

THE LEFT-WING PEACE & THE RIGHT-WING PEACE

Joshua Schwartz¹ and Dominic Tierney²

Abstract

How strong is the nexus between domestic and international politics? The democratic peace contends that democracies do not fight interstate wars against each other. However, we argue the impact of domestic ideology on international politics is broader than just democracy versus nondemocracy. In addition to the democratic peace, we contend there is also a “left-wing peace” and a “right-wing peace,” where people are less likely to support the use of force against countries that share their left-wing or right-wing ideology on social and cultural issues—like immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ rights—as well as economic issues. Observers view out-ideology states as more threatening than in-ideology states due to out-group bias, which is exacerbated by increasing polarization. Two survey experiments among the American public, and an analysis of militarized interstate disputes, provide strong evidence for our argument. Respondents in our primary experiment are about 27% less likely to support punitive action—like using military force and imposing sanctions—against foreign countries that share their left-right ideology compared to ones that do not. States that have similar left-right ideologies are also about 50% less likely to engage in militarized disputes. These effects hold independent of whether a foreign country is democratic or nondemocratic, and the left/right peace coexists along with the democratic peace. Our theory connects major literatures across political science subfields, including social identity theory, political polarization, and the democratic peace. It significantly contributes to debates about whether politics “stops at the water’s edge” and the impact of polarization on political violence.

¹ Assistant Professor of International Relations, Carnegie Mellon University, joshschwartz@cmu.edu.

² Claude C. Smith '14 Professor of Political Science, Swarthmore College, dtierne1@swarthmore.edu.

One of the foundational debates in international relations (IR) concerns the relationship between domestic politics and international politics. For example, realist and other third-image theories assume away countries' state-level and individual-level characteristics and prioritize international systemic factors (Waltz 1979). By contrast, liberal scholars often focus on domestic-level factors, like the democratic peace, which holds that democracies rarely fight interstate wars against each other. One important way that domestic and international politics can interact is ideology. Indeed, scholars contend that ideology is one factor underpinning the democratic peace—democratic publics and leaders see certain domestic institutions and processes (e.g., contested elections) as legitimate, and foreign representative regimes as unthreatening (Haas 2005; Owen IV 2010; Tomz and Weeks 2013).

However, we argue the impact of domestic ideology on foreign policy is broader than just democracy versus nondemocracy. Another type of ideology that shapes attitudes toward foreign affairs and impacts state behavior is left-wing (or liberal) versus right-wing (or conservative) belief systems, and the degree of alignment between the observer's beliefs and the perceived left-right orientation of another country. In contemporary politics, a particularly salient left-right ideological divide relates to social and cultural issues like immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ rights—often characterized as the “culture war.” We contend the schism between liberals and conservatives on these issues extends beyond the water's edge. People tend to view foreign countries more or less threateningly based on the consistency between their own left-wing or right-wing ideology on social and cultural issues and the respective country's perceived ideological lean.

During his first term, Donald Trump forged close relations with Brazil's right-wing leader Jair Bolsonaro, made Brazil a major non-NATO ally in 2019, and endorsed Bolsonaro's re-election campaign in 2022 over his left-wing opponent. On a visit to the White House in 2019, Bolsonaro said that Brazil and the United States, “stand side by side in their efforts to ensure liberties and respect to traditional family lifestyles...against the gender ideology.” He also backed Trump's border wall and

hostility towards immigrants: “The majority of potential immigrants do not have good intentions or do not intend to do the best or do good for the American people” (Colvin and Prengaman 2019).

Russian president Vladimir Putin highlighted the West’s acceptance of LGBTQ rights to justify the invasion of Ukraine: “They sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us...attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature” (Fisher 2022). The Kremlin’s 2021 national security strategy also strikingly referenced “traditional values” 20 times, and Patriarch Kirill, who heads the Russian Orthodox Church, blessed the invasion of Ukraine by arguing the West has made “the gay parade...a test of loyalty” (Edenborg 2022). Meanwhile, American conservatives sometimes laud Putin as a bulwark against secular liberal values. Former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon effused that “Putin ain’t woke—he is anti-woke,” and Tucker Carlson rhetorically wondered, “Has Putin ever called me a racist? Has he threatened to get me fired for disagreeing with him?” (Gabbatt 2022).

In 2024, right-wing American and European actors gathered at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, Hungary, to voice their shared opposition to “woke” ideology, including liberal immigration and gender policies. Hungary’s right-wing prime minister, Viktor Orbán (2024), declared, “Make America great again, make Europe great again!” In the U.S. presidential debate in September 2024, Donald Trump hailed Orbán as “a strong man. He’s a tough person. Smart...[Orbán said] you need Trump back as president” (Hoffman 2024).

The second Trump administration saw ideological alignment as a key driver of U.S. foreign policy. Trump railed against liberal states in Canada and Europe while speaking warmly about conservative Hungary and frequently declining to criticize right-wing Russia. Vice President J.D. Vance castigated European states for allegedly restricting the freedom of speech of conservatives, and tacitly supported the far-right German party, Alternative for Germany. In one post on Truth Social in

2025, Trump said, “We should spend less time worrying about Putin, and more time worrying about migrant rape gangs...So that we don’t end up like Europe!”

Meanwhile, Democrats routinely express approval of liberal countries in Europe and elsewhere, and look to build connections with like-minded actors around the world. In an official memorandum to executive branch agencies in 2021, Joe Biden made the promotion and protection of LGBTQ rights a key foreign policy priority, declaring, “The United States belongs at the forefront of this struggle” (Avery 2021). In 2024, former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (2024) called the right-wing Orbán “the democracy-killing Hungarian dictator.” Former Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz added that Trump “was asked for one world leader who is with him, and it was Orbán. My God, that’s all you need to know” (Spike 2024). Senator Bernie Sanders even praised certain domestic policies in left-wing authoritarian regimes like Cuba and Venezuela (Krieg, Kaczynski, and Steck 2020).

The tendency to view the world through an ideological lens means that people sometimes see domestic out-ideology actors as more perilous than foreign in-ideology actors. “I always say we have two enemies,” said Trump. “We have the outside enemy, and then we have the enemy from within, and the enemy from within, in my opinion, is more dangerous than China, Russia and all these countries” (Forrest and Stracqualursi 2024). This kind of thinking may heighten the likelihood that domestic political schisms will extend beyond the water’s edge and bleed over into foreign policy.

We develop a theory where the degree of ideological alignment between the observer and the potential target country shapes support for the use of force and other punitive actions like sanctions against that country. People on the political left see left-wing countries as less threatening and are less likely to back punitive action against those countries (compared to right-wing countries). We label this dynamic the “left-wing peace.” Meanwhile, people on the political right see right-wing countries as less threatening and are less likely to back punitive action against those countries (compared to left-

wing countries). We categorize this dynamic the “right-wing peace.” The “left/right peace” coexists with the democratic peace: shared left/right ideology and a shared democratic regime type both independently decrease support for the use of force and sanctions.

To test our theoretical argument, we conducted two survey experiments on national samples of the American public. Adopting an experimental approach helps overcome challenges to internal validity that prior (and valuable) case study research on the impact of left-right orientation faces (e.g., Haas 2003), such as selection on the dependent variable, omitted variables bias, and reverse causation (Weisiger 2011; Hundley 2020). Here, we extend the experimental framework developed by Tomz and Weeks (2013) for testing the democratic peace. Specifically, we outlined a hypothetical scenario for the use of force involving nuclear proliferation and randomly varied the potential target country’s regime type (democracy or nondemocracy) and prevailing left-wing or right-wing ideology with respect to cultural issues like LGBTQ rights, abortion, and immigration, as well as other factors like its predominant race, alliance status, and trade relationship with the United States. We find strong evidence for both the democratic peace *and* the left/right peace. Most strikingly, respondents are about 27% less likely to support punitive action against foreign countries that do share their left-wing or right-wing ideology relative to those countries that do not. Moreover, there is no statistically significant difference in the effect sizes between the democratic peace and the left/right peace. In other words, whether a foreign country protects abortion, immigration, and gender rights, or whether the country protects electoral rights, has about the same impact on the U.S. public’s willingness to use force or impose sanctions against that country. Consistent with the logic of our argument, the left/right peace effect is stronger among Americans that are more affectively polarized (i.e., who indicate greater favorability towards the in-party and greater hostility towards the out-party).

One crucial question is external validity, and whether the left/right peace holds in other contexts, for example: (a) outside the United States, (b) for policymakers as well as the general public,

(c) for other dimensions of left-right ideology besides social and cultural issues, and (d) for other time periods. Here, the finding that experimental support for the democratic peace holds in multiple countries outside of the United States (Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020; Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024), and that experimental results on the public tend to also hold among elites (Kertzer 2022), strengthens the case for external validity. Still, to empirically probe external validity, we conduct a statistical analysis of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) from 1945 to 2010. Compared to prior statistical work that focuses on regime type (Weisiger 2011; Hundley 2020) and our experimental focus on social and cultural issues, our MIDs analysis assesses the impact of left-right *economic* ideology on conflict. We find that countries are about 50% less likely to engage in a MID if their leaders share the same left-wing or right-wing economic ideology. As in our experiments, the democratic peace effect coexists alongside the role of left-right ideology. Although internal validity is weaker with this test than our experiments, these results provide preliminary evidence that there may be a broader left/right peace effect beyond culture war issues, outside the United States, and over time.

Of course, a necessary condition for the left/right peace to hold is that the public and leaders actually perceive a given foreign country as either left-wing or right-wing. This raises several challenges, including the fact that countries are not all left-wing or right-wing, their ideological lean can change over time, the meaning of left-wing and right-wing can vary across time and space, and knowledge about a country's average ideological lean is not universal, especially among the general public. We provide empirical evidence in a follow-up experiment establishing this factor as a necessary condition for the left/right peace to hold among the public, and the significant finding in the MIDs analysis suggests that leaders are indeed paying attention to the left-right lean of foreign countries. Although more research is needed to further probe how these dynamics impact the strength of the left/right peace, it is important to note that all of these challenges are also applicable to the democratic peace. After all, not all actors in a country hold uniform support for democracy, the meaning of

democracy is subjective and can vary over time, and there are multiple dimensions of democracy just as there are multiple dimensions of left-right ideology. Despite these challenges, many scholars see the democratic peace as a valuable theoretical construct.

Our project makes several contributions. First, we find that left-wing and right-wing ideology is a key nexus between domestic and international politics. We connect major literatures in political science—social identity theory, political polarization, and the democratic peace—and build a theory about how ideology impacts public support for the use of force abroad. While much of the research on domestic ideologies in IR focuses on regime type, we also shed light on the importance of conservative and liberal ideologies. In addition, researchers have explored the relationship between polarization and support for political violence *domestically* (e.g., Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Piazza 2023), but scholars have largely overlooked the impact of polarization on support for the use of force *abroad*.³

Second, scholars have long debated whether politics “stops at the water’s edge.” After World War II, for example, U.S. foreign policy was often depicted as a domain of bipartisanship (Schlesinger Jr. 1949). Some recent scholars have also stressed that polarization over foreign policy is less evident than over domestic issues (Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2010; Busby et al. 2013). However, the dominant strain of recent research contends that bipartisanship over foreign policy is weakening, and polarization shapes foreign policy attitudes at both the elite and public level (e.g., Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007; Schultz 2017; Friedrichs and Tama 2024). Our work supports the latter school and suggests that polarization over domestic issues like immigration and LGBTQ rights may rebound onto the international stage and shape attitudes toward war and peace.

Third, the argument offers several policy implications. The prospects for a bipartisan foreign policy may be lower than commentators imagine, as liberals and conservatives view foreign countries through fundamentally different lenses. The democratic peace implies that the democracy-

³ There are some notable exceptions (e.g., Owen IV 2010; Maxey 2022).

nondemocracy distinction is determinative in threat perceptions, but leaders may respond to liberal-democratic versus conservative-democratic countries differently. For example, a right-wing populist leader—such as Trump—may seek to coerce, or even fight, a left-leaning democracy, or they may go easy on a right-leaning autocracy. Election victories for left-wing or right-wing leaders could radically change the makeup of a country’s perceived list of friends and enemies, even among fellow democracies, impeding a consistent national security policy (Schultz 2017). The left/right peace may also incentivize foreign states to engage in election interference to help an in-ideology leader, especially because even the domestic reaction to foreign election interference is viewed through an ideological lens (Tomz and Weeks 2020). In addition, leaders may strategically try to accentuate their ideological similarity with certain foreign actors to curry favor. For example, some commentators argue Putin’s “war on woke” is partly motivated by the search for allies among conservatives abroad (Zygar 2024).

IDEOLOGY IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Drawing on Haas (2005, 5-6), we define political ideologies “as the principle upon which a particular group attempts to legitimate its claim to rule and the primary institutional, economic, and social goals to which it swears allegiance. Ideologies are, in short, particular visions for ordering *domestic* politics...[Ideologies are also] inherently transnational phenomena, meaning that people from different states can claim allegiance to the same set of ideological beliefs.” Therefore, ideology encompasses beliefs about the optimum political institutions (e.g., democracy versus autocracy), as well as beliefs about favored economic and social policies (e.g., a welfare state versus small government, or LGBTQ policy). Whereas the impact of foreign policy beliefs like isolationism on diplomacy is well-established (e.g., Mead 2002), the nexus between *domestic* political ideologies and foreign affairs is much less obvious, less studied, and remains widely contested.

Haas (2005) contends that the degree of similarity between countries’ domestic ideologies—which include socioeconomic ideologies in addition to regime type—impacts threat perceptions and

thus the quality of relations between states. This argument breaks from neorealist assumptions that threat perceptions are driven solely by a state's material power rather than the content of their ideology (Waltz 1979). For example, Haas (2005) provides historical evidence that Napoleon's anti-aristocracy domestic ideology was threatening to European nobles, even though Napoleon was a fellow autocratic monarch and thus was potentially less of a danger to the legitimacy of monarchy as a system. Owen IV (2010) contends that ideological factors like religious similarity impact the likelihood that countries use military force for regime change. He highlights the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism in the 16th to 18th centuries, as well as divides in the Muslim world today between secularism and Islamism. Oren and Hays (1997) provide statistical evidence that developed socialist states are less conflict prone in general than other types of regimes, including democracies. Relatedly, some studies find that right-wing governments are generally more likely to be involved in conflict than left-wing governments (e.g., Palmer, London, and Regan 2004). Tomz and Weeks (2019) find evidence, in a series of experiments, that citizens in the United States and the United Kingdom are less likely to support the use of force against countries that uphold human rights and are more likely to support war against countries that violate them by torturing or imprisoning citizens because of their beliefs.

The most influential argument about domestic ideology and foreign policy is the democratic peace theory, which holds that elected regimes rarely, if ever, fight each other. Strong macro-level evidence for this argument has been found in observational statistical analyses of interstate conflicts (e.g., Doyle 1986; Oneal and Russett 1991), and compelling micro-level evidence for the democratic peace has been found in survey experiments among members of the public (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020; Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024). While some scholars argue the democratic peace is actually a capitalist peace driven largely by economic disincentives for war (Gartzke 2007), contract-intensive economies (Mousseau 2009; 2013), or increased domestic economic privatization (McDonald 2007), others find that the empirical link

between *dyadic* democracy and peace remains stubbornly strong (Dafoe 2011; Ray and Dafoe 2018). As Imai and Lo (2021, 916) conclude from a sensitivity analysis, “We find that the positive association between democracy and peace is at least five times as robust as that between smoking and lung cancer.”

Scholars have proposed a number of logics to explain the democratic peace: democratic institutions introduce checks and balances that constrain the rush to war (Russett 1994), elected leaders face audience costs that convey information about their interests and resolve and stop crises from escalating (Fearon 1994), or democracies are unusually tough opponents (Reiter and Stam 2002). Scholars have also highlighted the role of ideology and mass public beliefs in spurring the democratic peace. Democratic publics tend to see other democracies as less threatening because they are part of the same “in-group” and share values and norms such as non-violence (Maoz and Russett 1993; Hayes 2012). Employing survey experiments, scholars found that members of the public in democratic states perceive democracies as less threatening than autocracies, even holding constant other factors (Tomz and Weeks 2013). Qualitative historical case studies support this contention. For example, Richard Nixon wanted to take a tougher stance towards India during the 1971 Bangladesh War, but he was constrained by the belief that the U.S. public would not view a fellow democracy as threatening (Hayes 2012).

Following prior work, we thus pre-registered the existence of a democratic peace effect, whereby citizens in democracies should be less supportive of using force against fellow democracies and countries should be less likely to engage in military conflict against sister democracies. However, our key point of departure from prior work is to argue that regime type is not the only element of domestic ideology that impacts foreign affairs.

THE LEFT-WING PEACE AND THE RIGHT-WING PEACE

We theorize that another key domestic ideological cleavage that impacts international politics is whether the observer and target country are left-wing or right-wing.⁴ Our pre-registered claim is that left-wing people are less supportive of using force and imposing sanctions against fellow left-wing countries than right-wing countries, and vice-versa for right-wing people. We term this dynamic the left/right peace (summarized in Table 1). We also contend these effects can coexist with the democratic peace, and may help to explain why there can be conflict (broadly defined) between some democracies, as well as an absence of conflict between some democratic and autocratic countries.

Table 1: Left/Right Ideology and Support for Punitive Action

		Foreign Country	
		Left-Wing	Right-Wing
Observer	Left-Wing	Lower Support	Higher Support
	Right-Wing	Higher Support	Lower Support

The concepts of “left-wing” and “right-wing” date back to the French Revolution, where radicals sat on the left side of the National Assembly and conservatives sat on the right side. Left-right divides have been prominent historically, from the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War through the Cold War. Defining left-wing and right-wing is far from straightforward because these terms can mean different things at different times to different people. Indeed, some scholars suggest the liberal-conservative spectrum is too simplistic (Martini 2015). But other scholars see this ideological distinction as meaningful, parsimonious, and useful (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009; Nincic and Ramos 2010). For example, political psychologists find that liberals and conservatives structure their preferences in distinctive ways (Conover and Feldman 1984). Liberalism (or progressivism or left-wing) emphasizes regulated capitalism, state activism, equality, and equity.

⁴ There may be other dimensions of domestic political ideology that impact international politics as well. Although analyzing all of them is outside the scope of this project, we contend that it is reasonable to focus our analysis on two macro-level, ideal type cleavages: regime type and left-right orientation.

Conservatism (or right-wing) favors limited government, free markets, and cultural and religious traditionalism. One article summarizes the literature: “liberals (or those on the political left) prioritize the care and fairness foundations, while conservatives (or those on the political right) have moral systems that rely to a greater degree on the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations” (Blumenau and Lauderdale 2024, 3).

Historically, some of the sharpest left-right schisms were over economic issues like taxes, regulation, and welfare, but since the late 1970s and early 1980s “culture war” and identity issues like abortion, LGBTQ rights, and immigration have grown in salience both in the United States and around the world—sometimes termed the “new politics” or “post-material” politics (Inglehart 1997; Flanagan and Lee 2003; Gamm et al. 2024; Kriesi et al. 2006; de Vries, Hakhverdian, and Lancee 2013; Han 2024; O’Brian 2024). Culture war issues have now become a defining feature of modern politics that often clearly divides left-wing from right-wing actors. In one study of the American public, for example, Kertzer, Brooks and Brooks (2021, 1771) find that the “issue where we observe the most distinct partisan types is immigration,” and they also discover similar effects for abortion.⁵ In the U.S. context, scholars have argued that “the degree of partisan polarization on abortion and LGBTQ rights is without historical precedent” (Gamm et al. 2024, 131).

Looking beyond the United States, scholars have found that cultural issues are more prominent than economic ones in the party manifestos of Western European democracies (Hall 2020). In addition, European voters who care most about cultural issues are the most affectively polarized (Han 2024). Elite polarization on cultural and social issues also increases the affective polarization of European voters more than elite polarization on economic issues (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Harteveld 2021). According to Norris and Inglehart (2019, 50), “[T]oday the most heated political issues in Western societies are cultural, dealing with...immigration and border control...same-sex

⁵ They did not test partisan types when it comes to LGBTQ rights.

marriage and LGBTQ rights...” Views on cultural issues are so strongly held that voters tend to punish politicians more for shifting their positions on cultural issues rather than economic ones (Tavits 2007). The global salience of these issues can be observed from the role of anti-immigrant views fueling Brexit in the United Kingdom and the rise of far-right parties in France and Germany to how opposition to LGBTQ rights unites right-wing leaders from around the world, such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, and Vladimir Putin. None of this is to say that economic divides do not also remain highly relevant, but our contention is that schisms over cultural issues have become particularly germane in the current era.

The left-right divide also does not simply map onto the democracy-nondemocracy divide. In stable democracies, there is often a stark left-right schism even among those who favor democracy. Whereas the democracy-nondemocracy divide highlights, in large part (though certainly not exclusively), the *process* of governance (e.g., contested elections), the left-right divide focuses more on the *policy outcomes* (e.g., LGBTQ rights). States can be, for example, left-wing nondemocracies (e.g., espousing abortion rights but not protecting political rights), or right-wing democracies (e.g., limiting gay rights but featuring fairly free and contested elections).

Scholars have identified a number of variables that may determine public backing for war, including casualties (Mueller 1973), cost-benefit analysis (Larson 1996), perceptions of success and failure (Eichenberg 2005; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009), the military objective of the mission, such as restraining interstate aggression versus nation-building (Jentleson 1992), and, of course, regime type (Tomz and Weeks 2013). Building on seminal work by Haas (2005) and Owen IV (2010) in particular, we contend that the left-right divide—over contemporary cultural issues in particular—is also a crucial factor that shapes attitudes to the use of force and other punitive action.

We posit that people are less supportive of punitive action against in-ideology countries because they see these countries as less threatening compared to out-ideology countries.⁶ Social identity theory contends that people gain their sense of identity and self-worth through membership of an in-group, and they tend to approve of the in-group, subscribe to its prevailing norms, rules, and behaviors, and—an even *stronger* prediction—dislike the out-group (e.g., Brewer 2001). Therefore, people tend to see even in-ideology *foreign* countries as part of the same common in-group, trust these countries, are more supportive of their use of force, and are less supportive of the use of force or punitive action against them (e.g., Terman and Voeten 2018; Schwartz 2024). By contrast, they see out-ideology countries as part of the out-group, distrust these countries, see them as exhibiting hostile intent, and are more willing to use force against them (Hermann and Kegley Jr. 1995; Haas 2005; Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007). For instance, scholars have shown that cultural similarity reduces threat perception and may have a similar pacifying effect as the democratic peace (Henderson 1998; Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007). They have also demonstrated that the legitimacy of international organizations among the public is contingent on whether the institution is perceived as left-leaning or right-leaning, and whether this is congruent or not with the observer’s own orientation (Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth, and Tallberg 2024). At the extreme, out-ideology foreign countries might even be perceived as threatening a domestic regime’s very survival (Owen IV 2010).

Rising polarization in many countries—especially in the United States, which has an outsized impact on global politics—can also explain why the left/right peace may be particularly strong in the current era (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024; Coggins and Gruschow 2024). People may externalize their highly negative view of the out-ideology when they consider international issues.

⁶ Following Tomz and Weeks (2013), we also pre-registered an expectation that attacking in-ideology foreign countries would be viewed as more morally wrong.

American public beliefs about the safety of U.S. cities illustrate how ideology can impact threat perceptions. One poll in 2023 found that Democrats tended to rate American cities as “safe” compared to Republicans, but the partisan gap in threat perceptions was much larger with perceived left-wing cities like Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York compared to other U.S. cities like Dallas, Houston, and Miami. For example, 75% of Republicans saw Dallas as safe whereas only 22% of Republicans saw New York City as safe, even though the murder rate in Dallas was over three times as high as in New York City (Brenan 2023). Members of the public also assess foreign countries at least partially through the lens of ideology. For example, in 2025, 44% of Republicans held a favorable view of the European Union versus 78% of Democrats (Wike, Fetterolf, Clancy, and Lippert 2025). In 2020, 39% of Democrats held a favorable view of left-wing and authoritarian Cuba, compared to only 16% of Republicans (Smith 2020).

People not only see out-ideology countries as a threat to their state’s *international* security, but also see out-ideology countries as a threat *domestically*. People may believe that foreign and domestic actors will coordinate to advance dangerous ideological agendas at home using transnational ideological networks, as well as diffusion and demonstration effects (Owen IV 2010). There is a large literature on democratic and authoritarian diffusion and many of these mechanisms also apply to the spread of left-wing and right-wing ideas (Ambrosio 2010). Globalization and technological change provide states with greater opportunities to cooperate, compete, or meddle internally abroad to pursue ideological goals. For example, ideological kin states may act as a model for policy initiatives in other countries. Steve Bannon described Orbán as “Trump before Trump” (Krastev 2018), and Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law in 2022 was based in part on Hungarian legislation (Marantz 2022). The opposite can also occur—out-ideology foreign countries can pressure governments to adopt unwanted domestic policies. For example, Orbán and his chief of staff claimed that Hungary was unable to ban the annual Hungarian Pride parade because of the “American boot” on the Hungarian government’s

throat during the Biden administration: “the U.S. ambassador [to Hungary during the Biden administration] led the [Pride] march, which clearly showed that the world’s great powers supported it” (Faiola 2022). By contrast, when Trump returned to office, Orbán felt freer to pursue his ideal domestic policy: “But now the world has changed, and the Americans have called these types of ambassadors back home...It’s clear that [Pride] won’t have international protection” (Faiola 2022).

Ideological kin states may also develop international networks and coordinate to achieve shared goals. Putin aided far-right and populist groups in Europe and the United States by meddling in the 2016 presidential election to help Trump. Right-wing illiberal democracies like Hungary coordinate with right-wing nondemocracies like Russia, and build networks with like-minded groups in other democracies, such as conservative think tanks in the United States. In 2022, Orbán told the national CPAC conference: “I’m here to tell you that we should unite our forces...We must take back the institutions in Washington and Brussels. We must find friends and allies in one another” (Smith 2022). In 2023, liberal Bernardo Arévalo won an election victory in Guatemala. The Biden administration pressed for a peaceful democratic transition, whereas Ric Grenell, Trump’s former acting director of national intelligence and ambassador to Germany, traveled to Guatemala, encouraged Guatemalan conservatives to block the inauguration on the basis of supposed electoral fraud, and claimed that Washington was “pushing leftwing ideas” and trying to “intimidate conservatives” in Latin America (Gramer 2024). Elon Musk, head of the Trump Administration’s Department of Government Efficiency, urged German voters to support the far-right Alternative for Germany in an upcoming election (Nicholls, Tanno, and Brennan 2025). Kristi Noem, the sitting U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, explicitly endorsed a right-wing candidate for the Polish presidency, saying, “he needs to be the next president of Poland,” and implied doing so will allow Poland to “continue to have a U.S. presence here, a military presence”, whereas failure to do so could lead to abandonment (Gera 2025). According to Noem, the main sin of the primary left-wing candidate for

the Polish presidency is related to immigration: “...you are threatened with a leader who is on the ballot who would take all of that [border] protection away from you...” (Gera 2025). Liberal countries also routinely coordinate to advance shared ideological positions. For example, the European Union uses foreign aid to encourage the spread of left-wing values abroad, such as LGBTQ rights (Thiel 2022). Here, in-group bias may sometimes lead observers to exaggerate the degree of cooperation by left-wing and right-wing actors around the world, but even so, the danger will *feel* real (Hermann and Kegley Jr. 1995).

We further posit that a key factor determining the strength of the left/right peace is the level of domestic affective polarization. The more negatively that individuals feel towards the ideological out-group, and the more favorably they feel towards the ideological in-group, the greater their threat perceptions towards the out-group and the stronger the left/right peace effect.⁷

We expect the democratic peace effect and the left/right peace effect to coexist. The two ideological dynamics may sometimes clash—how should a conservative view a left-wing democracy relative to a right-wing dictatorship?—but the effects should both hold on average and thus have an additive impact. Still, while our expectation was not strongly held, we did pre-register a hypothesis that the democratic peace might be somewhat attenuated for out-ideology countries relative to in-ideology countries because foreign countries might get less credit for being a democracy if they are the “wrong kind” of democracy. In other words, the degree of ideological alignment may shape beliefs about whether a foreign state is a “true” democracy or not—suggesting a potential interaction between the left/right peace and the democratic peace. Krishnarajan (2023), for example, finds that the public

⁷ This expectation was pre-registered. Owen IV (2010) makes a similar argument about “transnational ideological polarization.” However, he frames it as more of a necessary condition for domestic political ideology to have an impact, whereas we consider it more of a moderator impacting the marginal effect size of domestic ideology on foreign policy attitudes. Though we agree with the general idea that some baseline level of ideological polarization is likely necessary for the left/right peace to operate.

often rationalizes undemocratic policies by in-partisans as democratic, and sees pro-democratic policies by out-partisans as undemocratic.

Our theory makes several key points of departure from prior literature. First, contra neorealist and other third-image theories (Waltz 1979), domestic political ideologies can have a significant impact on international politics.

Second, regime type is not the only domestic ideological factor that matters. Instead, left-wing versus right-wing ideology may also shape attitudes to the use of force. Here, our argument builds on the work of scholars like Owen IV (2010), Oren and Hays (1997), and Haas (2005), who all suggest that other elements of domestic ideology—besides the democracy-nondemocracy divide—may impact international politics. Nevertheless, our work differs and builds on these prior studies in several ways. Owen IV (2010) focuses less on left-right schisms than he does on religious and regime type divides. For example, besides analyzing the role of religion, he studies the battle between absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, and republicanism in the 18th to 19th centuries, and fights between fascism, communism, and liberal democracy in the 19th to 20th centuries.

Whereas Oren and Hays (1997) highlight a *monadic* effect whereby developed socialist states are less conflict prone in general than other types of regimes, our argument relates to *dyadic* relations between states.⁸ Though we expect in-ideology countries to be less conflict prone, we have no hypotheses about whether left-wing or right-wing countries will be more or less likely to go to war in general. This is, instead, a task we leave to other research (e.g., Palmer, London, and Regan 2004).

Similarly, while Tomz and Weeks (2019) find support for the use of force among U.S. and U.K. citizens is lower when foreign countries uphold human rights (e.g., do not torture citizens for their beliefs), they do not argue or find that this effect is conditional on the observer's left-wing or

⁸ Our argument is also broader than Oren and Hays' (1997) in that we expect an impact not just for left-wing countries (e.g., socialist countries), but also right-wing ones.

right-wing orientation. The likely reason is that while some may consider policy debates about immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ people to be human rights issues, there is a much greater consensus in countries like the U.S. that the kind of extreme behavior Tomz and Weeks (2019, 185) study—torturing or imprisoning “citizens because of their beliefs”—is wrong than there is about the proper approach towards left-right debates over immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ policy.

Our left/right peace theory builds most directly on Haas’ (2005, 5, emphasis added) work, which also argues that ideological differences in terms of “institutional, economic, and *social* goals” can drive threat perceptions. Still, he focuses less specifically on the left-right divide than we do and more on broader ideological schisms. Haas (2005, 33) also notes, “in the five historical periods examined, there are relatively few examples of leaders being torn by cross-cutting ideological loyalties.” By contrast, we argue that (and then test whether) the left/right peace can hold even when accounting for regime type. For instance, we contend that a conservative will be more supportive of using force against a left-wing country *even when* that country is democratic. We also make a methodological contribution relative to Haas (2005), which is described below.

The third main point of departure of this work is to argue that it is not just economic factors and ideologies that matter, but also social and cultural ones. For example, the focus we place on cultural and social policies related immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ rights is quite different from the variables a scholar like Gartzke (2007) spotlights, such as capital market openness and economic development. It also differs from the kinds of 20th century economic ideological divides Haas (2003; 2005) highlights. Nevertheless, our argument and the contention that even non-ideological economic factors shape war and peace are not mutually exclusive, just as we argue (and find) that the democratic peace and the left/right peace can coexist.

DETERMINING ANOTHER COUNTRY'S LEFT-RIGHT LEAN

A necessary condition for our theory to hold is that leaders or the public perceive a given foreign country as having a left-wing or right-wing ideological lean. We conceive of this as a country-level characteristic, which, in principle, should be a function of the perceived average views of the foreign country's leaders and citizens with some weights attached to each. We argue that at any one time, observers abroad oftentimes share a coherent view that, say, Sweden is generally—on average—a left-wing state.

This condition may raise several challenges. First, the foreign country will not be *all* liberal or conservative. Instead, different actors within the foreign country will hold varying ideological views, and some may be left-wing whereas others may be right-wing. Nevertheless, foreign observers will tend to adopt a heuristic and place countries in a certain ideological box as “left-wing” or “right-wing.” For example, observers generally concur that Hungary is right-wing and Norway is left-wing.

Second, the meaning of left-wing and right-wing vary across time and space. For example, British conservatives are generally more moderate than American conservatives, and the content of American conservative ideology has evolved over time. But in contemporary politics there is broad consensus about the left/right coding of specific cultural and social positions. For example, as discussed above, liberals and conservatives agree that defending transgender rights is a left-wing position. As long as observers can broadly identify sister (and rival) ideologies in foreign countries, we expect the left/right peace effect to generally hold.

Third, a country's perceived ideological lean may evolve over time, from more left-wing to more right-wing and back again. Foreign countries with frequent pivots from one ideology to another will likely have a weaker perceived left-right lean in the minds of observers, whereas countries that maintain enduring stances on left-right issues will have a stronger perceived ideological lean.

One can note that these (and other) challenges could equally be posed about the democratic peace. Although countries are typically labeled “democratic” or “autocratic” in the aggregate, not all citizens or leaders hold identical views on the optimum regime type. Democracy also exists on a continuum. For example, Iran holds elections that have real consequences even though the country can be reasonably thought of as nondemocratic. In addition, the perceived bounds of democracy vary over time. For instance, what passed for a radical democratic experiment in 18th century America would likely be viewed as a much more suspect democratic regime by today’s standards. Furthermore, some countries transition from nondemocracy to democracy, or vice-versa. Despite these issues, many scholars see democracy and nondemocracy as meaningful ideal type categories. We similarly argue that left-wing and right-wing are meaningful categories. However, it is important to note that we would not expect our theory to hold when foreign countries are not perceived as either left or right-wing due to one or more of the above challenges.

In practice, then, how do observers reach judgments about the left-right lean of a foreign state? One indicator noted above is consistent policies enacted over a sustained period. The left-right lean of a foreign country’s current leader will also likely have an outsized effect on beliefs, in part due to recency bias, where people tend to focus more on the latest examples of a phenomenon rather than the overall pool of data. Salience bias may also make the foreign leader’s views more significant in observers’ minds than the foreign public’s attitudes, since the leader’s beliefs are easier to perceive and more prominent in the media. Given that the ideological beliefs of a country’s current leader and the average beliefs of its citizens are often highly correlated and endogenous, focusing on the former may be a reasonable heuristic.

Of course, different observers will have different levels of information about a foreign country’s ideological lean. Elites may be relatively well-informed about the ideological lean of foreign states, whereas members of the public are more likely to be misinformed about international affairs

(e.g., Holsti 2004). Therefore, the public may access knowledge about another state's ideological lean through top-down drivers of public opinion, including elite and media cues (Guisinger and Saunders 2017), or bottom-up sources like cues from social peers (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017). For example, U.S. elites (e.g., Trump) or the media (e.g., Fox News or MSNBC) may label a foreign state as a model of left-wing or right-wing values, individuals may tell their friends and family about a foreign country's domestic policies, or the leader of the foreign state may visit the United States and endorse a left-wing or right-wing president or viewpoint. Still, given the information advantage leaders have, the left/right peace may be even more likely to hold at the elite level than the public level.

BUILDING MICROFOUNDATIONS USING SURVEY EXPERIMENTS

RESEARCH DESIGN

To the extent scholars have analyzed the role of domestic political ideologies—besides regime type—in impacting war and peace, the approach has often focused on case study research (Haas 2005; Owen IV 2010). Although extremely valuable, one methodological concern is selection on the dependent variable (Weisiger 2011; Hundley 2020). Given that it is easier to study cases where conflict did occur compared to when it did not, it is possible that ideological similarity may also be present in cases where conflict did not erupt. Endogeneity and reverse causation are also potential problems, as leaders of countries with pre-existing disputes may purposefully adopt different ideologies (Weisiger 2011). Finally, it is challenging to fully isolate the different ideological dimensions (e.g., regime type and left-right orientation) in case studies to test which factors have an independent effect. However, it is important to do so given that actors may sometimes be “torn by cross-cutting ideological loyalties” (Haas 2005, 33).

To move the literature forward and provide a causally identified test of our theory, we designed and carried out a national survey experiment on the American public. We chose to study U.S. public opinion because of the significant U.S. impact on foreign affairs. High levels of U.S. polarization also

make this, in one sense, a most-likely test of our theory, meaning if we do not find evidence for our argument here, then it is unlikely to hold elsewhere. Given these factors, the U.S. provides a useful case with which to test the *plausibility* of our argument. Similarly, scholars studying public support for theories like the democratic peace and the nuclear taboo started first by conducting experiments on the U.S. public (Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013; Tomz and Weeks 2013) before then testing the external validity of those results in other countries (Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020; Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022; Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024).

Following other prominent studies that have analyzed the democratic peace via survey experiments conducted on the public, we first inform respondents that a country is developing nuclear weapons and could have its first bomb within a matter of months (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Bell and Quek 2018; Rathbun, Parker, and Pomeroy 2024). We then randomly vary three primary factors related to the foreign country's characteristics.

First, to test the democratic peace, we manipulate whether the country in question is a democracy or not, using the same language as in prior studies. Second, to test whether ideological factors besides regime type matter, we offer our key intervention and contribution compared to prior literature and randomize whether the country's domestic politics are predominantly left-wing, right-wing, or whether no information is provided about its domestic politics. For instance, if the country is ideologically right-wing, we tell respondents, "The country's politics are very right-wing and conservative. For example, the country has significant laws that oppose things like immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ rights." As previously noted, prior research has demonstrated strong left-wing and right-wing types exist in the minds of the contemporary American public (and in non-U.S. publics) with respect to issues like abortion and immigration (e.g., Kertzer, Brooks and Brooks 2021).

Besides experimentally manipulating a country's regime type and left-right orientation, we also randomize whether the country's population is white or nonwhite following the work of Rathbun,

Parker, and Pomeroy (2024). By randomizing regime type, left-right orientation, and race, we are able to test whether each factor has an independent impact on public opinion (controlling for the other two factors) and whether the effects interact.

Our experimental design also accounts for other potential factors that could impact public opinion on the use of force. Prior work has found that a country's religion can matter (Owen IV 2010; Johns and Davies 2012; Chu and Lee 2023). To account for this, we inform respondents that the country's dominant faith is Christianity and thus control for this variable. This is the approach taken by Rathbun, Parker, and Pomeroy (2024), who argue that the existence of nonwhite Christian countries is more plausible than white non-Christian countries. In line with prior work, we also control for the country's military strength compared to the United States. Following prior studies, we randomize whether the country has, or has not, signed a military alliance with the United States, and whether the country does, or does not, have high levels of trade with the United States. Although our main goal in this study is not to evaluate the impact of these factors, by randomizing them we can wash out (on average) any impact they might have on the results, control for them in a regression, and increase the external validity of the study by testing whether the findings hold under different values of these variables. Finally, we adopt the approach suggested by Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey (2018) and ask respondents a placebo question at the end of the study about their perceptions of the country's wealth. By controlling for answers to this question in a regression, we can mitigate any confounding effect this might have on the results. The experimental design is summarized in Table 2.

In line with prior studies, our primary dependent variable measures support for a U.S. military attack against the country's nuclear sites. We also ask two additional outcome questions designed to probe the extent to which respondents would be willing to punish the foreign country. First, we ask about support for using the U.S. military to overthrow the foreign country's government—which would, of course, imply greater escalation than attacking the country's nuclear sites. Second, we ask

about support for imposing severe economic sanctions on the foreign country. This is, arguably, a less severe response than the other two dependent variable questions. To gain leverage on potential causal mechanisms, and following prior studies, we ask a series of questions to measure whether the foreign country poses a threat (Tomz and Weeks 2013).

Table 2: Experimental Design Summary

Factor	Values
Regime Type	Democracy Nondemocracy
Political Ideology	Left-Wing Right-Wing No Information Given
Race	White Nonwhite
Military Alliance with the United States	Yes No
High Levels of Trade with the United States	Yes No
Religion	Christianity
Military Strength	Half as strong as the United States

We carried out our experiment online in June 2024 on a Lucid sample of just under 2,700 respondents. Lucid uses quota sampling to match census benchmarks on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region. Research demonstrates that experiments fielded on Lucid are high-quality and replicate the findings of previous studies (Coppock and McClellan 2019). In line with best practices in the literature, we include a *pre-treatment* screener to weed out inattentive respondents (Aronow, Baron, and Pinson 2019). Though this experiment was fielded in a presidential election year, which could have marginally increased the salience of a foreign country’s left-right orientation, we doubt the results would differ much if carried out after the election given that the U.S. remained highly polarized in both periods. Moreover, some prior work has found that the impact of polarization on support for military intervention does not significantly differ before and after election season (Maxey 2022).

RESULTS

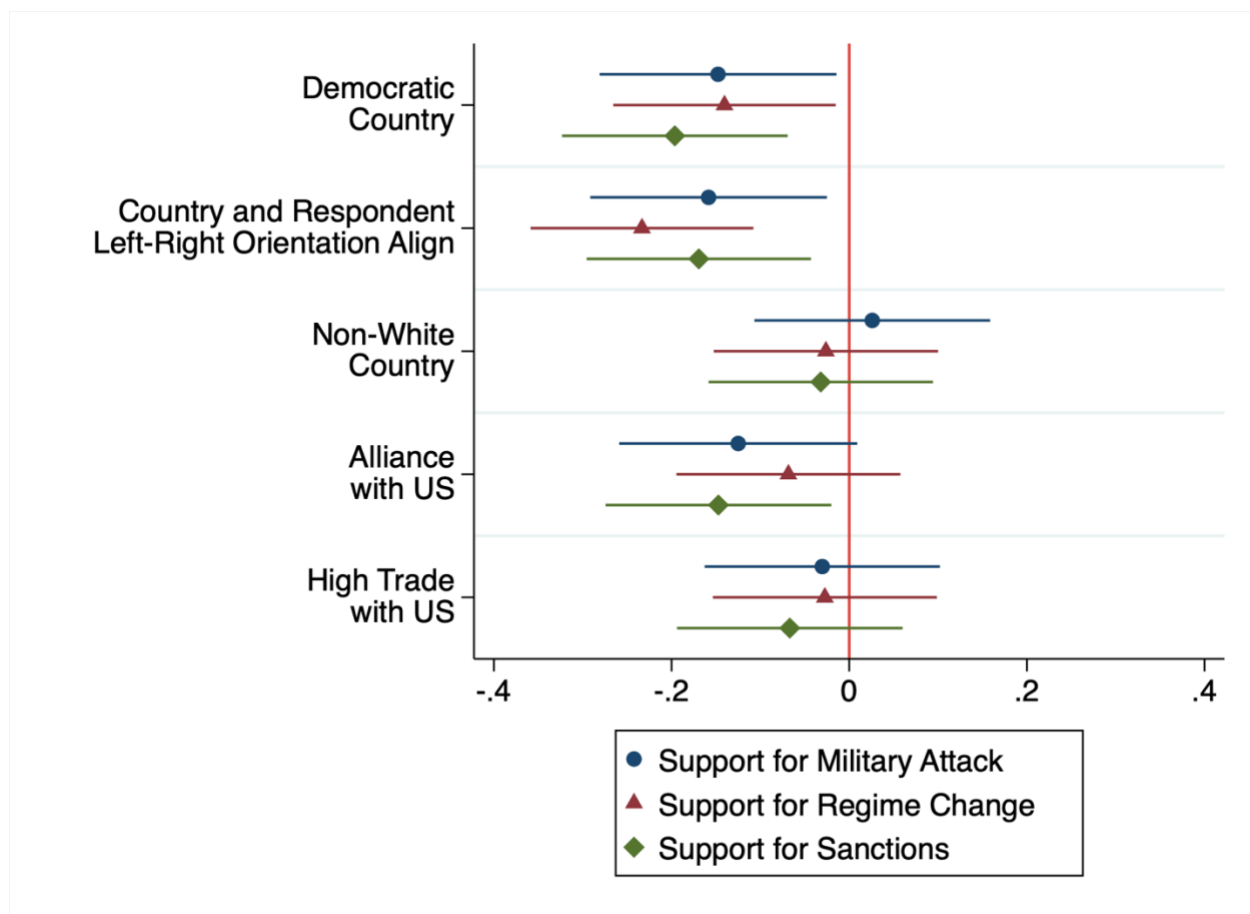
Per our pre-registered theoretical expectations, we find strong evidence for both the democratic peace *and* the left/right peace. We estimate separate regressions with our three principal outcome variables (measured on a 5-point scale), each of the factors we randomized in the experiment as explanatory variables, and a series of control variables (e.g., demographics, hawkishness, concern about nuclear proliferation, ethnocentrism, and respondents' perception of the foreign country's wealth).⁹ To conduct a simple test of our theory, we create a binary measure of whether the political identification of the respondent (Democrat or Republican) differed or not from the foreign country (left-wing or right-wing). For this analysis, we drop respondents that did not identify with either major political party and respondents that received no information about the foreign country's political ideology. The results are summarized in Figure 1. For simplicity, we omit displaying the results for the control variables.

As in prior studies on public opinion, we find evidence for the democratic peace, even when controlling for other factors like race. Respondents are significantly less likely to support military action or sanctions against the foreign country if it is a democracy. However, this is not the only characteristic of a country that matters. Respondents are also significantly less likely to support the use of military force or sanctions against a foreign country if its left-wing or right-wing political ideology matches their own ideology, even when controlling for factors like whether the foreign country is a democracy or a nondemocracy. The reverse holds as well: respondents are more supportive of punitive action against countries with a rival left-right orientation. Crucially, there is no statistically significant difference in the effect sizes between the democratic peace and the left/right peace. In other words, the two effects are about equally as powerful.

⁹ It is necessary to control for other factors since respondent political identification is not randomly assigned.

Both effects are also substantively significant as well as statistically significant. Collapsing the dependent variables into binary measures of support for military action or sanctions and estimating a series of logistic regressions reveals that respondents are (on average) 19.5% less likely to support punitive action against foreign democracies than nondemocracies. They are also about 27% less likely to support punitive action against foreign countries that share their political ideology compared to ones that do not.¹⁰

Figure 1: The Left-Wing Peace, Right-Wing Peace, and Democratic Peace



Note: Errors bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Control variables are not displayed.

¹⁰ These differences are also not statistically significant.

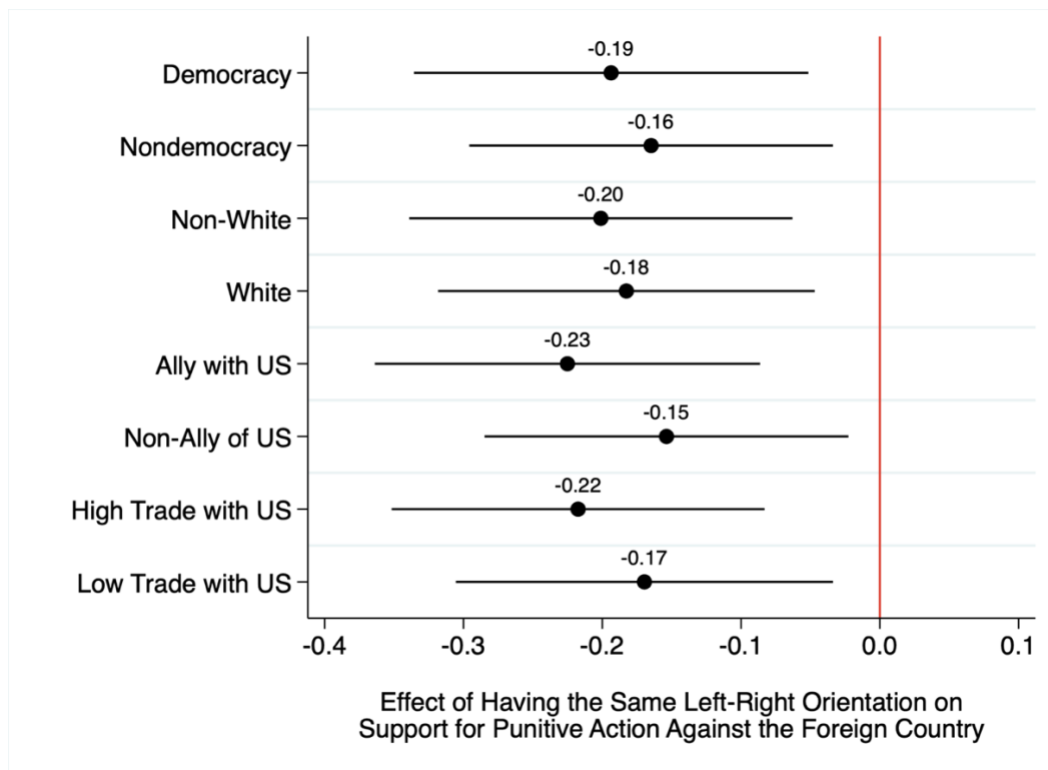
On the other hand, we find little consistent evidence that a foreign country's predominant race, alliance status with the U.S., or trade with the U.S. impacts public support for punitive action. This is in line with the results of prior studies and builds confidence in our design (Tomz and Weeks 2013).¹¹ It also indicates that ideological factors like left-right orientation and regime type may have a greater *relative* impact on public opinion than these other factors.

Evidence for our theory also holds for a series of robustness checks outlined in appendix Table A.3. First, the left/right peace holds when we utilize broader measures of who counts as a Republican or Democrat. For example, while some respondents initially identified as “independents” or “other” party, we asked them in subsequent questions “if you had to choose, are you closer to” the Republican or Democratic party and gave them a binary choice. The left/right peace holds even when including these weaker partisans in the analysis. Second, the effect also holds when, instead of respondents' political identification (Democrat or Republican), we utilize whether they self-identify as left-wing or right-wing, and then measure ideological difference or similarity with the foreign country. We began our analysis utilizing partisan identification because studies on polarization typically focus on respondents' self-identification as Democrats or Republicans rather than their self-identification as liberals and conservatives. However, these two different ways of measuring ideology are, of course, highly correlated. Third, the left/right peace holds when, instead of a binary measure of whether respondent and country ideology match, we interact an 8-point measure of respondent political identification (strong Democrat to strong Republican) and a binary measure of the foreign country's left-right orientation. Fourth, the left/right peace holds when, instead of excluding respondents from the analysis that received no information about the foreign country's left-right lean, we include those respondents and code them as not having the same left-right orientation as the foreign country.

¹¹ Note that an analysis of Rathbun, Parker, and Pomeroy's (2024) data we conducted also reveals that a country's predominant race has no main effect on public support for the use of force.

Fifth, as demonstrated in Figure 2, the left/right peace holds when subsetting the data to different factors. For example, the effect remains statistically significant when only analyzing democratic countries, nondemocratic countries, white countries, nonwhite countries, and so on. In other words, it is not the case that the left/right peace only operates when the foreign country is a nondemocracy or a nonwhite country. The consistency of the results across these tests builds confidence in the findings. It also provides an empirical contribution compared to prior work. For example, while Haas (2005, 33) does not study many cases where actors were “torn by cross-cutting ideological loyalties”, we demonstrate the left/right peace holds even when respondents faced cross-cutting pressures (e.g., evaluating a democratic country, but one with a rival left/right ideology).

Figure 2: The Robustness of the Left/Right Peace



Note: Errors bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Control variables are not displayed.

What explains the left/right peace? Per our expectations, respondents are significantly more likely to believe that a foreign country with an in-ideology is less threatening.¹² For example, collapsing the components of the threat index into binary variables and estimating a series of logistic regressions reveals that respondents are over 33% less likely to believe that foreign countries that share their left-wing or right-wing ideology will threaten to use nuclear weapons against the United States or its allies compared to countries that do not share their left-right orientation. Respondents are also 26% less likely to believe that foreign countries that share their left-right orientation will use nuclear weapons against the United States or its allies. In appendix Table A.6, we show that this effect also holds for a formal causal mediation analysis utilizing the method described by Imai, Keele, and Tingley (2010).

What factors, if any, increase or decrease the strength of the left/right peace effects? When conducting a non-pre-registered exploratory analysis, we find some evidence that the effect is stronger among Democratic respondents than Republican respondents (see appendix Table A.9). For example, when we subset the data to just Republicans, we find the right-wing peace effect only remains statistically significant for the regime change outcome variable, and only marginally so ($p = 0.092$).¹³ On the other hand, the left-wing peace effect remains strongly significant for all of our primary dependent variables when we subset to Democratic respondents ($p < 0.015$). However, two significant caveats are in order.

First, adopting an interaction variable rather than a subsetting approach suggests there is a less stark contrast between Democrats and Republicans (see appendix Table A.10). The left/right peace is only statistically weaker among respondents that are stronger Republicans for the sanctions outcome variable—there is a null result for the two military force dependent variables.

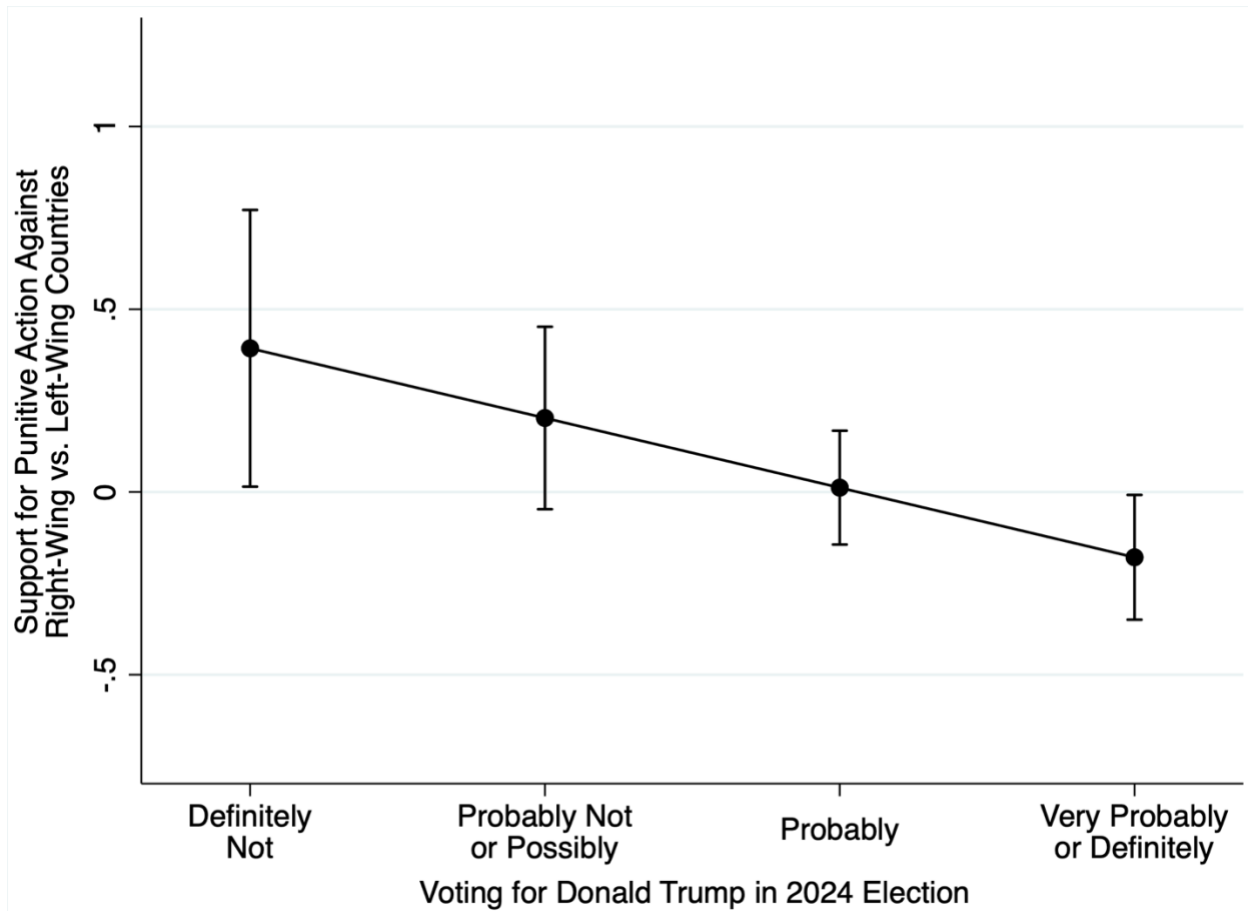
¹² We find no evidence for our other pre-registered mechanism hypothesis that attacking in-ideology countries would be perceived of as less ethical.

¹³ This analysis also includes our full suite control variables.

Second, the right-wing peace does strongly hold for a particular type of Republican: Trump supporters. When we subset the data to respondents that indicated they planned to vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election, we find statistically significant evidence for the right-wing peace for all three of our primary outcome variables (see appendix Table A.11). The same basic results hold if we utilize an interaction variable approach instead. We illustrate this dynamic visually in Figure 3, which shows that for an index measure of our three primary outcome variables, respondents that are more likely to vote for Trump in the 2024 election are less likely to support punitive action against right-wing than left-wing foreign countries. This effect is strongest for respondents that are definitely or very probably going to vote for Trump.

Therefore, there exists a kind of “populist peace” effect, where the Trump-wing of the Republican party is more (less) supportive of punishing foreign countries that adopt left-wing (right-wing) policies domestically. While a large majority (over 82%) of the Republicans in our sample indicated they were probably, very probably, or definitely going to vote for Trump, MAGA Republicans appear to be distinct from more Trump-skeptical Republicans. For example, as outlined in appendix Table A.12, pro-Trump Republicans are much more likely to identify as stronger conservatives ($p < 0.001$), to indicate support for conservative-coded policies, such as opposition to immigration, abortion access, and LGBTQ rights ($p < 0.001$), and to be more affectively polarized ($p < 0.001$). It is thus no surprise that they are more hostile to foreign countries that do not share their strongly-held right-wing values.

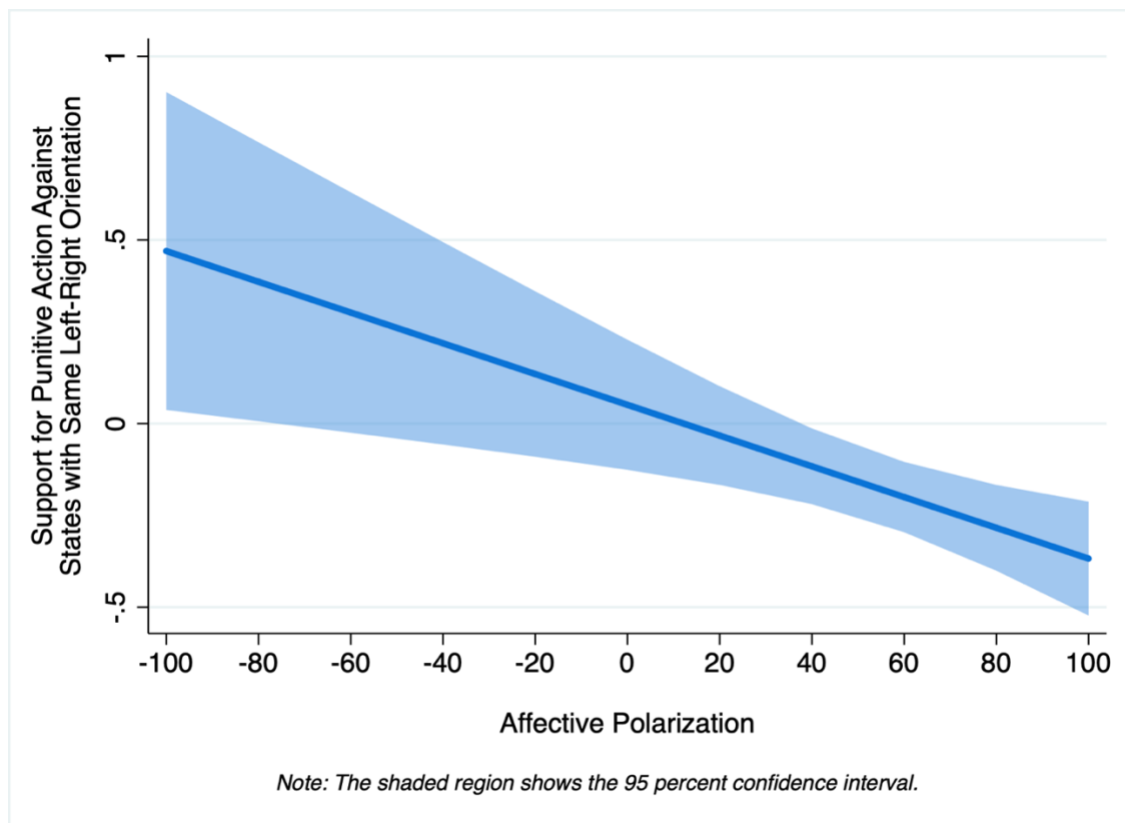
Figure 3: The Populist Peace



Note: Errors bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Control variables are included and held at their means for this analysis, but not displayed.

As outlined in Figure 4, and consistent with our pre-registered expectations, we also find evidence that the left/right peace effect is stronger among respondents that are more affectively polarized, or indicate greater favorability to the domestic in-party and greater hostility towards the domestic out-party. While prior research has found evidence that high levels of affective polarization can increase support for political violence domestically (e.g., Piazza 2023), our study shows it can also increase support for violence internationally against out-ideology countries (Owen IV 2010). We find no evidence that any other variables (e.g., hawkishness, concern about nuclear proliferation, gender, etc.) consistently moderate the left/right peace (see appendix Table A.14).

Figure 4: Political Polarization as a Moderator



Note: Errors bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Control variables are included and held at their means for this analysis, but not displayed.

In contrast to our expectations, we find little evidence that the democratic peace is diminished when the left-right orientation of the country does not match the political ideology of the respondent.¹⁴ The democratic peace holds, on average, when subsetting the data to either in-ideology or out-ideology countries. There is also no statistically significant interaction effect when utilizing the full 5-point measures of the core outcome measures. These null findings are important because they indicate that the democratic peace and left/right peace are independent effects and a model of public opinion that does not account for *both* will have diminished explanatory power.

¹⁴ See appendix Tables A.16 and A.17.

USING REAL COUNTRIES AND PROBING THE ROLE OF INFORMATION

To test the external validity of our primary experiment, we conducted a second study on the American public in October 2024. Our experiment was again carried out via Lucid and included about 1,000 respondents. The basic setup of the experiment was the same (a nuclear proliferation crisis), but there were two key differences in the design of this study compared to our initial one.

First, instead of using hypothetical countries, which can cause respondents to be more likely to support the use of force (Majnemer and Meibauer 2023), we named real countries. Specifically, we chose Poland as an example of a right-wing country and Sweden as an example of a left-wing country because Poland has more restrictive policies on abortion and LGBTQ rights compared to Sweden.¹⁵ For example, abortion is illegal in Poland except in the case of rape or when the health of the mother is at risk, whereas women can elect to have an abortion for any reason in Sweden up to 18 weeks. Sweden has also historically had more liberal immigration policies than Poland, although the gap has narrowed in recent years. Another major advantage of using these two countries is that they are both democracies, European, part of the EU and NATO, majority white, and majority Christian. Thus, we are able to hold constant many relevant factors and do not need to experimentally vary the foreign country's regime type, predominant race, alliance status, or trading relationship with the United States like we did in the first experiment.¹⁶ In one sense, this setup is a hard test for finding evidence of the left/right peace due to possible floor effects. Given that Sweden and Poland are U.S. treaty allies, we might imagine that American public support for a military operation or sanctions against them will be very low, and there will be little room for their left-right orientation to have a marginal effect.

¹⁵ We utilize Poland rather than Hungary because the U.S. public has already been repeatedly treated with elite and media cues about Hungary's right-wing ideology.

¹⁶ We also explicitly tell respondents that both countries are democracies, are allies of the United States, and have moderate levels of trade with the United States.

Second, we randomize whether respondents receive specific information about whether Sweden/Poland is left-wing/liberal or right-wing/conservative, or receive no information about their ideology. This enables us to probe whether information about a foreign country's left-right lean—which could in practice be provided by policymakers, the media, or social peers—is a necessary condition for the left/right peace to operate.¹⁷ If respondents are not familiar with Poland or Sweden's left-right orientation, then we do not expect the left/right peace to hold. Prior experimental studies on the democratic peace have not analyzed this informational dynamic since they all provide respondents with data about the foreign country's regime type.

The first primary finding is that the left/right peace effect holds when using real countries instead of hypothetical ones (see appendix Table A.21), even though aggregate support for the use of force is, as expected, low (about 13% compared to 36% in Study 1). As in Study 1, the effect was generally stronger among Democrats than Republicans (appendix Table A.22). The consistency of the results between Study 1 and Study 2 builds confidence in our argument.

The second principal finding of the follow-up experiment is that the left/right peace effect disappears if we do not inform respondents about Poland/Sweden's left-right orientation (see appendix Table A.23). This indicates that information about the foreign country's left-right lean is a necessary condition for our argument to operate. This finding also suggests that information about regime type is likely a necessary condition for the democratic peace to operate, though prior work has not explicitly tested whether this is the case.

How do members of the public become informed about a foreign country's left-right lean? To probe this question empirically, we conduct an analysis of Google trends that is described in more detail in the appendix (see Figure A.1 and Table A.25). This data has also been utilized in other prominent work in political science (e.g., Pelc 2013; Dancy and Fariss 2024). For example, Google

¹⁷ We did not pre-register this test and thus it should be considered exploratory.

trends data has been shown to more accurately predict protests than the use of structural variables (Timoneda and Wibbels 2022).

Given that the case of Hungary is one of the key motivating examples for our theory about the left/right peace, we assess when Google searches for terms like “Hungary” and “Orbán” spike, indicating when the American public was most interested in learning more about Hungary and (potentially) its left-right lean. We find evidence that U.S. policymaker and media cues are key factors. These cues often follow a foreign leader’s visits, their domestic policy changes, or their salient statements. For example, Google searches spiked after Trump mentioned Orbán and Hungary in the debate with Kamala Harris. Moreover, as outlined in the appendix, many media articles published after the debate specifically referenced Hungary’s right-wing policies on issues like abortion, immigration, and LGBTQ rights. With respect to media cues, searches also spiked following Tucker Carlson’s visit to Hungary in 2021, which was broadcast on right-leaning *Fox News* and highlighted the conservative policies pushed by Orbán. Left-leaning outlets, like the *New York Times*, covered this visit with headlines that highlighted Hungary’s right-wing orientation: “Conservative Fellow Travelers: Tucker Carlson Drops in on Viktor Orbán” (Novak and Grynbaum 2021). Searches also increased after Jordan Klepper from the left-leaning *The Daily Show* hosted a special report on Hungary and its undemocratic and right-wing turn. Finally, increased interest in the country occurred after (a) Orbán went to CPAC and espoused right-wing views; (b) Hungary banned LGBTQ content for minors; and (c) Hungary took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union and changed its motto to “make Europe great again.” A representative *PBS* article headline following the CPAC visit read: “Hungary’s Autocratic Leader Tells U.S. Conservatives to Join His Culture War” (Folkenflik 2022).

In sum, a Google trends analysis provides strong—even if only suggestive—evidence that top-down cues from policymakers and the media (Guisinger and Saunders 2017) play an important role in informing the American public about a foreign country’s left-right lean and motivating individuals to

learn more about a country. The same is likely also true when it comes to public understanding about a foreign country's regime type, which is a necessary condition for the democratic peace to hold among the public.

TESTING EXTERNAL VALIDITY USING OBSERVATIONAL DATA

The principal claim of this paper is that there is a left/right peace effect among the public for a substantively important country—the United States—in the contemporary era that is driven by divides over social and cultural issues like immigration and LGBTQ rights. That is the key inference that our experiments enable us to make. Nevertheless, these findings beg the question of whether the left/right peace holds outside the American context, in different time periods, in the real world among political leaders, and for different aspects of the left-right divide.

With respect to whether our theory is likely to hold cross-nationally, promisingly, studies indicate that experimental findings from U.S. samples—such as the democratic peace and weak support for the nuclear taboo—typically hold in other countries as well (e.g., Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022; Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024). The theoretical anchor of our argument—social identity theory—is also a dynamic that speaks to broader human nature rather than just specific American political dynamics.

As it relates to whether our argument is likely to hold among political leaders as well as the general public, prior research demonstrates that experimental results from samples of average citizens also typically hold among elites (Kertzer 2022). Additionally, the in-group and out-group dynamics highlighted by social identity theory should have relevance among elites. Though it is important to note that public opinion has been demonstrated to be impactful in its own right even if policymakers hold different views (e.g., Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020).

There is also reason to believe our argument may hold for different aspects of the left-right ideological divide. While economics and culture can be considered somewhat distinct domains, there

are logical reasons why observers often believe the more general labels of “left-wing” and “right-wing” can be used to summarize different positions within each domain. For example, left-wing values like equality and equity can cause individuals to support both LGBTQ rights and economic redistribution (Conover and Feldman 1984). To the extent individuals perceive the cultural policies of out-ideology countries as threatening, they may also have a similar view of the economic policies of out-ideology countries.

Several historical examples also provide suggestive evidence that the left/right peace may be a broader phenomenon. In the 1930s, many of those on the political right in Britain and France supported a partnership with right-wing and autocratic Italy or Germany to counter the perceived threat of the left-wing and autocratic Soviet Union, whereas those on the political left in Britain and France preferred an alliance with Moscow (Haas 2003). During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), where a leftist and elected Spanish government battled right-wing rebels, American liberals tended to see the conflict as “democracy versus fascism” and favored selling weapons to the Spanish government, whereas American Catholics and conservatives tended to see the war as “Christianity versus communism” and favored an embargo on arms sales to Spain (Tierney 2007). In the Cold War era, Washington routinely destabilized leftist democracies through electoral meddling or backing for coups, and supported right-wing dictatorships (Downes and Lilley 2010; Levin 2019). In fact, the conservative Ronald Reagan-appointedee Jeanne Kirkpatrick (1982) argued explicitly for differentiating between nondemocracies based on whether they were left-wing (totalitarian) or right-wing (authoritarian) because right-wing authoritarian regimes were supposedly friendlier to the United States and less threatening.

To probe the external validity of the left/right peace in a more systematic manner, we test whether our theory holds in the context of MIDs, which are episodes of conflict short of war that involve the threat, display, or use of force by one government towards another. Given the relatively

small sample size of interstate wars, analyses of MIDs have long served as one of the primary forms of statistical evidence for the democratic peace (e.g., Oneal and Russett 1991; Maoz and Russett 1993), and thus are a natural format in which to test our argument.

Our research design follows the conventions of prior work on the democratic peace. We leverage a nondirected dyadic dataset of MIDs that covers 1945 to 2010.¹⁸ Our primary dependent variable is MID initiation, which is coded as a 1 when a state first threatens, displays, or uses force against another state and a 0 otherwise.¹⁹ Our key explanatory variable is ideological similarity between the leaders of the countries in a given dyad. To operationalize this variable, we utilize the Global Leader Ideology Dataset (GLID), which codes the economic ideology (left-wing, right-wing, centrist, or no ideology) for the leaders of 182 countries on an annual basis (Herre 2023). Unlike other datasets on leader ideology, GLID has global coverage and significantly less missing data. One key difference between GLID and our experiments is that GLID defines left-right ideology in terms of economic factors, whereas our experiments highlight social issues. Although, as explained above, the salience of social issues in dividing those on the political left from those on the political right is rising, economic schisms also remain germane. Consequently, the different way we operationalize left-right divides in the MIDs analysis compared to the experiments has an advantage: it stress tests the external validity of our experimental findings and the extent to which the left/right peace can hold up to different operationalizations of ideology. Future work should disentangle whether different dimensions of left-right orientation (e.g., economic vs. social) matter more, though our goal here is a narrower one—to establish the plausibility of the left/right peace as a theory. Using GLID, we generate a binary variable that equals 1 if both leaders in a dyad are left-wing, or both are right-wing, and 0 otherwise. To test

¹⁸ Specifically, we utilize the data from Barnhart et al. (2020). We start our analysis in 1945 because that is when data is available for leaders' left-right orientation.

¹⁹ We follow Barnhart et al. (2020) and omit all but the first year of disputes that continue for more than a single year.

the democratic peace, we follow the convention in prior work and utilize data from Polity.²⁰ We also include the normal suite of control variables, such as whether the two states in the dyad have an alliance, high levels of trade, similar interests, nuclear weapons, or are contiguous.²¹

Table 3: MIDs Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation	Use of Force	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation
Heads of Government Have Same Left-Right Ideology	0.513*** (0.047)	0.730*** (0.058)	0.523*** (0.049)	0.510*** (0.053)			0.812 (0.213)	0.491*** (0.046)	0.431 (0.313)
Both Countries Democracies	0.331*** (0.078)	0.607*** (0.098)	0.326*** (0.084)	0.226*** (0.071)	0.340*** (0.079)	0.331*** (0.077)	0.379*** (0.088)	0.266*** (0.072)	0.333*** (0.078)
Heads of State Have Same Left-Right Ideology					0.595*** (0.052)				
Heads of Government Both Right-Wing						0.550*** (0.067)			
Heads of Government Both Left-Wing						0.485*** (0.057)			
Heads of Government Have Same Left-Right Ideology × Average Political Polarization							0.832* (0.087)		
Heads of Government Have Same Left-Right Ideology × Both Countries Democracies								2.190** (0.826)	
Heads of Government Have Same Left-Right Ideology × Cold War									1.191 (0.871)
Alliance	1.249* (0.145)	0.900 (0.143)	0.999 (0.123)	1.103 (0.147)	1.350*** (0.149)	1.230* (0.145)	1.288** (0.153)	1.251* (0.145)	1.220* (0.138)
Economic Interdependence	0.000* (0.000)		0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Capability Ratio	1.002 (0.015)	1.030 (0.086)	0.999 (0.018)	1.037** (0.018)	0.996 (0.014)	1.001 (0.015)	1.006 (0.015)	1.001 (0.015)	1.003 (0.015)
Interest Similarity	0.302*** (0.080)	1.021* (0.012)	0.690 (0.228)	0.407*** (0.121)	0.258*** (0.066)	0.306*** (0.081)	0.263*** (0.070)	0.304*** (0.080)	0.344*** (0.087)
At Least One State Nuclear-Armed	2.496*** (0.409)	0.525*** (0.090)	2.333*** (0.401)	2.132*** (0.404)	2.370*** (0.362)	2.512*** (0.413)	2.491*** (0.417)	2.500*** (0.410)	2.599*** (0.422)
Both States Nuclear-Armed	0.810 (0.424)	0.340*** (0.105)	0.282** (0.174)	0.998 (0.571)	0.829 (0.427)	0.824 (0.429)	0.822 (0.420)	0.823 (0.429)	0.826 (0.431)
Minor Power	0.329*** (0.060)	0.319*** (0.125)	0.375*** (0.074)	0.369*** (0.077)	0.316*** (0.054)	0.329*** (0.060)	0.335*** (0.062)	0.329*** (0.060)	0.337*** (0.061)
Contiguity	8.888*** (2.105)		10.755*** (2.514)	7.953*** (1.988)	9.362*** (2.208)	8.796*** (2.073)	8.690*** (2.076)	8.868*** (2.098)	8.775*** (2.069)
Distance	0.999*** (0.000)		0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)
Average Political Polarization							1.250*** (0.080)		
Year	1.005 (0.004)	1.002 (0.003)	1.001 (0.004)	1.002 (0.005)	1.006 (0.004)	1.005 (0.004)	1.007 (0.004)	1.005 (0.004)	
Cold War									2.125* (0.869)
Constant	0.000 (0.000)		0.018 (0.157)	0.010 (0.096)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.155*** (0.080)
Observations	245287	17851	241045	245287	258287	245287	241237	245287	245287
Dyad Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
United States Included	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by dyad in parentheses. *p<0.10; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 3 displays a series of logistic regressions. To better illustrate substantive effect sizes, the coefficients are odds ratios. A value of 0.5 indicates that a variable reduces the probability of MID initiation by half, and a value of 2 means it doubles it. Model 1 in Table 3 replicates the core democratic peace finding: democratic dyads are significantly less likely to engage in MIDs.²² Crucially, we also find strong statistical evidence that when the heads of government in a dyad share the same left-wing or right-wing ideology, they are significantly less likely to engage in MIDs ($p < 0.001$). The effect is

²⁰ The findings are also robust to using V-Dem's measure of democracy instead.

²¹ We also include squared and cubed measures of distance and peace years, but omit them from Table 3 for space reasons.

²² States are coded as democracies if they have a Polity score above 6.

substantively large: left-right ideological similarity reduces the risk of MID initiation by about 50%.²³ Our analysis of MIDs therefore replicates the key finding of our two experiments: both a democratic peace *and* a left/right peace exist.

Support for our argument holds for different model specifications. Model 2 shows that the left/right peace effect holds when dyad fixed effects are included. This helps control for time-invariant factors that might differ between dyads, even though the sample size is significantly reduced. To probe external validity from our U.S.-based experiments, Model 3 illustrates that the effect is robust to excluding the United States from the analysis entirely. Model 4 shows that the core results hold when we use an alternative dependent variable: whether a MID escalates to the use of force. In other words, the left/right peace helps explain the presence or absence of the most serious type of MID. In Model 5, instead of using a measure of left-right similarity based on a country's head of government, we utilize a measure based on a country's head of state. In most cases these two figures are the same, but not always. The effect remains strong with this alternative variable. Model 6 shows that the effect holds when the two leaders in a dyad are either (a) both left-wing or (b) both right-wing. In other words, there is both a left-wing peace *and* a right-wing peace. This dyadic effect differs from Oren and Hays (1997), who find left-wing socialist states are more peaceful in general. There is also no statistically significant difference in the effect sizes between the left-wing and right-wing peace.

Model 7 echoes our experimental results in that when the average level of political polarization in a dyad is higher, the left/right peace effect is significantly stronger ($p = 0.079$). We measure political polarization using a variable from V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2024).²⁴ Interestingly, per our pre-registered expectations, but in contrast to our experimental results, Model 8 shows there is a significant

²³ There is some evidence the democratic peace effect is larger than the left/right peace effect, but it is only significant at the 10% level in Model 1 (despite the large sample size) and becomes insignificant in Model 2.

²⁴ The variable ("v2cacamps") ranges from 0 (not at all polarized) to 4 (polarized to a large extent) and is coded by country experts.

interaction effect between the democratic and left/right peace. The left/right peace appears to attenuate the democratic peace and vice-versa. This discrepancy in findings between the experiment and the MID's analysis is a ripe avenue for future work. Finally, Model 9 illustrates that the left/right peace effect does not significantly vary based on the Cold War. All of our results noted above are also robust to including a Cold War control variable. These two findings indicate that the left/right peace effect in our MID's analysis is not fully an artifact of the Cold War.

The robustness of the left/right peace effect across two experiments and an observational analysis of MID's builds confidence in the internal and external validity of the theory.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that there is a strong nexus between domestic political ideology and international politics, and that the impact of ideology is broader than being just about the democracy-nondemocracy divide. Politics does not stop at the water's edge, and debates between the political left and political right about social and economic issues can spill over into foreign policy. The argument can help explain puzzling dynamics, such as Trump's embrace of right-wing—but autocratic—Russia compared to his coercive attempts at territorial expansion vis-à-vis left-wing—but democratic—Canada and Denmark. From a policy perspective, the left/right peace may impede a consistent foreign policy over time if administrations vary in ideology from left to right. It may also incentivize foreign actors to engage in election interference or strategically accentuate their apparent ideological similarity with another leader or country to curry favor.

There are also several promising avenues for future work. Since observers may expect birds of an ideological feather to flock together, scholars could test whether leaders can offer a costly and credible signal by acting against type (e.g., Mattes and Weeks 2019; Blair and Schwartz 2023). For instance, a left-wing leader might support the use of force against a left-wing country. Scholars might also assess whether the left/right peace dynamic holds in the context of alliance formation or support

for humanitarian aid in addition to impacting the likelihood of punitive action. Whereas this study focused more on the impact of domestic ideology on more conflictual or punitive dynamics of IR (e.g., the use of force and sanctions), future work can study its impact on more cooperative dynamics (e.g., alliances). Another question concerns which specific policies (e.g., abortion, immigration, LGBTQ rights, or economic policies) are most significant in altering threat perceptions and support for the use of force. This project also leaves unanswered the question of when and why domestic ideological schisms over cultural and economic issues develop in the first place and become more or less salient; that is outside the scope of our project. Instead, we take these divides as a given and theorize and test the impact they have on international politics. Future work could also assess whether the left/right peace is becoming stronger relative to the democratic peace as domestic political polarization continues to increase, and the most powerful heuristics elites and members of the public utilize to categorize foreign countries as left-wing or right-wing. While we demonstrated that there are multiple dimensions of domestic ideology that impact international politics, there may be additional salient ideological factors (e.g., foreign policy ideology or different subcategories of left-right ideology) that scholars can identify. Finally, while we presented some anecdotal, historical, and statistical evidence that the left/right peace effect may hold outside the U.S., for policymakers as well as the general public, for other dimensions of left-right ideology besides social and cultural issues, and for time periods besides the present-day, future work should continue to probe the external validity of the left/right peace effect across time and space. Our goal in this project was to establish the plausibility of what might be termed the “multidimensional ideological peace” that includes the left-wing peace and the right-wing peace, along with the well-established democratic peace.

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