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Unnamed but Reassuring: Quasi-Secrecy and Public Support for Foreign Policy

Clara H. Suong*
Virginia Tech, USA

How does quasi-secrecy—the selective revelation of foreign policy secrets—affect public attitudes toward the use of force by democracies? Existing research on secrecy and on public attitudes toward war has yet to consider the role of quasi-secrecy, such as unattributable communication by unnamed bureaucrats, in affecting public opinion about military action. I argue that unattributable communication can boost public support for the use of force by rallying individuals to infer policy success. My analyses of two survey experiments on nationally representative samples show that anonymous bureaucrats' unattributable messages can rally individuals around a government's use of covert action, relative to attributable messages. I also find that the positive effect of unattributable communication is informational, rather than partisan. The positive effect stems from its interaction with the audience's inferences about success, rather than the political attributes of the source or the audience. By problematizing the previously understudied topic of quasi-secrecy in conflict processes, this paper contributes to existing literature on secrecy and on public opinion about foreign policy and generates important policy implications about the democratic foreign policymaking process.

¿De qué manera afecta el cuasisecretismo (la revelación selectiva de secretos en materia de política exterior) a las actitudes del público con respecto al uso de la fuerza por parte de las democracias? La investigación existente sobre el secretismo y las actitudes públicas hacia la guerra aún no ha tenido en cuenta la influencia que ejerce el cuasisecretismo, como, por ejemplo, la comunicación no atribuible por parte de burócratas anónimos, sobre la opinión pública con respecto a la acción militar. Argumentamos que esta comunicación no atribuible puede contribuir a aumentar el apoyo público al uso de la fuerza dado que induce a las personas a inferir el éxito de las políticas. Llevamos a cabo análisis de dos experimentos de encuestas en muestras representativas a nivel nacional que demuestran que los mensajes no atribuibles por parte de burócratas anónimos pueden tener la capacidad de reunir a las personas a favor del uso de acciones encubiertas por parte del Gobierno, en comparación con los mensajes atribuibles. Además, concluimos que este efecto positivo de la comunicación no atribuible es de carácter más bien informativo, y no tanto partidista. Este efecto positivo proviene de su interacción con las inferencias de los ciudadanos sobre el éxito, más que de los atributos políticos de la fuente o del público. Este artículo, al problematizar el tema previamente poco estudiado del cuasisecretismo en los procesos de conflicto, contribuye a la literatura existente sobre el secretismo y sobre la opinión pública en materia de política exterior y genera importantes implicaciones para la política sobre el proceso democrático de formulación de la política exterior.

Quelle est l'incidence du quasi-secret, la révélation sélective de secrets de politique étrangère, sur l'attitude publique à l'égard du recours à la force par les démocraties ? La recherche existante sur le secret et sur l'attitude publique à l'égard de la guerre n'a pas encore envisagé le rôle du quasi-secret, comme la communication non imputable par des bureaucrates anonymes, quand il s'agit d'influer sur l'opinion publique concernant l'action militaire. J'affirme que la communication non imputable peut augmenter le soutien public à l'usage de la force en mobilisant les individus afin qu'ils déduisent une réussite politique. Mes analyses de deux expériences de sondage sur des échantillons représentatifs à l'échelle nationale montrent que les messages non imputables de bureaucrates anonymes peuvent rallier les individus à l'emploi d'actions secrètes par le gouvernement, par rapport aux messages imputables. Je remarque aussi que l'effet positif de la communication non imputable est informationnel, et non partisan. L'effet positif découle de son interaction avec les inférences du public quant à la réussite, et non des attributs politiques de la source ou du public. En problématisant le sujet jusqu'ici sous-étudié du quasi-secret dans les processus de conflit, cet article contribue à la littérature existante sur le secret et l'opinion publique concernant la politique étrangère et génère d'importantes implications politiques à propos du processus démocratique d'élaboration de politiques étrangères.

Key words: foreign policy; secrecy; covert action; drone strikes; political communication; public opinion; text-as-data; survey experiments.

Introduction

The lethal use of unmanned aerial vehicles—also known as drones—in military operations has become increasingly commonplace in US foreign policy. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US government has launched over 500 drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, and

*Corresponding author: Virginia Tech, USA. Email: clara.suong@vt.edu. X: @chsuong

Clara H. Suong is an Assistant Professor of political science at Virginia Tech, USA. Her research examines how political authorities shape the strategic choices and political behavior of individuals, including elites and citizens, in international politics.

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Yemen for counterterrorism.[1] Despite criticisms over drone strikes' legality, the US public has generally been very supportive of them (Kreps 2014). Such popularity is puzzling because the classified program spearheaded by the Central Intelligence Agency has been largely shrouded in secrecy.[2] In particular, this covert program is notable for its reliance on unattributable communication (Pozen 2013) and quasi-secrecy—a combination of official secrecy and de facto public disclosure via unattributable communication (Banka and Quinn 2018).[3]

However, the quasi-secrecy surrounding drone strikes has not drawn much scholarly interest. Existing literature credits their popularity to their attributes—the lack of domestic casualties (Walsh 2015; Walsh and Schulzke 2018) in particular—or how they are framed in the public narrative (Kreps 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016). Moreover, their quasi-secret nature reinforces the need to reinterpret or adapt existing findings on the effect of complete secrecy on public support for the use of force (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Myrick 2020) to the case of drone strikes and unattributable communication; unattributable communication is distinct from the two due to its public content, hidden identity of the source, and indirect cues (Abel 1987; Halloran 1983; Hess 1984; Pozen 2013).

This paper shows that quasi-secrecy can enable democratic governments to build and maintain support for the use of force. I find that quasi-secrecy can rally the public around foreign policy by emphasizing its success. My survey experiments on the quasi-secret, unattributable communication about drone strikes on nationally representative samples in the United States find that it can increase individuals' support for drone strikes by approximately 5 percentage points on average, and by about 15 percentage points if they infer success from unattributable communication—relative to its attributable counterpart. The results indicate that unattributable communication's rallying effect is fueled by its ability to underscore foreign policy success, not its capacity to highlight partisan cues or to downplay foreign policy costs.

By exploring the understudied impact of quasi-secrecy on public attitudes (Carnegie 2021), my findings contribute to several strands of political science research. First, this paper extends the existing literature on secrecy and deception in international relations (IR; Colaresi 2012, 2014; Mearsheimer 2011; Reiter 2012; Schuessler 2013; Slantchev 2010), including the scholarship on the domestic political dynamics underlying democracies' covert action (Carson 2016; Downes and Lilley 2010; O'Rourke 2020; Poznansky 2015; Smith 2019) and public views of covert action (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Myrick 2020)—such as drone strikes (Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019; Kreps 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016; Lushenko, Raman, and Kreps 2022; Walsh 2015; Walsh and Schulzke 2018).

My findings also advance the existing literature on public attitudes about foreign policy, including the use of force (Berinsky 2007, 2009; Gartner and Segura 2021; Gelpi 2010; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005/2006, 2009; Guisinger and Saunders 2017). In particular, my results extend the existing literature on the role of the media in public opinion formation (Baum and Groeling 2010; Baum and Potter 2015) by shedding light on anonymous sources quoted in media reports—which have largely been overlooked, compared to named, partisan sources (Lupia 2016; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Zaller 1992).

Additionally, my findings illustrate the opportunities and pitfalls of quasi-secrecy as a policy tool for democratic governments. They suggest that quasi-secrecy may be an optimal communication strategy for democratic governments balancing foreign policy effectiveness and accountability (Colaresi 2012, 2014) and competing over public influence with non-state actors armed with emerging technologies (Lin-Greenberg and Milonopoulos 2021). At the same time, my analysis also indicates that quasi-secretive communication can potentially undemocratize the foreign policymaking process by being abused by democratic governments to shore up domestic support for a policy potentially against the public interest.

This paper will proceed as follows. I will first review existing literature and then contextualize unattributable communication. The next section posits theories and hypotheses about the effect of unattributable communication on public support for military action. I will then describe the research design, data, and methods. Results from analyses of the experimental data are presented in the following section. I then conclude.

Literature Review

Secrecy in IR refers to the "intentional concealment of information from one or more audiences" (Carson 2018, 5). Recent scholarship has studied the causes and consequences of secrecy, particularly the questions of why leaders of democratic countries employ secrecy about foreign policy and how secrecy affects the outcomes and public reception of foreign policy. They note that while democratic regimes are more transparent in general—due to electoral competition, political opposition, and free media (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011), democratic leaders have strong incentives to maintain secrecy about foreign policy. They often withhold sensitive foreign policy information, such as "troop strength estimates and specific vulnerabilities, negotiating positions, the content of decoded enemy communications, and the means and capabilities that obtained them" (Colaresi 2012, 4–5), from three main audiences—"domestic publics, other countries, or market actors" (Carnegie 2021, 215).

In particular, domestic politics has been identified as a key motivation for democratic governments' secrecy. Scholarship on crisis bargaining notes that, despite the audience costs generated by public threats, democratic leaders can prefer secret negotiations over public negotiations because secrecy allows the leaders to avoid domestic pressure (Baum 2004; Kurizaki 2007). Similarly, existing research on covert action notes that domestic political dynamics can motivate democratic leaders to act covertly (Carson and Yarhi-Milo 2017; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017). For example, democratic leaders act covertly when the United States targets fellow democracies or countries with dense information and communications technology networks in the face of domestic opposition (Gibbs 1995; Joseph and Poznansky 2018), particularly when the use of force benefits only a handful of powerful elites rather than the general public (Downes and Lilley 2010; Poznansky

[1] I use the term "drones" to refer to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)—also referred to as Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), following other scholars (e.g., Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019; Kreps 2014; Walsh and Schulzke 2018).

[2] The US military maintains a separate overt drone program.

[3] For example, Mazzetti and Mekhennet (2009) quote in their news article unattributable communication by multiple anonymous government sources as follows: "**An American intelligence official** said there were 'strong indications' that a drone strike this week killed Saleh al-Somali, a member of Al Qaeda's inner circle […] United States officials **spoke on condition of anonymity** because the information about the C.I.A. drone program is **classified**" (text in bold by the author).

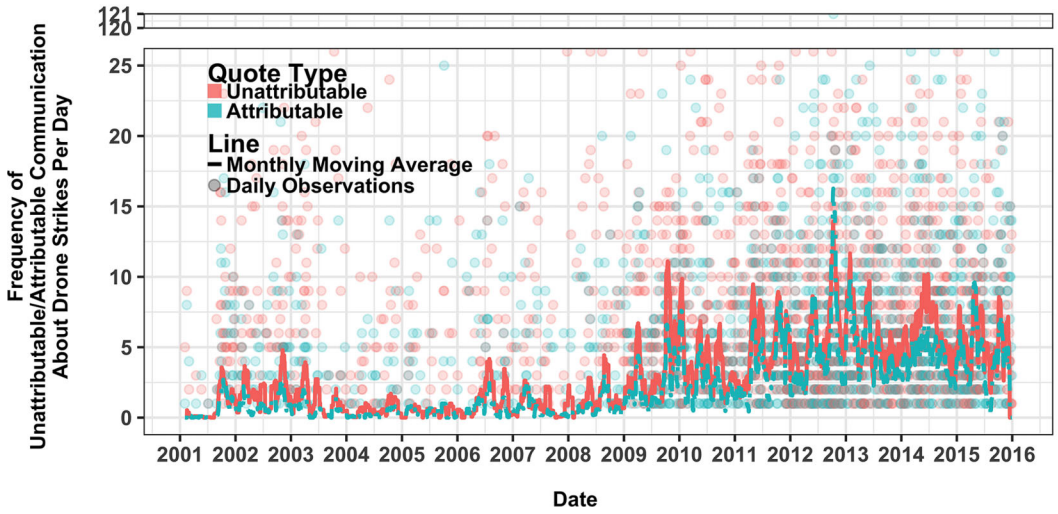

Figure 1. Unattributable communication about drone strikes (2001–2015)

2015). They can also act covertly to deflect the blame from the domestic public and to "minimize the material, economic, and reputational cost" (O'Rourke 2020, 94).

Such secrecy in foreign policy can be concerning for citizens of democracies. Secrecy increases citizens monitoring costs in democracies (Lake 1999, 34), possibly failing to constrain and hold elites accountable. Cases abound in which secrecy was abused by democratic governments, allowing elites to mislead or deceive the public about foreign policy (Mearsheimer 2011; Reiter 2012; Schuessler 2013).

Despite the concerns about accountability, secrecy exists—and is justified by leaders and accepted by the public—due to the "democratic secrecy dilemma" (Colaresi 2014; Sagar 2013). While democracies' transparency can make them more credible in crisis bargaining (Fearon 1994; Schultz 1998) and accountable to their citizens, it can also result in "transparency costs" in foreign policy implementation, depriving them of "the ability to surprise, feign weakness or strength, or—more generally—hide valuable foreign policy information" from adversaries (Colaresi 2012, 672). Thus, these costs enable elites to employ secrecy and justify it by citing geopolitical considerations and instrumental benefits (Brown 2014), such as gaining or retaining tactical or bargaining advantages in inter-state negotiations (Slantchev 2010) or avoiding unintended escalation with an adversary (Carson 2016, 2018).

In turn, citizens can be accepting of secrecy. Myrick finds that the US public has only a "weak preference for transparency" about the use of force (Myrick 2020, 828) and cares more about policy outcomes, accepting secrecy when the use of force is successful or when secret negotiations "involve[s] highly sensitive material or increase[s] the probability that an agreement would be concluded successfully" (Myrick 2023, 19). Similarly, Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo (2023) note that while the public strongly believes in transparency about foreign policy in principle, most individuals can be accepting of the covert use of force when it has instrumental benefits.

While insightful, the literature on secrecy has yet to delve into the role of quasi-secrecy, including unattributable communication, in forming public opinion on the use of force. Quasi-secrecy has certainly been mentioned in the literature, which notes that secrecy "can be thought of as falling on a continuum" (Carnegie 2021, 214) and "can take several different forms, including […] quasi-secrecy" (215). In particular, scholars have noted the quasi-secrecy of some covert operations (Carson 2016, 2018; O'Rourke 2018; Perina 2014–2015; Treverton 1987) and selective secrecy of reassurances or proxy management (Carson and Yarhi-Milo 2017; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Yarhi-Milo 2013), remarking that they can be "open secrets" (Carson 2016, 114) or "overt covert" (Treverton 1987, 94). Yet the literature overall has understandably focused on complete secrecy and its effect on public support for the use of force (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Myrick 2020).

However, quasi-secrecy is prevalent in the foreign policy realm. In the United States, quasi-secrecy—a combination of official secrecy and de facto public disclosure via unattributable communication (Banka and Quinn 2018; Carnegie 2021)—is rife. In particular, unattributable communication—also referred to as veiled or cloaked attribution (Culbertson 1978, Culbertson and Somerick 1976)—by anonymous sources from the government, such as "a senior government official who prefers to be anonymous" quoted in news reports, plays a prominent role in informing the public about foreign policy (Blankenburg 1992; Culbertson 1975; 1978; Culbertson and Somerick 1976; Denham 1997; Gladney, Shapiro, and Ray 2013; Hallin, Manoff, and Weddle 1993; Sheehy 2008; Sobel and Riffe 2016; Wulfemeyer 1985).

For example, quasi-secrecy about drone strikes is prevalent. My comparison of unattributable and attributable communication by bureaucrats in a corpus of 2,850 New York Times articles about US drone strikes published in 2001–2015 shows that the former dominates the latter. Figure 1 displays a scatterplot of the number of quotes by unattributable and attributable individuals and a line plot showing their monthly rolling averages. On average, there are about 2.894 quotes about drone strikes by unattributable individuals and 2.105 quotes by attributable individuals on each day during this period.

Substantively, quasi-secrecy shares similarities with secrecy while also departing from it in two key ways. First, it differs from secrecy in that it involves an intentional (albeit selective) revelation of information. In particular, unattributable communication is often intentional and reflects the will

of a government or its leader because the messengers—anonymous bureaucrats quoted in the media—are actually "planting" pro-government classified information *with* implicit authorization (Abel 1987; Hess 1984; Pozen 2013). More often than not, unattributable communication in the United States is "a political instrument wielded almost daily by senior officials within the Administration to influence a decision, to promote policy, to persuade Congress and to signal foreign governments" and is "not solely nor even largely the province of the dissident" (Halloran 1983). Consequently, while some unattributable messages are critical of the government, many are either neutral or supportive of the government's policies, contrary to the impression created by well-known whistleblowers (Hess 1984; Pozen 2013; Sagar 2013).

Second, unattributable communication lacks direct, explicit cues—like secrecy—but can still send some cues—albeit indirect—about the source or the policy, like attributable communication. Specifically, it can send indirect cues by revealing the source's affiliation with the current (or former) regime in the government (Duncan et al. 2019; Gladney, Shapiro, and Ray 2013; Hallin, Manoff, and Weddle 1993), by being associated with a media outlet (Abel 1987; Hess 1984; Pozen 2013), or by signaling or drawing attention to certain aspects of a given policy (Culbertson 1975; Culbertson and Somerick 1976; Hess 1984; Pozen 2013).

This paper also extends—yet differs from—additional related strands of research. Scholars have discussed national security "leaks" (unauthorized disclosure of classified information about foreign policy) of *harmful* information by whistleblowers (Gill and Spirling 2015; Carson and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Yarhi-Milo 2013). Less has been studied about the strategic revelations of foreign policy secrets by democratic governments, except for Castle and Pelc (2019) and Kydd and Saunders (2023). This study differs from the two by focusing on the effect of unattributable communication on public attitudes toward the use of force, instead of public attitudes toward trade negotiations (Castle and Pelc 2019) or the motivation of individual bureaucrats engaging in unattributable communication (Kydd and Saunders 2023).

Similarly, existing scholarship on public support for drone warfare has largely overlooked the role of unattributable communication. Noting that drone strikes have been relatively popular among the US public, existing literature has attributed the popularity to the following: their success in killing prominent terrorists while resulting in no American military casualties (Walsh 2015; Walsh and Schulzke 2018); that they counter security—not economic—threats and invoke the public's anger against the terrorists (Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019); and the public's failure to think of their illegal and inhumane aspects without the dissenting voices of third parties (Kreps 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016).

A few works on drone strikes' popularity imply that communication may be the culprit behind the popularity of drone strikes—arguing that the framing and information provided to the public about drone strikes is at fault (Kreps 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016; Lushenko, Raman, and Kreps 2022)—but do not focus on the role of unattributable communication. Banka and Quinn (2018) are an exception in that they credit quasi-secrecy with the lack of a major backlash against drone strikes. However, this paper departs from their work in two ways. First, I focus on different aspects of quasi-secrecy, focusing on unattributable communication and exploring its effect on public attitudes relative to attributable, public communication—not how the US government transitioned from secrecy to quasi-secrecy about drone strikes, which they focus on. The comparison of unattributable and attributable, public communication allows me to extend and incorporate existing scholarship on secrecy, and public opinion and foreign policy, which discuss attributable, public communication. Second, I test for a causal effect of unattributable communication on attitudes toward drone strikes instead of offering a descriptive narrative.

Theory

Existing scholarship diverges about the possible effect of unattributable communication—relative to attributable communication—on public attitudes toward foreign policy. Some works hint at possible direct effects of unattributable communication, whereas others suggest its conditional effects. I elaborate on both predictions below.

Direct Effects of Unattributable Communication

Existing literature suggests there are two ways in which unattributable communication can directly affect the audience's stance on foreign policy. First, some imply that unattributable communication may be less credible—hence less effective at rallying the public around foreign policy—than attributable communication because the former lacks direct partisan cues about the source. Existing work has documented the powerful effect of direct partisan cues from elites, finding that the public is often swayed by the cues from co-partisan elites, not the situation on the ground or its specific benefits and costs (Berinsky 2007, 2009; Berinsky and Druckman 2007; Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Zaller 1992). This literature implies that unattributable communication may be less persuasive and less effective at invoking public support for a policy since it lacks explicit cues about the speaker, such as her partisanship, rendering it useless for individuals in choosing their policy positions (Druckman and Lupia 2016; Lupia 2016; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Not knowing the source's identity and partisan status, the audience may simply dismiss her message. In fact, some communication scholarship indicates that anonymous sources harm the perceived credibility of news reports citing them and make the readers less likely to agree with the policy positions of the sources (Pjesivac and Rui 2014; Sternadori and Thorson 2009; Sundar 1998).

Alternatively, unattributable communication may be more effective than attributable communication in convincing the public to support the government's foreign policy. This may be due to individuals' surprising associations of unattributable communication with strong credibility and persuasiveness. Some scholars find that individuals can rate an unnamed source—from the government in particular—as more credible than the US Treasury Department (Adams 1964) or a named source (Fedler and Counts 1981). Moreover, individuals are more likely to agree with an unnamed source than a named source in their policy positions in some cases (Fedler and Counts 1981).

Individuals may react positively to the anonymity of government sources for three reasons: (1) perceived importance stemming from personal transparency costs; (2) perceived importance due to the potential political and social contribution; and (3) journalistic efforts to justify anonymous attribution.

First, individuals may perceive an anonymous source (hence the policy information provided by the source) to be

important and authentic—hence credible and persuasive—because they recognize the source's personal "transparency costs" from identifying himself. They may recognize that the source faces political, social, or professional pressure and may experience political, social, or professional retribution when identified (Pozen 2013; Rains and Scott 2007) and that anonymous attribution "encourages sources to talk more freely and candidly" (Wulfemeyer 1985, 81). For example, Rains (2007) notes that receivers of an unattributable message may infer that the source had a good reason to "[forgo] the cultural norm of identifying him or herself and use it in interpreting the message" (200). Specifically, he notes that an unnamed source's efforts to make himself anonymous to avoid retaliation or retribution "may be interpreted as evidence that the information [he is conveying] is important" and that his message "deserves to be heard at all costs" (200). Consequently, individuals may view anonymous messages as persuasive because they convey to the public a sense of urgency, importance, and authenticity.

Second, individuals may react positively to unattributable communication because it conveys a sense of importance—arising from the (long-term) benefits reaped by their society or country's democratic governance. The anonymity may emphasize the importance of the message by signaling to and reminding of the public that anonymous sources can be sources with an objective, apolitical third-party assessment of a policy or potential whistleblowers (Pozen 2013)—who function as "fire alarms" to keep democratic governments in check (Baum and Potter 2015; McCubbins and Schwartz 1984) in the likes of Deep Throat during the Watergate scandal (Carlson 2010). It is possible for individuals to embrace unattributable communication because they see it as an important or legitimate aspect of journalism (Blankenburg 1992; Carlson 2010) and a long-standing tradition in democratic countries (Duffy 2014).

Third, individuals may view unattributable communication as more credible and persuasive than attributable communication due to the journalistic efforts to highlight the anonymous source's expertise and "insider" status. Most anonymous sourcing is subject to the newsrooms' strict policies on the use of unnamed sources (Carlson 2011), which specify that journalists must give explicit and clear reasons (Gladney, Shapiro, and Ray 2013, 45). Consequently, journalists often justify them by emphasizing their qualifications in the text of the news report. As a result, anonymous sources—those cited in foreign policy news in particular—are usually described as senior government officials with "high status" (Culbertson 1975; Gladney, Shapiro, and Ray 2013; Wulfemeyer 1985) and not low-ranking officials (such as "aides" or "assistants") (Gladney, Shapiro, and Ray 2013, 45). The goal here is to signal that the anonymous source is an "insider" source privy to foreign policy secrets and capable of providing accurate information. In contrast, a journalist is under less pressure to legitimize a named source or to elaborate on the source's qualifications. This asymmetric pressure on journalists by source type may—ironically—render anonymous sources more convincing and persuasive to the public.

Thus, I test the following hypotheses about the direct effect of unattributable communication on support for drone strikes:[4]

H_{-}^{Direct}: Unattributable communication is less effective than attributable communication in rallying the public around the government's foreign policy, all else equal.

H_{+}^{Direct}: Unattributable communication is more effective than attributable communication in rallying the public around the government's foreign policy, all else equal.

Conditional Effects of Unattributable Communication

Existing literature also suggests possible conditional effects of unattributable communication on public attitudes toward foreign policy in several ways. In particular, it is possible that unattributable communication is more effective than attributable communication only under certain conditions, such as (1) when unattributable communication signals co-partisanship; and (2) when unattributable communication signals about policy success/failure or policy costs.

First, it implies that the ability of unattributable communication to draw public support for foreign policy, relative to its attributable counterpart, may be conditional on its indirect cues about the source. While an unnamed source's identity is hidden, other information about it, such as the source's relationship with the media outlet and the current leader, is often available to the public. Specifically, individuals can associate unattributable communication with the partisanship of a media outlet because it is always conveyed by an outlet. Unattributable communication can also be linked to the leader and the party the leader belongs to because it usually reveals the relationship between the unnamed source and the current administration (Hallin, Manoff, and Weddle 1993).

The inferred partisanship of the anonymous source may empower the appeal of his message to the public. In particular, shared partisanship between an unnamed source and the leader in power or the media outlet it is quoting can drive the public's foreign policy attitudes according to existing scholarship (Baum and Groeling 2010; Baum and Potter 2015, 2019; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Zaller 1992). Individuals often distrust and discount messages about foreign policy from out-partisan elites and media but trust and value those from co-partisan elites and media—to the extent of ignoring facts and events on the ground (Berinsky 2007, 2009). In other words, partisan favoritism can boost the persuasiveness of unattributable communication by a source inferred to be co-partisan but suppress the equivalent by a source inferred to be out-partisan.

Consequently, an unnamed source may be able to persuade individuals who are responsive to such indirect cues about the partisanship of the source to support the government's policy. Specifically, a message by an unnamed bureaucrat who is affiliated with a Democrat (or Republican) administration is likely to be perceived positively by individuals who identify as Democrats (or Republicans) but not by those who identify as Republicans (or Democrats). Similarly, an unnamed bureaucrat whose message is conveyed by a Democrat/liberal (or Republican/conservative) media outlet is likely to appeal to those who see themselves as Democrats (or Republicans) but not to those as Republicans (or Democrats). These conjectures can be summarized as follows:

$H_{Co-Partisan\ Source_{+}}^{\prime Conditional}$: Unattributable communication results in higher support for the government's foreign policy than

[4] In some cases, unattributable communication has been documented as equally effective as attributable communication at persuading the public to support government policy (Duncan et al. 2019; Fedler and Counts 1981; Matthews 2012; Rains 2007; Riffe 1980).

attributable communication if the anonymous source is implied to be co-partisan.[5]

At the same time, whether unattributable communication persuades an audience may be conditional on the audience's inferences about its content. Existing literature notes that public attitudes toward the use of force can be based on the public's inferences and projections about it (e.g., Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Gartner 2008; Gartner and Segura 2021; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997; Gelpi 2010; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005/2006, 2009; Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Jacobson 2010; Jentleson 1992; Mueller 1973). Independent of elite cues, individuals can form their own opinions based on the situational information about military action and on their beliefs about its benefits and costs.

Specifically, public attitudes toward the use of force can be based on the public's evaluations of two dimensions—military success and casualties. First, scholars find that the public's perceptions of success "matter the most" in their support for military action and that these evaluations trump other considerations about the use of force (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009, 2). The public's beliefs in a war's success can sustain their support for war and make them even casualty-tolerant—willing to accept their own military casualties in exchange for sufficient benefits (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005/2006, 2009).

Second, the public may be sensitive to military action's human costs, including foreign civilian casualties. Some scholars find the US public to be casualty-averse (Gartner 2008; Gartner and Segura 2021; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997), inexorably and reflexively opposing a war in response to increasing war casualties among US troops (Jacobson 2010; Mueller 1973). In addition, deaths among the local population as a consequence of a sending country's military action abroad can be seen as a major human cost by the sending country's public, suppressing their support for the use of force (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009). In particular, foreign civilian casualties are an important determinant of the public's stance toward drone strikes; drone strikes do not result in any military casualties among their own troops but can cause high foreign civilian casualties (Walsh 2015; Walsh and Schulzke 2018).

In sum, the casualty aversion scholarship implies individuals' contextual evaluations of a given foreign policy's success and cost—foreign civilian casualties in the case of drone strikes—may be key determinants of their support for military action. This, in turn, implies that the ability of unattributable communication to rally the public around the use of force may be contingent on what it signals about the success and cost of military action. There are two ways in which unattributable communication can do so. First, unattributable communication can underscore the value of its content about policy success and cost by underscoring unnamed sources' well-informedness. Unnamed sources are usually accompanied by adjectives or adjective phrases that emphasize their well-informedness and first-hand knowledge about the situation (Culbertson 1975; Culbertson and Somerick 1976), rendering informative and persuasive their unattributable messages about policy specifics (Culbertson 1975), such as the success and cost of drone strikes.

Second, the perceived motive of an unnamed source can result in different "weights" individuals assign to different aspects of the content of her message (Pozen 2013). Individuals may perceive unattributable communication as a product of an anonymous bureaucrat engaging in a "policy leak" intended to support the policy (Hess 1984, 70–1) out of her own volition; because she endorses it even when protected by anonymity. In this case, individuals exposed to an unattributable message about drone strikes would be more likely to support them because it underscores their benefits—their success in countering terrorism—and downplays their costs.[6] Thus, I test the following hypotheses about the informational moderators of unattributable communication's rallying effect:

$H'^{Conditional}_{ConditionalInferSuccess_+}$: Unattributable communication results in higher support for the government's foreign policy than attributable communication if the audience infers policy success from unattributable communication.

$H'^{Conditional}_{NotInferHighCost_+}$: Unattributable communication results in higher support for the government's foreign policy than attributable communication if the audience does not infer high policy costs from unattributable communication.

Research Design and Data

I test the aforementioned hypotheses with a survey experiment on the rallying effect of unattributable communication on public support for drone strikes. The survey experiment is fielded on two nationally representative samples of Americans—each of which consists of 1,000 respondents recruited through YouGov's Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) in 2016 or 2020.

This recruitment strategy strengthens the external validity of my findings for two reasons. First, the CCES pool consists of national stratified samples managed by YouGov and is featured in prominent experimental studies on public opinion and foreign policy (Gartner and Segura 2021; Guisinger and Saunders 2017). Second, my experiment is fielded on samples from two different years (2016 and 2020) pooled into one, spanning different administrations and political environments and enhancing the generalizability of the results.[7] Like Guisinger and Saunders (2017), the two CCES samples are pooled to increase statistical power and to account for partisan polarization across two administrations; a consistent effect of unattributable communication during the Obama and Trump administrations would show the strength of the effect despite partisan polarization.[8] To account for any between-sample differences, I use the population weights provided by YouGov in the analysis to make both samples "similar" to the general population, hence to each other, and check for heterogeneous treatment effects by year.[9]

The survey experiment includes a "vignette" with 2 × 2 treatments embedded, a moderator item, and an outcome item. Each vignette, in the form of a short news article, includes 2 × 2 factorial treatments on source attributability—whether a respondent is informed about the given drone

[5]Of course, it is also possible for the positive effect of unattributable attribution to be conditioned by individuals' inference that it is out-partisan. This implies conditional effects in the opposite direction; unattributable communication may signal and emphasize out-partisanship, which, in turn, can persuade them about the policy. I examine this possibility in Online Appendix F.5.

[6]Of course, it is also possible for individuals to perceive unattributable communication as "whistleblowing" aimed to highlight the costs of a policy. Such perception can result in conditional effects in the opposite direction; unattributable communication can signal and emphasize policy failure and/or high policy costs, making them unlikely to support the policy. This is assessed in Online Appendix F.3.

[7]See Online Appendix B for the full summary statistics and the balance table.

[8]The cost of pooling is that it shifts our attention away from the variation in the salience and assumptions about drone strikes across administrations.

[9]My analysis takes account of the difference across administrations by including the year of the sample as a moderator for the unattributable effect. See Model 4 in Online Appendix Tables 2 and 11 and the discussion on page 24.

Table 1. Vignette.

[The New York Times/The Wall Street Journal][2]
US Debates Drone Strikes in Country A
WASHINGTON—The US government is considering launching drone attacks on Country A in the Middle East, according to [a senior CIA official who spoke on the condition of anonymity/David S. Cohen, Deputy Director of the CIA][1]
Country A is believed to be harboring anti-American terrorist groups who are actively plotting imminent attacks against the United States and its citizens
"The drone operations are likely to succeed in killing the militants," said [the official/Mr Cohen].[1] "But the number of civilian casualties is expected to be high," he added

strikes by anonymous or named sources—and the media outlet. The vignette also includes information on the key dimensions of drone strikes' popularity discussed in the literature—their perceived success (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Myrick 2020, 2023) and collateral damage (Kreps 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016).[10]

Specifically, at the start of the survey, each respondent is shown the vignette and asked to "read the following news article about a situation in the United States." The hypothetical news article features US drone strikes against terrorists in a hypothetical country—"Country A"—in the Middle East. The treatment of interest varies the attributability of the source quoted in the news report—whether the information is provided by "a senior CIA official who spoke on the condition of anonymity" or "David S. Cohen, Deputy Director of the CIA." The second treatment varies the media outlet in which the article was published, randomizing between the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.[11] Table 1 shows a sample vignette with the key treatments marked in brackets.

After the vignette, respondents are first asked a moderator question about whether they believe it to be true that the drone attacks in Country A will succeed in killing the militants and that there will be many civilian casualties due to the drone strikes, respectively, similar to existing work with a moderator/mediator design (Tomz and Weeks 2013). Then they are asked the following outcome question on their support for the drone strikes discussed in the vignette: Do you favor or oppose the US launching drone strikes to attack the terrorist groups in Country A? Respondents are given the response options of "I strongly favor," "I favor," "I oppose," and "I strongly oppose" to choose from, following existing work (Tomz and Weeks 2013, 2020).[12] This set-up, the order and wording of the moderator/mediator and outcome questions in particular, is standard in mediation/moderation experiments (Imai et al. 2011; Tingley et al. 2014; Tomz and Weeks 2013, 2020).[13]

Note that I control for the outcome of covert operations, following Myrick (2020). The paper focuses on the difference between communication modes—attributable and unattributable communication—in their effects on public attitudes, not the difference in information content. Thus, all respondents are assigned to receive the same information about the operation but through different modes.

I also control for any between-sample differences by wave by keeping the same operationalization for both waves of the study, following Myrick (2020). The same individual with a job title that signals expertise and knowledge in intelligence but with a generic-sounding name ("David S. Cohen, Deputy Director of the CIA") is listed as the attributable source for both the 2016 and 2020 studies.[14]

Results

This section discusses the results of the analysis on the causal effect of unattributable communication on individuals' support for drone strikes. I first present the main results. I then discuss the robustness checks for the main results.

Main Results

I estimate unattributable communication's rallying effect on public attitudes toward military action via linear regression models. The main model is defined as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} y_i = \alpha &+ \beta_u^{\text{Direct}}\text{Unattributable}_i + \Sigma\beta_b^{\text{Direct}}\text{Policy Evaluation}_{bi} \\ &+ \Sigma_c^{\text{Direct}}\text{Co} - \text{Partisan Source}_{ci} \\ &+ \Sigma y_b \text{Unattributable}_i * \text{Policy Evaluation}_{bi} \\ &+ \Sigma y_c \text{Unattributable}_i * \text{Co} - \text{Partisan Source}_{ci} \\ &+ \Sigma K_d \text{Control}_{di} + \varepsilon_i. \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

The binary dependent variable, y_i, represents whether individual i supports or opposes drone strikes. Specifically, I collapse the four-category outcome question into the dichotomous variable, y_i, on respondent i's (strong) support for (when 1) or (strong) opposition to (when 0) the drone strikes discussed in the vignette respondent i is assigned to read. In other words, y_i is coded as 1 if respondent i chooses the options "I strongly favor" or "I favor" to the outcome question and 0 if he picks the options "I oppose" or "I strongly oppose," similar to other experimental studies on public attitudes toward the use of force (e.g., Tomz and Weeks 2013, 2020).[15]

[10] See Online Appendix Section 5.2 and Online Appendix E for the discussion of Model 11, which includes threat perceptions as additional variables.

[11] For the 2016 study, the third treatment with a dichotomous assignment of whether the source is criminally charged by the US Department of Justice or not was included. The 2020 study included a different third treatment—a dichotomous assignment about whether the respondents evaluate covert action retrospectively or prospectively. The main analyses pool both prospective and retrospective conditions to maintain power. However, my robustness checks include analyses with the timing of quasi-secrecy (prospective or retrospective) as a moderator of the unattributable effect (Model 5 in Online Appendix Tables 2 and 6 and subgroup analyses with only respondents assigned to the prospective condition in Online Appendix F.6's Table 13. Both results do not significantly depart from the main results. See Online Appendix C for the full vignettes for both studies.

[12] I opt for a 4-point scale over a 5- or 7-point scale and a feeling thermometer due to practical constraints.

[13] See Online Appendix C for the full text of the vignettes and moderator and outcome questions.

[14] David S. Cohen served as the Deputy Director of the CIA from 2015 to 2017 but not in 2020. However, it is unlikely that respondents' level of recognition by sample year affects the effect of unattributable communication; Model 4 in Tables 2 and 6 in Online Appendix E checks for heterogeneous treatment effects by sample year but does not find evidence supporting their presence.

[15] My operationalization of persuasiveness differs from a more conventional measure of persuasiveness, such as a measure of positive changes in policy beliefs

Unattributable$_i$ refers to whether individual i is randomly assigned to receive an unattributable (when equaling to 1) or attributable (when 0) message about drone strikes. Policy Evaluation$_{bi}$ reflects individual i's inferences about the drone strikes' situational information b—their success or high costs[16] (collateral damage)—after individual i receives the message. Note that the variable is reverse-coded for costs but not success, consistent with my hypotheses; in other words, Policy Evaluation$_{1i}$ refers to individual i's belief (if 1) or unbelief (if 0) in the success of the vignette's strikes, and Policy Evaluation$_{2i}$ refers to individual i's *unbelief (if 1)* or belief (if 0) in their high costs. Co-Partisan Source$_{ci}$ is whether the message assigned to individual i comes from co-partisan source c (when 1) or not (when 0). A co-partisan source refers to a bureaucrat associated with a co-partisan media outlet (the *New York Times* for individual i who identifies as a strong, weak, or leaning Democrat and the *Wall Street Journal* for individual i who identifies as a strong, weak, or leaning Republican) or a bureaucrat associated with a co-partisan government (the Obama administration for a Democrat i and the Trump administration for a Republican i). This operationalization of co-partisanship largely follows Guisinger and Saunders (2017). Control$_{ri}$ represents the control and demographic variables—including those on individual i' level of education and being male, white, conservative, and Republican.

The coefficient β_u^{Direct} allows us to test the hypothesis about the direct effect of unattributable communication on public support for drone strikes (or lack thereof)—hypothesized in H_-^{Direct} and H_+^{Direct}. The sum of coefficients $\beta_u^{Direct} + \gamma_b$ enables us to check for its conditionally positive effects by policy evaluation—an assessment of the drone strikes' success and costs—hypothesized in $H^{Conditional}_{Inter\,Suces s_+}$ and $H^{Conditional}_{Not\,Infer\,High\,Cost_+}$. Estimates for the sum of coefficients $\beta_u^{\text{Direct}} + \gamma_c$ will test the hypothesized conditionally positive effects of unattributable communication by co-partisanship of individuals and the unnamed source elaborated in the hypothesis $H^{Conditional}_{Co-Partisan\,Source_+}$.

Table 2 displays the results of the main model (Model 1) and its various specifications (Models 2–6). I also include a baseline model with no interaction terms (Model 7).[17]

Several observations can be made about the results. First, unattributable communication can rally individuals around drone strikes. Compared to attributable communication, unattributable communication results in a higher proportion of supporters—by about 5 percentage points, according to Model 7. In other words, the respondents who are informed by "a senior CIA official" are more likely to endorse drone strikes, compared to the respondents who learned about it from "David S. Cohen, Deputy Director of the CIA." This is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Online Appendix Table 7 also shows the average marginal effect of unattributable communication to be about 4.3–5.2 percentage points and positive at the 0.05 level according to Models 1–6 (Online Appendix F.1).[18]

Second, the rallying effect of unattributable communication stems from its positive conditional effect via the respondents' evaluation of the drone strikes discussed in the vignette—their inferences about the policy's success in particular. The results show that unattributable communication cannot persuade individuals to support drone strikes unless they infer from unattributable communication the strikes' success. Relative to individuals who are informed by a named bureaucrat, those to whom unattributable communication underscores success are more likely to approve of the strikes by approximately 14.9 percentage (Model 1), 14.3 percentage (Model 2), 15.3 percentage (Model 3), 16.3 percentage (Model 4), 11 percentage (Model 5), or 18.4 percentage (Model 6) points on average. This conditional effect is captured by the coefficient estimates of the interaction term *unattributable* × *infer success* in Models 1–6, which are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Note also that the coefficient estimate for unattributable communication's direct effect is significant only in the baseline model without any interaction terms (Model 7) and fails to be significant in all models with interaction terms (Models 1–6). This also supports the hypothesis about individuals' inferences about success being the moderator for the positive effect of unattributable communication.

However, not all inferences matter; it is only the evaluation of the vignette's drone strikes' success, but not their high cost, that moderates unattributable communication's effect. None of the coefficient estimates for the interaction term *unattributable* × *not infer high cost* in Models 1–6 is significant at the 0.05 level. This suggests that unattributable communication's rallying effect cannot be attributed to its interaction with individuals' inferences about high foreign policy cost—deaths of foreign civilians. In other words, unattributable communication does not increase public support for covert action by suppressing the salience of its cost.

Third, unattributable communication's rallying effect is also *not* dependent on co-partisanship of the source. My results show that unattributable messages from co-partisan anonymous sources—who convey their co-partisanship via their association with the current government or a media outlet—are not more effective at rallying the public than attributable messages in general. All coefficient estimates for the interaction term *unattributable* × *co-partisan govt* in Models 1–6 fail to be significant at the 0.05 level, suggesting that unattributable communication's rallying effect is not moderated by co-partisanship of the unnamed source signaled by her relationship with the current administration. In fact, some coefficient estimates of the interaction term *unattributable* × *co-partisan media*—in Models 1 and 3—are actually negative and significant at the 0.05 level. This implies that unattributable communication's rallying effect also does not stem from the shared partisan status of the anonymous source and individuals signaled by the media outlet quoting the source.

captured by pre- and post-treatment outcome variables. This operationalization is chosen for three reasons. First, this paper theorizes about the rallying effect of unattributable communication—its ability to boost—not suppress—individuals' support for military action, relative to attributable communication. Second, this paper also focuses on the issue of drone strikes—a relatively low-salience issue and a policy option that has already been chosen and regularly implemented by the US government. Relatedly, I do not include a pre-treatment measure for individuals' support for drone strikes because I do not want to risk making the issue too salient. Nevertheless, I do encourage future research to include pre- treatment measures of issue salience without making some "too salient"—by asking questions about several different issues and not just drones for instance (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023).

[16]See Online Appendix D for more information on the deception during the two experiments.

[17]See Table 6 in Online Appendix E for the full results.

[18]In addition, all coefficient estimates for unattributable communication are positive at the 0.1 level according to Online Appendix Table 11's Models 10–14—models with no interaction terms—in Online Appendix F.5.

Table 2. Linear regressions of support for the use of force.

	Dependent variable: Support for the use of force						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Unattributable	0.037	0.036	0.040	0.039	0.009	0.039	0.049**
	(0.041)	(0.037)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.053)	(0.044)	(0.020)
Unattributable × infer success	0.112***	0.107***	0.113***	0.124***	0.119***	0.145***	—
	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.042)	
Unattributable × not infer high cost	0.017	0.023	0.017	0.022	0.024	0.050	—
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.039)	
Unattributable × infer threat imminence	—	—	—	—	—	−0.051	—
						(0.041)	
Unattributable × infer threat existence	—	—	—	—	—	−0.038	—
						(0.041)	
Unattributable × co-partisan media (including leaners)	−0.081**	—	−0.079**	−0.066*	−0.076*	−0.067∗	—
	(0.039)		(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)	
Unattributable × co-partisan govt (including leaners)	−0.008	—	−0.009	−0.026	−0.014	−0.007	—
	(0.040)		(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.039)	
Unattributable × co-partisan media (excluding leaners)	—	−0.061	—	—	—	—	—
		(0.042)					
Unattributable × co-partisan govt (excluding leaners)	—	−0.057	—	—	—	—	—
		(0.043)					
Unattributable × NYT	—	—	0.008	—	—	—	—
			(0.039)				
Unattributable × 2020 sample	—	—	—	0.033	—	—	—
				(0.039)			
Unattributable × prospective	—	—	—	—	0.049	—	—
					(0.045)		
Infer success	0.069**	0.072**	0.069**	0.094***	0.075***	0.001	0.124***
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.020)
Not infer high cost	0.230***	0.225***	0.230***	0.218***	0.225***	0.188***	0.236***
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.020)
Infer threat imminence	—	—	—	—	—	0.139***	—
						(0.029)	
Infer threat existence	—	—	—	—	—	0.120∗∗∗	—
						(0.030)	
Co-partisan media (including leaners)	0.068**	—	0.068**	0.067**	0.065**	0.055**	0.028
	(0.028)		(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.020)
Co-partisan govt (including leaners)	0.036	—	0.037	0.031	0.031	0.024	0.034*
	(0.028)		(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.020)
Co-partisan media (excluding leaners)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Co-partisan govt (excluding leaners)	—	0.051*	—	—	—	—	—
		(0.030)					
		0.091***					
		(0.030)					
NYT	—	—	0.011	—	—	—	—
			(0.027)				
2020 sample	—	—	—	0.149∗∗∗	—	—	—
				(0.027)			
Prospective	—	—	—	—	0.063∗∗	—	—
					(0.031)		
Constant	0.167***	0.177***	0.159***	0.102**	0.212***	0.193***	0.176***
	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.048)	(0.047)	(0.050)	(0.045)	(0.042)
Demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,854	1,854	1,854	1,854	1,854	1,854	1,854
R^2	0.288	0.291	0.289	0.315	0.294	0.313	0.283
Adjusted R^2	0.283	0.286	0.282	0.309	0.288	0.306	0.279
Residual std. error	0.408 (df = 1,838)	0.407 (df = 1,838)	0.408 (df = 1,836)	0.401 (df = 1,836)	0.407 (df = 1,836)	0.401 (df = 1,834)	0.409 (df = 1,842)
F statistic	49.651*** (df = 15; 1,838)	50.366*** (df = 15; 1,838)	43.812*** (df = 17; 1,836)	49.748*** (df = 17; 1,836)	45.045*** (df = 17; 1,836)	44.026*** (df = 19; 1,834)	66.202*** (df = 11; 1,842)

Note. *$P < .1$; **$P < .05$; ***$P < .01$.

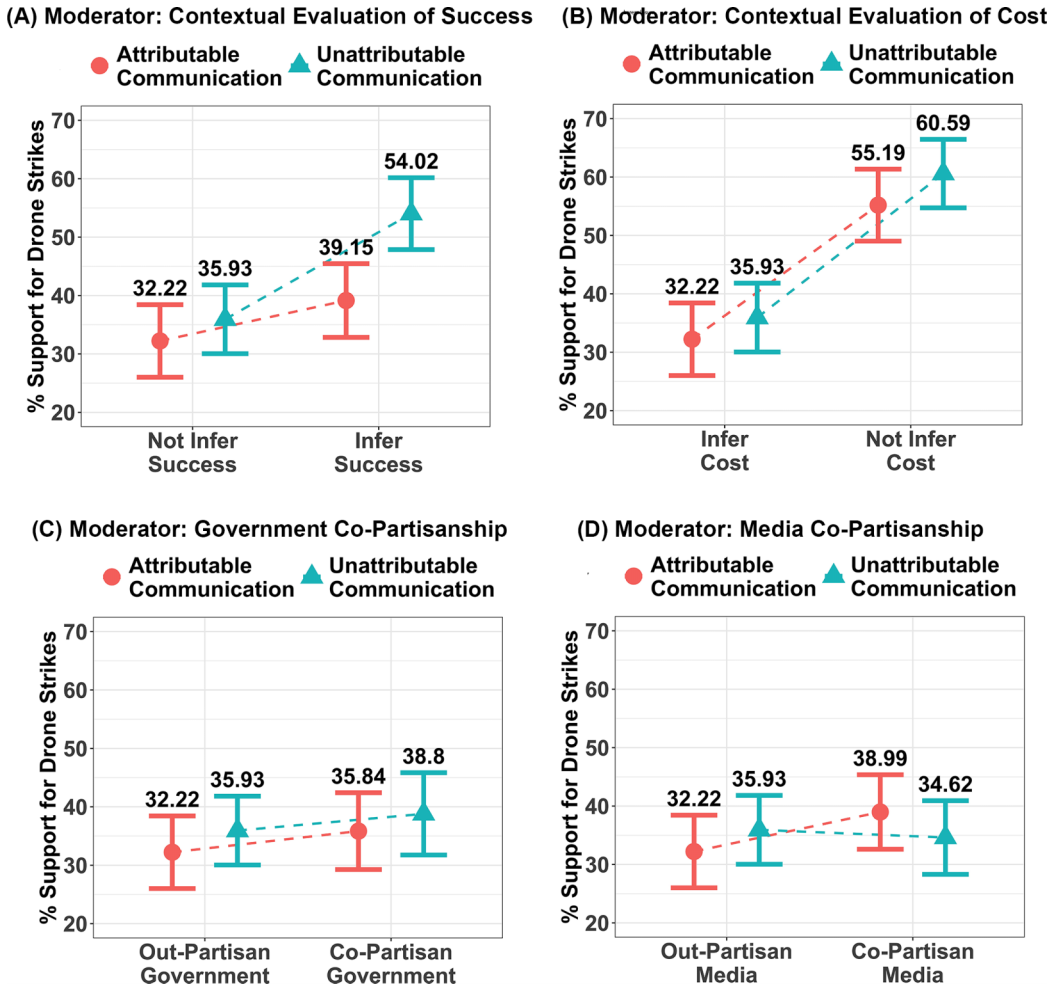

Figure 2. Predicted support for military action by moderator and by communication type. *Note:* The figure displays predicted levels of individuals' support for drone strikes and their 95 percent confidence levels by communication type (attributable or unattributable) and by moderator. The moderator is individuals' inferences about their success (panel A); individuals' inferences about their cost (panel B); co-partisanship of the unnamed *source*, the administration, and individuals (panel C); and co-partisanship of the unnamed *source*, the media outlet quoting the *source*, and individuals (panel D). The predictions are generated by Model 1 in Table 2. All independent variables except the moderator and the variable for communication type are held at their median.

Robustness Checks

I check the robustness of the results on unattributable communication's direct and indirect effects on foreign policy support in five ways. First, I examine the predicted levels of support for drone strikes by communication type and by moderator, estimated by the main model—Model 1—in Table 2. Figure 2 displays these estimates and their 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs). For each plot, all independent variables except the moderator and the variable for unattributable communication are held at their median.

Panel A in figure 2 shows that the rallying effect of unattributable is fueled—and moderated—by individuals' inference about foreign policy success. Individuals who receive unattributable communication but do not interpret it as a signal of success do not differ in their likelihood of supporting covert action from those exposed to attributable communication; about 35.93 percent of the former support drone strikes (95 percent CI: 30.04–41.82 percent), whereas 32.22 percent of the latter approve of them (95 percent CI: 26–38.44 percent).[19] In contrast, unattributable communication results in a significant boost of war support among individuals who believe in success; approximately 54.02 percent of the individuals who receive unattributable communication and infer success support military action (95 percent CI: 47.86–60.17 percent), whereas about 39.15 percent of those who receive its attributable counterpart and infer success endorse the attacks (95 percent CI: 32.84–45.46 percent). This result again indicates that the effect of unattributable communication on support for drone strikes is moderated by individuals' contextual evaluation of their success, supporting the hypothesis $H^{InferSuccess_+}_{Conditional}$.

I fail to find evidence that the rallying effect of unattributable stems from individuals' inferences about foreign policy costs (panel B). While a lack of inference about costs boosts individuals' war support on average, I do not find evidence that the effect differs by communication type. Compared to individuals who infer high costs from either

[19] These predictions serve as a baseline for all four moderators.

an attributable or unattributable message, individuals who do not infer high costs from the message are more likely to support the use of force on average. However, the predicted level of support is not statistically different at the 0.05 level among the individuals who do not infer high costs from the message—55.19 percent for those who receive the attributable (95 percent CI: 49.02–61.35 percent) and 60.59 percent for those who get the unattributable (95 percent CI: 54.73–66.45 percent).

In panels C and D, I also fail to find evidence that the rallying effect of unattributable communication is fueled by the shared partisanship between the source and the audience. Unattributable communication's effect does not statistically differ by the source's association with a co-partisan government or by the source's association with a co-partisan media outlet at the 0.05 level. Approximately 35.84 percent of the respondents exposed to an attributable message from a source from a co-partisan administration endorse military action (95 percent CI: 29.27–42.41 percent), whereas 38.8 percent of their counterparts with an unattributable message support it (95 percent CI: 31.75–45.84 percent). Similarly, 38.99 percent of the respondents who receive an attributable message from a source associated with an out-partisan media outlet support the use of force (95 percent CI: 32.61–45.37 percent), whereas 34.62 percent of their equivalent with an unattributable message approve it (95 percent CI: 28.32–40.93 percent).

Second, I check for alternative explanations for unattributable communication's rallying effect. In particular, Models 3–6 in Table 2 examine alternative conditional effects of unattributable communication on support for drone strikes. Model 3 checks whether the unattributable effect is moderated by media outlet—whether respondents are assigned to a New York Times or Wall Street Journal article—but its failure to find it as a significant moderator suggests that this is unlikely. Model 4 searches for unattributable communication's conditional effect by administration and includes an interaction term for unattributable communication and the variable for whether individuals belong to the sample from 2016 (during the Obama administration) or 2020 (during the Trump administration). It fails to find evidence that the positive effect of unattributable communication on support for drone strikes varies by administration. Model 5 also checks whether the rallying effect of unattributable communication varies by timing of quasi-secrecy—whether individuals are evaluating drone strikes that have yet to occur ("prospective" quasi-secrecy) or have recently occurred ("retrospective" quasi-secrecy)—but its results imply this to be unlikely.[20] Model 6 includes the variables for additional contextual inferences about the policy—those about the existence and imminence of the threats that the said drone strikes are countering—and interactions between unattributable communication and these evaluations. This specification reflects the prominence of perceived threats as a driver of public support for drone strikes (Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019). While it finds that threat perceptions result in stronger support for drone strikes on average, consistent with Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos (2019), it does not find evidence that the effect of unattributable communication on support is dependent on threat perceptions. None of the interaction terms for the alternative conditional effects is significant at the 0.05 level.

Third, I compare the main model to its nested model, testing whether any of the conditional effects captured in the main model are meaningful. Online Appendix F.2 includes the result of an *F*-test that compares the main model with interaction terms (Model 1 in Table 2) and its nested model without interaction terms (Model 7 in Table 2). It shows that the reduction in the residual sum of squares in Model 1 relative to its nested model (Model 7) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level and that at least one of the interaction terms in Model 1 is different from 0. Again, this is consistent with the main results on the moderated effect of unattributable communication.

Fourth, I check whether the unattributable effect on individuals' support for the use of force is moderated by their inference about success in two ways. I first run Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) linear regression models of their evaluations of policy success on independent variables, including whether they received an unattributable message. The estimated results, further discussed in Online Appendix F.3, suggest that unattributable communication can be more effective at promoting the success of the policy to individuals, relative to attributable communication.[21] I also estimate a causal mediation model that models the respondents' evaluations of policy success as both a moderator and a mediator. In other words, this model allows the possibility that the effect of unattributable communication is both moderated (or conditioned) by and mediated by individuals' evaluation of policy success. Specifically, I estimate a non-parametric causal mediation model, following Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo (2023), but with interactions between the treatment (unattributable communication) and the mediator (evaluation of success) to capture the moderating/conditional effect (Tingley et al. 2014, 8–9). Online Appendix F.4 discusses unattributable communication's total effect, average direct effect (ADE), and average causal mediation effect (ACME) in detail, showing that the total effect (significant at the 0.05 level) can be disaggregated into the ADE (significant at the 0.05 level) and the ACME (significant at the 0.1 level) and is dominated by the ADE.

Fifth, I run additional linear regression models (Online Appendix F.5's Models 8–14 in Table 11) and logistic regression models (Online Appendix F.6's Table 12) of support for drone strikes. These results resemble those of the main models. In particular, I fail to find evidence of out-partisanship moderating the effect of unattributable communication on policy support.

Discussion

This paper problematizes the previously understudied topic of quasi-secrecy in conflict processes by investigating the relationship between unattributable communication and public attitudes toward drone strikes. My study finds that unattributable messages by anonymous bureaucrats, relative to attributable messages, can lead individuals to be more supportive of the use of force. I also find that the positive effect of unattributable communication is informational—rather than partisan—and can be attributed to its interaction with the audience's inferences, rather than the political attributes of the source or the audience. In particular, unattributable communication appeals to the individuals who infer foreign policy success from it; unattributable communication's rallying effect is due to its ability to sig-

[20] In Online Appendix F.7, I also analyze only the subset of individuals assigned to the prospective quasi-secrecy condition, dropping those assigned to the retrospective condition. Their results mimic the main results.

[21] The results also fail to support evidence that unattributable communication can signal and emphasize policy failure and/or high policy costs.

nal success to individuals, not its ability to draw attention to foreign policy costs or threats or to emphasize the partisan status of the anonymous source.

My findings make several contributions to existing literature on secrecy, deception, and public attitudes toward the use of force. First, this paper contributes to and extends our existing knowledge about the role of secrecy and deception in IR (Colaresi 2012, 2014; Maxey 2020; Mearsheimer 2011; Reiter 2012; Schuessler 2013; Slantchev 2010), finding support for the public's acceptance of secrecy and the "weak transparency" norm in the foreign policy realm (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Myrick 2020, 2023). It also implies that democratic citizens are generally understanding of the "democratic secrecy dilemma" (Colaresi 2012, 2014) and willing to sacrifice transparency for foreign policy success.[22]

Relatedly, this paper advances the literature on the domestic political dynamics of covert action (Carson 2016; O'Rourke 2020; Smith 2019)—drone strikes in particular. Existing literature suggests that public support for drone strikes can be attributed to instrumental concerns such as their perceived effectiveness, non-existent military casualties, and the prominence of threats they counter (Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019; Kreps 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016; Walsh 2015; Walsh and Schulzke 2018). I contribute to this literature by problematizing the role of quasi-secrecy—noted by some scholars (Banka and Quinn 2018; Carnegie 2021; Carson 2016, 2018; O'Rourke 2018)—and identifying its causal effect on the popularity of drone strikes.

At the same time, my study departs from the existing studies in that it suggests that quasi-secrecy may be more effective at rallying the public around military action than attributable communication. They find that the covertness of foreign policy actions generally suppresses individuals' support for them, relative to transparency (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Myrick 2020, 2023); in contrast, I find quasi-secrecy can result in stronger support for military action than attributable communication—at least in the short run. Moreover, my findings indicate that such effectiveness of quasi-secrecy stems from its ability to underscore and draw attention to foreign policy success.

Additionally, this paper expands our understanding of public support for the use of force. I extend the existing knowledge about the influence of public—and mostly attributable—discourse on public attitudes toward military action (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Gartner 2008; Gartner and Segura 2021; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005/2006, 2009; Guisinger and Saunders 2017)—including communication by political elites (Berinsky 2007, 2009; Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Zaller 1992), experts (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Lupton and Webb 2022), and the media (Baum and Groeling 2010; Baum and Potter 2015, 2019)—by comparing the effects of attributable and unattributable communication. It sheds light on how the two are similar yet different. Unattributable communication does not differ from attributable communication in its ability to sway the public via implicit partisan cues. Yet my results indicate that unattributable communication can outperform attributable communication in persuading the public by reframing the public narrative around success.

My findings carry several policy implications. First, they suggest quasi-secrecy as an optimal communication strategy for democratic governments balancing foreign policy effectiveness and accountability. When available, quasi-secrecy about foreign policy may be a viable alternative to deception, full secrecy (in some cases), or even transparency because it optimizes on both dimensions of accountability and effectiveness. Scholars find democratic citizens to be generally averse to deception (Maxey 2020) and full secrecy (Carnegie, Kertzer, and Yarhi-Milo 2023; Myrick 2020, 2023). In contrast, I find no evidence of a major backlash from quasi-secrecy. Additionally, quasi-secrecy allows democratic governments to selectively reveal information, minimally hurting foreign policy effectiveness (Pozen 2013).

Second, my findings also suggest that quasi-secrecy may be a practical option for a democratic government competing with private actors over informational influence. Emerging technologies, such as imagery satellites, that were "once the domain of state governments" are now available to private actors (Lin-Greenberg and Milonopoulos 2021, 1067). This means that private actors can serve as alternative sources of sensitive information about international issues—previously monopolized by governments—and affect public opinion (Lin-Greenberg and Milonopoulos 2021). Because private actors can now collect and disclose sensitive information, full secrecy may not be viable. Thus, quasi-secrecy may be a practical option for a democratic government competing with non-state actors over the influence on public opinion.

Third, my findings underscore the potential pitfalls of quasi-secrecy as a democratic policy tool. Because quasi-secrecy can draw attention to a policy's success—and rally the public around it—rather than its high costs or partisan nature, a government may be tempted to choose it over transparency to evade criticism from the public. If this is scaled across all foreign policy issues, it would deprive the public of opportunities to monitor and hold the government accountable for unseen policy costs or failures.

This paper suggests several directions for future research. First, future research should investigate whether and how the different motivations of quasi-secrecy may affect policymaking and public reception of foreign policy. This paper focused on the deliberate disclosures of classified information about covert operations. However, it is also true that some unattributable communication is not deliberate; sometimes it occurs accidentally. A unifying framework on the differently motivated disclosures and their consequences is necessary.

Second, future research should also further probe the role of quasi-secrecy in other contexts. For example, it could examine the effect of quasi-secrecy in the face of competing messages intended to support or oppose a policy. Additionally, the dynamics around quasi-secrecy may be different (or similar) regarding other foreign policy issues—other than drone strikes—and under different political contexts, especially those highly polarized by partisanship (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Smith 2019). The institutional contexts underpinning quasi-secrecy also merit further investigation, as such practices do not unfold in an institutional vacuum but are structured and constrained by governmental organization and accountability mechanisms.

Third, it would be worthwhile to examine the political dynamics of quasi-secrecy in other policy domains. This paper focused on the foreign policy realm, due to the prevalence of quasi-secrecy in the domain. However, institutionally protected secrecy and quasi-secrecy also exist in domestic policy domains. Studying the pattern of quasi-secrecy and its consequences on domestic policymaking may prove useful.

Finally, future research should examine whether these effects on foreign policy attitudes generalize beyond the United States. This paper focuses on quasi-secrecy in the context of US foreign policy. Yet quasi-secrecy has yet to

[22] In practice, complete transparency in foreign policy is exceedingly rare.

be studied in other democracies—facing the same secrecy dilemma but varying in secrecy institutions (Colaresi 2012, 2014) and political context. How quasi-secrecy's pattern and effect differ by political context would be worth investigating.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *International Studies Quarterly* online.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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