

Examining American Attitudes on the Use of Military Drones

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Abstract

Recent polls have revealed that Americans of both the political left and right support the use of military drones. This statement stands true among groups who traditionally do not support the use of military force. I hypothesize that people of a more liberal persuasion will be more concerned with whether or not the drone program endangers innocent civilians, while those of a more conservative view will be more concerned with the legality of conducting military drone strikes. I analyze data obtained from the Pew Research Center to examine people's attitudes on military drone strikes via framing theory. My hypothesis has been partially supported by the data in that Democrats in general are more concerned with the risk of civilian casualties than Republicans. However, Democrats tend to show less concern overall with the drone program. This may be, in part, due to their political affiliation with President Obama and a partisan frame to the drone war.

Authorization for the Use of Military force

September 11th 2001. The most devastating terrorist attack in American history occurred. Three days later, Congress met in order to decide how to respond against those responsible for the attacks. They had several issues preventing them from taking action. First of all, the organization claiming to have launched the attacks was a highly mobile stateless group called Al-Qaida. They had a web of networks which stretched across several countries in the Middle East. With no specific state harboring Al-Qaida, congress could not declare a traditional war; they needed a way to give the military authority to pursue the terrorist organization across state borders without being slowed by bureaucratic and political opposition. As a result congress passed the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, with 420 yea votes and 1 nay vote in the house, and a unanimous passage in the senate (S.J.Res. 23, 2001).

The AUMF states “that the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States” (S.J.Res. 23, 2001). This bill gave the president of the United States authority to bypass the Senate and the House of representatives when issuing commands to the military so long as the action was being taken against any ‘nation, organization, or person’ he determines to be have aided or harbored Al-Qaida’s agents.

The AUMF has very vague language in order to give the president a lot of flexibility. There are a series of logical tests used to determine who can be targeted, where they can be targeted, and what means of force can be used. When determining if someone is a legitimate target, we must

ask: does the president believe that this person is a part of Al-Qaida, have they ever aided Al-Qaida, or are they in any way associated with the attacks that took place on September 11th 2001? If yes, they are a legitimate target and that the president is free to use 'all necessary force' against them. According to the top State Department lawyer John Bellinger, military force is the use of military resources to remove a target's ability to cause harm or pursue its objectives (Bellinger, 2013). Within these parameters, the president has the authority to imprison or kill or imprison members of Al-Qaida and their associated forces.

Drones

An Unmanned Aerial Vehicle -or *drone*- is any vehicle that is designed to fly while being controlled by an on board computer, or by remote control. The first machine matching the description of a drone came about in the mid 1950's when Edward M. Sorensen's preprogrammed the first unmanned planes to take to the air. His planes were loaded with an onboard computer which could take the plane into flight, turn around, and safely land. It was not until the 1960's that the military adopted the use of drones in a field setting. Planes were programmed to fly over large swaths of China and Korea while taking surveillance photos; however these vehicles were quickly replaced by spy satellites (Schwing 2015).

By the late 1980's bandwidth improvements allowed for live video feed, meaning that drones could provide live video footage of the battle field. They could follow targets and search for threats over hostile territory without any risk to the pilot. During this time drones were limited to surveillance due to their clumsiness and inaccuracy (Schwing, 2015).

On September 14th 2001, Congress Passes the Authorization for the Use of Military Force. The president now had the Authority to administer force (kill or imprison) against more people

than before. While the President gained the authority to target Al-Qaida, he still had several logistical barriers in his way. The first obstacle facing the Commander in Chief was the fact that Al-Qaida was spread across multiple Middle Eastern countries. Occupying multiple countries with large military forces would be incredibly expensive. By 2012, the United States had already spent roughly 2.1 trillion dollars on the occupation of Afghanistan alone (Bilmes, 2013). In order to fulfil congresses mandate to hunt down Al-Qaida, the president needed a military presence in multiple countries. This could not be done through conventional methods without spending a massive amount of money. The second barrier facing the president was the fact that spreading the military thinly across multiple countries would likely result in a tremendous number of casualties. If there is one thing that could blemish a president's term in office, it would be a large numbers of young men and women dying on his orders.

The president needed a means of making war over large swaths of the globe, he needed it to be cheap, and he needed it to not result in a large number of American casualties. Such a method of warfare would soon exist with the conversion of surveillance drones to armed combat drones (Air force, 2015) (Bilmes, 2013) (Zakheim, 2009).

Controversy Over the Use of Drones

While drones have been seen as an incredibly efficient means of making war under the parameters of the AUMF, their use has certainly not come without controversy. Drones have been adopted by the military despite their continued inaccuracy. A study by The Human Rights Institute of Columbia showed that in 2011 alone, there were 105 confirmed militant casualties, 56 confirmed civilian casualties, and between 115 and 305 contested casualties. At best one third of the 161 people killed by drones in Afghanistan were confirmed to be civilians. While drones allow

the United States to pursue its goals of hunting down terrorists, it does so at the cost of many innocent lives.

Additionally a 2014 poll by the Pew Research Center asked civilians from 44 different countries whether or not they approved of the United States using drone strikes to target extremists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Of these 44 countries only 3 had a majority of their population respond in favor of the drone program: the United States, Israel, and Kenya (Pew, 2014). This figure shows that the United States may risk alienating the rest of the world by using drones.

A third reason for controversy is the fact that the AUMF is an incredibly vague law. All the United States president needs to do is claim that his target is an affiliate of Al-Qaida in order to use military force against them. One could certainly question how closely a person needs to be associated with Al-Qaida, or how imminent of threat to US interests this person needs to pose in order for their execution to be legitimized. Unfortunately the president is the only person who can determine this. There is no language in the AUMF which determines how closely associated to Al-Qaida a person needs to be for them to be targeted (S.J.Res. 23, 2001).

In March of 2016 a US drone strike targeted a camp run by the Somali terrorist organization Al-Shabab. This attack was ordered under the authority of the AUMF. While Al-Shabab is an Islamic terrorist organization, and they have coordinated efforts with Al-Qaida in the past, their organization explicitly avoids American targets and is targeting US interests in order to be a legitimate target under the AUMF. An organization must be working with Al-Qaida AUMF (Walsh, 2015). Since Al-Shabab explicitly avoids attacking American interests, you could question whether or not they were an appropriate target. The explicit lack of congressional oversight caused by the AUMF could certainly cause alarm to many Americans.

Priming Theory

Priming and Framing are both used to influence public opinion. Priming theory is somewhat different from framing however. Framing is when a subject is portrayed in a positive or negative light in order to influence people's opinion on it. It usually involves broad language, and has a large target audience. Priming on the other hand takes a subject and builds a stronger connection between it and a bias the audience already has by making them view it through a specific lens. A study published by the *Journal of Business Ethics* found that priming can potentially create a stronger, longer lasting impact on its audience when the subject can be associated with an bias the audience already has (Clark, 2013).

What makes priming so relevant to the drone debate is the fact that two people can react differently to a prime (Wheeler, 2007). Priming relies on the audiences existing biases to further shaping their opinions. If the prime can effectively strengthen an association with a negative bias the audience already has, their opinion of the subject will fall considerably. On the other hand, if there is already a strong association built between the subject and the bias within the minds of the audience, their opinions will not shift significantly because they have already made that connection. Additionally if the prime is something which they are not concerned about, then it will have little impact on the audience's opinion (Wheeler, 2007).

People often react differently to the same prime based on their preexisting values. A 2015 survey by New Jersey State University asked people to identify themselves as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. Additionally they were asked to review one of two hurricane relief plans. Group A was given a plan which placed an emphasis on safety and recovery of human lives. Group B was given a plan which placed emphasis on economic recovery. In the end Democrats

had the highest approval when reviewing ‘plan A’ while Republicans had the highest approval when reviewing ‘plan B’ (*Wheeler, 2007*). This study may have asked people about hurricane relief plans, but hurricanes were not what the researchers were really after. This study was actually examining the values of Democrats and Republicans when it came to humanitarian aid vs economic recovery. It is highly unlikely that very many people would outright say that they economics over human life, but priming allows researchers to get strait to values of their test subjects.

Data

Priming can be used to analyze the drone program in order to determine which symptoms effect public opinion the most. I examine the changes in opinion as a result of priming to determine what people of different political ideologies are most concerned about. The Pew Research center provided the May 2015 data set which was used to construct cross tabulation tables to uncover existing trends.

When initially examining the initial levels of concern over the drone program of people of differing political ideologies there was a very clear trend. There was a negative relationship between being liberal and the level of concern over the use of military drones. In other words, the more liberal a person was, the less likely they were show concern over the use of military drones. In addition, there was a positive relationship between being conservative and level of concern over the use of military drones, meaning the more conservative a person was, the more likely they were to be show high levels of concern. I examine the opinions of people identifying as very conservative and people identifying as very liberal and compared the changes in highest levels and lowest levels of concern for each prime used.

(Table 1 about here)

The sample included responses from 6,263 people. Of those 6,263, 479 considered themselves to be very conservative, 1,726 considered themselves to be somewhat conservative, 2,192 considered themselves to be moderate, 1,117 considered themselves to be liberal, and 514 considered themselves to be very liberal. Their political ideology was my independent variable. My dependent variable was their level of concern over drones when viewing them through one of the four following lenses: 1) How concerned are you, if at all, about whether U.S. drone strikes could lead to retaliation from extremist groups? 2) How concerned are you, if at all, about whether U.S. drone strikes could damage America's reputation abroad? 3) How concerned are you, if at all, about whether U.S. drone strikes are being conducted legally? 4) How concerned are you, if at all, about whether U.S. drone strikes endanger the lives of innocent civilians? The purpose of these 'lenses' was to attempt to figure out which symptom of the drone program generates the most change in concern, and which generates the least change concern among Conservatives and Liberals.

Hypothesis

While the research may be examining the drone program through four lenses, I expected two of them to have the largest effect on the opinions of the test subjects. I expect to see a large jump in level of concern when Liberals were exposed to the prime which strengthens the association between the drone program and the danger it poses to innocent civilian life. I expect this because previous literature suggests that liberals are most concerned with humanitarian issues (Wheeler, 2007)

Additionally I expect to see a jump in level of concern by conservatives when they were prompted to consider the legality of the drone program. I expected this because there was a Democratic president in the Whitehouse at the time this poll took place. It would make sense that conservatives would be more likely to question President Obamas authority to make war without first consulting the republican House and Senate due to some level of distrust.

Results

Before any primes were applied, 28.5% of conservatives and 14.7% of liberals claimed to feel very high levels of concern over the use of military drones. Additionally 23.3% of conservatives and 44.7% of liberals claimed to have very low levels of concern. The following are the levels of concern over the use of drones when viewed through the four aforementioned lenses, and a measurement of the amount of change caused by said primes.

(Table 1 about here)

When viewing drones through the ‘increased risk of terrorist retaliation’ lens, two things occurred. The first being a very small shift in the number of conservatives feeling high levels of concern. The second being that there was a very large shift in the number of liberals feeling high levels of concern. Once the ‘increased risk of terrorist retaliation’ lens was applied, conservatives with high levels of concern -of whom 28.5% felt high levels of concern before priming- fell to 27.1% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 1.4% drop in the number of conservatives feeling high levels of concern. Liberals on the other hand -of whom only 14.1% showed the high levels of concern before priming- grew to 41.7% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 27.0% increase the number of liberals feeling high concern over the use of drones.

The data also showed that the ‘increased risk of terrorist retaliation’ lens also had an impact on the percentage of conservatives and liberals with the lowest levels of concern. Once the ‘increased risk of terrorist retaliation’ lens was applied, conservatives with the lowest levels of concern -of whom 23.3% felt low levels of before priming- grew to 24.6% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 1.3% increase in the number of conservatives feeling low levels of concern. Liberals on the other hand -of whom 44.7% felt low levels of concern before priming- dropped to 14.1% after being exposed to the prim, resulting in a 30.6% drop in the number of liberals feeling low levels of concern over the use of military drones.

(Table 2 about here)

When viewing drones through the ‘damage to American image abroad’ lens there was once again a slightly larger shift in conservative concern. Once again, liberal levels of concern experienced a large jump. conservatives with the highest levels of concern -of whom 28.5% showed high levels of concern before priming- fell to 22.9% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 5.6% drop in the number of conservatives feeling high levels of concern. Liberals on the other hand -of whom 14.1% showed the highest levels of concern before priming- grew to 39.8% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 25.7% increase the number of liberals feeling high concern.

The data also showed that the ‘damage to American image abroad’ lens also had an impact on the percentage of conservatives and liberals with the lowest levels of concern. The number of conservatives with the lowest levels of concern -of whom 23.3% felt high levels of concern before priming- grew to 32.7% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 9.4% increase. Liberals - of whom 44.7% showed the lowest levels of concern before priming- dropped to 16.5% after being

exposed to the prime, resulting in a 28.2% drop in the number of liberals feeling low levels of concern.

(Table 3 about here)

When viewing drones through the ‘questionable legality’ there was only a marginal change in the number of conservatives feeling high levels of concern, while the number of liberals feeling high levels of concern experienced a large jump. Conservatives with the highest levels of concern -of whom 28.5% felt high levels of concern before priming- fell to 26.7% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 1.8% drop in the number of conservatives feeling high levels of concern. The number of liberals feeling high level of concern liberals -of whom 14.1% showed the highest levels of concern before priming- grew to 44.4% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 30.3% increase in concern.

The data also showed that the ‘Questionable legality’ lens also had an impact on the percentage of conservatives and liberals with the lowest levels of concern over the drone program. Conservatives with the lowest levels of concern -of whom 23.3% felt low levels of concern before priming- grew to 23.6% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in 0.3% increase in the number of conservatives feeling low levels of concern. Liberals on the other hand -of whom 44.7% felt the lowest levels of concern before priming- dropped to 15.7% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 29.0% drop in the number of liberals feeling low levels of concern.

(Table 4 about here)

When viewing drones through the ‘risk to civilian life’ there was a large bump in conservative levels of concern, and liberal levels of concern experienced the largest jump yet. Conservatives with the highest levels of concern -of whom 28.5% felt high levels of concern before priming-

jumped to 37.4% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 8.9% increase in the number of conservatives feeling high levels of concern. Liberal concern –which was 14.1% before priming- grew to 70.8% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 56.7% increase the number of liberals feeling high levels of concern over the use of military drones.

The data also showed that the ‘risk to civilian life’ lens also had an impact on the percentage of conservatives and liberals with the lowest levels of concern over the drone program. Conservatives with the lowest levels of concern -of whom 23.3% felt low levels of concern before priming- fell to 13.4% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in 9.9% decrease in the number of conservatives feeling low levels of concern. Liberals on the other hand -of whom 44.7% felt the lowest levels of concern before priming- dropped to 4.9% after being exposed to the prime, resulting in a 39.8% drop in the number of liberals feeling low levels of concern.

(Table 5 about here)

Conclusion

The data sharpened our understanding of public perception of drone by showing which biases liberals and conservatives already associate with the drone program, and which symptoms of the drone program conservatives and liberals are most concerned with.

Conservatives experienced low levels of change when viewing the drone program through the drone program through the ‘increased risk of terrorist retaliation’ and the “questionable legality’ lenses. This implies that conservatives have a strong association between the drone program and these two symptoms, or they are simply not concerned about them.

Conservatives are seen to experience a sizable drop in their level of concern when view the drone program through the 'damage to US image abroad lens'. The drop in concern seems to show that conservatives almost approve of the damage to the damage to Americas image abroad caused by the drone program.

The prime which caused conservative concerns to grow was the 'risk to civilian life' lens. The lens found a weak association between the drone program and the risk it causes to civilians in the conservative mind and caused a moderate level of opinion on drones. It also implies that the risk to innocent civilians is something that concerns conservatives. Perhaps if the association was strengthened, conservative approval would drop.

Liberals seemed to have a very weak association between the risks of the drone program, and its symptoms. The 'increased risk of terrorist retaliation', 'damage to American image abroad', and 'Questionable legality' lenses all saw a jump in level of in number of liberals feeling high levels of concern by 25% to 30%. The only lenses which broke the trend was the 'risk to civilian life' lens which caused a 56.7% jump in level of high concerns. This shows that liberals were likely most concerned about the endangerment of civilian life. This data also shows that there was a huge gulf in the minds of liberals between their perceptions of the drone program, and the reality of it. Many of them claimed to have low levels of concern over the drone program, but once the symptoms of it were highlighted, they seem to abandon their views. Perhaps this happened because of a fifth unintentional lens through which only liberals viewed the drone program through: President Obama.

While the Bush administration did in fact use military drones, they were not a widely discussed topic until sometime after President Obama was elected into office. It would not surprise me if there was already a strong association between President Obama and the use of military

drones formed in the minds of many liberals. Viewing drones through the lens of President Obama may in fact have caused a 25%-30% drop in liberal levels of concern. This association could have been broken when drones were viewed through different lenses. Perhaps if there were a conservative president in office liberals would have a much higher initial level of concern before being exposed to any additional primes. If this were the case, then perhaps the ‘increased risk of terrorist retaliation’, ‘damage to American image abroad’, and ‘Questionable legality’ lenses would have only caused moderate levels of change in concern, and only the ‘risk to civilian life’ lens would have resulted in large levels of change in concern.

In the future I would like to conduct further research on the American approval of drones through priming and add approval rating of President Obama as a second independent variable. I would like to see if people with high approval ratings of President Obama would experience larger changes in attitude as a result of the ‘increased risk of terrorist retaliation’, ‘damage to American image abroad’, and ‘Questionable legality’ lenses than people with low levels of approval of President Obama. Suspect that if there were a conservative president in office the number of liberals approving of drones would diminish.

Speculation aside, the research shows that both liberals and conservatives have increased concern for the drone program when primed to consider the ‘risk to civilian life’. I suspect that if there were a stronger association between the death toll among civilians and the drone program which caused them, American approval for the use of armed military drones would drop significantly.

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Table 1

Overall Concern Over the Use of Military Drones

			Political Ideology				
			Very conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very liberal
Overall level of concern over the use of military drones	Least Concerned	Count	103 _a	430 _a	628 _b	321 _b	222 _c
		Percent	23.3%	25.9%	30.1%	30.5%	44.7%
	Somewhat Concerned	Count	92 _a	384 _a	565 _b	298 _b	122 _{a,b}
		Percent	20.8%	23.1%	27.0%	28.4%	24.5%
	Very Concerned	Count	121 _{a,b}	477 _b	508 _a	260 _a	80 _c
		Percent	27.4%	28.7%	24.3%	24.7%	16.1%
	Most Concerned	Count	126 _a	370 _b	388 _c	172 _{c,d}	73 _d
		Percent	28.5%	22.3%	18.6%	16.4%	14.7%
Total		Count	442	1661	2089	1051	497
		Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square: 0.00

Gamma Value: -.142

Table 2

Concern Over Whether Potential Increased Risk of Terrorism Retaliation as a Result of Drone Program

			Political Ideology				
			Very conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very liberal
Level of concern over whether the drone program could lead to retaliation from extremist groups	Least concerned	Count	116	245	246	90	72
		Percent	24.6%	14.3%	11.5%	8.2%	14.1%
	Somewhat concerned	Count	93	299	379	196	65
		Percent	19.7%	17.5%	17.7%	17.9%	12.7%
	Very concerned	Count	135	694	816	477	161
		Percent	28.6%	40.6%	38.1%	43.5%	31.5%
	Most concerned	Count	128	470	702	333	213
		Percent	27.1%	27.5%	32.8%	30.4%	41.7%
Total		Count	472	1708	2143	1096	511
		Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square: 0.00

Gamma Value: 0.108

Table 3

Concern Over Whether Drone Program Harms US Image Abroad

			Political Ideology				
			Very conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very liberal
Level of concern that the drone program could hurt U.S. Image Abroad	Least concerned	Count	153	373	421	206	84
		Percent	32.7%	22.0%	19.4%	18.7%	16.5%
	Somewhat concerned	Count	83	405	499	236	77
		Percent	17.7%	23.9%	23.0%	21.4%	15.1%
	Very concerned	Count	125	535	794	406	146
		Percent	26.7%	31.6%	36.5%	36.8%	28.6%
	Most concerned	Count	107	380	460	254	203
		Percent	22.9%	22.4%	21.2%	23.0%	39.8%
Total		Count	468	1693	2174	1102	510
		Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square: 0.00

Gamma Value: 0.103

Table 4

Concern Over the Legality of the Drone Program

			Political Ideology				
			Very conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very liberal
Level of concern over the legality of the drone program	Least concerned	Count	107	333	344	155	79
		Percent	23.6%	19.8%	16.1%	14.4%	15.7%
	Somewhat concerned	Count	74	312	357	168	51
		Percent	16.3%	18.5%	16.7%	15.6%	10.2%
	Very Concerned	Count	152	597	792	468	149
		Percent	33.5%	35.5%	37.1%	43.5%	29.7%
	Most Concerned	Count	121	441	640	286	223
		Percent	26.7%	26.2%	30.0%	26.6%	44.4%
Total		Count	454	1683	2133	1077	502
		Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square: 0.00

Gama Value: 0.103

Table 5

Level of Concern Over the Risk to Civilian Lives Caused By the Drone Program

			Political Ideology				
			Very conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very liberal
Level of concern over the risk posed to innocent civilians caused by the drone program	Least Concerned	Count	63	157	150	70	25
		Percent	13.4%	9.2%	6.9%	6.3%	4.9%
	Somewhat Concerned	Count	80	220	244	96	21
		Percent	17.0%	12.9%	11.2%	8.7%	4.1%
	very concerned	Count	152	619	731	362	104
		Percent	32.3%	36.2%	33.6%	32.7%	20.2%
	Most concerned	Count	176	716	1050	580	364
		Percent	37.4%	41.8%	48.3%	52.3%	70.8%
	Total	Count	471	1712	2175	1108	514
		Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square: 0.00

Gamma Value: 0.198