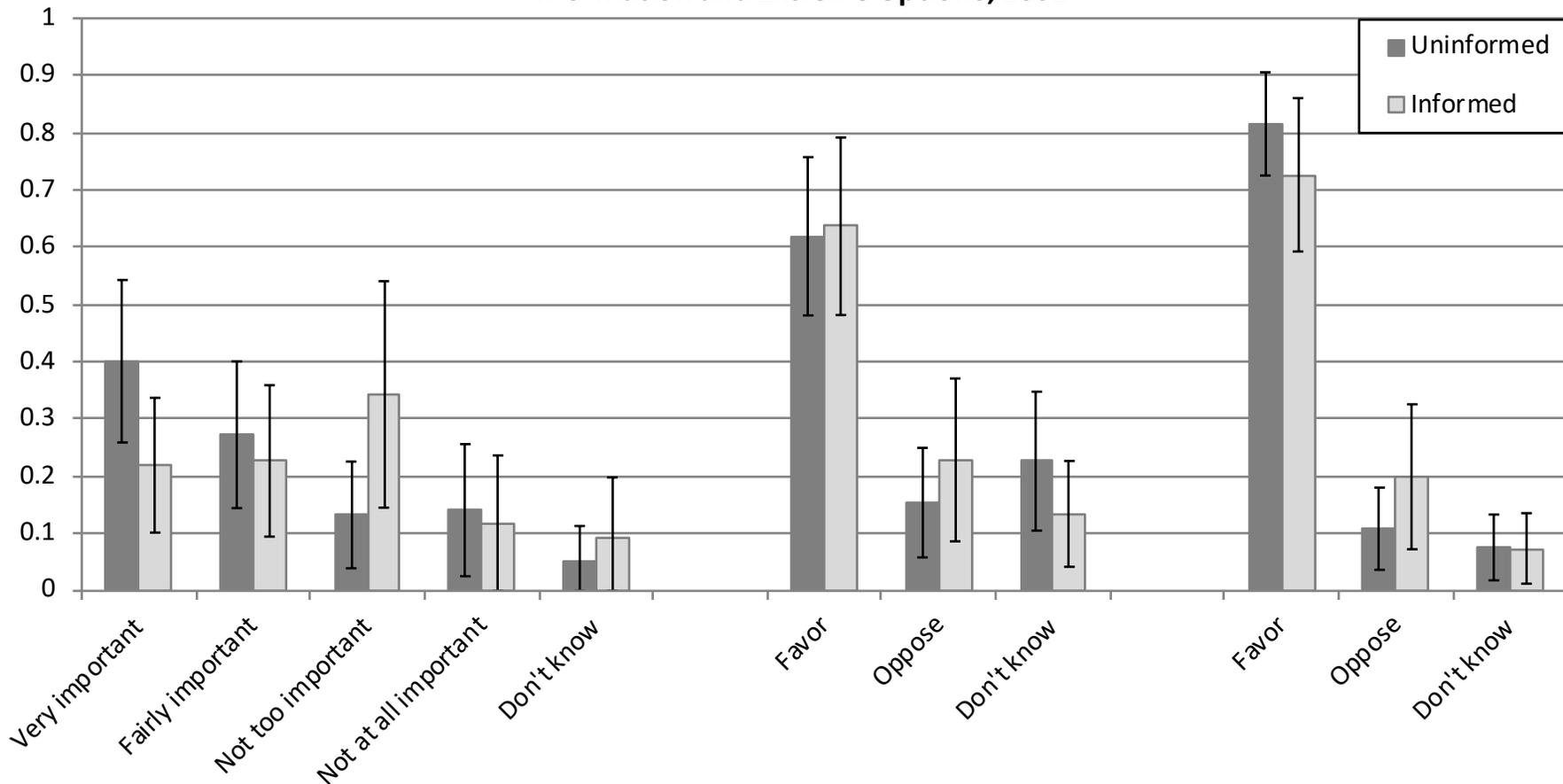
If Hitler offered peace now to all countries on the basis of not going farther, but of leaving matters as they are now, would you favor or oppose such a peace?

If we win the war, how do you think we should treat the people in Germany? [Open-ended punishment responses included "put them in their place," "treat them harshly," "Lock them up," "kill them," etc.]

**Figure 3.**  
**Information and Responses to Terrorism, 1999-2002**



**Figure 4.**  
**Information and Extreme Options, 2002**



As a way to reduce terrorism, how important is taking military action against countries trying to build nuclear weapons?

Favor military action against terrorist groups in Somalia?

Favor military action against terrorist groups in Sudan?