

THE IDEOLOGICAL PEACE

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ABSTRACT

How does ideology impact international politics? Scholars have often highlighted the role of ideological preferences about the appropriate *process* of policymaking, especially democracy versus nondemocracy. People in democracies tend to see other elected governments as less threatening than authoritarian governments, helping to explain the “democratic peace.” However, we argue that ideology also shapes foreign policy because of beliefs about the appropriate *outcome* of policymaking on social and economic issues. People tend to view foreign countries that share their individual left-wing or right-wing ideology as being less threatening than countries that exhibit an opposing ideological lean, and are less supportive of employing punitive actions like sanctions and the use of force against them. We term this dynamic the “left/right peace.” These two faces of ideology—the democratic peace and the left/right peace—are additive. Observers in democratic countries are especially disinclined to engage in conflict if a foreign state is aligned on both ideological dimensions, which we term the “ideological peace.” Four survey experiments in two countries and an analysis of militarized interstate disputes provide strong evidence for our argument. Our theory significantly contributes to debates about whether politics stops at the water’s edge and the impact of polarization on political violence.

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During his first term in office, U.S. President Donald Trump forged close relations with Brazil's leader, Jair Bolsonaro, based in large part on their shared right-wing political ideology. Bolsonaro backed Trump's proposed border wall as well as his skepticism toward immigrants, and 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" (Colvin and Prensaman 2019). In 2019, Trump made Brazil a major non-NATO ally, and in 2022, Trump endorsed Bolsonaro's re-election campaign against his left-wing opponent, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. After Lula won the election, Bolsonaro faced trial for his alleged involvement in an attempted coup. When Trump was re-elected president, he applied a draconian 50% tariff on Brazil—one of the highest U.S. rates for any country. In a letter to Brazil announcing the new tariff rate, Trump (2025) declared, "The way that Brazil has treated former President Bolsonaro...is an international disgrace. This Trial should not be taking place."

Trump's warm relations with the right-wing Bolsonaro and his frosty relations with Brazil's left-wing government illustrate a crucial dynamic in international relations (IR) where shared (or opposing) left/right ideology can shape leaders' rhetoric and state behavior. For example, in the 1930s many conservatives 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 the political left in Britain and France preferred an alliance with Moscow (Haas 2003).

In recent years, the degree of ideological kinship has become increasingly significant in shaping foreign policy preferences. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy sharply criticized European countries and the European Union for deviating from right-wing ideology. The strategy established a core goal of "promoting European greatness" and "cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory" by altering European domestic policies on issues like immigration, regulations, and censorship (of conservatives), thereby averting Europe's "civilizational erasure." Washington openly celebrated right-wing populist groups, or "the growing influence of patriotic

European parties” (White House 2025). Vice President J.D. Vance publicly supported the far-right German party, Alternative for Germany (Nicholls, Tanno, and Brennan 2025). The U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem explicitly endorsed a right-wing candidate for the Polish presidency, and said that his election would allow Poland to “continue to have a U.S. presence here, a military presence,” whereas choosing a different candidate could lead to U.S. abandonment (Gera 2025). Ideological alignment was also important for U.S. policy on Argentina. Trump offered \$20 billion in economic bailout funds to Argentina’s right-wing government under Javier Milei, but said that if Milei lost the upcoming election, “we are not going to be generous with Argentina...if he doesn’t win, we’re gone” (Kanno-Youngs and Rappeport 2025). In 2026, the Trump administration launched an audacious military raid in Caracas that captured Venezuela’s left-wing authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro. Meanwhile, American liberals routinely approve of left-leaning countries in Europe and elsewhere, and criticize right-wing leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán. Left-wing senator Bernie Sanders even praised certain domestic policies in Venezuela and Cuba (Krieg, Kaczynski, and Steck 2020).

How does domestic ideology impact leaders’ and publics’ foreign policy preferences in democratic states? Scholars have often highlighted ideological preferences about the appropriate *process* of policymaking, notably democracy versus nondemocracy. Democratic publics and leaders tend to view representative processes (e.g., contested elections) as legitimate, and see foreign states that maintain these processes as less threatening than authoritarian regimes—helping to explain the “democratic peace,” or the absence of interstate war between elected regimes (Haas 2005; Owen IV 2010; Hayes 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013). Indeed, scholars have proposed a defining global division between democracies and autocracies (McFaul 2025). As Doyle (2024, 140) put it, “the world’s democratic powers appear to be girding themselves for a long twilight struggle with authoritarian regimes.”

However, we contend the impact of domestic ideology on foreign policy also encompasses beliefs about the appropriate *outcome* of policymaking, for example, on social or economic issues. People tend to view foreign countries that share their individual left-wing or right-wing ideology as being less threatening than countries that exhibit an opposing ideological lean, and they are less supportive of employing punitive actions like sanctions and the use of force against them, which we term the “left/right peace.” The two faces of ideology—the democratic peace and the left/right peace—are additive. A shared democratic regime type and a shared left/right lean both independently reduce perceptions of threat and decrease support for punitive policies. Therefore, the combination of shared democracy and shared left/right orientation is especially powerful—an effect we term the “ideological peace.”³

We provide strong support for the argument using four survey experiments in two countries, as well as an analysis of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs). We conducted three survey experiments on national samples of the American public. Our primary experiment extends the experimental framework developed by Tomz and Weeks (2013) for testing the democratic peace. We outlined a hypothetical scenario for the use of force involving nuclear proliferation. We then randomly varied the potential target country’s regime type (democracy or nondemocracy) and its prevailing left-wing or right-wing ideology with respect to cultural issues like LGBTQ rights, abortion, and immigration.

We find strong evidence for both the democratic peace *and* the left/right peace. Strikingly, respondents are about 27% less likely to support punitive action against foreign countries that share their left-wing or right-wing ideology relative to countries that do not. Moreover, there is no

³ Certain parts of the theory apply in both democratic and nondemocratic states, notably the left/right peace. Nondemocratic regimes tend to also favor other countries that share their left-wing or right-wing ideology (e.g., the Soviet Union favored left-wing states in the Cold War). We focus on ideology in democracies, especially in the public opinion experiments, for two reasons: (1) the views of the masses are more directly impactful in democracies than autocracies, and (2) in democracies, there is a strong preference for democracy as the optimum process of governing in other countries, whereas in nondemocracies there is a weaker preference for democracy versus nondemocracy in other countries, meaning the democratic peace is most relevant in democratic countries. In the MIDs analysis, we broaden our approach to study all types of regimes.

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 roughly 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 who 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: (1) when priming real rather than hypothetical countries, (2) outside the United States, (3) for other dimensions of left/right ideology besides social and cultural issues, (4) for policymakers as well as the general public, and (5) for other time periods. In a second study on the U.S. public, we find the left/right peace is robust to using real countries (right-wing Poland and left-wing Sweden) rather than hypothetical ones. To test whether our results hold outside the United States, we carried out an experiment in the United Kingdom, which has lower polarization than the U.S. and thus may be a harder test of our argument (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024; Coppedge et al. 2024). We found support for both the democratic peace and the left/right peace. We also tested economic dimensions of left/right ideology and, again, found support for our argument. To further probe external validity over time and to real-world IR, we conducted a statistical analysis of the impact of left/right economic ideology on MIDs from 1945 to 2010, and we find that countries are about 50% less likely to engage in conflict if their leaders share the same left-wing or right-wing economic ideology. As in our experiments, the democratic peace effect coexists alongside the left/right peace.

Our project makes several contributions. First, we connect major literatures in political science (social identity theory, political polarization, and the democratic peace) to build a theory about how ideology impacts foreign policy views across two dimensions of ideology (democracy/nondemocracy and left/right beliefs). Although seminal prior research has demonstrated that ideological differences

matter (e.g., Haas 2005; Owen IV 2010), our key theoretical contribution is to move beyond the predominant focus on regime type and highlight the salience of left/right distinctions. Crucially, we also disaggregate the impact of ideologies of process from ideologies of outcome, and consider how these ideologies can be cross-cutting or mutually reinforcing.

Second, these analyses provide a hard test for our argument: the high-stakes decision about whether to use force. If ideology plays a role in the ultimate decisions of state, it is likely to be significant in other situations as well (e.g., diplomacy, tariffs, financial bailouts, and election interference).

Third, scholars have long noted the dangerous impact of polarized politics on democratic norms and institutions at home. Dahl (1971, 105) warned that democratic society is threatened when it “becomes polarized into several highly antagonistic groups.” Our project highlights how polarization can also impact foreign policy. After World War II, U.S. foreign policy was often seen as a domain of bipartisanship where politics “stopped at the water’s edge” (Schlesinger Jr. 1949). And more recently, some scholars have argued 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 (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007; Schultz 2017; Friedrichs and Tama 2024; Myrick 2025). Our work supports the latter school. Indeed, polarization over domestic issues like immigration and LGBTQ rights may rebound onto the international stage and shape attitudes toward war and peace.

Fourth, the argument holds important policy implications. The democratic peace implies that the democracy/nondemocracy distinction is determinative in threat perceptions, but leaders may respond to liberal-democratic versus conservative-democratic countries differently. For example, a right-wing leader (like Trump) may seek to coerce, or even fight, a left-leaning democracy (like

Denmark or Canada), or go easy on a right-leaning autocracy (like Russia or El Salvador). In addition, the prospects for a bipartisan foreign policy may be lower than commentators imagine because liberals and conservatives view foreign countries through fundamentally different lenses. The left/right peace could spur dramatic lurches in foreign policy following elections, as governments shift from conservative to liberal (or vice versa) and rethink their perceived allies and adversaries—impeding a consistent national security policy (Schultz 2017; Myrick 2025). For example, the Barack Obama administration removed left-wing Cuba from the state sponsors of terrorism list and eased travel restrictions. Trump then reversed these policies in his first term, the Biden administration reinstated them, and Trump reversed them again in his second term. Furthermore, the left/right peace may incentivize foreign states to engage in election interference to help an in-ideology leader (Tomz and Weeks 2020). Leaders may also strategically shape their ideological image to curry favor with certain foreign actors. For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s criticism of “woke” policies may be partly motivated by his search for allies among conservatives abroad (Zygar 2024).

The article is organized in four sections. The first section briefly summarizes the literature on ideology in IR. The second section offers our theory of the ideological peace as a combination of the democratic peace and the left/right peace. The third section tests the argument with four survey experiments and an analysis of MIDs. The fourth section offers concluding comments and policy implications.

IDEOLOGY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The relationship between domestic politics and international politics is one of the foundational debates in IR. A particularly significant domestic force is political ideology, or “the principles 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” (Haas 2005, 5-6). Ideologies are extraordinarily diverse, encompassing belief systems from absolute monarchy to theocracy, from communism to fascism. 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 less obvious and remains widely contested.

Scholars have long debated the causal importance of ideology in shaping foreign policy. Realists often assume that the balance of power, rather than ideology, is the main driver of threat perceptions (Waltz 1979). For example, Walt (1987, 38) saw only a limited role for ideology in alliance formation: “security considerations are likely to take precedence over ideological preferences, and ideologically based alliances are unlikely to survive when more pragmatic interests intrude.”

However, other scholars contend that the degree of similarity between countries’ ideologies can shape threat perceptions and impact the likelihood of punitive action, including war (Gries 2022). For example, Haas (2005) argues that during the French Revolutionary Wars, European nobles perceived French anti-aristocratic ideology as deeply threatening. Owen IV (2010) also shows that the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism in the 16th to 18th centuries, as well as divisions in the Muslim world today between proponents of secular and Islamist belief systems, impacted the likelihood that countries used military force.

One gap in the literature is a systematic focus on the impact of left-wing and right-wing ideologies on foreign policy and their connection with pro-democracy ideology. Haas (2005) highlights the degree of ideological “distance” between actors, but he does not typologize ideologies based on either process or outcome, disaggregate their relative impact, or consider their relationship. Owen IV (2010) focuses on ideological divides based on religion and regime type (e.g., the contest between fascism, communism, and liberal democracy in the 19th to 20th centuries) rather than left/right schisms. Scholars have found that right-wing governments are more likely to be involved in conflict than left-wing governments (Palmer, London, and Regan 2004; Dueck 2010; Gries 2022). Developed socialist

states may also be less conflict prone in general than other types of regimes (Oren and Hays 1997). While valuable, these arguments focus on the monadic effect of an actor's left/right orientation, or how liberal, conservative, and socialist governments respond to all external actors. However, the democratic peace is primarily dyadic rather than monadic. That is, democracies routinely fight non-democracies but rarely fight each other. In a similar vein, the impact of left/right ideology may hinge on the ideological orientation of the target as well as the observer.

Meanwhile, scholars who analyze public support for the use of force have not explored the role of left/right ideological similarity. A number of variables 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 whether foreign countries uphold basic human rights by, for example, refraining from torture (Tomz and Weeks 2019). All of these factors are important in understanding public backing for war, but a notable missing piece is the left/right ideological alignment between an observer and a target state. We now turn to developing a theoretical framework to fill this gap.

THE IDEOLOGICAL PEACE

We propose the theory of an ideological peace based on shared democracy and the alignment of left/right ideology. Building on the foundational work of Haas (2005) and Owen IV (2010), as well as scholars of the democratic peace, we contend that ideologies can shape threat perceptions, alter state behavior, and impact the likelihood of punitive action. Here, the “peace” effect is conceptualized as a continuum rather than a binary (Davenport, Melander, and Regan 2018). Military conflict is at one end of the spectrum, followed by punitive economic measures such as sanctions or tariffs, positive economic relations such as open trade and financial bailouts, and then alliances at the other end. Our

theory is also probabilistic rather than deterministic: shared ideology will increase the likelihood of peace across several dimensions (e.g., the use of force and sanctions), rather than essentially guarantee peace (as in narrow conceptions of the democratic peace focused on interstate war). Other factors outside the theory, such as the balance of military power, economic interests, and idiosyncratic leader characteristics, also (of course) condition public opinion and state behavior.

Social identity theory (SIT) explains why ideological divergence—whether based on regime type deviation or left/right misalignment—can boost threat perceptions. SIT contends that people gain their sense of identity and self-worth through membership of an in-group. People tend to approve of the in-group, subscribe to its prevailing norms, rules, and behaviors, and—an even *stronger* prediction—dislike the out-group (Brewer 2001). People are less supportive of punitive action against in-group countries than out-group countries because they see in-group members as inherently less threatening. For example, the public is more supportive of the use of force (including counter-normative actions like employing nuclear weapons) when conducted by in-group allies or partners, even when holding strategic circumstances constant (Schwartz 2024). People are also less supportive of punitive action, such as human rights naming and shaming, against in-group states (Terman and Voeten 2018). By contrast, people distrust out-group countries, see them as more threatening, and are more willing to use force against them (Hermann and Kegley Jr. 1995; Henderson 1998; Haas 2005; Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007).

Out-ideology states may pose a greater perceived threat—whether real or not—at both the foreign and domestic level. People may worry that an out-ideology state’s foreign policy could harm their national security and, in the extreme, threaten their regime’s survival (Owen IV 2010). People may also fear that an out-ideology state may imperil their domestic politics, for example, through direct internal meddling or via demonstration effects that inspire perceived subversion at home. Globalization and technological change provide actors with greater opportunities to meddle in internal

politics abroad, build transnational ideological networks, and employ diffusion and demonstration effects (Ambrosio 2010; Owen IV 2010).

In turn, heightened threat perceptions may exacerbate several mechanisms that spur conflict between states. For one, out-ideology actors may struggle to credibly commit to peace. If observers believe that an out-ideology state is inherently hostile, or “by nature predisposed to aggression,” then they may conclude that preventive action (e.g., sanctions, tariffs, or even the use of force) to address the threat is necessary (Weisiger 2013, 7). Ideological divergence may also make it harder for actors to communicate effectively with each other about their interests and negotiate bargains short of conflict given the fundamentally different ways in which they understand the world (Haas 2005). In addition, heightened threat perceptions can worsen the security dilemma and cause the spiral effect, where actions taken by one side to defend themselves lead to escalatory responses by the other side. Here, observers may be more likely to see an out-ideology state as pursuing an aggressive rather than a defensive strategy (Walt 1996).

These dynamics can shape state behavior through two main pathways. Ideology can impact policy-making directly if leaders view out-ideology states as more threatening and favor punitive action against them. Alternatively, at least in democracies, ideology can impact policy-making indirectly if the public views out-ideology states as more threatening and then influences leaders’ behavior through the ballot box or because elites proactively follow public opinion. One influential study found that shifts in U.S. public opinion on IR tended to precede changes in U.S. foreign policy (Page & Shapiro 1983). Another analysis employed an experiment directly on policymakers themselves to show that greater public support for the use of military force increased policymakers’ willingness to seize the sword (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020).

Within democracies, three dimensions of ideology shape leaders’ and publics’ in-group beliefs and threat perceptions, as well as state behavior: (1) pro-democracy, or a shared ideology about the

favoring *process* of governance, which helps underpin the democratic peace; (2) left-wing versus right-wing, or contested ideologies about the optimum policy *outcomes*, which helps to explain the left/right peace; and (3) the combination of pro-democracy and left/right ideological alignment, which can spur the ideological peace. We can consider each part in turn.

The Democratic Peace

In democracies, people maintain an ideology of process, or beliefs about who should decide political questions and how, and the optimum political institutions—independent of whatever specific policy outcome might be reached (Chu, Williamson, and Yeung 2025). Here, leaders and publics in democracies tend to exhibit a shared preference for democracy, including contested elections, freedom of speech, and an independent judiciary, versus other models of governance like authoritarianism. For example, a poll taken in a dozen North American and European democracies in 2024 found that between 76% and 83% of people thought a system where democratically elected representatives decide what becomes law would be a good way to run their country. Meanwhile, between 72% and 94% of people said a system where a strong leader made decisions without interference from parliament or courts would be a bad way to run their country (Wike et al. 2024). Experiments carried out in Egypt, India, Italy, Japan, Thailand, and the U.S. also reveal that the public is generally unwilling to give up free and fair democratic elections to obtain greater wealth (Chu, Williamson, and Yeung 2025). Although support for democracy is not purely a matter of process, and can entail a commitment to certain policy outcomes like a free press and the right to assembly, these outcome preferences are often about enabling a fair democratic process (Tudor 2025).

In democracies, the shared preference for democracy as a process of governance helps to explain why elected regimes rarely fight each other—the well-known democratic peace. Citizens in democracies are less supportive of using force against fellow democracies (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Suong, Desposato, and Gartzke 2020; Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024), and

democracies are less likely to engage in military conflict against sister regimes (Doyle 1986; Oneal and Russett 1991). While some scholars suggest that 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 strong (Dafoe 2011; Ray and Dafoe 2018). As Imai and Lo (2021, 916) conclude from a sensitivity analysis, “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. For instance, democratic institutions may introduce checks and balances that constrain the rush to war (Russett 1994), elected leaders may face audience costs that convey information about their interests and resolve, preventing crises from escalating (Fearon 1994), or democracies may be unusually tough opponents (Reiter and Stam 2002).

Scholars have also highlighted the role of ideology, at both the elite and public level, in spurring the democratic peace. People in democracies may see other democracies as being less likely to undermine their foreign policy interests than authoritarian regimes because other democracies are part of the same in-group, share values such as non-violence, and are more trustworthy (Maoz and Russett 1993; Owen 1994; Hayes 2012). By contrast, authoritarian regimes are inherently dangerous because they are ruled by despots who do not subscribe to democratic values and norms. People in democracies may also fear that a foreign dictator will meddle in their domestic politics and spur the diffusion of authoritarian ideas (Ambrosio 2010).

Here, pro-democracy ideology may operate directly or indirectly. Elected leaders may see authoritarian counterparts as more threatening and/or the public may exhibit a pro-democracy ideology and pressure elected leaders to distinguish between foreign countries based on regime type. Scholars have found that members of the public in democratic states view democracies as less

threatening than autocracies, even holding other factors constant (Tomz and Weeks 2013). Historical case studies support this contention. For example, Richard Nixon favored a tougher stance towards India during the 1971 Bangladesh War, but he was constrained by a belief that the American public would not view a fellow democracy as dangerous (Hayes 2012).

Following prior work, we pre-registered the existence of a democratic peace effect, whereby citizens in democracies should be less supportive of adopting punitive measures 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 literature is to argue that regime type is not the only element of domestic ideology that impacts foreign affairs.

The Left/Right Peace

In democracies (and autocracies), people also maintain ideological beliefs about the optimum policy outcome, independent of the process, on issues from immigration to the minimum wage. Here, there is no shared ideological position, but rather two broad camps: left-wing (or liberal or progressive) and right-wing (or conservative).

Our pre-registered theoretical claim is that individuals 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), which we term 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), which we term the “right-wing peace.” Together, these two effects constitute the left/right peace (summarized in Table 1). We contend that the left/right peace coexists with the democratic peace and both independently decrease support for punitive action.

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. The

left/right divide is nuanced, complex, and evolving. Conservatives in the United Kingdom, for example, tend to be more moderate than conservatives in the United States. Indeed, some scholars suggest the liberal/conservative spectrum is too simplistic (Martini 2015). But other scholars view the left/right ideological divide as meaningful, parsimonious, and useful, with coherent belief systems existing on both economic and cultural issues (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009; Nincic and Ramos 2010). Political psychologists find that liberals and conservatives structure their preferences in distinctive ways (Conover and Feldman 1984). Liberalism emphasizes regulated capitalism, state activism, equality, and equity. Conservatism emphasizes 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).

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 meaning of “left-wing” and “right-wing” has shifted over time. During the Cold War, liberals and conservatives often differed over economic policy, welfare programs, and government regulation. In recent years, scholars have described the emergence of the “new politics” or “post-material politics,” where “culture war” or identity issues like abortion, immigration, and LGBTQ rights have grown in salience, both in the U.S. and around the world (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). For example, one study of the American public found the most distinct partisan types were evident with the issues of immigration and abortion (Kertzer, Brooks and Brooks 2021, 1771). In the

U.S. context, scholars have also 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, cultural issues are now more prominent than economic issues in the party manifestos of Western European democracies (Hall 2020). Voters tend to punish politicians more for shifting their positions on cultural issues rather than economic ones (Tavits 2007). 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 marriage and LGBTQ rights...” Still, left/right divides over economic policy remain highly relevant and may interact with cultural issues, for example, in debates over whether immigrants should receive welfare benefits.

Building on the SIT dynamics discussed above, we posit that people are less supportive of punitive action against countries that share their left/right ideology on cultural or economic issues because they see these countries as less threatening compared to countries that do not share their left/right ideology. American public beliefs about the safety of U.S. cities illustrate how left/right ideology can impact threat perceptions. One poll in 2023 found that Republicans tended to see perceived left-wing cities like Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York as unsafe compared to other 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 higher than in New York City (Brenan 2023).

The public may also assess the favorability of foreign countries through the lens of left/right ideology. In 2025, only 44% of Republicans held a favorable view of the European Union (widely seen as “liberal”) 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). Scholars have found that public perceptions of the legitimacy of international organizations are 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-Ehrardt, Dellmuth, and Tallberg 2024).

Left/right ideology may also shape Putin's beliefs about who is a threat, as well as Americans' beliefs about whether Putin is a threat. Putin highlighted the West's acceptance of LGBTQ rights as one justification for 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 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). By underscoring his conservative credentials, Putin also built bridges with some American conservatives who view Russia as a bulwark against liberal values (Zygar 2024). For instance, 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).

More specifically, SIT dynamics may lead people to perceive countries that do not share their left/right ideology as a threat to their state's international security. Observers may see out-ideology countries as more likely to form threatening alliances, take hostile economic actions, or even use overt or covert military force against them. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), when 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 conservatives (especially Catholics) often saw 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). The conservative Ronald

Reagan-appointed 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 less threatening to the United States.

People may also perceive countries that do not share their left/right ideology as a threat to their domestic politics. Observers may worry about meddling by out-ideology actors. Putin, for example, aided far-right and populist groups in Europe and the United States, including in the 2016 presidential election. Meanwhile, the Orbán government claimed that the left-wing Biden administration stopped Hungary from banning the annual Hungarian Pride parade: “the U.S. ambassador [to Hungary] led the [Pride] march, which clearly showed that the world’s great powers supported it” (Faiola 2022). Out-ideology actors may also act as a—potentially dangerous—model for policy initiatives in one’s own country. 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). In addition, international actors may coordinate across borders to advance shared agendas. In 2022, Orbán told the national Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC): “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). Meanwhile, liberal actors often build connections with like-minded actors around the world. In an official memorandum in 2021, Biden made the protection of LGBTQ rights a key foreign policy priority: “The United States belongs at the forefront of this struggle” (Avery 2021). The European Union also uses foreign aid to encourage the acceptance of LGBTQ rights abroad (Thiel 2022). These networks are likely to be seen as a benevolent form of international cooperation when formed by in-ideology actors, and a dangerous axis of bad agents when formed by out-ideology actors.

A key factor determining the strength of the left/right peace is the level of domestic affective polarization. Although we expect that there is a baseline level of polarization that, on average, will

cause out-ideology countries to be perceived as more threatening, polarization also varies at the individual and state-level, as well as over time. At the individual-level, we thus expect that the more negatively someone feels towards the left/right out-group, and the more favorably they feel towards the left/right in-group, the greater their threat perceptions towards the out-group and the stronger the left/right peace effect.⁴ At the state-level, the left/right peace effect may be particularly salient in countries that have experienced an increase in polarization, such as the contemporary United States. Among 12 countries from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “the United States exhibited the largest increase in affective polarization” (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024, 557). Trump claimed, “I always say we have two enemies. 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). In the Trump era, left/right ideological kinship has become a key driver of U.S. foreign policy. During his second term, Trump railed against liberal states in Canada and Europe while speaking warmly about conservative Hungary and frequently declining to criticize right-wing Russia. Sharpened ideological divisions are also evident in Western Europe and other countries around the world (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024; Emanuele and Marino 2024).

In sum, we argue that regime type is not the only dimension of ideology that matters in shaping threat perceptions and state behavior. The left versus right schism over favored policy outcomes can also serve as a crucial nexus between domestic and international politics.

⁴ 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 fully agree with the general idea that some baseline level of ideological polarization is likely necessary for the left/right peace to operate.

The Ideological Peace

Democracies tend to flock together with ideological kin states, while being more likely to impose punitive actions against out-ideology states. Crucially, however, we argue the assessment of kinship is based on both shared democracy *and* shared left/right ideology. The two types of peace—the democratic peace and the left/right peace—are separate and additive. All else equal, the presence of either form of kinship diminishes the chances of punitive action, and the presence of both forms of kinship creates a more durable ideological peace (see Table 2).

Table 2: The Dual Importance of Ideologies of Process and Outcome

	Democracy	Nondemocracy
Same Left/Right Lean	Strongest Peace (Ideological Peace)	Intermediate Peace
Different Left/Right Lean	Intermediate Peace	Weakest Peace

In democracies, we expect support for punitive action will be lowest when the target country is democratic and shares a similar left/right lean with the observer (top left of Table 2). Here, the impact of ideology is doubly strong as the target has both a favored governance process and favored policy outcomes. For example, liberals in the United States would be strongly disinclined to use force against Canada or Denmark.

If the target is a democracy with an opposing left/right lean, or a nondemocracy with a similar left/right lean, we expect an intermediate level of support for punitive action. Whether support for punitive action is higher or equivalent for the former or latter scenario likely hinges on individual preferences for democratic processes *versus* policy outcomes. Therefore, *ex ante*, it is not possible to have strong theoretical predictions for these intermediate categories.

Support for punitive action will be highest when the target country is out-ideology in terms of both process and outcome (bottom right of Table 2). Here, observers are more likely to see the target state as a member of the out-group, untrustworthy, and threatening—increasing the odds of

preventive war dynamics, miscommunication, and/or a security dilemma, thereby boosting the chances of conflict. For example, the double ideological misalignment between American conservatives and authoritarian and left-wing Venezuela may help explain why the Trump administration perceived the government of Nicolás Maduro as highly threatening.

Of course, there could be an interaction between the two different peace effects. An observer's left-wing or right-wing ideology may impact how they view the democratic credentials of another state. Krishnarajan (2023) finds that the public often rationalizes undemocratic policies by in-partisans as being democratic and sees pro-democratic policies by out-partisans as undemocratic. Applied to IR, people with a left-wing ideology, for example, may be more skeptical about the democratic credentials of a right-wing elected regime.⁵ Still, overall, we expect the democratic peace effect and the left/right peace effect to coexist. After all, the two faces of ideology are distinct. States can be left-wing nondemocracies (e.g., espousing abortion rights but not protecting political rights), or right-wing democracies (e.g., limiting LGBTQ rights but featuring fairly free and contested elections). Chu, Williamson, and Yeung (2025), for example, find that publics across the world conceive of democratic processes and policy outcomes as distinct, and consider tradeoffs between the two in a logical way. For example, voters may accept more authoritarian leadership in return for appealing policies. Our theory is probabilistic, meaning that countries will not always act in line with the ideological peace. Still, shared democracy and aligned left/right ideology tend to separately increase the *likelihood* of peace.

⁵ While our expectation was not strongly held, we did pre-register a hypothesis that the democratic peace might be *somewhat* attenuated for countries that do not share their left/right ideology relative to those that do because foreign countries could get less credit for being a democracy if they are the “wrong kind” of democracy.

Assessing Regime Type and Left/Right Lean

A necessary condition for the democratic peace and the left/right peace to hold is that leaders and/or the public perceive a given foreign country as democratic or nondemocratic and left-wing or right-wing. It is not straightforward for leaders or publics to judge the democratic credentials of another state. For one thing, democracy exists on a continuum. Iran, for example, holds elections with real consequences, but the country's regime type is usually coded as nondemocratic because these elections occur among a limited sample of officially sanctioned candidates. The understanding of democracy also varies over time. For instance, what passed for a radical experiment in representative rule in 18th century America would likely be viewed today as either an undemocratic regime or a highly flawed and limited democracy. Furthermore, the democratic credentials of a particular state may evolve: democratic countries can backslide and autocratic countries can democratize. Despite these issues, many scholars believe that democracy and nondemocracy are meaningful concepts, there are stable and consensus understandings of democracy, and elite and public perceptions of another country's democratic credentials tend to broadly align with scholarly assessments—and, therefore, the democratic peace remains a valuable theoretical construct (Owen 1994).

Similar challenges exist when observers judge the left/right lean of another state. The meaning of left-wing and right-wing differs across time and space, a country's population and leaders will not all be liberal or conservative, and a country's ideological lean may evolve, from more left-wing to more right-wing or vice versa. However, observers can still make meaningful assessments of another country's left/right lean. There are stable consensus understandings about the left/right coding of particular economic or social policies at any *given time*. For example, liberals and conservatives today agree that defending LGBTQ rights is a left-wing position. The primary way that observers assess the left/right lean of another country is likely the ideological tilt of the country's current leadership. The recency bias means that people tend to focus more on the latest examples of a phenomenon rather

than the overall pool of cases. 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 judge and more prominent in the media. Still, focusing on a foreign country's leader as a guide to the country's prevailing left/right ideological lean may be a reasonable heuristic given that the ideological beliefs of a country's current leader and the average beliefs of its citizens are often correlated and endogenous. Another indicator of a country's left/right lean is the consistency of policies enacted over time. Foreign countries with frequent pivots in administration ideology, or where the administrations adopt a jumble of left-wing and right-wing policies, will likely have a weaker perceived left/right lean, whereas countries that maintain uniform left/right stances for years or decades will likely have a stronger perceived left/right lean.

Observers also vary in terms of their levels of information about a foreign country's democratic status or left/right lean. Elites may be relatively well-informed about international affairs, whereas members of the public may be relatively uninformed (e.g., Holsti 2004). The public may access knowledge about another state's ideological characteristics 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 or the media may label a foreign state as a model of left-wing or right-wing values, or a foreign leader may visit the United States and endorse a liberal or conservative position and become associated with that viewpoint.

In sum, we contend that observers are, on average, able to code foreign states as democracies versus nondemocracies, or left-wing versus right-wing, in coherent ways. If observers are unable to code foreign states' democratic or left/right credentials, our theory is not expected to hold. Here, leaders have an informational advantage, and the democratic peace, the left/right peace, and the ideological peace may be even stronger at the elite level than the public level.

TESTING THE IDEOLOGICAL PEACE

Study 1 Research Design

Existing analyses of the impact of ideology (besides regime type) on conflict in IR have often utilized case study research (Haas 2005; Owen IV 2010). These studies are extremely valuable, but they raise several methodological challenges. One issue is selection on the dependent variable (Weisiger 2011; Hundley 2020). It is easier to study cases where conflict did occur compared to when it did not, and, therefore, it is possible that ideological similarity is also present in cases where conflict did not erupt. Endogeneity and reverse causation are also potential challenges because leaders of countries with pre-existing disputes may then adopt different ideologies (Weisiger 2011). In addition, Haas (2005, 33) notes that it is important to isolate different ideological factors (e.g., regime type and left/right orientation) because actors may sometimes be “torn by cross-cutting ideological loyalties,” but distinguishing the independent effect of these factors is hard in case studies.

To 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. affective and ideological 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.

Following other prominent studies that analyzed the democratic peace through survey experiments conducted on the public, we inform respondents that an unspecified country is developing nuclear weapons and could have its first bomb within a matter of months, and measure support for a U.S. military attack against the country’s nuclear sites and economic sanctions (Johns and Davies 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Bell and Quek 2018; Rathbun, Parker, and Pomeroy 2024). We randomly vary two 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 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). Note that, as with democracy, we conceive of a country's left/right lean in this experiment as a country-level characteristic, which, in principle, should be a function of the leaders and citizens' views in that country (likely with greater weight placed on the former), as well as the policies they have adopted.

Our experimental design also accounts for other potential factors that could impact public opinion on the use of force. For example, we also randomize whether the country's population is white or nonwhite. We do so because a recent study finds that perceptions of race may play a role in driving the democratic peace effect found in public opinion, meaning accounting for this factor is potentially important (Rathbun, Parker, and Pomeroy 2024, though see Tomz and Weeks 2025 for a rebuttal). Since prior work has found that a foreign country's religion can matter (Owen IV 2010; Johns and Davies 2012; Chu and Lee 2023), we control for this variable by informing respondents that the country's dominant faith is Christianity. 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 control for the country's military strength compared to the United States. Again, 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 additional factors (or race), 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 3.

Table 3: 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

In line with prior studies, our primary dependent variable measures support for a U.S. military strike 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 imply greater escalation than attacking the country's nuclear sites. Second, we ask about support for imposing severe economic sanctions on the foreign country, which would imply less escalation than

the other two dependent variable questions. These additional outcome variables help measure multiple dimensions of “peace” or the lack thereof (Davenport, Melander, and Regan 2018).

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). We focus on perceived threats to U.S. national security, in particular whether the foreign country would threaten to use, or actually use, nuclear weapons against the U.S. or its allies. In sum, our experiment tests whether ideology (in terms of regime type and left/right orientation), as well as other factors (e.g., race, alliances, and economics), impact support for punitive action.

We carried out our experiment online in June 2024 on a Lucid sample of nearly 2,700 respondents. Research demonstrates that experiments fielded on Lucid replicate the findings of previous studies (Coppock and McClellan 2019). To create a more representative sample, Lucid also uses quota sampling to match census benchmarks on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region. In line with best practices in the literature, we include a *pre-treatment* screener to weed out inattentive respondents (Aronow, Baron, and Pinson 2019). We fielded this experiment in a presidential election year, which could have marginally increased the salience of a foreign country’s left/right orientation. Still, we doubt the results would differ significantly if carried out after the election given that the U.S. remained ideologically 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 or after election season (Maxey 2022).

Study 1 Results

Consistent with our pre-registered theoretical expectations, we find strong evidence for both the democratic peace *and* the left/right peace. We use regression analysis to evaluate our hypotheses. The outcome variables for these analyses are support for a targeted military attack, a broader regime change

operation, and economic sanctions on a 5-point scale from lesser support (1) to greater support (5).⁶ The key explanatory variable is left/right ideological similarity between the respondent and the foreign country. 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).⁷ We also include measures of the other key factors we randomized (e.g., regime type, race, and alliance status) and a series of control variables (e.g., demographics, hawkishness, concern about nuclear proliferation, ethnocentrism, and respondents' perception of the foreign country's wealth).⁸ The results are summarized in Figure 1. For simplicity, we omit results for the control variables, which are available in the appendix.

As in prior studies on public opinion, we find evidence for the democratic peace, even when controlling for other factors like race and alliance status. 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 ideological dimension 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 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. Interestingly, 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 powerful. They are also additive, meaning that the lowest support for punitive action is when the foreign country is democratic *and*

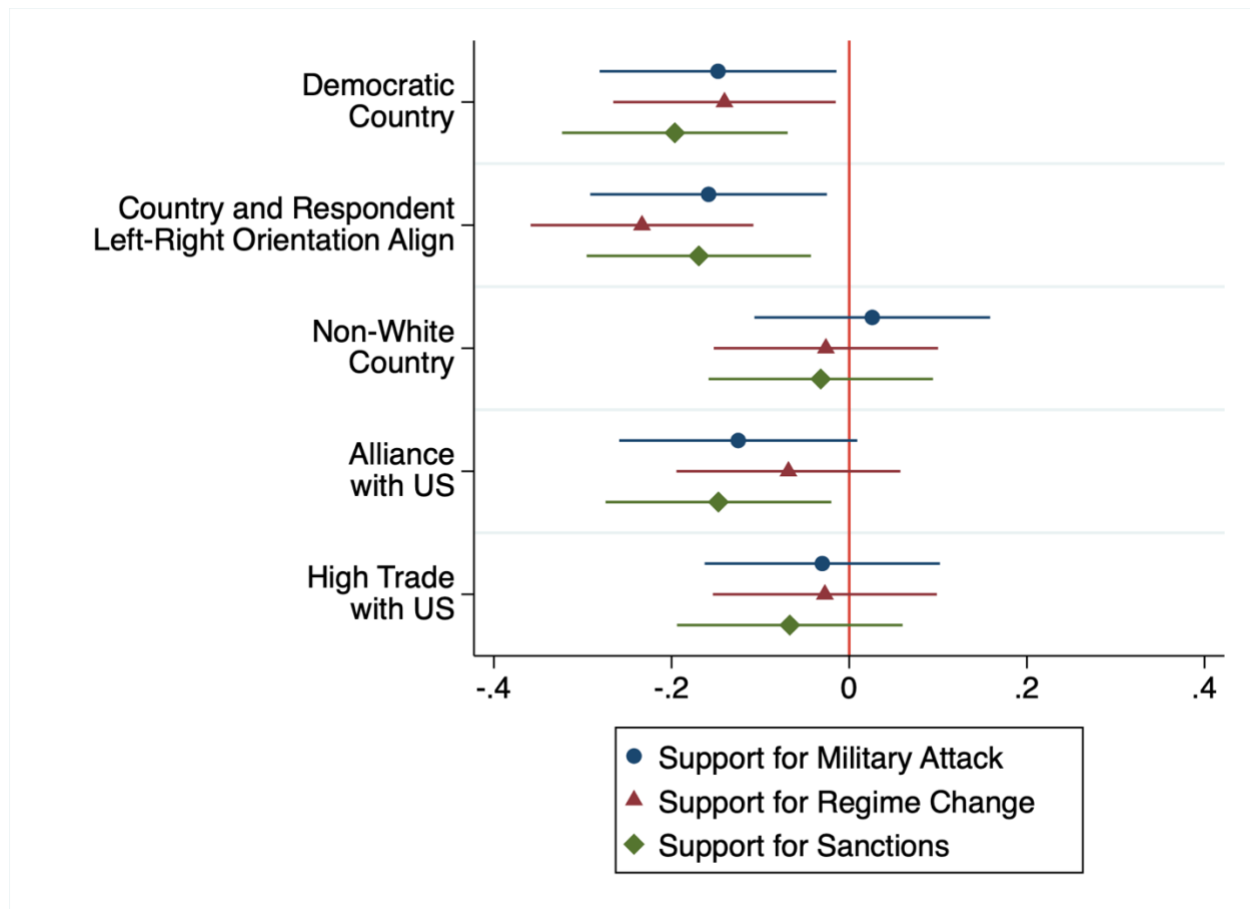
⁶ We estimate separate regressions for each outcome variable.

⁷ 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.

⁸ It is necessary to control for other factors since respondent political identification is not randomly assigned.

shares the observer's left/right lean. In combination, the democratic peace and the left/right peace constitute a broader ideological peace.

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



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

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 left/right ideology compared to ones that do not.⁹

On the other hand, we find little consistent evidence that a foreign country's predominant race, alliance status with the United States, or trade with the United States, 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, 2025).¹⁰

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. 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

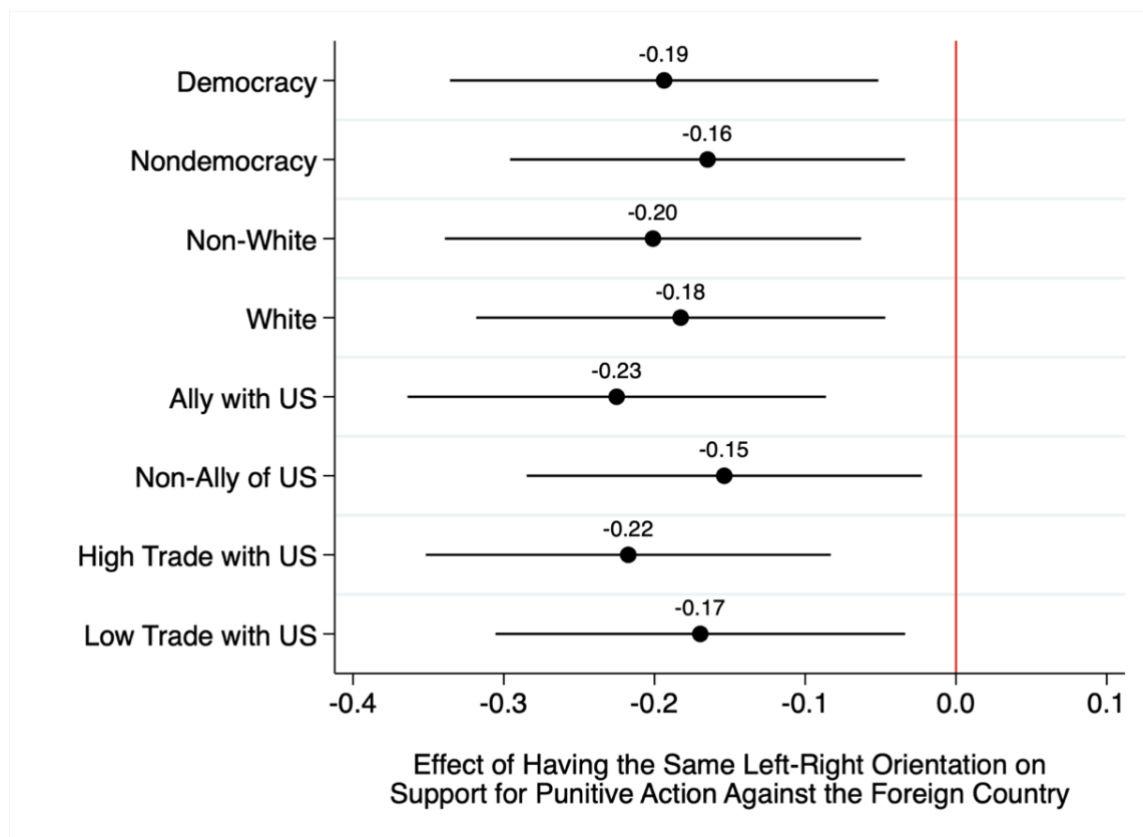
⁹ These differences are also not statistically significant.

¹⁰ 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 (see also Tomz and Weeks 2025).

county's left/right lean, we include those respondents and code them as not having the same left/right orientation as the foreign country.

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.

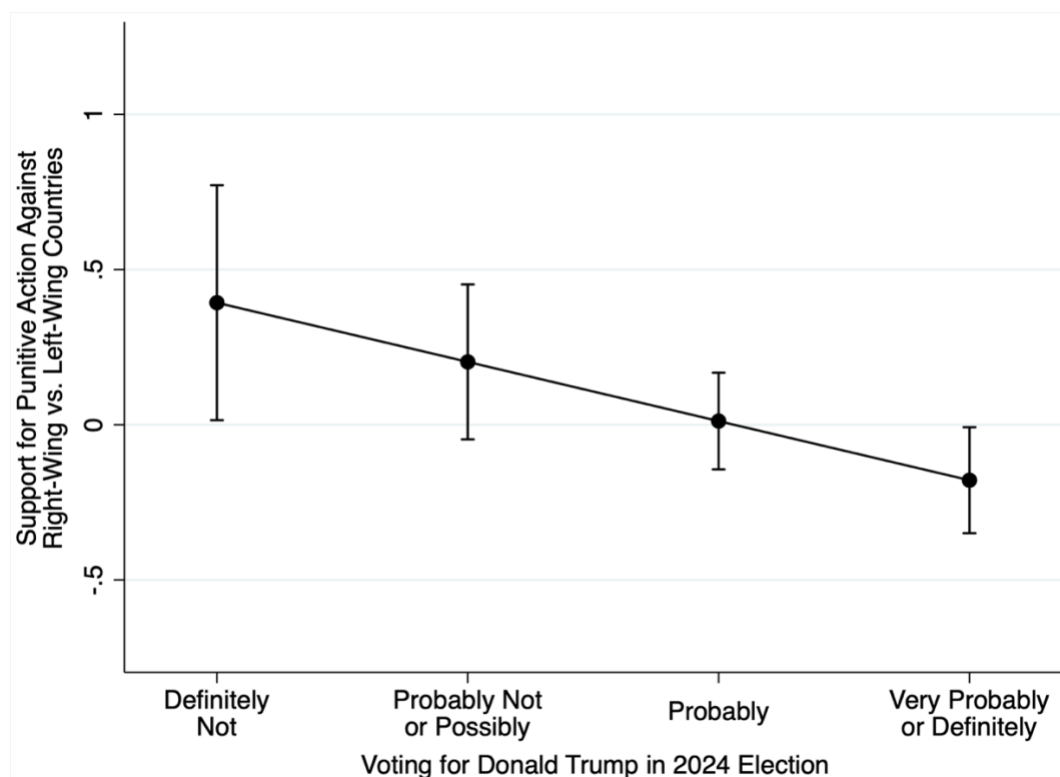
Figure 2: The Robustness of the Left/Right Peace



Note: Error 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.¹¹ For example, 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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).

Figure 3: Right-Wing Peace Among Trump Supporters



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

¹¹ We find no evidence for our other pre-registered mechanism hypothesis that attacking in-ideology countries would be perceived of as less ethical. Future work could probe the reasons for this null effect.

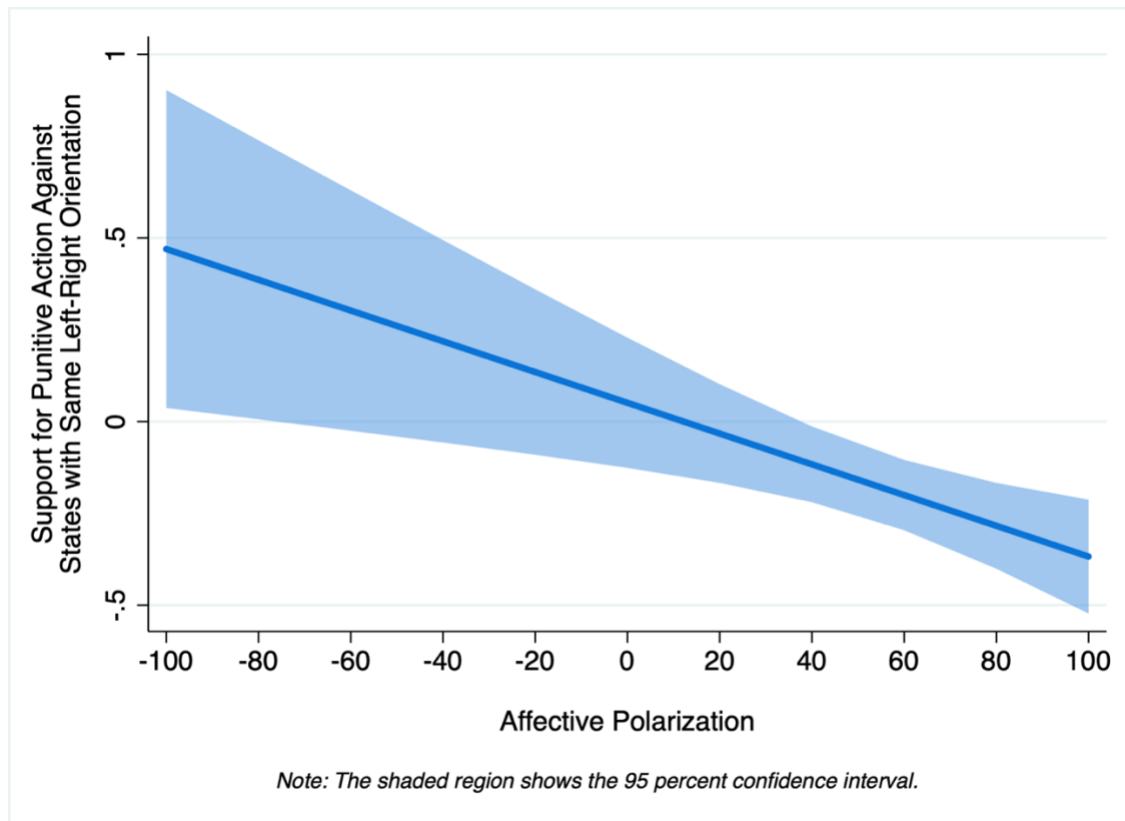
What factors, if any, impact the strength of the left/right peace effects? When conducting a non-pre-registered exploratory analysis, we find some (inconsistent) evidence that the effect is stronger among Democratic respondents than Republican respondents (appendix Table A.9). Meanwhile, the right-wing peace is particularly strong for a certain type of Republican: Trump supporters. Figure 3 shows that respondents that indicated they were definitely or very probably going to vote for Trump in the 2024 election were especially unlikely to support punitive action against right-wing (versus left-wing) foreign countries.

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 ideology. Consistent with prior studies, we also find no significant evidence that the democratic peace is weaker for Republican respondents (or Trump supporters specifically).

As outlined in Figure 4, and consistent with our pre-registered expectations, we find evidence that the left/right peace effect is stronger among respondents who 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 the use of force internationally against out-ideology countries (Owen IV 2010). This finding also implies that the greater the degree of polarization in the U.S. (and other countries), the stronger the left/right peace effect is likely to be. On the other hand, 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: Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Control variables are included and held at their means for this analysis, but not displayed.

Lastly, 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.¹² This null finding is important because it indicates that the democratic peace and the left/right peace are independent effects and a model of public opinion that does not account for *both* effects will have diminished explanatory power.

¹² See appendix Tables A.16 and A.17.

Study 2: External Validity to the Use of 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 we made two key differences in the design of our study compared to the initial one.

First, instead of using hypothetical countries, which can cause respondents to be more likely to support the use of force in general (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.¹³ 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. Historically, Sweden has also 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.¹⁴ This setup may be a harder test 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.

Second, we randomize whether respondents receive specific information about whether Sweden and Poland are left-wing or right-wing, or receive no information about their ideological lean.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Though, to ensure experimental control, 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.

This enables us to probe whether information about a foreign country's left/right lean is a necessary condition for the left/right peace to operate, as we argue.¹⁵ After all, 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 probed this informational dynamic since they all provide respondents with explicit data about the foreign country's regime type.

The first main 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, relatively 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 and its external validity.

The second principal finding of the follow-up experiment is that the left/right peace effect disappears when 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 a foreign country's 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.¹⁶

Study 3: External Validity Outside the United States

While one strength of experiments is internal validity, external validity is always an open question. Given the high levels of polarization in the contemporary United States, and the finding in Study 1 that heightened polarization can increase the strength of the left/right peace, how generalizable is the argument in a context with lower polarization? To probe external validity across space, we conducted

¹⁵ We did not pre-register this test and thus it should be considered exploratory.

¹⁶ In the appendix, we conduct a Google trends analysis, which provides empirical evidence that top-down cues from policymakers and the media play an important role in informing the U.S. public about a foreign country's left/right lean and motivating individuals to learn more about a country.

a third experiment on 1,549 U.K. citizens. The design is substantively identical to Study 1, and it was again carried out on Lucid between August and September of 2025.

Again, we find evidence of both a democratic peace *and* a left/right peace.¹⁷ As in Study 1, there is no statistically significant difference between the two effects. The results are also additive: the strongest peace effect is when the foreign country is both democratic and shares a left/right lean with the respondent. The consistency of the findings in two countries builds confidence in our argument.

Study 4: External Validity to Economic Dimensions of the Left/Right Divide

In recent years, the left/right ideological divide has increasingly focused on cultural issues versus economic ones, and our main experiment highlighted abortion, immigration and LGBTQ rights as examples of left-wing and right-wing policies the foreign country had adopted. To test whether the left/right peace holds up to different operationalizations of ideology (and also outside the context of a presidential election), we conducted an experiment on 1,644 members of the U.S. public via Lucid in September 2025. The key change we make from the Study 1 design is to operationalize the foreign country's left/right lean based on economic rather than cultural issues ("for example, the country has low/high taxes, minimal/significant government regulation, and few/many generous welfare programs to help the poor"). Once more, we find evidence consistent with our argument, building confidence in its external validity.

Militarized Interstate Disputes: External Validity Over Time and to Real-World Scenarios

Thus far, we have found evidence of a left/right peace effect among the public in two substantively important countries with varying levels of polarization—the United States and United Kingdom—in the contemporary era. These findings beg the question of whether the left/right peace holds in

¹⁷ The findings remained statistically significant for the military attack and economic sanctions outcome variables, but were somewhat weaker for the regime change outcome measure than in Studies 1 and 2. This makes sense given that regime change is a less plausible policy option for the United Kingdom relative to the United States.

different time periods and in the real world among political leaders. Historical examples (e.g., European alliance politics before World War II and U.S. behavior during the Cold War) indicate that the left/right peace may have long-standing relevance. And prior research demonstrates that experimental results from samples of average citizens also typically hold among elites (Kertzer 2022).

Still, to analyze these questions empirically, we conducted a final test of external validity 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). They are thus a natural format 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. It includes both democratic and nondemocratic regimes since either can have left-wing economic ideologies (e.g., Nelson Mandela and Kim Il Sung) or right-wing economic ideologies (e.g., Shinzo Abe and François Duvalier). Additionally, while the democratic peace is specific to democratic dyads, we expect the SIT-

¹⁸ 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.

based left/right peace should also be relevant to nondemocracies. Since GLID codes *economic* ideology, it is most similar to how we operationalized ideology in Study 4.

One key difference between GLID and our experiments is that the former codes left/right ideology at the leader level whereas the latter operationalizes left/right ideology at the country level. However, as discussed above, the two forms of coding are correlated, and leader ideology may be the strongest driver of beliefs about a country's left/right lean (though future work could assess this question directly). 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 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 All of our data (except on left/right orientation) is drawn from Barnhart et al.'s (2020) analysis.

Table 4 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 the probability of MID initiation. Model 1 in Table 4 replicates the core democratic peace finding: democratic dyads are significantly less likely to engage in MIDs.²² Crucially, we also find strong evidence that when the heads of government in a dyad share the same left-wing or right-wing economic ideology, they are significantly less likely to engage in MIDs ($p < 0.001$).²³ The effect is substantively large: left/right ideological similarity reduces the risk of MID

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

²¹ See the appendix for more detailed variable descriptions. We also include squared and cubed measures of distance and peace years, but omit them from Table 4 for space reasons.

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

²³ This finding holds if we utilize heads of state rather than heads of government. In most, but not all, cases these two individuals are the same.

initiation by about 50%.²⁴ Our analysis of MIDs therefore replicates the key finding of our four experiments: both a democratic peace *and* a left/right peace exist.

Table 4: MIDs Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Initiation	Use of Force	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation
Heads of Government Have Same Left-Right Ideology	0.513*** (0.047)	0.510*** (0.053)	0.730*** (0.058)	0.523*** (0.049)	0.548*** (0.053)		0.812 (0.213)	0.491*** (0.046)	0.519*** (0.048)
Both Countries Democracies	0.331*** (0.078)	0.226*** (0.071)	0.607*** (0.098)	0.326*** (0.084)	0.400*** (0.082)	0.331*** (0.077)	0.379*** (0.088)	0.266*** (0.072)	0.334*** (0.078)
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 × Post-Cold War									0.624 (0.340)
Alliance	1.249* (0.145)	1.103 (0.147)	0.900 (0.143)	0.999 (0.123)	1.105 (0.123)	1.230* (0.145)	1.288** (0.153)	1.251* (0.145)	1.222* (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)	1.037** (0.018)	1.030 (0.086)	0.999 (0.018)	1.019 (0.015)	1.001 (0.015)	1.006 (0.015)	1.001 (0.015)	1.003 (0.015)
Interest Similarity	0.302*** (0.080)	0.407*** (0.121)	1.021* (0.012)	0.690 (0.228)	0.497*** (0.133)	0.306*** (0.081)	0.263*** (0.070)	0.304*** (0.080)	0.337*** (0.085)
At Least One State Nuclear-Armed	2.496*** (0.409)	2.132*** (0.404)	0.525*** (0.090)	2.333*** (0.401)	1.640*** (0.281)	2.512*** (0.413)	2.491*** (0.417)	2.500*** (0.410)	2.585*** (0.422)
Both States Nuclear-Armed	0.810 (0.424)	0.998 (0.571)	0.340*** (0.105)	0.282** (0.174)	1.511 (0.583)	0.824 (0.429)	0.822 (0.420)	0.823 (0.429)	0.828 (0.431)
Minor Power	0.329*** (0.060)	0.369*** (0.077)	0.319*** (0.125)	0.375*** (0.074)	1.039 (0.231)	0.329*** (0.060)	0.335*** (0.062)	0.329*** (0.060)	0.338*** (0.061)
Contiguity	8.888*** (2.105)	7.953*** (1.988)		10.755*** (2.514)	4.494*** (1.415)	8.796*** (2.073)	8.690*** (2.076)	8.868*** (2.098)	8.881*** (2.090)
Distance	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)		0.999*** (0.000)	1.000** (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 (0.005)	1.002 (0.003)	1.001 (0.004)	1.006 (0.004)	1.005 (0.004)	1.007 (0.004)	1.005 (0.004)	
Post-Cold War									0.749 (0.204)
Constant	0.000 (0.000)	0.010 (0.096)		0.018 (0.157)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.328*** (0.117)
Observations	245287	245287	17851	241045	23123	245287	241237	245287	245287
Dyad Fixed Effects	×	×	✓	×	×	×	×	×	×
United States Excluded	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Politically Irrelevant Dyads Excluded	×	×	×	×	✓	×	×	×	×

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

Support for our argument holds for a number of robustness tests. Model 2 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. Model 3 shows that the left/right peace effect holds when dyad fixed effects are included, meaning we only leverage variation within dyads rather than between them. This helps control for time-invariant factors that might differ between dyads, even though the sample size is significantly

²⁴ 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.

reduced. To probe external validity from our three U.S.-based experiments, Model 4 illustrates that the effect is robust to excluding the U.S. from the analysis entirely. Model 5 shows a left/right peace is also present when we focus the analysis only on politically relevant dyads that include at least one major power or contiguous states (Maoz and Russett 1993).²⁵ 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. 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 from Study 1 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).²⁶ Interestingly, per our pre-registered expectations—but in contrast to our experimental results—Model 8 shows there is a significant 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 analysis is a valuable avenue for future work. Finally, Model 9 illustrates that the left/right peace effect does not significantly vary before or after the Cold War (i.e., the interaction effect is statistically insignificant). All of our results noted above are also robust to including a Cold War control variable. In other words, the left/right peace effect in our MID analysis is not merely an artifact of the Cold War.

In sum, the robustness of the left/right peace effect across four experiments and an observational analysis of MID analysis builds confidence in the internal and external validity of the theory.

²⁵ The significant finding for politically relevant dyads is even robust to also including dyad fixed effects or only analyzing dyads that are non-major powers but are contiguous.

²⁶ The variable (“v2cacamps”) ranges from 0 (not at all polarized) to 4 (polarized to a large extent) and is coded by country experts.

CONCLUSION

This paper theorizes and finds strong evidence that the impact of political ideology on international politics is greater than some skeptics believe. The role of ideology in IR is also more complex than some scholars and policymakers have anticipated. The world is not solely divided into a binary of democracies versus nondemocracies, but rather into loose and jostling coalitions organized around both ideologies of political process and outcome. The membership of these coalitions is fluid and evolving, as states democratize or face democratic backsliding, and as governments shift from left-wing to right-wing. The argument can help explain puzzling dynamics, such as Trump's tolerance for right-wing and autocratic Russia, as well as his criticism and, indeed, coercion of left-wing and democratic actors like Canada and the European Union. One key implication is that politics does not stop at the water's edge. Debates between the left and the right about domestic social and economic issues can spill over into foreign policy, shaping perceptions of other countries and even support for the use of force.

There are several promising avenues for future work. This study focused on the impact of domestic ideology on punitive actions in IR, and future work can explore the effect of ideology on more cooperative dynamics, such as alliances, trade, or humanitarian action. 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, as well as the conditions under which domestic ideological variables have a greater or lesser impact than other factors. In addition, future work could assess whether growing polarization and, in some countries, weakening support for democracy is making the left/right peace stronger relative to the democratic peace. Finally, 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 per the "only Nixon could go to China" logic (e.g., Mattes and Weeks 2019; Blair and Schwartz 2023). For instance,

a left-wing leader might provide an especially credible signal by backing the use of force or sanctions against a left-wing country.

The ideological peace also has significant policy implications. For one, it may create new opportunities for leaders. For example, as the United States seeks allies and partners to compete with other major powers (e.g., China), Washington may be able to court not just fellow democracies, but also foreign states that share the U.S. president's left/right lean, as those countries should (all else equal) be more receptive to cooperation. Given the broader ideological peace effect we identify, partnerships based on both shared left/right alignment and shared democracy may be especially strong. Meanwhile, for weaker powers, the left/right peace can help them predict a priori when they may be at greater risk of facing punitive action or may have an opportunity to extract benefits from more powerful states.

The ideological peace may also pose significant policy challenges. Countries with governments that rotate often in liberal versus conservative orientation may frequently lurch in their perceptions of foreign actors as allies and adversaries. The left/right peace may also incentivize foreign actors to engage in election interference, or strategically accentuate their seeming ideological similarity with major powers to curry favor. Therefore, the value of dialing down political polarization may not stop at the water's edge.

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