

# **Trump's Taboos: Elite Rhetoric and the Normative Foundations of American Grand Strategy**

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The dominant feature of American foreign policy over the past 70 years has been its overall consistency. The stability of American foreign policy is rooted in bipartisan support for a stable grand strategy that has shaped American international behavior since at least the end of World War II (Gavin 2105, Brands and Feaver 2016). This grand strategy, in turn, has been anchored in a broad set of norms that serve as a foundation and a justification for America's role in the world.

Donald Trump built his rise to the White House on his opposition to the American political establishment – both Republican and Democratic. And as President he continues to appear intent on a complete reformulation of American grand strategy. Candidate Trump questioned our commitments to NATO allies, promoted the spread of nuclear weapons to countries like Japan and South Korea, and threatened to use nuclear weapons to attack ISIS. President-Elect Trump continued this trend by calling into question America's long-standing support for the "one China" policy. And President Trump has quickly withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, banned immigration from certain majority-Muslim countries, and moved to expand the border wall with Mexico.

All of these policies are inconsistent with typical Republican positions on these issues. Moreover, President Trump's policy stances are well outside a stable and long-established bipartisan consensus that has guided American grand strategy through Democratic and Republican administrations for the past half-century or more. Part of Trump's strategy for reshaping American foreign policy has been a direct assault on the norms that justify this bipartisan consensus – including economic openness, the legitimacy of international institutions, and the management of nuclear security through the norms of non-proliferation and no first use.

As President and Commander-in-Chief, Mr. Trump has wide leeway to implement these policies regardless of their (un)popularity in the short term. However, if he is to succeed in reshaping American grand strategy in the longer term, Mr. Trump will need to persuade a substantial segment of the American public to support his policies. Thus President Trump's ability to maintain support for his unorthodox approach to foreign policy, as well as his ability to implement longer-term changes in America's international orientation will depend significantly on at least three factors: 1) how strong is popular support for the normative foundations of American grand strategy; 2) how persuadable is the public regarding changes to these long-standing bipartisan policies; and finally 3) how different is Donald Trump from a typical politician in his ability to rally public support these unorthodox views?

Our study focuses specifically on nuclear weapons norms, which have been a stable foundation of American grand strategy for more than half a century, and have been our primary means for promoting American interests and security while limiting the possibility of nuclear war. Recent research on the norm against the first-use of nuclear weapons raise important questions about the robustness of this norm (Press et. al. 2013; Sagan and Valentino 2017), making it even more important that we understand the implications of Trump's attempt to change course.

In the weeks leading up to the 2016 American Presidential election, we conducted an experiment that randomly assigned participants to read news stories about Republican candidates making foreign policy statements. The experiment compares the impact of elite rhetoric on popular attitudes regarding a typical partisan nuclear issue to their impact on attitudes that undergird the normative foundations of American nuclear strategy. Half of the stories attributed the statements to Donald Trump, and the other half attributed the statements to Paul Evans, a fictional Republican candidate for U.S. Senate. Participants read news stories on one of three topics: criticizing the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran, supporting the development of nuclear weapons by Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, and using nuclear weapons to destroy ISIS. The Iran deal story represents a typical Republican foreign policy position, while the other two stories present significant challenges to the norms supporting American nuclear strategy.

Our results present a mixture of good news and bad news regarding the popular foundations of American grand strategy. First, our results indicate that the principles of American nuclear strategy are generally – but not universally – popular. Second, we find that Trump did not differ from our fictional “generic” Republican candidate in terms of his ability to alter public attitudes. Consequently, we find that Trump is likely to be able to use the bully pulpit of the White House to rally Republicans and some independents to support typical Republican policy positions. On the other hand, our results indicate that President Trump will have difficulty persuading the public to abandon the norms that undergird American nuclear policy.

### **Nuclear Weapons and the Foundations of American Grand Strategy**

Nuclear non-proliferation has been a centerpiece of American grand strategy almost since the moment of the Japanese surrender in World War II (Gavin 2015). This policy preference is rooted in very practical material advantages that non-proliferation provides the United States. First, containing the spread of nuclear weapons limits American vulnerability to a nuclear strike by limiting the number of actors who are capable of such an attack – either intentionally or inadvertently. Second, nuclear non-proliferation enhances America's ability to project power around the world. The fate of the three “Axis of Evil” regimes singled out by George W. Bush in his 2002 State of the Union speech illustrate this fact. Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled before it was able to muster a credible nuclear program. Iranian leaders made sufficient progress on a bomb that the United States was forced to negotiate an agreement with them. And North Korea's successful detonation of a weapon has left them essentially immune from American influence. Finally, non-proliferation limits the likelihood that a violent non-state group will obtain a weapon, which would be especially dangerous because they might be more difficult to deter than a state actor (Allison 2004).

The American material interest in non-proliferation is quite straightforward, but persuading the rest of the world to support such a policy proved more complex. Beginning as early as 1946 with the Baruch Plan, American diplomats set about embedding non-proliferation and an American monopoly on nuclear weapons into international law. The

failure of the Baruch plan was eventually followed by President Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" policy which led to the creation of the International Atomic Energy to monitor international nuclear activity in 1957. After more fitful progress on a partial nuclear test ban and other low level nuclear cooperation with the Soviet Union, the superpowers were able to square the normative circle of condemning the spread of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states while simultaneously maintaining that capacity for themselves through the negotiation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was signed in 1968 and entered into force in 1970.

The text of the NPT establishes nuclear non-proliferation as a normative good from which all states benefit by "considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples." (IAEA, 1970). The treaty then asserts the shared belief "that the proliferation of nuclear weapons would seriously enhance the danger of nuclear war." The remainder of the document describes the core of the deal: non-nuclear weapons states agree not to acquire these weapons (Article II) in exchange for a promise from the nuclear weapons states that they will not transfer this technology to non-nuclear states (Article I), and they will "negotiate in good faith" to work toward "nuclear disarmament and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control" (Article VI).

The acceptance of the goal of global nuclear disarmament was the price that the superpowers paid in order to instantiate the goal of non-proliferation in international law and to infuse that goal with normative content. Since that time American presidents have consistently endorsed the norm of a nuclear-free world, even if they have not achieved that goal. Staunchly conservative Republicans such as Ronald Reagan endorsed this goal repeatedly, including as a part of his 1985 inaugural address. Similarly, liberal Democrats such as Barack Obama called for a world without nuclear weapons and for, "a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not as the dawn of atomic warfare but as the start of our own moral awakening. (CITE NY Times)" The American public appears to have internalized the normative imperative of global disarmament. A 2005 IPSOS Associated Press poll found that 66% of Americans believed that no country – including the United States – should be allowed to have nuclear weapons. (CITE)

Viewed in this context, Donald Trump's rhetoric on nuclear proliferation calls into question this longstanding American commitment to non-proliferation as part of progress toward a world without nuclear weapons. In April of 2016, candidate Trump declared nuclear proliferation "inevitable," and argued that proliferation was actually in America's strategic interests. Wittingly or not, these campaign statements cut to the core of one of the normative pillars of American grand strategy.

Like non-proliferation, the normative proscription against the first-use of nuclear weapons has been a longstanding foundation of American foreign policy. However, the "nuclear taboo" did not take root quite as quickly as the American goal of limiting proliferation. In the throes of World War II, both the Roosevelt and Truman administrations never seriously considered not using the atomic bomb as soon as it was available (Bernstein 1975), and

American leaders continued to consider the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear targets well into the 1950's (Foot 1985; Betts 1987, Trachtenberg 1988). President Eisenhower, for example, publicly insisted that nuclear weapons were ordinary military tools, to be "used just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else." (Tannenwald 2007:9) Similarly, surveys conducted in the early years of the Cold War suggested that the American public did not view the use of nuclear weapons to be illegitimate (Sagan and Valentino 2017).

Over time, however, the attitudes of both mass publics and elites have changed dramatically in this regard. Tannenwald (1999, 2007) argues that the Vietnam war was a critical turning point in this regard. Robert McNamara, for example, stated that the US "never seriously considered using nuclear weapons in Vietnam." (quoted in Tannenwald 1999:451) And Dean Rusk insisted that he would never participate in the first use of nuclear weapons, except possibly in response to a massive Soviet invasion of Western Europe (Tannenwald 1999:451). By the end of the Cold War, Tannenwald (1999, 2007) concludes that the norm against nuclear first use was so strongly entrenched among American decision-making elites that nuclear weapons were fundamentally unusable for any purpose other than nuclear deterrence.

The norm against nuclear first use became even stronger than the norm against nuclear proliferation, because of the way in which it connected and overlapped with the strengthening norm against killing non-combatants (Sagan and Valentino 2017) as well as some of the central tenets of just war theory (Walzer 2015). For example, Thomas (2001) argues that the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped to set in motion a growing revulsion against the killing of non-combatants in war. This trend strengthened gradually in the post-World War II era, such that Pinker (2012) came to argue that violence is globally on the decline. More specifically, Pinker argues that an increase in empathy and changes in what is perceived as "civilized" behavior has led to a decreasing popular tolerance for violence, especially against non-combatants. And finally, the first use of nuclear weapons – especially against a non-nuclear state – would seem to violate the principle of proportionality that is central to just war theory (Walzer 2015). These reinforcing norms led Tannenwald (1999, 2007) and others (e.g. Schelling 1994) to label the norm against first use a "nuclear taboo." That is, nuclear first-use was more than just unwise or even undesirable. According to these scholars, nuclear first-use had become unacceptable and even unthinkable for most Americans.

The American public expressed broad support for the nuclear taboo by the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, in March 2004 a Knowledge Networks poll found that 60% of Americans felt that the U.S. should only use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack, and 21% felt that the U.S. should not use nuclear weapons under any circumstances. Only 18% were willing to countenance first-use under any circumstances. (CITE). This poll result is particularly striking because it was taken in the midst of an ongoing war in Iraq that was going very poorly for the United States. Moreover, this finding was hardly anomalous, as many other studies found similar results.

### **Campaign Rhetoric and a Real-World Stress Test for Nuclear Norms**

In order to function effectively, norms require broad - but not universal - support. However, the strength of a norm lies primarily in its depth rather than its breadth. That is, the best place to observe the strength of a norm is by observing behavior in the wake of its violation (Gelpi 1997, Kratochwil 1991; Franck 1990). Thus, the best way to observe the strength of public commitment to the nuclear norms underpinning American grand strategy, is to observe how public opinion responds to their violation. Does the public quickly abandon these views when they are inconvenient or when they feel the opportunity or an obligation to violate them?

Previous academic research on public support for the nuclear taboo suggested that the norm against first use was reasonably widely held, but not deeply ingrained (Press et. al. 2013; Sagan and Valentino 2017). For example, most members of the public would prefer not to use nuclear weapons when all else is equal, but if nuclear weapons are perceived as more effective, then the aversion to their use declined sharply. All else is, of course, rarely equal, and so these findings raised important questions about how the American public would respond to a leader - like Donald Trump - who actually considered a nuclear first strike. Even less is known about how the public would respond to calls for nuclear proliferation.

One important limitation of previous work in this area is that it is all based on hypothetical questions about an imagined scenario. The use of such scenarios was necessary because no mainstream American politician had advocated either for nuclear first use or for proliferation. However, the rise of Donald Trump to the Presidency during 2016, creates both the opportunity and the necessity to observe public responses to elite calls for the violation of these norms in a real-world context. The crystallization of these policy positions, and their communication to the public by a plausible political candidate, makes the challenge to these norms both more politically salient, and more forceful than they would be under hypothetical scenarios.

While responses to hypothetical questions can be useful, and may be necessary in order to study questions without plausible policy referents, there are important reasons to wonder whether responses to policy questions may shift when they move from the realm of the hypothetical into the realm of current events. On the one hand, the placement of a normative question - such as proliferation or first use - into a real political debate creates the opportunity for countervailing concerns or specific contextual factors that may undermine the persuasiveness (or perceived relevance) of the norm. On the other hand, some individuals who say that they would support violating a norm in the context of a hypothetical scenario may back away from that support if they believe it might have real-world consequences. That is, violating norms in a hypothetical scenario may seem a safe and purely expressive act. But the real-world possibility of the norm being violated may be viewed as costly and unadvisable.

Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign gave both the non-proliferation norm and the nuclear taboo their first real-world stress tests in many decades. In order to understand how this opportunity allows us to test the robustness of popular support for these nuclear

norms, we turn to the literature on elite cues and public opinion in the context of political campaigns.

In principle, elections create democratic representation and accountability by allowing citizens to express their support for candidates who express their preferred policy positions on a portfolio of issues (Enelow and Hinich 1984; Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989; Aldrich et. al. 1989; Kenny and Loftin 2005). In practice, however, we know that citizens have hold on to limited amounts of factual information about politics (Carini and Keeter 1991), and their attitudes can be shaped by rhetorical cues from partisan elites (Zaller 1992). In particular, Gabriel Lenz (2009) argues that we often observe a strong correlation between candidate platforms and voter issue positions not because voters select candidates who share their preferences, but rather because voters adopt the issue stances of candidates that they prefer for partisan reasons.

Lenz's work builds on an extensive literature that emphasizes the public's strong reliance on elite partisan opinions in the formation of their attitudes and beliefs (Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Zaller, 1992; Bartels 2002). Studies of "priming effects," for example, have shown substantial elite influence on individual attitudes (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Mendelberg 2001; Druckman and Holmes, 2004). Similarly, numerous studies of "framing effects" indicate that individual attitudes toward the use of military force can be altered through the provision of narrative frames (Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Allen, O'Laughlin and Sullivan, 1994; Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Aday, Cluverius and Livingston, 2005; Boettcher and Cobb 2006; Berkinsky and Kinder, 2006). And Lenz (2009, 2013) argues that we often observe a strong correlation between candidate platforms and voter issue positions not because voters select candidates who share their preferences, but rather because voters adopt the issue stances of candidates that they prefer for other reasons.

Co-partisanship represents a strong sense of identity in the context of a political campaign. Espousing policy positions that differ substantially from a candidate with whom one shares partisan identity creates burdensome cognitive dissonance that voters will be motivated to avoid. Consequently, examining public responses to elite rhetoric that advocates nuclear proliferation and first use provides a nearly ideal test for the robustness of these norms that has been heretofore impossible to conduct in a truly realistic fashion.

Co-partisans who receive a message from their candidate regarding nuclear proliferation or first use should feel strong pressure to express this same view. The impact of this identity should be especially strong during the 2016 presidential campaign because of the extremely high level of political polarization that has come to permeate nearly every aspect of American public life (Jacobson 2007, 2010; Iyengar et. al 2012; Popescu 2013, Doherty 2014; Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

This argument suggests that co-partisans will feel the strong pressure to align their views to match those of their party's candidate in the context of an election. If the norms of nuclear non-proliferation and no first use are weakly held and internalized, then we should expect voters to respond to these cues in exactly the same manner that they do to partisan

messaging on other issues: 1) Co-partisans should rally to support the candidate's position; 2) partisan opponents should ignore the message; and 3) independent voters should be somewhere in between.

**Weak Norm Hypothesis: Republicans will express increased support for violating nuclear norms in response to campaign rhetoric that conflicts with those norms.**

However, other work on American public opinion and foreign policy suggests that citizens are – at least under some circumstances – capable of forming and retaining attitudes that are independent of elite preferences, even when they feel pressured by elite rhetoric on the issue. For example, Mueller's (1971, 1973) seminal work on casualties and public support for the Vietnam and Korean Wars implied that the public formed coherent and systematic judgments about foreign policy events. Subsequent research on attitudes toward military conflict concluded that the public can form reasoned and "prudent" attitudes that are shaped more powerfully by information about real-world events than they are by elite partisan rhetoric (Jentleson 1992; Gartner and Segura 1998; Gelpi et. al. 2005, 2009; Gartner 2008; Gelpi 2010). This research is rooted in a broader literature suggesting that the public appears to respond in systematic and reasonable ways to information about foreign policy events. (Nincic 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992; Aldrich et. al. 2006).

The public's capacity to form attitudes that remain independent of elites give us reason to believe that public support for non-proliferation and the nuclear taboo may be strong enough to resist elite encouragement to violate them. If the American public has strongly internalized the norms against nuclear proliferation and first use, then the "rational public" literature suggests that they will respond positively to elite cues that conform with their prior beliefs, but will resist cues that conflict with strongly held attitudes – especially if those attitudes are underpinned by a strong normative commitment. This argument suggests that elite rhetoric will alter Republican support for the Iran nuclear deal, but will not influence Republican attitudes about non-proliferation and nuclear first use.

**Strong Norm Hypothesis: Republicans will *not* express increased support for violating nuclear norms in response to campaign rhetoric that conflicts with those norms.**

Finally, we expect that support for the norm against nuclear first use will be stronger and more robust than the norm against nuclear proliferation. As noted above, the norm against first use is also supported by strengthening norms against killing non-combatants as well as basic tenets of just war theory such as the requirement of proportionality. While the argument for non-proliferation ultimately rests on a normative claim about the catastrophic nature of nuclear war, the act of proliferation is at least one step removed from such an outcome. The actual preemptive or preventive use of nuclear weapons, however, would lead immediately and directly to the kind of massive and disproportionate civilian death that elevates first use to the level of a "taboo." (Tannenwald 1999, 2007)



## **Nuclear Taboo Hypothesis: Elite rhetoric regarding the use of nuclear weapons will elicit less public response than elite rhetoric regarding nuclear proliferation.**

### **Research Design and Measurements**

We examine the robustness of public attitudes toward the nuclear norms at the foundations of American strategy through an analysis of a survey experiment conducted during the week leading up to the 2016 presidential election. Our sample includes 1,567 adults from the United States who were contacted during the week leading up to the 2016 presidential election. The samples were collected online through Qualtrics. Subjects were selected so as to include equal numbers of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents (as well as an equal number of men and women). We collected our sample in this way because we expect that responses to elite rhetoric may vary based on the partisanship of the participant.

Our experiment was a 2x3 between subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned either to read a foreign policy statement attributed to Donald Trump, or attributed to the hypothetical Paul Evans. Additionally, each participant was randomly assigned one of three news stories to read. All of the stories included policy statements on nuclear weapons and national security as well as an image of the attributed speaker – Trump or Evans - delivering a campaign speech. Our three stories were created using actual news stories presented in the lead up to the election by such outlets as CNN and The New York Times. Each of these articles includes a set of direct quotes from Donald Trump. Specifically, the articles cover: 1) Trump's criticisms of The Iran nuclear deal (a mainstream Republican position); 2) Trump's statements in support of Japan acquiring its own nuclear weapons (breaking the norm of nuclear non-proliferation); and 3) Trump entertaining the idea of using a nuclear weapon against ISIS (breaking the nuclear taboo). Thus, our treatments include exposure to two issue positions that violate nuclear norms, while our control exposes subjects to a typical Republican issue position regarding nuclear weapons. Subjects assigned to the Paul Evans treatment condition received the same news story treatments, but the remarks were attributed to Evans, and the story was accompanied by a picture of a politician giving a speech whom we identified as Evans.<sup>1</sup>

After reading the assigned article, each participant answered several questions about their views on nuclear weapons issues. With regard to the Iran deal, we asked subjects, "Do you think the nuclear deal with Iran makes the world safer or less safe?" With regard to nuclear non-proliferation, we asked subjects, "Do you favor or oppose the goal of eventually eliminating all nuclear weapons, which is stated in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)?" Additionally, we asked how important a goal do you think preventing the spread of nuclear weapons should be for American foreign policy. This second question provides a yet more difficult test for the robustness of the non-proliferation norm, because it allows co-partisans to respond to the elite message regarding proliferation without directly violating the norm. That is, Republican subjects could ease their cognitive dissonance by

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<sup>1</sup> Treatment and control stories are available from the authors upon request.

downgrading the importance of nuclear proliferation in their mind rather than directly endorsing a violation of the norm.

Finally, regarding the norm against first use of nuclear weapons, we asked, "If you had to choose, do you think the U.S. should only use nuclear weapons if an enemy uses them against the U.S. first, or do you think the U.S. should be willing to use nuclear weapons first, even if no enemy has used them against the U.S.?" This question directly captures the core of the nuclear taboo, but once again we asked a second question to provide a more difficult test of the norm. Previous research indicates that individuals may be willing to violate norms in a real-world scenario even if they claim to support them in principle (Prothro and Grigg 1960; Sullivan et. al. 1982). Moreover, support for the no first use norm may decline when subjects must trade off their support for the norm against a likely cost in American lives or battlefield effectiveness (Sagan et. al. 2017). Consequently, we also asked subjects a more concrete question about the use of nuclear weapons that connected directly to the news story in our experimental treatment. Specifically, we asked: "Some Americans favor the use of tactical nuclear weapons against ISIS as a way to quickly end the conflict and save lives. Others oppose first use of nuclear weapons as immoral and likely to make other nations eager to develop nuclear weapons of their own. Which comes closer to your view?"

There are at least four major characteristics of this design that let us test our hypotheses effectively. First, we present one mainstream and two taboo positions in the same issue area of nuclear weapons and national security. We therefore vary issue stances while controlling for issue area. This means that we can see if expressing a taboo, as opposed to a mainstream position, hurts the persuasiveness of the speakers. Second, we are able to see if these effects vary based on the strength of the norm that is being broken. Allowing for the proliferation of nuclear weapons to Japan is normatively proscribed because it may raise the probability of civilian death in a nuclear conflict. In contrast, actually using a nuclear weapon preemptively or preventively would involve directly inflicting that level of damage. Third, by running a parallel set of treatments with Paul Evans as a second speaker we can see if these effects vary by Republican candidate. Specifically, we can address the question of whether Donald Trump is unusual in his ability to rally the public (and Republicans in particular) to support unorthodox policies. Finally, by relying on treatments that are very close to "real world" news stories, we improve the external validity of our design. As noted above, because credible threats to use nuclear weapons have been rare, most systematic tests of the "nuclear taboo" have relied on questioning subjects regarding hypothetical scenarios. While such studies are useful, it can be difficult to know whether subjects can accurately anticipate how they would react to a hypothetical scenario. The unorthodox nature of the Trump campaign gives us an opportunity to observe how Americans respond to real proposals to spread or use nuclear weapons in highly salient scenarios.

Randomization of assignment was very effective in creating balanced treatment and control groups. Respondents' demographic characteristics and other attitudes for the Trump and Evans condition are described by treatment condition in Table 1. All participants self-reported their political party affiliation (Republican, democrat, independent, or something else), political ideology (five items from very liberal to very conservative), age (categorical intervals), sex (male or female), race (categorical), level of

education (highest degree achieved), employment type (including two indicators for unemployment duration), and whether or not they have served on active military duty. Foreign policy hawkishness is also measured through self-report on a ten-point scale, where participants are asked if the United States should be very reluctant (one) or ready and willing (ten) to use military force around the world. Political knowledge is measured as the number of correct responses participants give to four factual political questions identifying John Kerry, Paul Ryan, and Joe Biden's political positions, and identifying that Republicans hold the U.S. Senate in 2016. Finally, we coded two binary indicator variables for our analyses, one for being white (from the race question) and another for being unemployed (coded one for selecting "out of work for more than one year" or "out of work for less than one year" for employment type).

### **Table 1 About Here**

We found no statistically significant differences whatsoever across any of these potentially confounding variables across the treatment and control groups for our Paul Evans condition. For the Trump condition, we found that the treated groups (proliferation, and nuclear first-use) were slightly older than the control group (Iran deal), but the difference is not substantively large. Moreover, given that we were checking for associations within ten confounding variables across two experiments, it is not surprising (and perhaps even expected) to find one association that is statistically significant at the .05 level. Thus, we find that the treatment and control groups in both of our experimental samples are well-balanced across a wide variety of plausible confounders.

While our experimental subjects are not a probability sample of American voters, they are broadly representative of the American public on a variety of dimensions. We deliberately structured our sample to be evenly divided among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents because we suspected that our treatment effects might vary across these groups. However, this division also roughly comports with Gallup's finding that 27% of their respondents identified as Republican in October 2016, while 32% identified as Democrats, and 36% as Independents (Gallup 2017 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx>). Moreover, when compared to 2015 data from the US Census Bureau (CITE), we find that 56% of our subjects were between the ages of 18 and 44, as compared to 54% of all American adults. Women constitute 50.3% of our sample, as compared to 50.8% of the public. Similarly, 78% of our subjects were non-hispanic Whites, who make up 77% of the US population. And approximately 7% of our subjects were unemployed at the time of the study, while the unemployment rate in the US was 4.9% in October of 2016 (CITE).

Our subjects did differ significantly from the American public on a few dimensions. In particular, our sample was somewhat more educated than the public at large. Specifically, 45% of our subjects over the age of 25 held a Bachelor's degree or higher, as compared to 30% of Americans over age 25 according to the Census. Additionally, 13% of our subjects were either current or former members of the US military, while only about 6% of the American population were veterans in 2016. In terms of overall support for Donald Trump, these two biases in our sample would seem to counterbalance one another to some extent,

since he drew support from less educated voters but also from veterans. On balance, we might expect the former effect to outweigh the latter somewhat because of the relative scarcity of veterans in our sample as compared to college educated voters.

## **Empirical Results**

We begin with our analysis of whether Donald Trump differs from a generic Republican candidate in his ability to mobilize public opinion. For this stage of the analysis, we divided our subjects according to the policy statements they received, and then compared the responses of those who had the statements attributed to Donald Trump to those who had the statements attributed to Paul Evans. A simple cross-tabulation of the responses quickly suggests that Trump is very much an ordinary Republican with regard to his impact on public opinion. For example, subjects who read criticism of the Iran deal attributed to Donald Trump were about 5% less likely to say that the deal made the world less safe than if they read the same criticism from Paul Evans. Subjects who received the Trump treatment regarding non-proliferation treatment were less than 1% more likely to state that they opposed the NPT. And those who read Trump's rhetoric regarding nuclear weapons and ISIS were about 5% less likely to support the preemptive or preventive use of nuclear weapons. None of these differences were statistically significant.

In order to be sure that Trump's persuasive powers were not being masked by minor variations in the potentially confounding covariates described in Table 1, we conducted multivariate analyses comparing the persuasiveness of each of the policy treatments from Trump and Evans. Complete results for these multivariate analyses are displayed in Appendix A, but Figure 1 displays the estimated regression coefficients for Trump's persuasive effects relative to Evans. The dots in the figure identify Trump's estimated relative persuasion on issue. Positive estimates indicate that subjects expressed views closer to those in the news article when the rhetoric was attributed to Trump. Negative coefficients indicate that subjects expressed attitudes closer to the treatment rhetoric when it was attribute to Evans. The black vertical bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals around those estimates.

### **Figure 1 About Here**

As was the case with the bivariate results, Trump was slightly less persuasive than Evans with regard to the Iran deal and nuclear first use, but slightly more persuasive regarding non-proliferation. Most importantly, however, we can see that the estimated confidence intervals easily encompass zero for all of the policy treatments. Clearly, when forming their attitudes toward nuclear issues, our subjects did not respond to the policy positions identified in the news stories any differently when the statements were attributed to Donald Trump as opposed to the fictional Paul Evans. Consequently, when evaluating the impact of the policy positions we pool together subjects in the Trump and Evans treatments both for ease of presentation and in order to avoid unnecessarily wasting

statistical power. The results remain unchanged if we analyze subjects in the Trump and Evans conditions separately.<sup>2</sup>

Next, we turn our attention to our central question: the impact of elite rhetoric on public attitudes toward the nuclear norms. We begin with the analysis of a typical partisan foreign policy issue: the Iran nuclear deal. Overall, we find that the Iran nuclear deal is not especially popular with our subjects. Specifically, over 52% of our respondents stated that the deal made the world “less safe.” Not surprisingly, there is a significant difference of opinion across party lines, but even among Democrats just over 40% of our subjects stated that the deal made the world less safe. Figure 2 displays the percentage of subjects who stated that the Iran deal made the world less safe depending both on their partisanship and whether they received the treatment critiquing the Iran deal. In light of the strong balance across treatment and control groups with regard to potential confounding variables, we present simple bivariate analyses of the responses by treatment category. However, multivariate models including all the potential confounders in Table 1 yields identical results, which are displayed in Appendix B.

### **Figure 2 About Here**

As expected for a typical partisan issue, responses to the anti-deal rhetoric differs sharply by party. While Democrats are not especially fond of the Iran deal, they completely ignore cues from Republican politicians when expressing their views. Exactly 40% of Democrats oppose the deal regardless of whether they are exposed to the Republican critique. Independents, however, do respond moderately to exposure to Republican rhetoric on the deal. Here we see opposition increases by nearly 10 percentage points in response to the negative news story. This increase in opposition is fairly substantial, but does not quite achieve statistical significance. Republicans, however, respond sharply to rhetoric from their party leaders (real or fictional) criticizing the deal. Even in the absence of exposure to the critique, Republican opposition is at 62%, but the Iran deal treatment raises this opposition to 79%. This large increase in skepticism about the deal is statistically significant at the .001 level.

Thus public attitudes toward the Iran deal respond precisely as expected by the elite rhetoric literature. This result is not surprising, since the Iran deal is clearly a positional issue with a well-established partisan divide. But how will the public respond when elite partisan rhetoric breaks longstanding patterns of bipartisan agreement and challenges widely held normative foundations of American nuclear strategy?

First, unlike the Iran nuclear deal, we find that Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is generally quite popular with our subjects. Specifically, only 21% of our respondents expressed opposition to the core principle of the NPT. Moreover, as expected, support for the NPT varies less across party lines, with 17% of Democrats, 17% of Independents, and

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<sup>2</sup> Trump does slightly better with Republicans than Evans, while Evans does modestly better than Trump with Democrats and Independents. However, none of these differences are statistically significant.

27% of Republicans opposing the treaty. This partisan difference is statistically significant, but is barely one-third of the size of the partisan gap on the Iran deal.

### **Figure 3 About Here**

Figure 3 displays the percentage of our subjects who oppose the principles of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by party identification and by news treatment. Here we see that when elite rhetoric moves outside the boundaries of typical partisan debate, it loses its ability to persuade or rally even strong co-partisans. Just 16% of Democrats oppose the NPT if they do not receive any cue regarding the issue, and this number remains essentially unchanged at 18% if they read a Republican critique of non-proliferation. Similarly, 19% of Independents who did not read Trump's criticism oppose the treaty, as do a slightly lower 16% of those exposed to Trump's rhetoric. Most importantly, however, while 29% of Republicans who did not read Trump's views on proliferation oppose the principles of the NPT, this number actually drops 5% among those who read Trump's comments. The decline is not statistically significant, but it does stand in stark contrast to the Republican response to a more typical partisan cue such as Trump's comments on the Iran deal. Thus, while not all Republicans endorse the non-proliferation norms at the core of the NPT, those who do appear to have internalized their support for the norm strongly enough that rhetoric from a co-partisan elite cannot alter their support.

Figure 3 demonstrates that the non-proliferation norm has some sticking power with the public even when elites endorse its violation, but we looked deeper to see if Trump's rhetoric could shake public support for this norm in more subtle ways. Figure 4 displays the percentage of our subjects who stated that nuclear non-proliferation should be a "very important" goal for American foreign policy. Here we see some responsiveness among Independents and especially Republicans to the anti-NPT cue. When subjects did not receive an anti-NPT message, there was nearly a perfect bipartisan consensus that nuclear non-proliferation is "very important." Specifically, 75% of Democrats, 69% of Independents and 70% of Republicans expressed this view. Democrats did not change their views on the importance of non-proliferation at all when exposed to Republican rhetoric undermining this position. But Independents and Republicans became somewhat less likely to rate non-proliferation as "very important." The 13% drop in Republican support for this view is statistically significant at the .05 level, while the 11% drop among Independents just misses this threshold.

### **Figure 4 About Here**

These results suggest that while Trump's rhetoric did not persuade Republican or Independent supporters of the NPT to abandon their view, it did cause them to downplay the importance of this issue somewhat. In the longer term, of course, a declining sense of the importance of non-proliferation among the public could lead to an erosion in the norms status. If the norm declined in importance in the public mind, it is possible that partisan affiliation, military expediency, or some other contingency could lead individuals to abandon their support of the normative goal of non-proliferation and a nuclear free world.

Finally, we turn to our analysis of the robustness of the nuclear taboo. Figure 5 displays the percentage of our subjects who expressed principled support for the idea of a nuclear first strike. As previous research has indicated, the nuclear taboo is not a universally held view among the American public. Overall, we find that 27% of our subjects expressed support for preemptive or preventive nuclear strikes by the United States as a matter of principle. Moreover, we continue to see a partisan divide on this issue. Approximately 38% of Republicans supported the principle of a preemptive or preventive nuclear strike, but only about 20% of Democrats did so. This partisan gap is statistically significant, and somewhat larger than the partisan divide on the NPT, but it remains much smaller than the divide over the Iran deal. Moreover, across party lines we see that support for the taboo against nuclear first use is the modal position.

### **Figure 5 About Here**

As was the case for the NPT, support for the nuclear taboo varies by party, but elite Republican rhetoric has no mobilizing effect undermining the norm. Specifically, 21% of Democrats who were not exposed to the news story advocating a preventive nuclear strike on ISIS supported the first use of nuclear weapons, but this number dropped to 18% among those who read the news story. Similarly, we find that 23% of Independents who were not exposed to the ISIS story supported the principle of a nuclear first strike, but only 21% of those who read the story expressed this view. Even among Republicans we see no evidence of the rallying effect of the Trump/Evans rhetoric that we observed with regard to the Iran deal. Support for first use among Republicans is nearly twice as high as among Democrats and Independents when Republican subjects do not receive a first use cue. But support for this policy actually dropped by 1% when Republicans heard either Trump or Evans advocate a nuclear preventive strike on ISIS. Once again, Republicans who expressed support for the norm appear to have internalized the attitude sufficiently that they did not respond to elite co-partisan cues encouraging them to change their view.

On balance, these results seem encouraging for those who support the nuclear taboo, the normative underpinnings of American nuclear strategy, and American grand strategy as it stands more generally. However, supporting the principle of no first use and supporting the policy in practice may not be the same thing (Press et. al. 2013; Sagan and Valentino 2017). For example, individuals who express support for the norm of free speech, may be very willing to silence the voices of those with whom they disagree (Prothro and Grigg 1960; Sullivan et. al. 1982). Moreover, policy questions – including those regarding the use of nuclear weapons – are never resolved in principle. They must always be implemented in practice. So perhaps elite rhetoric would have encouraged some of our subjects to support violating the nuclear taboo in practice, even if they continued to espouse support for the no first use principle.

In order to address this question, we also asked our subjects about the specific nuclear first use scenario highlighted in our experimental treatment: a preventive strike against ISIS. Specifically, we asked, “Some Americans favor the use of tactical nuclear weapons against ISIS as a way to quickly end the conflict and save lives. Others oppose first-use of nuclear

weapons as immoral and likely to make other nations eager to develop nuclear weapons of their own. Which comes closer to your view?"

Note that this wording gives respondents permission either to support or oppose a nuclear strike on ISIS by letting them know that other people had taken either side of the issue. Moreover, the question provided them with both normative and practical arguments on each side of the issue. The question gives subjects the opportunity to justify first use both as a way to save lives and as a practical means to end the conflict swiftly. At the same time, the question reminds them of the moral proscription against first use in the nuclear taboo as well as the practical argument that first use would fuel nuclear proliferation. Finally, by focusing on ISIS – a terrorist group that is widely reviled and was responsible for terrorist attacks on U.S. soil – the question gives subjects maximal room to respond to the elite cue.

### **Figure 6 Around Here**

Figure 6 displays the percentage of our subjects who support a nuclear first strike against ISIS by party identification and by news treatment. Here we can see that the transition from principle to practice does indeed seem to lead some additional subjects to support a nuclear first strike. Overall, about 31% of our respondents expressed support for a nuclear first strike against ISIS, as compared to 27% who expressed support for a first strike in principle. This increase in support exists across party affiliation. Democrats were about 7% more likely to support first use when ISIS is mentioned, while Republicans were about 9% more supportive in this context. This increase brings Republican support for a strike on ISIS up to a strikingly high 47%, and the gap between Democrats and Independents on the one hand, and Republicans on the other remains statistically significant.

However, despite the increases in support for a first strike, we see that elite rhetoric continues to have no impact on attitudes toward nuclear first use, even in the context of a real-world scenario involving ISIS. Democratic support for a nuclear strike against ISIS drops from 29% to 23% when they are exposed to Republican rhetoric advocating the strike, and support among Independents drops ever so slightly from 20% to 19% in response to the cue. Most importantly, Republican support for a strike against ISIS drops from 47% to 46% when they are exposed to Trump or Evans advocating for the strike. None of these changes approach standard levels of statistical significance.

Thus, like Sagan et. al. (2017; see also Sagan and Valentino 2013), we find that a significant segment of the American public is willing to support a nuclear first strike under some plausible real-world scenarios. Moreover, we also find evidence of some partisan divide over this issue, with a substantial number of Republicans expressing opposition to the taboo, and even more expressing a willingness to violate the norm in practice. At the same time, our results also demonstrate that Republican support for nuclear non-proliferation and the nuclear taboo does appear to be quite stable. That is, those Republicans who support the norm appear to have internalized its values sufficiently that their attitude cannot be swayed by elite co-partisan messaging, even in the midst of an intense and hotly tested presidential campaign.



Taken as a whole, our results support the “strong norm” hypothesis, as well as the “taboo” hypothesis. Both the NPT and the nuclear taboo are generally quite popular with the American public. Moreover, in the midst of a very closely contested and extremely bitter partisan campaign, Republican rhetoric undermining these norms had no impact whatsoever on Republican support for these principles, despite the fact that Republicans were the least supportive partisan group in our sample. The one point of weakness for the non-proliferation and no first use norms was that Republicans did reduce their estimate of the importance of the NPT in response to partisan critiques. In the longer term, one could imagine that a secular decline in public perceptions of the importance of the NPT could eventually open the door to undermining support for its principles altogether.

Public attitudes toward nuclear no first use, however, were almost entirely impervious to the effects of elite rhetoric. Support for first use might be higher than advocates of the nuclear taboo would like to observe – especially within the Republican party. But overall support for the taboo among our subjects was fairly strong, and Republican supporters of no first use were not affected by campaign rhetoric pressing them to change their view. Even when we asked about a specific scenario involving a first-strike against a reviled and threatening terrorist group and reminded subjects of the expediency of a strike, Republican supporters of the nuclear taboo were unmoved by partisan rhetoric. Thus, while public support for non-proliferation and the nuclear taboo are by no means universal, support for those norms appears to be reasonably robust. President Trump will have his work cut out for him if he wishes to undermine public support for those norms in the longer run.

## **Conclusions**

Many aspects of American foreign policy have developed a “taken for granted” quality among observers and analysts of international politics. Among the most important of these points of consensus are the norms underpinning U.S. nuclear strategy. The rise of Donald Trump to the White House raises both the need and the opportunity to examine the robustness of popular support for the norms of nuclear non-proliferation and no first use. Trump’s rhetoric directly critiqued both of these norms in the context of an intensely partisan presidential campaign, creating an opportunity to observe Republican commitments to these norms.

While we do observe some significant partisan variation in support for the NPT and the nuclear taboo, our results also suggest that those who endorse the nuclear norms appear to have internalized their beliefs strongly enough to resist pressure from co-partisan elites to change their views. Our results regarding the perceived importance of the NPT reveal some signs of weakness for this norm, but the overall pattern of results suggests some independent thinking on the part of the public. Moreover, our results suggest that President Trump may be swimming against a fairly strong popular current if he seeks to alter American grand strategy with regard to nuclear weapons.

Table 1: Analysis of Variance Across Treatment Conditions

	Iran Deal	Nuclear Proliferation	Strike ISIS	P-value
Paul Evans				
Republican	0.351	0.332	0.372	0.631
Ideology	3.188	3.261	3.23	0.733
Age	5.621	5.119	5.291	0.189
Education	3.543	3.373	3.426	0.307
Unemployment	0.070	0.082	0.074	0.871
White	0.813	0.772	0.822	0.320
Sex	1.488	1.515	1.508	0.821
Military Experience	0.113	0.142	0.112	0.505
Hawk or Dove	5.770	5.586	5.628	0.751
Political Knowledge	2.805	2.821	2.686	0.446
Donald Trump				
Republican	0.301	0.292	0.330	0.601
Ideology	3.170	3.314	3.222	0.331
Age	4.703	5.310	5.337	0.036*
Education	3.427	3.467	3.312	0.506
Unemployment	0.081	0.066	0.068	0.802
White	0.763	0.771	0.753	0.878
Sex	1.513	1.483	1.513	0.739
Military Experience	0.136	0.111	0.125	0.692
Hawk or Dove	5.508	5.561	5.581	0.951
Political Knowledge	2.564	2.616	2.652	0.760

Figure 1

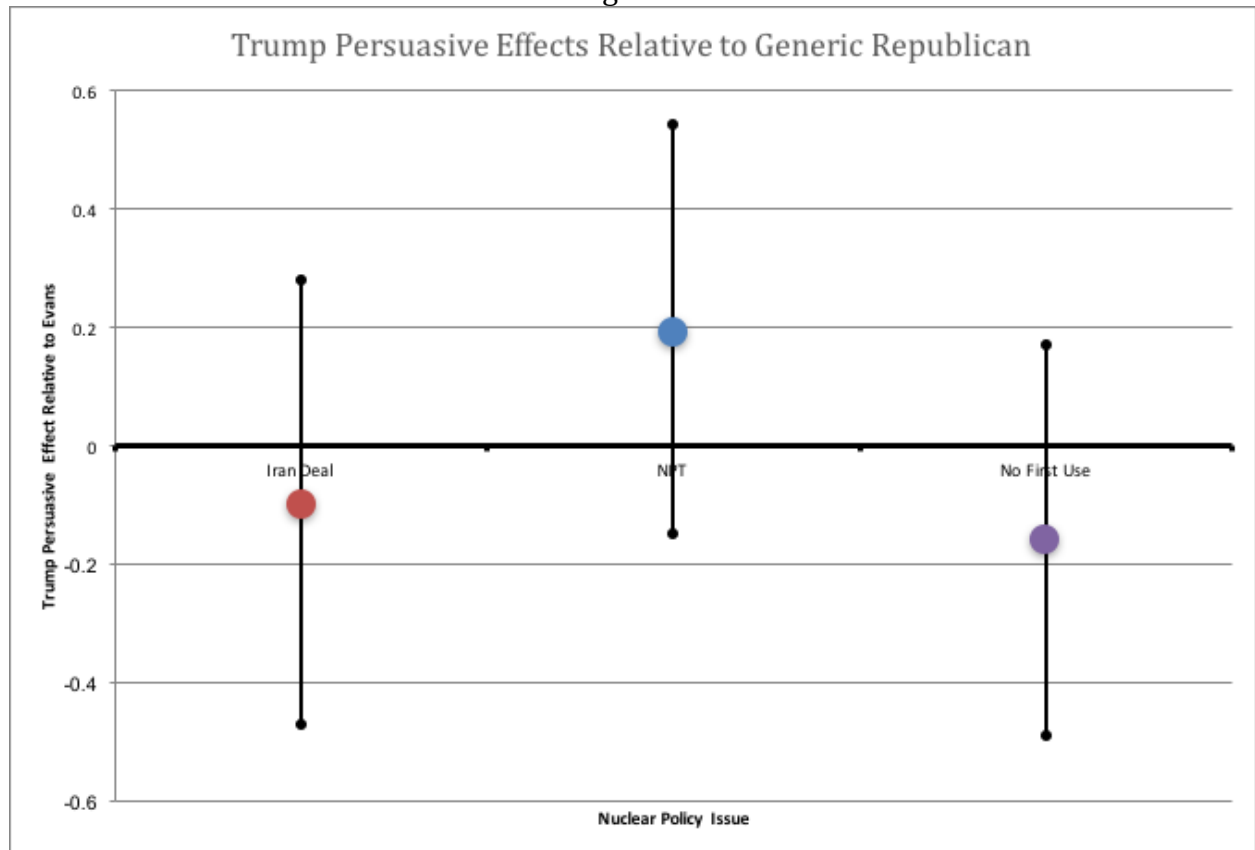
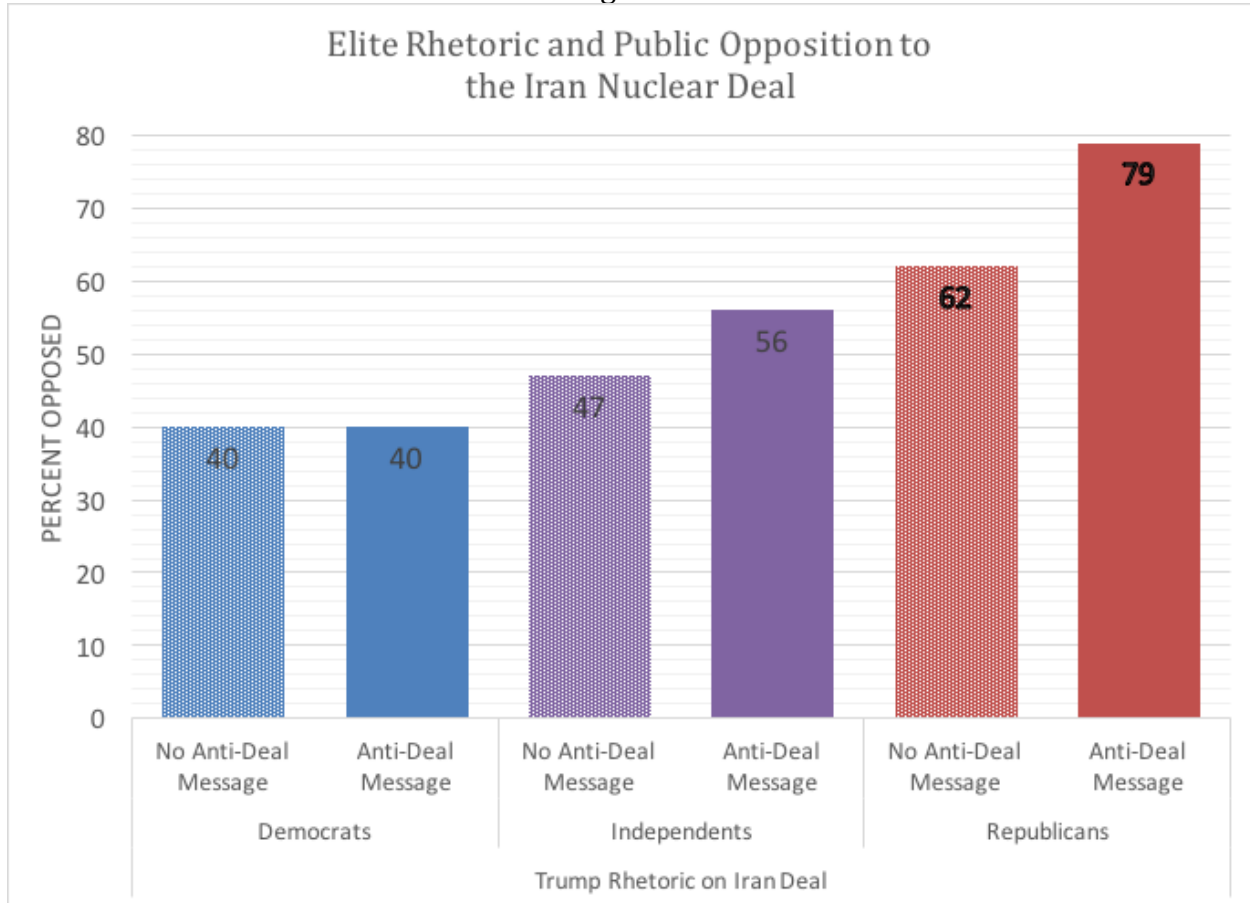


Figure 2



Note: Bold = Treatment Effect Statistically Significant,  $p < .05$

Figure 3

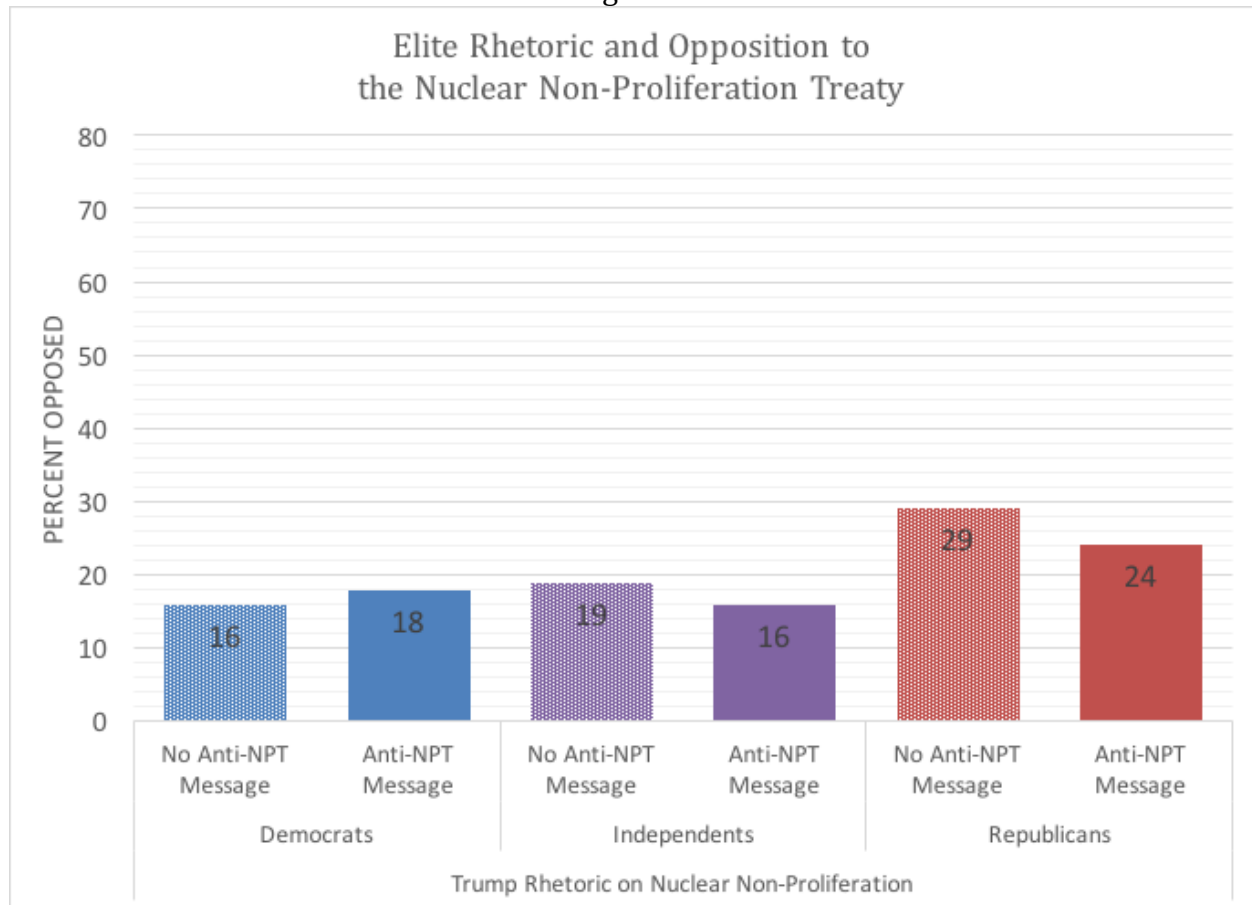
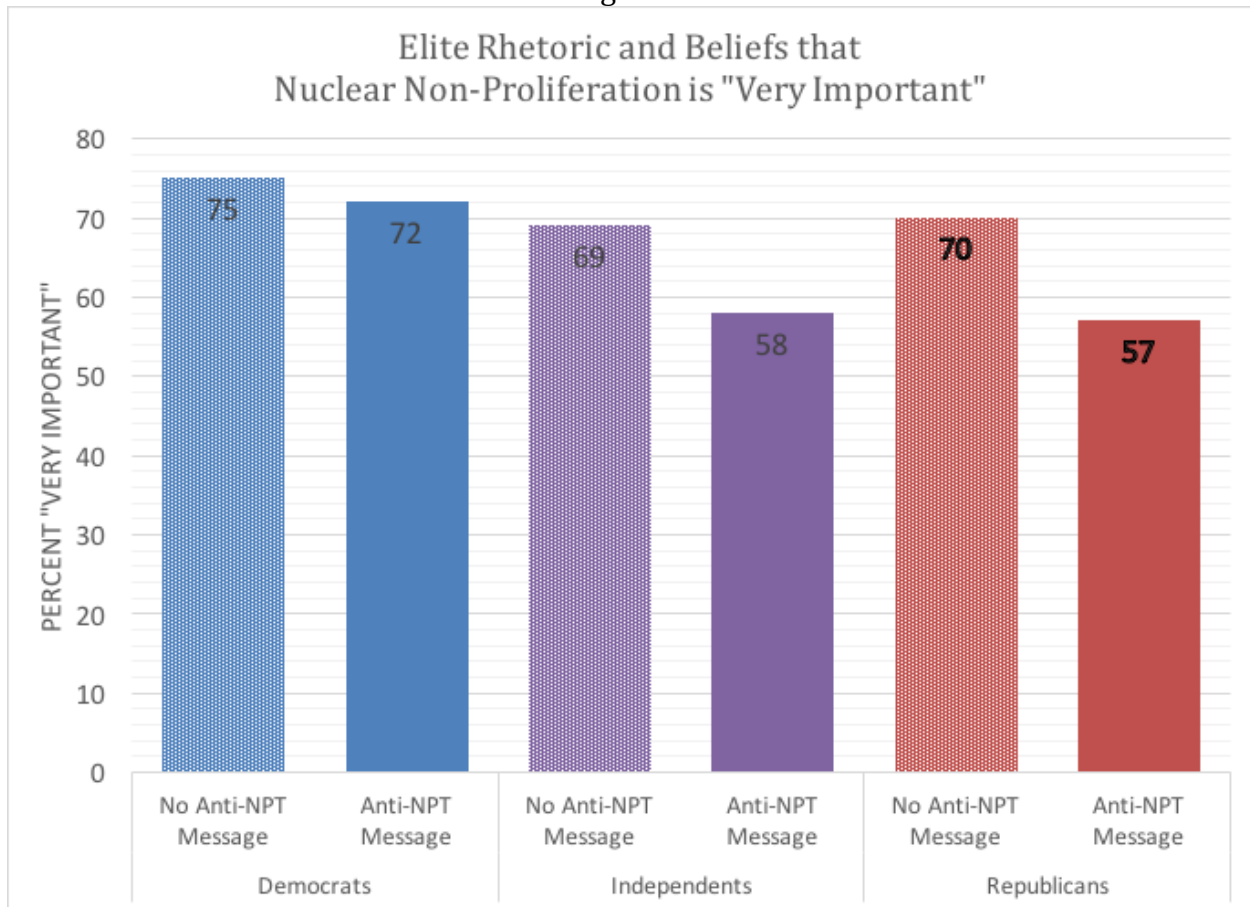


Figure 4



Note: Bold = Treatment Effect Statistically Significant,  $p < .05$

Figure 5

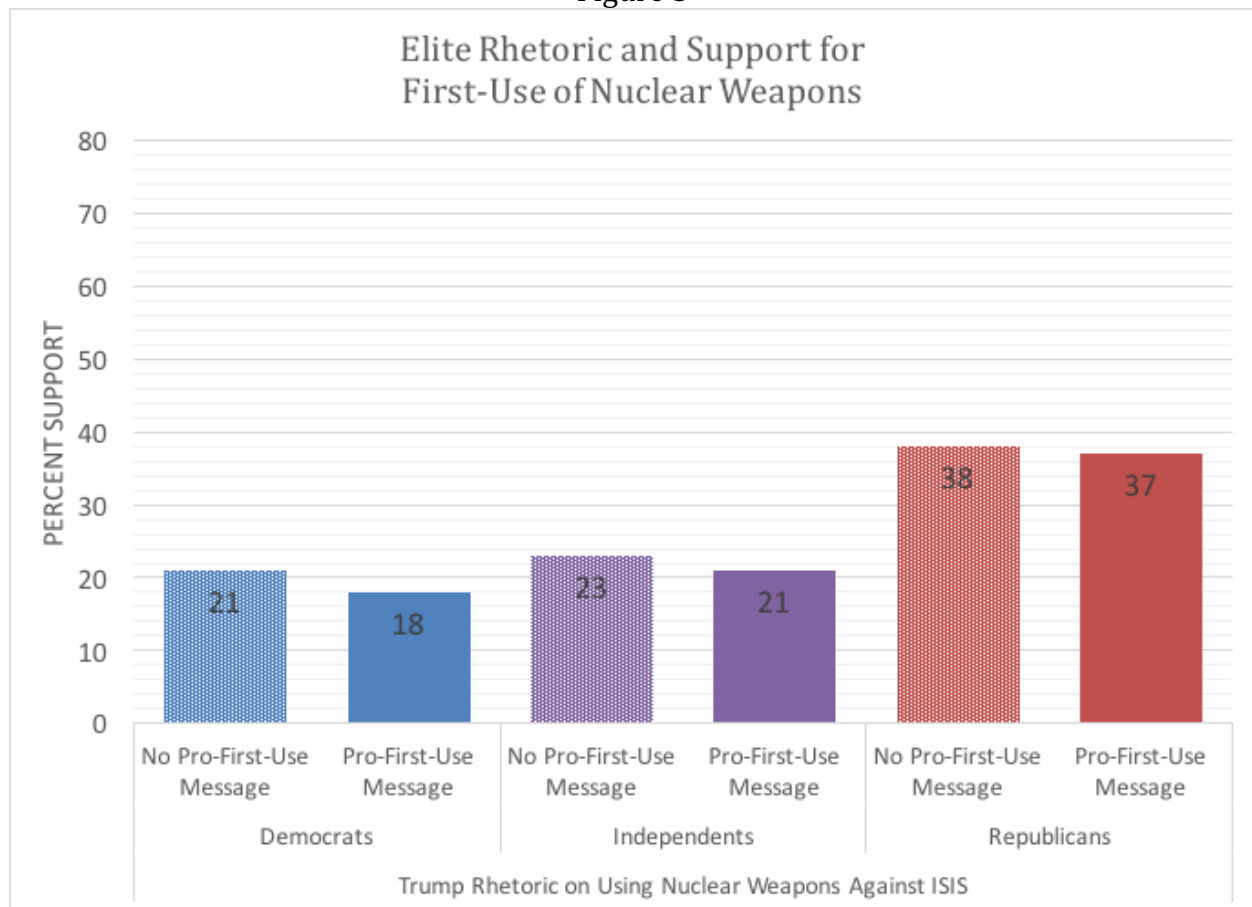
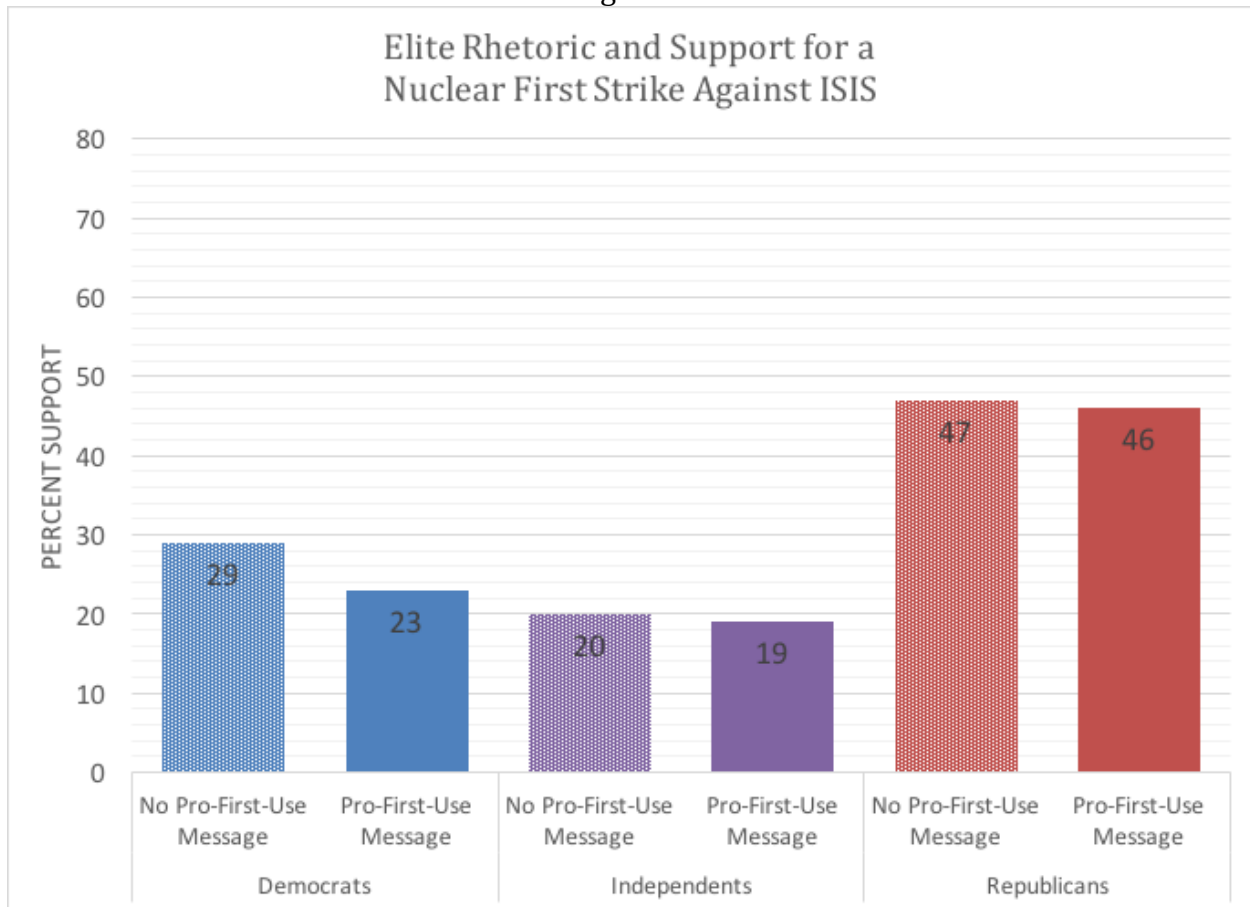


Figure 6





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