

**The Moral Foundations of Restraint:
Partisanship, Military Training, and Combatant Norms of Civilian Protection**

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Abstract

How does partisan identification shape the attitudes of U.S. military officers toward the protection of civilians in war? Drawing on unique surveys of soon-to-be commissioned officers in twelve Army ROTC programs, we find that Democratic-leaning cadets are more supportive of norms of civilian protection than Republican-leaning cadets. This gap remains partially resilient after sustained exposure to military training and socialization. We attribute these partisan differences to insights from Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), which suggests that the moral values of Democrats and Republicans guide their views toward the individual use of force in combat. Our findings have implications for the impact of military training and socialization on restraint toward civilians in war.

Keywords: U.S. military, partisanship, norms, surveys, training, socialization, ROTC, law of war, ethics, conflict

On November 26, 2019, Donald Trump stood in front of a stadium-size crowd in Sunrise, Florida and touted his most recent controversial move as commander-in-chief. Less than two weeks before, the president had pardoned or granted clemency for three U.S. servicemembers accused or convicted of war crimes, including Army 1st Lieutenant Clint Lorance, who in 2013 was found guilty of murdering two civilians in Afghanistan. Trump boasted, “I will always stick up for our great fighters. People can sit there in air-conditioned offices and complain, but it doesn’t matter to me” (C-SPAN 2019). Referring to the case of Major Matthew L. Golsteyn, an Army Special Forces officer accused of killing an unarmed man in Afghanistan, Trump had tweeted earlier, “We train our boys to be killing machines, then prosecute them when they kill!” (Philipps 2019).

Trump is hardly unusual among Republican politicians in challenging laws and norms surrounding civilian targeting. For example, Senator Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) called for the U.S. military to “carpet bomb” parts of the Middle East (Neal 2016), former presidential hopeful Ben Carson labeled airstrikes against the children of enemies as “merciful” (Keating 2016), and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush advocated “[g]et[ting] the lawyers off the damn backs of the military once and for all” (O’Toole 2016). Former U.S. Representative Duncan Hunter (R-Calif), a military veteran, unapologetically pronounced that his unit “killed probably hundreds of civilians” in Fallujah (Kelly 2019). As a presidential candidate in 2015, Trump advocated “taking out” family members of terrorists (Byrnes 2015).

The U.S. military has historically gone to great lengths to incorporate norms of civilian protection—also known as “norms of restraint”—into its doctrine, training, and combat operations (Bell *forthcoming*; Department of the Army 2013; Department of Defense 2019,

2020; Kahl 2006, 2007).¹ Yet the apparent willingness of many Republican politicians to endorse the targeting of civilians as the basis of a partisan appeal suggests that this norm is not universally shared (Sagan and Valentino 2017, 2018).² Polling data, for example, show broad support among Republicans for Trump's war crime pardons (Sagan and Valentino 2019a). Other work finds that Democrats are significantly more bothered by ethics breaches in the military than Republicans (Robinson 2019).

For U.S. combatants themselves, adhering to military norms in the uncertainty and danger of combat can force difficult and subjective judgments about how to balance the risk of civilian harm against other priorities.³ Limited attention, however, has been paid to whether the political values that U.S. servicemembers hold affect their own attitudes toward what constitutes appropriate conduct in war. This gap is surprising given evidence from the broader U.S. public that Republicans and Democrats possess differing attitudes toward the imperative of protecting civilian lives and what the consequences should be for violating norms of restraint on the battlefield.

Does partisan identification influence the attitudes of U.S. combatants toward norms of restraint in combat? In this article, we survey cadets from U.S. military officer training to investigate how left-right political cleavages shape the attitudes of future officers toward protecting civilians during combat operations. We argue that partisan identification affects the

¹ Norms of restraint include legal, cultural, and organizational norms of civilian protection, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and humanity represented in the law of armed conflict (International Committee of the Red Cross 2018).

² For a contrasting analysis, see Carpenter and Montgomery (2019, 2020).

³ We use the term "combatant" broadly to designate any armed force member who is not a "civilian" and who is authorized to engage in the use of force under the law of armed conflict. See Department of Defense (2016: 99-105).

willingness of combatants to prioritize the protection of civilians relative to other important objectives based on fundamental liberal-conservative principles. These principles are linked to how Democrats and Republicans prioritize ethical values.

Building on Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), a widely used framework in social psychology for conceptualizing ethical decision-making, we argue that the moral intuitions typically associated with liberalism (an emphasis on fairness and the avoidance of harm) promote more deference to norms of restraint than the moral intuitions typically associated with conservatism (an emphasis on in-group loyalty, authority, and purity) (Day et al. 2014; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Haidt and Graham 2007). Consequently, we argue, relative to Democrats, Republican combatants should be more apt to use force against noncombatants in the pursuit of other goals—namely, protecting fellow soldiers and achieving military objectives.

To test this theory, we use original surveys given to first- and fourth-year cadets at 12 U.S. Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs across the country to measure attitudes regarding restraint and military conduct toward civilians. Specifically, we investigate whether a partisan gap exists in the willingness of soon-to-be commissioned officers to target civilians with force in order to achieve military objectives or to save the lives of fellow soldiers—and whether a divide persists despite common U.S. military training in ethics and the laws of war.

In our unique sample of 344 soon-to-be-commissioned officers enrolled in ROTC programs, we find that, among cohorts entering their first year, partisanship is a significant predictor of attitudes toward the protection of civilians. Democratic-leaning cadets express more concern than Republican-leaning cadets for protecting civilians, even if that means potentially

compromising the success of a military mission or increasing the risk to their fellow soldiers. By comparison, Republican-leaning cadets express more concern than Democratic-leaning cadets for accomplishing military objectives and ensuring the safety of their unit members, even if that means risking civilian lives.

Drawing on cross-cohort surveys, we demonstrate that these partisan divides remain partially resilient after the completion of ROTC training, which includes instruction in “the Army Ethic,” or the set of guiding rules and principles that mandate respect for civilians on the battlefield (Department of the Army 2013). Similar to first-year ROTC cohorts, senior Republicans prioritize the protection of fellow soldiers over the protection of civilians more than senior Democrats. Unlike first-year cohorts, however, Republicans in their final year of ROTC do not differ significantly from Democrats in prioritizing civilian protection over mission success. We find that, both before and after ROTC training, Democrats and Republicans alike are more apt to trade civilian lives to save fellow soldiers than to accomplish mission objectives.

Our study makes several contributions to debates over partisanship, military organizations, and norms of restraint. First, we show that partisanship shapes the attitudes of U.S. military personnel toward the use of force and the protection of civilians in war. We argue that this phenomenon is linked to the differing moral priorities of Democrats and Republicans. As professionals in the “management of violence” (Huntington 1964: 11), ROTC-trained officers hold leadership roles and exert considerable influence over the conduct of troops under their command. Consequently, partisanship may be a significant factor in shaping the treatment of civilians during U.S. combat operations and may inform the adoption of norms of restraint within the organizational culture of the U.S. military.

Second, our findings shed light on the socialization of combatants to norms of restraint and the importance of combatants' political orientation—a factor under-examined in existing studies of violence against civilians.⁴ The U.S. military expends enormous resources to educate and train combatants in norms of civilian protection (Kahl 2007). These efforts are intended to mold individuals with a diverse range of perspectives into a cohesive corps that abides by U.S. military norms promoting professionalism, restraint, and ethical conduct on the battlefield. Although military training is designed to equalize attitudes across combatants in their restraint toward noncombatants, we show that this may not fully occur between Democrats and Republicans.⁵

Third, our findings contribute to the literature on U.S. civil-military relations. Numerous studies demonstrate that military and civilian populations differ both in their partisan compositions (Bacevich and Kohn 1997; Feaver and Kohn 2001; Holsti 2001a, 2001b; Ricks 1997) and in their attitudes toward foreign policy, the military, and the use of military force (Burbach 2019; Feaver and Gelpi 2003; Gacek 1994; Gelpi and Feaver 2002; Golby, Cohn, and Feaver 2016; Robinson 2018). We show, however, that the partisan divide among the public toward the appropriate use of military force—with conservatives generally being more hawkish than liberals (Dueck 2010; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Gries 2014), including in their willingness to incur civilian casualties (Pew 2017; Ron, Lavine, and Golden 2019)—may extend

⁴ On combatant socialization, see Checkel (2017) and Gates (2017). For studies on combatant socialization and norms of restraint, see Bell (*forthcoming*), 2014; Hoover Green (2018). For a review of literature on military training in the law of war, see]Stubbins Bates (2014).

⁵ For a review of the impact of military rank on combatant adoption of norms of restraint, see Bell and Terry (*forthcoming*).

to individual combatant views on the use of force on the battlefield. This may be especially true when the lives of fellow unit members are on the line.

Lastly, our study contributes to a broad scholarship on Moral Foundations Theory by applying this framework to the high-stakes arena of modern combat. Although MFT is widely used in the social and behavioral sciences (Clifford and Jerit 2013; Koleva et al. 2012; McAdams 2008), and studies have investigated moral values, including MFT, in the context of public opinion and international conflict (Smetana and Vranka 2020; Rathbun and Stein 2020; Liberman 2006; Sagan and Valentino 2019b; Stein 2015, 2019), we are—to our knowledge—the first to extend its implications to the wartime conduct of combatants in the U.S. military specifically. Our results not only suggest that MFT affects whether partisans will accept greater risk to civilians to achieve other objectives, but also indicate that certain values may be more instrumental than others in shaping the attitudes of combatants to undertake ethically-charged decisions on the battlefield.

Partisanship and Adoption of Norms of Restraint

Political scientists have devoted increasing attention to the role of individual political beliefs in both intra- and inter-state conflicts (Maynard 2019; Schubiger and Zelina 2017). Scholarship has advanced past the generic question of whether such orientations affect conflict to probe specific issues such as how ideology motivates individuals to partake in political violence (Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Hoover Green 2018; Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Thaler 2012; Ugarriza and Craig 2013), how it informs the strategies adopted by armed groups (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Maynard 2019), and how it influences voter support for military

interventions (Golby 2011). Such research, however, typically does not account for the role of individual political persuasions in shaping attitudes among actual combatants toward the use of force in war, including against civilians.

Considerable work has examined the causal mechanisms that lead militaries to harm civilians.⁶ These explanations tend to focus on international, national, or organizational-level factors, such as identity-based antagonism, the regime type that the military represents, the expected strategic costs and benefits on the battlefield, domestic and global pressures, military culture, command enforcement, group ideology, and group socialization and induction rituals (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Bell 2016; Cohen 2013; DeMerritt 2012; Downes 2008; Kahl 2007; Manekin 2020; Ruffa 2018; Stanton 2016; Valentino 2004, 2014).⁷ The fast-paced and relatively decentralized nature of modern warfare, however, means that individual commanders and combatants frequently have considerable latitude in choosing how and when to deploy violence on the battlefield.⁸

To understand the roots of these choices, we build on the concept of “the combatant’s trilemma,” which specifies that combatants must trade off among three main priorities in warfare: 1) achieving military objectives (“military advantage”); 2) protecting military peers (“force protection”); and 3) respecting civilian lives (“civilian protection”) (Bell *forthcoming*).⁹

⁶ A small number of studies look at individual-level incentives among insurgents to target civilians, but these analyses almost entirely concentrate on material payoffs (Azam and Hoeffler 2002; Kalyvas 1999; Wood 2010).

⁷ For a comprehensive review of the broad literature on civilian targeting, see Balcells and Stanton (2021).

⁸ This decentralized philosophy of warfighting is known in the United States and in many Western militaries as “mission command” (King 2017).

⁹ Regarding the trade-off between force protection and military advantage, see Castelli and Zambernardi (2017).

The premise of the combatant's trilemma is that while all three priorities are important, combatants may sometimes have no choice but to trade off between protecting civilians and other aims. Combatants can accept greater risk to their unit or their military objectives by adopting tactics to minimize the risk of collateral harm to civilians, or vice versa.

Military organizations frequently establish guidelines for acceptable behavior on the battlefield through specified rules of engagement. Amid the "fog of war," however, combatants may need to make subjective judgments about whether and how to use force that has the potential to harm civilians. We argue that, in navigating these high-stakes choices, partisanship may affect U.S. combatant attitudes toward restraint because liberalism (aligned mostly with the Democratic Party) and conservatism (aligned mostly with the Republican Party) differ in their underlying value systems (Hunter 1991; Jost 2006; Lakoff 2002). These values may extend to how combatants judge the appropriateness of using force against civilians.

Moral Foundations Theory

To explain the potential roots of a partisan gap in combatant attitudes toward respect for the principle of civilian protection, we draw on a well-developed literature in social psychology referred to as "Moral Foundations Theory" (Day et al. 2014; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Haidt and Graham 2007). MFT is a widely used framework that has been used across the social sciences to explain how people orient their moral compasses and why polarization exists along major lifestyle choices, habits, and opinions (Clifford and Jerit 2013; Koleva et al. 2012; McAdams 2008). It stipulates that essentially everyone—regardless of culture or

background—prioritizes several common values, although disagreement exists over how much they are rooted in heredity versus exposure to social environments.

MFT identifies the basis of ethical decision-making as a function of five core values: 1) harm; 2) fairness; 3) in-group loyalty; 4) authority; and 5) purity. The concept of harm broadly refers to the desire to avoid unnecessary trauma, physical or otherwise. Fairness implies that people should be treated equally under the laws and customs of society. In-group loyalty involves closeness to people with whom one shares certain traits, either immutable or mutable. Authority refers to the deference that societies give to hierarchies, as well as the order that emanates from these structures. Purity entails avoiding certain activities or objects deemed subversive to a righteous society.

MFT shows that these five values relate closely to individual political beliefs. Liberals (Democrats) are relatively more likely to prioritize harm and fairness, whereas conservatives (Republicans) are relatively more likely to prioritize in-group loyalty, authority, and purity (Day et al. 2014; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Haidt and Graham 2007). We contend that different orientations toward MFT values should lead Democratic- and Republican-leaning combatants to differ in how they balance civilian protection with other priorities in war. We hypothesize the effect of these five values on support for the norm of restraint as follows:

1) Harm: A defining liberal value is an emphasis on preventing harm and extending compassion. This corresponds with empathy for marginalized populations. On the battlefield, civilians are likely to be seen as a vulnerable group without the ability to protect themselves. This may lead liberal combatants to be more sympathetic toward civilians caught in the crosshairs of fighting. By comparison, conservative combatants may exhibit less restraint toward

civilians because they place lower weight on potential harm to vulnerable groups, consider harm an inevitable byproduct of war, or perceive civilians as aiding or abetting the other side. This does not mean that conservatives favor inflicting harm against noncombatants—only that they may be more willing to accept that harm is necessary to accomplish other goals.

2) *Fairness:* A second liberal value is fairness. Liberalism tends to hold that individuals are entitled to fair or similar treatment under a prescribed set of rules or principles. In a conflict zone, liberal combatants may be more likely to view violence against civilians as rarely, if ever, justified without evidence of wrongdoing or recourse to procedural protections. Conservative combatants, however, may be less willing to extend principles of fairness to civilians in foreign conflicts. They may be more comfortable making judgments about how exacting injury or punishment is a necessary evil during war. On the battlefield, conservatives may be more willing to suspend normal protections for noncombatants or to believe that it is acceptable for civilians to incur some of the costs of political violence.

3) *In-group loyalty:* Conservatives are more likely to draw boundaries between in- and out-groups, to place greater moral weight on the goals and safety of their in-group, and to defend individuals with whom they share similar traits. In a war zone, this may lead conservative combatants to prioritize their own goals over preserving the lives of foreign civilians. Conservatives may also be more likely to perceive civilians in a conflict as part of the same out-group as enemy combatants or as aiding or abetting the other side. This makes it easier to rationalize not protecting them. Liberals, by contrast, are less likely to see national, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other distinctions as salient. This belief in commonality may make liberals more averse to incurring civilian casualties to advance other objectives.

4) Authority: Conservatives generally place greater weight on respect for authority, hierarchy, and order. Consequently, when faced with moral dilemmas on the battlefield, conservatives may be more likely to execute orders and to avoid breaking the chain of command, even when such orders can result in collateral damage, such as civilian deaths. Conservatives may be more likely to view civilian casualties as an undesirable, but acceptable, outcome of deferring to superiors and carrying out military operations. Liberals, by contrast, may be more willing to depart from authoritative commands to preserve the moral values associated with fairness and limiting harm. For liberal combatants, this may lead to situations where deference to authority gives way to the need to protect noncombatants.

5) Purity: Conservatives tend to value maintaining a clear separation between what they perceive as pure and impure. When lines are drawn between good and evil on the battlefield, conservative combatants may perceive their own goals and colleagues as morally virtuous and foreign civilians as connected to the impurity of the opposing side. This might lead conservatives to rationalize violence against civilians if it advances what they see as pure objectives. Liberals, on the other hand, might be more likely to view war as morally ambiguous, with no side having a monopoly on ethics. Even while serving their own military, they may perceive that it is not without faults and that the opposing side is not without virtues. As a result, liberal combatants may be more likely to internalize norms of civilian protection.

Table 1 summarizes the predicted effects of the five MFT values—harm, fairness, in-group loyalty, authority, and purity—on views regarding the protection of civilians. Taken together, the predictions lead to our main hypothesis: *Democratic combatants should be more likely to adopt norms of restraint than Republican combatants.*

Table 1. Predicted Impact of MFT Values on Adoption of Norms of Restraint

	Harm	Fairness	In-group Loyalty	Authority	Purity
Democrat	✓	✓			
Republican			✓	✓	✓
Effect on Adoption of Norms of Restraint	+	+	-	-	-

Note: + = more respect / - = less respect

The Case: U.S. Military

We investigate the case of the U.S. military because it is both the most powerful and active military in the world and because it is subject to the same political divides that characterize American society more broadly. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, the Huntingtonian thesis of the professionalized, politically neutral military largely dominated social science studies of civil-military relations in the United States (Huntington 1964). Yet despite this idealized model, since at least the end of the Cold War, academics have produced a surge of research documenting the mounting politicization of the U.S. armed forces, especially in terms of its conservative composition (Bacevich and Kohn 1997; Holsti 2001a; Ricks 1997).

For example, one early influential study found that the senior officer corps in the U.S. military was comprised of much larger shares of Republicans than in civilian leadership roles: 64 percent of military leaders self-identified as Republican, 8 percent as Democratic, and 17 percent as independent (Feaver and Kohn 2001). By comparison, elite non-veteran civilian respondents

self-identified at rates of 30 percent, 43 percent, and 20 percent, respectively.¹⁰ Subsequent research has corroborated the conservative tilt of the U.S. officer corps (Urban 2014). These findings, coupled with other research on the attitudes of U.S. servicemembers, have led scholars to identify a partisan “gap” in civil-military relations (Golby 2011; Urban 2014: 574).¹¹

Because the organizational culture of the U.S. military also promotes compliance with the laws of war, the U.S. represents an excellent case in which to study the tension between the individual use of military force and restraint toward civilians. The principle of civilian protection has been foundational to U.S. military doctrine, training, and rule enforcement since the Vietnam War era.¹² Recent U.S. military operations, however, have inflicted significant civilian casualties. For example, according to an often cited human rights organization, between 2014 and 2021, U.S. operations in Iraq and Syria resulted in the deaths of approximately 8,000 to 13,000 civilians (Airwars 2021). The ongoing, active nature of its force deployment means that the U.S. military will continue to grapple with this challenge (Mahanty and Shiel 2019).

Surveys and Methods

¹⁰ Similarly, in terms of political ideology, 67 percent of the military leaders self-identified as somewhat or very conservative, 28 percent as moderate, and 4 percent as somewhat or very liberal. By contrast, elite nonveteran civilian respondents self-identified at respective rates of 32 percent (conservative), 28 percent (moderate), and 38 percent (liberal) (Holsti 2001b).

¹¹ Analyses also show that perceptions of rising conservatism and partisanship influence social dynamics within the U.S. military. For example, an examination of the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) discovered that the perceived conservative predominance in the military leads cadets to overestimate the degree of conservatism embraced by their peers (Sondheimer, Toner, and Wilson 2013). One study also found that nearly half of USMA cadets felt pressure to identify with the Republican Party (Dempsey 2009).

¹² See, for example, Kahl (2007).

To test our hypothesis, we exploit original data from the Combat Ethics Survey (CES), which surveyed hundreds of cadets in U.S. Army ROTC programs about the ethical dilemmas they may face in war.¹³ ROTC is of particular interest because it is the largest source of commissioned officers in the U.S. Army, producing thousands of U.S. Army lieutenants every year. At the completion of their studies, ROTC graduates earn officer commissions and, within months, lead many of the U.S. Army's frontline forces in tactical combat units. Therefore, this group is highly influential in shaping the U.S. Army's culture on the battlefield.¹⁴

Questionnaires were distributed at 12 ROTC programs across the United States, with the goal of obtaining a relatively representative sample of cadets both at the beginning of their studies (during their first year in the program) and at the end (during their fourth year in the program).¹⁵ The cross-cohort nature of the data allows us to examine both the initial effect of partisanship on views regarding civilian protection among ROTC cadets and whether exposure to military training affects the size of any gap in attitudes between Democrats and Republicans.

ROTC surveys were given both online and with paper. They were administered to a diverse sample of universities to obtain variation in variables such as academic prestige,

¹³ This survey was designed and carried out by Andrew M. Bell. See Bell (*forthcoming*).

¹⁴ New U.S. Army officers are also commissioned primarily through the U.S. Military Academy and the Officer Candidate School. ROTC graduates, however, make up the majority of new officers in the Army (Population Representation in the Military Services 2017).

¹⁵ To reduce social desirability bias—in which combatants might feel pressured or obliged to give certain responses—the survey was given using questionnaires that emphasized confidentiality and data protection, and survey questions used neutral language to present the competing values of the combatant trilemma as an ethical dilemma (Krumpal 2013). Cadets were asked to complete questionnaires knowing limited information about the nature and intent of the study. This obviates potential priming effects and maximizes the likelihood that respondents answer openly and honestly. Surveys were administered both in person and remotely using paper and online Qualtrics software. Surveys were administered during ROTC courses in conjunction with relevant course instructors. When not administered by Bell, ROTC instructors were told to use an identical introductory script.

public/private status, geographic location, racial composition, religious tradition, and political leaning.¹⁶ Surveys were distributed to freshman (first-year cadets) in fall 2013 and seniors (fourth-year cadets) in spring 2013. Participation was voluntary, and the uptake rate was high (estimated at 90 to 95 percent by ROTC battalion commander assessments). All together, 344 ROTC cadets took part in the survey, including 200 freshman (“Military Science I”) cadets and 144 senior (“Military Science IV”) cadets.

ROTC Training

ROTC provides cadets with a part-time military education within a civilian university context. Cadets typically undergo four years of training under the overarching ROTC “Leadership Development Program,” which focuses on five major themes: 1) values and ethics; 2) personal development; 3) leadership; 4) tactics and techniques; and 5) officership. As part of this program, cadets engage each week in two hours of formal instruction in “military science” (“MS”) courses focusing on military training, tactics, leadership, and various aspects of officership and military service.

Army ROTC training on law and ethics focuses on developing the “Army Ethic”—the set of professional, ethical, and legal principles and rules (including those mandating respect for civilians in war) that form the basis of the U.S. Army’s organizational culture.¹⁷ Introductory

¹⁶ Universities were: Brigham Young University, Duke University, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Georgetown University, George Mason University, Howard University, Iowa State University, Johns Hopkins University, Liberty University, University of Maryland, University of Mississippi, and the University of Virginia.

¹⁷ Bell (*forthcoming*). As outlined by *Army Doctrine Reference Paper 1*, the Army Ethic is based on multiple sources: the Army Values, including “honor,” “integrity,” and “respect for others”; the law of armed conflict, which emphasizes the core principles of military necessity, distinction, proportionality, and humanity; the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which criminalizes murder

ROTC classes provide basic education on the principles of the Army Values and the law of armed conflict (LOAC), while advanced classes prepare cadets for the ethical and practical demands of leading soldiers in combat. ROTC training is primarily conducted with briefings, readings, and case studies, although discussions, hypothetical scenarios, and other types of training methods are occasionally used, as well. Overall, an estimated 21 hours of classroom hours are devoted to ethics, the law of war, and military law.

Outside the classroom, cadets also participate in weekly “leadership labs,” which put academic concepts into practice through drills and exercises, as well as regular ROTC group physical fitness training, interactive weekend training activities, and semesterly field training exercises. Following their third year, cadets attend the Leader Development and Assessment Course (LDAC), an intensive, month-long leadership and tactics exercise known colloquially as “Warrior Forge” (McCormick 2011). LDAC places cadets in leadership positions that simulate stressful combat situations, with a focus on physical fitness, weapons training, tactics, and small unit combat leadership.

Together, these classroom and practical training elements expose ROTC cadets to U.S. Army’s organizational values, including norms promoting professionalism, combat ethics, and the laws of war.

Operationalizing Attitudes of Restraint toward Civilians

To operationalize attitudes of restraint toward civilians, we use two dependent variables, which elicit how ROTC cadets prioritize civilian protection relative to military advantage and

and assault; and the Army’s “Soldier’s Rules,” which distill these requirements into simple battlefield precepts. See Department of the Army (2013).

force protection. Combined, our questions encapsulate the three values embodied within the “combatant’s trilemma.” In the first question, cadets were asked whether they agree that “During combat operations, it is justifiable to...Intentionally kill a civilian when it is necessary to accomplish the mission.” In the second question, cadets were asked whether they agree that “During combat operations, it is justifiable to...Intentionally kill a civilian if it will save the life of a soldier.” Responses were coded on a 1-5 Likert scale, from “Strongly Agree” (1) to “Strongly Disagree” (5).¹⁸

These questions aim to capture cadets’ underlying normative attitudes toward battlefield conduct and the protection of civilians. Because legal rules can never adequately cover the infinite complexity of the battlefield, underlying normative attitudes are crucial because they broadly reflect the general impulses or instincts on which combatants are prone to act in high-stakes scenarios. Indeed, law of war theorists note that effective socialization to LOAC principles requires that combatants internalize not just the law but the deeper norms that guide behavior (Stephens 2019; Ron 2000). As Stephens (2019: 4) points out, “No training regime in the world could possibly hope to replicate every instance of possible technical application. Hence, technical proficiency alone is not enough, rather effective training requires the development of a personal set of internalized principles that guide behaviour under the law.”

To capture underlying attitudes regarding civilian protection, we employ ethical dilemmas that intentionally leave the legality of conduct open to interpretation. This is in line with the arguments of military ethicists who assert that combatants’ normative attitudes toward

¹⁸ Although in real-world situations it may be less than clear that killing a civilian will guarantee advancing a military mission or saving a fellow soldier, these questions reasonably reflect the trade-offs that a combatant might—and often does—face on the battlefield.

conduct in war can be effectively elucidated through the presentation of ethical dilemmas—scenarios in which respondents are confronted with competing, but potentially legitimate values—that represent the moral ambiguity of the modern battlefield (Kem 2006). By contrast, questions seeking ethically or legally “correct” answers, by definition, do not constitute dilemmas. Instead, they evaluate technical knowledge of the law itself.

We keep the details of our questions parsimonious, devoid of facts and other contextualizing information. In doing so, respondents are less likely to answer based on their knowledge of the law and how it should be applied in a particular scenario, and more likely to answer based on their individual moral judgment. Absent details, combatants have less information available on which to make legal determinations. By comparison, extensive details—such as perceptions of a hostile threat, or the dress or conduct of “civilians”—could transform questions into assessments of knowledge of specific LOAC rules, such as the criteria by which civilians can be deemed “combatants” under the “direct participation in hostilities” test in the law of war (Melzer 2009).

Results

Before Military Training

We first examine whether Republican-leaning cadets who enter ROTC (i.e., before exposure to military training) display less restraint toward civilians than Democratic-leaning cadets. For this analysis, we confine the sample to first-year cadets and estimate the following model:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{RepublicanScale}_i + X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Here, Y indicates how much cadets disagree that executing a military mission or saving a fellow soldier is sufficient cause for killing a civilian (i.e., higher numbers refer to more restraint); *RepublicanScale* is a 1-7 scale of partisanship, measured from “Strong Democrat” (1) to “Strong Republican” (7); X represents individual-level controls¹⁹; and ε is the error term. For ease of interpretation, all of the main regressions in our results are estimated using linear models. As a robustness check, we also reestimate the regressions using ordered logit models in Appendix Table A2.

To start, we examine how first-year ROTC cadets prioritize carrying out a military mission relative to protecting civilians. As expected, in Model 1 of Table 2, the coefficient on *RepublicanScale* is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that cadets who self-identify as higher on the Republican scale display less restrained attitudes toward civilians. Figure 1a plots these effects. In our simulations, the average response among “Strong Republicans” on the 1-5 Likert scale denoting attitudes toward civilian restraint is 3.15, compared to 4.03 for “Strong Democrats.”²⁰

Next, we analyze how cadets weigh saving a fellow soldier relative to safeguarding civilians. As anticipated, in Model 2 of Table 2, the coefficient on *RepublicanScale* is again negative and statistically significant, confirming that cadets who self-identify as higher on the Republican scale exhibit less restraint toward civilians. Figure 1b charts these effects. In our simulations, the average response among “Strong Republicans” on the 1-5 Likert scale balancing

¹⁹ Control variables are age, race, sex, and prior combat experience. These results are also robust to controlling for whether an individual attends a religious university (see Appendix Table A3).

²⁰ We conducted simulations using the “margins” package in R (Leeper, Arnold, and Arel-Bundock 2018).

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civilian protection and force protection is 2.40, whereas the average response among “Strong Democrats” is 2.87.

Overall, these results are consistent with our expectations: Among first-year ROTC cadets, Republican-leaners display significantly less restrained attitudes toward civilians in war than Democratic-leaners. Despite these differences, it is worth noting that tolerance for civilian casualties is nontrivial across the partisan spectrum. Even among strong Democrats, responses do not approach 5 on the restraint scale, which they would if cadets believed that killing civilians was categorically wrong. Both Republicans and Democrats express greater acceptance of civilian casualties when it would save the life of a fellow soldier compared to when it would advance the military mission.

After Military Training

We next look at whether partisan divides toward civilian protection change in response to military training. For this analysis, we restrict our sample only to fourth-year cadets at ROTC and estimate the same models as before.

We begin by analyzing how cadets weigh the importance of executing a military mission when civilian lives are at stake. In Model 3 of Table 2, the coefficient on *RepublicanScale* is not statistically significant. This implies that, on the military advantage dimension, partisan differences in restraint toward civilians do not persist after exposure to military training. Figure 1c graphs these effects. In our simulations, “Strong Republicans” have an average response of 3.78 on the 1-5 Likert scale marking restraint toward civilians. For “Strong Democrats,” that number is 4.00.

We also examine the willingness of cadets to sacrifice civilian lives to save a fellow soldier. Model 4 of Table 2 shows a negative and statistically significant coefficient on *RepublicanScale*. This means that, on the force protection dimension, partisan divides in attitudes toward restraint persist even after military training. This is depicted in Figure 1d. In our simulations, “Strong Republicans” have a mean value of 2.25 on the 1-5 Likert scale representing restraint toward civilians. That number is 2.87 for “Strong Democrats.”

These results indicate that, after exposure to military training, partisan divides in restraint toward civilians are partially resilient: Republican-leaners remain less restrained toward civilians than Democratic-leaners when the lives of fellow soldiers are on the line, but not when the success of the military mission is at stake.²¹ Again, however, acceptance of civilian casualties remains nontrivial across the partisan divide. Even among strong Democrats, responses do not clearly trend toward 5 on the restraint scale, which would denote a clear rejection of incurring civilian casualties. After ethics training, both Republicans and Democrats remain more tolerant of civilian casualties when doing so would save the life of a fellow soldier than when it would help to execute a military mission.

²¹ These results do not appear to be an artifact of attrition bias. A *t*-test confirms that the proportion of Democrats in the sample of ROTC seniors is not significantly different than in the freshman sample. In Appendix Table A4, we also show the effects of senior status on willingness to incur civilian casualties for Democrats and Republicans, respectively. For these analyses, we code partisanship dichotomously and drop independents. One point to note is that, from their first to their fourth year, Democrats actually become less restrained in their willingness to accept civilian casualties to protect fellow soldiers. A plausible explanation is that—just as with Republican cadets—Democrat cadets also develop strong bonds with their fellow cohort members over the course of four years in ROTC, which leads them to be even more protective of their fellow unit members irrespective of ethics training.

Table 2. Effect of Partisanship on Adoption of Norms of Restraint, by Year

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Year 1		Year 4	
	Military Advantage	Force Protection	Military Advantage	Force Protection
Republican Scale	-0.15*** (0.05)	-0.08* (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.10** (0.05)
Age	0.11** (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Male	0.11 (0.19)	-0.24 (0.19)	0.54** (0.25)	-0.01 (0.25)
White	0.06 (0.21)	-0.19 (0.21)	-0.27 (0.23)	-0.01 (0.22)
Combat Experience	-2.32* (1.21)	-0.90 (1.21)	0.02 (0.51)	0.21 (0.51)
Observations	230	230	126	126
R-squared	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.05

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

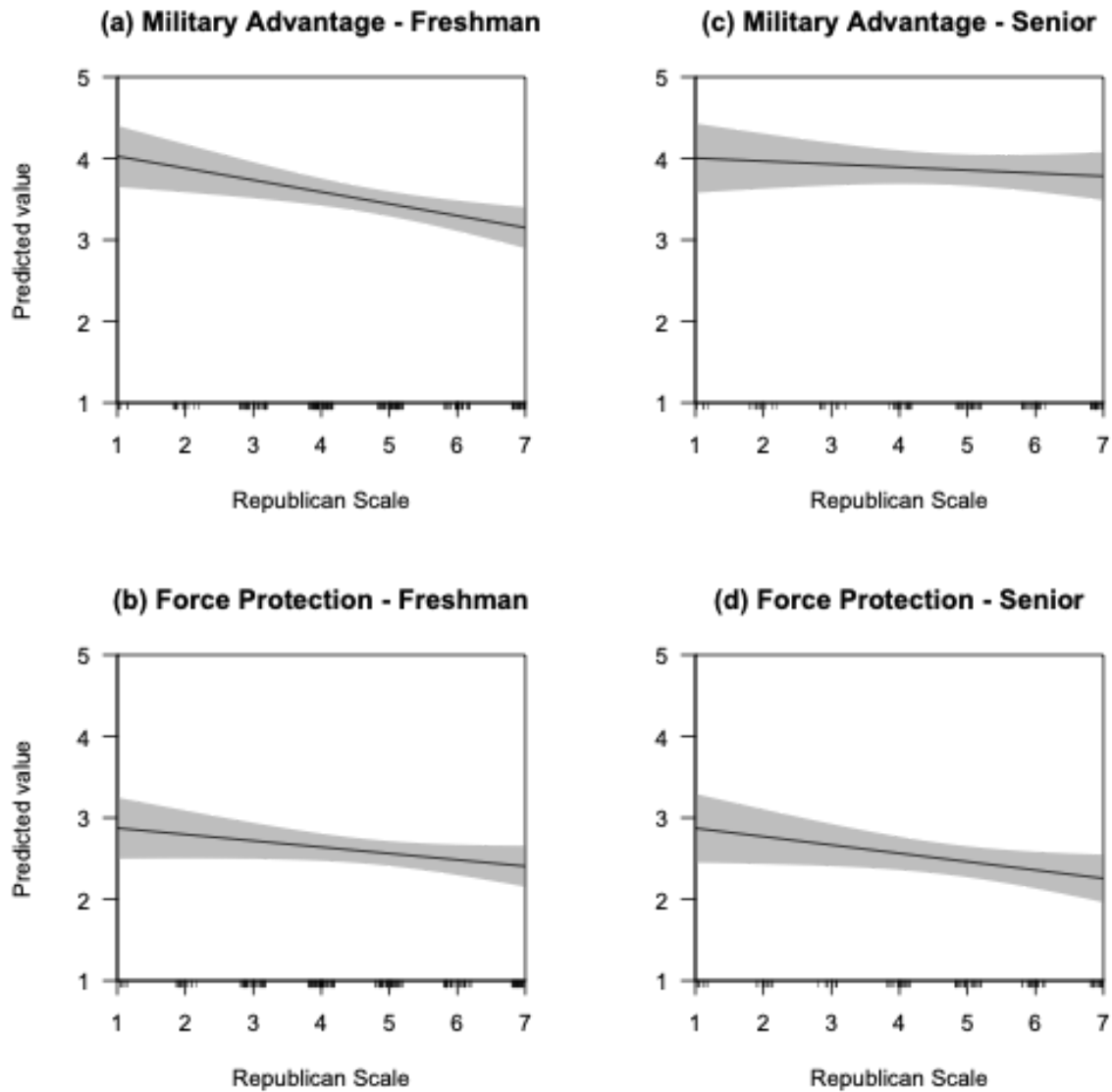


Figure 1. Effect of Partisanship on Adoption of Norms of Restraint, by Year (Higher Numbers = More Restraint)

Note: Figure depicts the predicted levels of disagreement, on the 1-5 Likert scale, with the statement that it is justifiable to intentionally kill a civilian during combat operations when it is necessary to accomplish the mission (panels (a) and (c)) or if it will save the life of a soldier (panels (b) and (d)), ranging from 1 (“Strong Democrat”) to 7 (“Strong Republican”).

Discussion

Our analysis points to two key findings. The first—that a partisan gap exists over both military advantage and force protection prior to cadets undergoing ROTC training—is consistent with Democrats and Republicans entering the military with MFT values that orient them differently toward the protection of civilians. Democrats, who tend to emphasize the values of harm and fairness, are less inclined to think that civilian casualties are acceptable to achieve a military mission or to save the lives of fellow soldiers. By contrast, Republicans, who tend to emphasize in-group loyalty, authority, and purity, are more inclined to think that it is acceptable to trade off civilian lives to achieve these other objectives.

Our second key finding—that an emphasis on force protection is subject to a durable partisan divide after military training, whereas an emphasis on military advantage is not—raises the question of what drives this outcome. Our data do not allow us to parse the independent effects of the five MFT values on combatant adoption of norms of restraint. A plausible explanation, however, is that one or more of the MFT values (such as in-group loyalty) are more closely aligned with force protection than with military advantage, and—especially for Republicans—these values are more deeply-held. Broadly, this would point to the possibility of certain MFT values bearing more directly on specific pillars of the combatant’s trilemma.

Conclusion

In this article, we used an original survey of soon-to-be-commissioned officers in a dozen U.S. Army ROTC programs to examine whether partisanship influences combatant attitudes

toward the protection of civilians in war. We show that, among cohorts entering ROTC, Republican-leaning cadets emphasize the principle of civilian protection less than Democratic-leaning cadets. After exposure to military training, a partisan divide remains when cadets weigh the value of civilian lives against the lives of fellow soldiers, but not against the value of achieving mission objectives. Both Republican- and Democratic-leaning cadets are more likely to accept civilian casualties to save a fellow soldier than to accomplish a mission objective, even after four years of officer training.

We attribute partisan differences to an extensive social psychology literature on Moral Foundations Theory, which holds that liberals and conservatives generally differ on five fundamental values—related to harm, fairness, in-group loyalty, authority, and purity—that influence how they interpret moral trade-offs. We argue that the moral priorities of Democratic- and Republican-leaning combatants may induce different choices about the value of restraint toward civilians. Initially, Democrats exhibit greater adoption of norms of restraint than Republicans, and although ROTC training closes these gaps in balancing civilian protection and military advantage, it does not fully do so when balancing civilian protection and force protection.

Our results have several important implications. First, they provide—to our knowledge—the first evidence of partisan divides among U.S. combatants in attitudes toward the use of force against civilians in combat. Additionally, they speak to the effects of U.S. military training insofar as it partially, but not completely, overrides partisan beliefs regarding civilians on the battlefield—at least for U.S. Army officers commissioned via ROTC. In terms of civil-military relations, our findings also show that the hawkish tendencies among Republicans

relative to Democrats among the general public appear to be reflected in the views of military personnel in how they employ violence on the battlefield.

To the extent that combatant attitudes toward civilians translate into actual restraint in war, our findings could shed light on U.S. military conduct. As already described, the U.S. military is disproportionately comprised of self-identifying Republicans, and Republicans—even after exposure to military training—appear to place greater emphasis on force protection than civilian protection. This normative emphasis could result in combatants individually—and thus the U.S. military overall—prioritizing force protection as a preeminent value in combat operations. This could have implications for the extent to which U.S. military training emphasizes the imperative of civilian protection in light of deeply-held beliefs that servicemembers hold to protect their peers on the battlefield.

In fact, throughout much of the twentieth century, the U.S. military has faced charges of pursuing an “American way of war” that prioritizes minimization of U.S. troop casualties at the expense of civilians (Weigley 1973).²² U.S. operations have been broadly critiqued for privileging the security of American forces over civilians even amid the civilian-centric counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan (Crawford 2013; Cronin 2018; Dill 2014; Jenks 2020; Mahanty and Shiel 2019; Tirman 2011). Whether this emphasis on force protection is inherent within the organizational ethos of all armed groups—or emanates more directly from the political makeup and moral values of its members—remains an open question. Our research, however, indicates that despite the U.S. Army’s formal embrace of norms of restraint,

²² See, for example, the U.S./NATO “zero casualty” policy to limit pilot losses during the Kosovo bombing campaign (Barber 2010).

Republicans remain less inclined than Democrats to transfer risk from civilians to U.S. servicemembers.

Future research should continue to investigate how partisanship shapes U.S. combatant attitudes toward the use of force by unpacking the discrete effects of the five MFT values on views toward force protection and military advantage. This includes how those values affect both “heat-of-battle” decisions and ones that are more premeditated. A complementary analysis might also examine how Republican and Democratic combatants respond to detailed vignettes where the legality of conduct is made clear. This could measure not just underlying normative attitudes toward the principle of noncombatant protection but knowledge about the law and how to apply it. Survey experiments could also investigate how partisan combatants respond to changes in scenarios—for example, by altering the ethnic or religious background of civilians.

Although our study was confined to officer cadets in Army ROTC, surveys could also be administered to personnel at other levels of the military, including both enlisted soldiers and high-ranking officers. Scholars might also replicate surveys in other countries to see whether different military cultures affect partisan judgments toward respect for civilians and whether the prioritization of force protection in the U.S. extends to other militaries.²³ Our study reveals that, for soon-to-be commissioned officers in ROTC, partisanship can be an important determinant of attitudes toward civilians in war. More work is needed to understand the generalizability of this result beyond the U.S. Army officer corps, including in other professionalized militaries.

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²³ See, for example, Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (2020); Bell, Gift, and Miller (2020).

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Appendix Tables

Table A1. Summary Statistics

	Year 1		Year 4	
	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican
Sample Size	57	128	31	99
Age	18.5	19.0	22.5	22.3
Male	.67	.82	.61	.87
White	.56	.91	.65	.81
Combat Experience	.02	.00	.00	.02

Notes: All variables (except age) are dichotomous indicators for whether a respondent is male, white, or had previous combat experience. Excludes independents.

Table A2. Effect of Partisanship on Adoption of Norms of Restraint, by Year: Ordered Logit

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Year 1		Year 4	
	Military Advantage	Force Protection	Military Advantage	Force Protection
Republican Scale	-0.23***	-0.14*	-0.06	-0.20**
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Age	0.16**	0.08	0.03	0.04
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Male	0.11	-0.45	0.98**	0.05
	(0.30)	(0.29)	(0.43)	(0.44)
White	0.10	-0.29	-0.42	-0.12
	(0.33)	(0.32)	(0.38)	(0.36)
Combat Experience	-3.34**	-1.19	-0.32	0.45
	(1.63)	(1.65)	(0.78)	(0.78)
Observations	230	230	126	126

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Cutpoints not shown.

Table A3. Effect of Partisanship on Adoption of Norms of Restraint, by Year (Controlling for Religious Universities)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Year 1		Year 4	
	Military Advantage	Force Protection	Military Advantage	Force Protection
Republican Scale	-0.15*** (0.05)	-0.09* (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.10* (0.05)
Age	0.10* (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Male	0.13 (0.20)	-0.20 (0.19)	0.53** (0.26)	-0.02 (0.25)
White	0.04 (0.21)	-0.22 (0.21)	-0.28 (0.23)	-0.02 (0.22)
Combat Experience	-2.24* (1.21)	-0.79 (1.21)	-0.00 (0.52)	0.15 (0.52)
Religious School	0.14 (0.19)	0.19 (0.19)	-0.08 (0.27)	-0.23 (0.26)
Observations	230	230	126	126
R-squared	0.07	0.04	0.05	0.05

Notes: Religious universities in the sample include Liberty University, Catholic University of America, and Brigham Young University. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A4. Effect of Year on Adoption of Norms of Restraint by Partisanship

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Democrat		Republican	
	Military Advantage	Force Protection	Military Advantage	Force Protection
Senior	-0.40 (0.30)	-0.61* (0.35)	0.46** (0.23)	-0.10 (0.22)
Age	0.12** (0.05)	0.15** (0.06)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)
Male	0.32 (0.24)	-0.17 (0.27)	0.13 (0.23)	-0.14 (0.22)
White	0.08 (0.23)	-0.13 (0.27)	-0.05 (0.24)	-0.04 (0.23)
Combat Experience	-2.75*** (1.04)	-1.60 (1.19)	0.64 (0.87)	-0.18 (0.83)
Observations	88	88	203	203
R-squared	0.14	0.09	0.05	0.01

Notes: Excludes independents. Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1