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Is There Such a Thing as ‘Conservative’ Foreign Policy in 2014?

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INTRODUCTION

Recent events have once again thrust foreign policy to the fore of public debate in the United States. Americans have taken notice of ISIS and President Obama's decision to commit the United States to an active role in the conflict. Sixty two percent of Americans are now "very concerned" about the "rise of Islamic Extremism," an increase of 25 points in barely two years' time.¹ In fact, foreign policy currently ranks as the fifth "most important problem" facing the country.²

Ranking as "only" fifth on this list does not mean that foreign policy lacks important implications: foreign policy will be the second most important factor affecting voters' choices during the midterms.³ We ask the reader to consider the following: First, the academic literature suggests that foreign policy tends have an important impact on candidate selection.⁴ Second, a wide partisan division exists in how much foreign policy affects peoples' decisions about who to elect to Congress. For instance, only 53 percent of Democrats say that foreign policy will affect how they will vote in the midterm elections. However, for 77 percent of GOP partisans, foreign policy will be "very important" to their vote for Congress. Further, the significance of foreign policy is even more important in the context of partisan polarization, especially when foreign policy is one of its sources.⁵ For instance, 77 percent of the GOP believes President Obama's approach is too soft when it comes to keeping America secure, versus 34 percent of Democrats.⁶

Inter-party differences are to be expected. However, given that foreign policy will have significant influence on approximately 8-in-10 Republicans' votes in the upcoming midterms, we think it prudent to assess the cohesiveness of the GOP's views on foreign affairs. Furthermore, recalling the way in which foreign policy served as a source of disagreement among Democrats during the late 1960s, effectively costing them the White House in 1968, we think it timely to examine what may turn out to be fissures among conservatives when it comes to foreign policy on the eve of the 2014 midterms.

This paper's structure is as follows. First, we furnish the relevant background information. This includes a sketch of theoretical concepts and a review of Republican foreign policy during the postwar years. Foreshadowing our position, we argue that the Tea Party's foreign policy attitudes are driven by the same factors that Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto have shown to provide the impetus for their domestic policy preferences: fear and anxiety tied to perceived ethno-cultural displacement.⁷ We then introduce what we think are important foreign policy issues. For analytical purposes, these are divided into retrospective, prospective, and current issues in American foreign policy. The analysis includes a careful, empirical assessment in which we reveal there is no such thing as "Conservative" foreign policy if it means that conservatives must speak with a single voice. We conclude with a discussion of the potential electoral implications for the impending midterms.

BACKGROUND

Since 1945, Republican foreign policy has been pulled in at least two directions: realism and idealism. For the uninitiated, realism is a pragmatic vision of foreign policy in which national interests—defined in terms of power—dictates the course of action to be taken. If *realpolitik* recommends that intervention is necessary as a means of protecting vital American interests, so be it. If, on the other hand, realism suggests the best course of action is to remain aloof, that's what we shall do. We can see examples of this starting with the Eisenhower administration's approach.

By maintaining a strategy of containment first developed under the Truman administration, the Eisenhower administration demonstrated its commitment to realism by limiting American intervention to instances in which they believed it necessary to do so. Led by Henry Kissinger, the Nixon administration demonstrated its commitment to *realpolitik* by withdrawing from Vietnam, and opening a dialogue with China, an event that led to *détente* with the Soviet Union. Likewise, the elder President Bush also hewed close to a more realist approach to foreign policy when, among other things, he sought only to secure America's interests in the region, stopping short of toppling Hussein in Iraq.

We argue that Tea Partiers' foreign policy is driven by something else: perceived ethno-cultural threat.

Idealism, on the other hand, is more about a foreign policy guided by principles versus pragmatism. For instance, President Reagan's foreign policy was committed to destroying the Soviet Union, an entity he dubbed the "Evil Empire." As such, Reagan shifted gears from a containment-driven policy to one in which rollback was the strategy of choice. His was a crusade to extinguish what he deemed a malevolent ideology: Communism. While the adminis-

tration avoided direct confrontation with the Soviets, one that may have resulted in a European conflagration, the low-intensity, proxy conflicts in which Reagan engaged with the Soviets forced the latter to defend their interests in what they deemed their sphere of influence. This is something Kissinger would have avoided. Second, Reagan managed to skirt the Constitution by cutting Congress out of the loop. The idealism of neoconservatives once again emerged during the younger President Bush's administration as it tried to bring the "axis of evil" to heel through the liberation of the beleaguered populations of these countries, as it attempted to export democracy.

Realists take a more pragmatic, cautious approach, avoiding unnecessary risks, allying with erstwhile "enemies" when necessary, and jettisoning erstwhile "friends" if it means the preservation of American interests. Neo-conservatives, on the other hand, are ardent idealists. In spite of such philosophical differences, both approaches

are, for the most part, motivated by securing American interests. We argue that Tea Partiers' foreign policy is driven by something else: perceived ethno-cultural threat.

We believe that the Tea Party's foreign policy outlook is dominated by a nationalist sentiment that dates back to Andrew Jackson. This is because Tea Partiers adhere to a different set of beliefs, ones that—despite claims to the contrary—defy the tenets of conventional conservatism in the domestic sphere. For instance, Parker and Barreto illustrate that Establishment Conservatives are animated by concern for law and order, traditional values, and small government. This is not the case for Tea Party Conservatives. Parker and Barreto found that Tea Party Conservatives (more than Establishment Conservatives) are motivated by fear and anxiety associated with the belief that the America to which they've become accustomed, in which white men have dominated from the beginning, is in rapid decline.⁸

In other words, “real Americans,” according to Tea Partiers, are becoming displaced. In short, Tea Partiers aren't driven by classical conservative impulses. They're driven, instead, by the fear that they're “losing” *their* country. Hence, Parker and Barreto surmise that the now famous Tea Party refrain of “taking our country back” references its perception that its members are losing America.

We believe that the same predisposition carries over to the foreign policy views of Tea Party Conservatives. In the context of foreign policy, we believe that the reactionary conservatism identified by Parker and Barreto is commensurate with a strain of nationalist sentiment present on the American political scene since President Andrew Jackson.

Beyond the populism for which Jackson was well known, his brand of nationalism was tethered to a *specific* sense of community, one bound together less by Enlightenment ideals of democracy than to racial and cultural affinity. Not to put too fine a point on it: Anglos were the in-group in Jacksonian America. This is very much in line with Parker and Barreto's findings on the Tea Party in present-day America. Extending this to foreign policy suggests that, for Tea Partiers, Jacksonian nationalism is the appropriate analog in which non-Western progress is perceived as a threat to Western hegemony.⁹

To summarize before moving on to the analysis: History suggests that the foreign policy of Republican administrations are driven by realist and idealist impulses. Even so, Republican (and even Democrat) foreign policy is ultimately motivated by a concern with securing American interests. If we are correct, Tea Partiers' foreign policy isn't concerned as much with American interests as much as it is motivated by the national chauvinism associated with nationalism in which American global dominance is believed to be threatened by an ethno-cultural “other.” In this sense, we should observe tangible differences between Tea Party Conservatives and Establishment Conservatives in their foreign policy preferences. If, on the other hand, Tea Partiers are also motivated by defense of American interests—not nationalism—the policy attitudes of Tea Party Conservatives and Establishment Conservatives should be very similar, even indistinguishable.

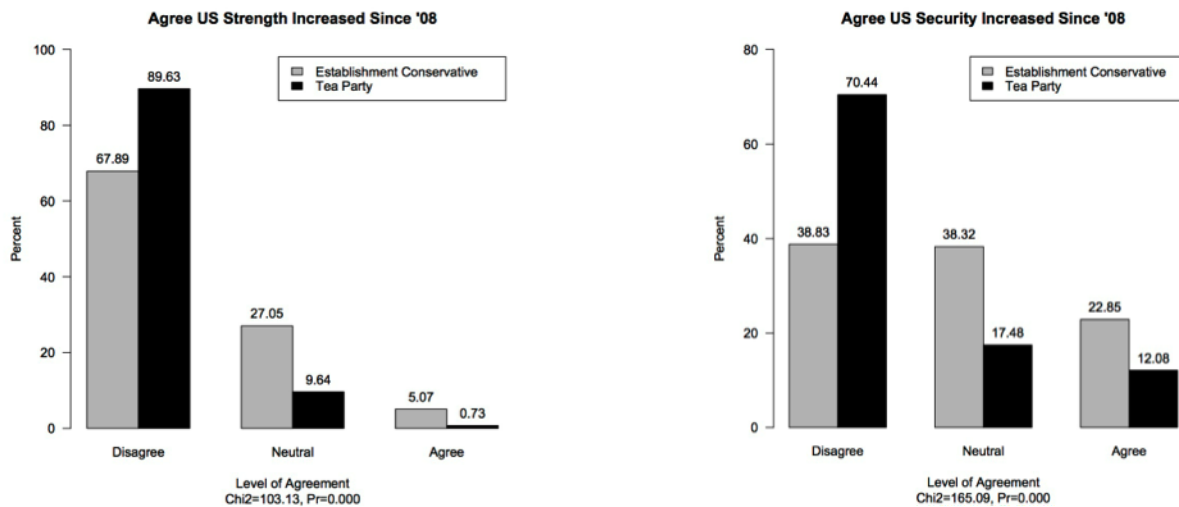
THE ISSUES

To compare the foreign policy attitudes of Tea Party Conservatives and Establishment Conservatives, we turn to the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES),¹⁰ which asks respondents several foreign policy related questions. We group the questions into three categories: retrospective attitudes, prospective attitudes, and current issues.

The retrospective category includes questions about foreign policy issues in the past, the prospective category involves questions about future foreign policy actions, and the current issues category includes questions about contemporary policy issues. We present the results in graphs that show the percentage of people who chose each response category, allowing for easy comparisons of Tea Party Conservatives and Establishment Conservatives.

RETROSPECTIVE ISSUES

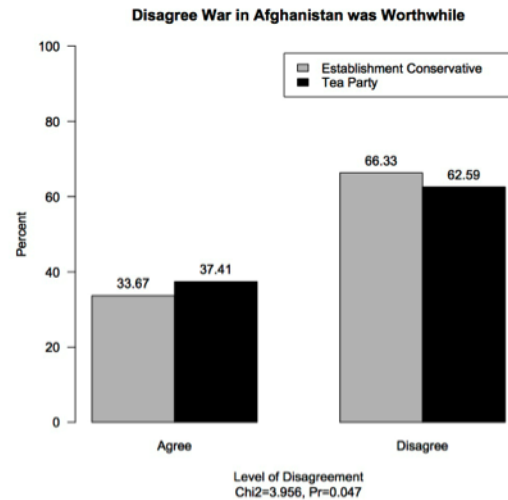
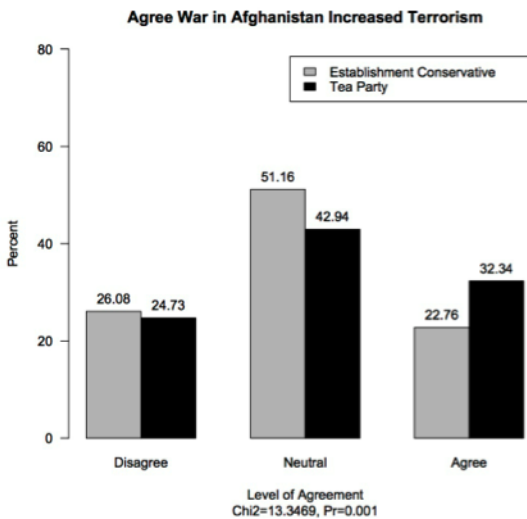
The first two retrospective questions ask respondents to compare the United States as they experience it now with what they remember of it in 2008. In particular, respondents evaluate the United States' "strength in the world" and its security. We wished to examine responses to these questions as a means of setting the tone for the balance of the analysis. Since domestic perceptions of American strength and security are essential to the conduct of foreign policy, we begin there.



At first glance, these are fairly innocuous questions. They simply ask respondents to assess American strength and security since 2008. However, upon closer inspection, 2008 coincides with the beginning of the Obama administration¹¹. This makes it likely that respondents are thinking about Obama and his administration's leadership when they are answering these questions. Unsurprisingly, *both* Tea Party Conservatives and Establishment Conservatives disagree that the US has grown stronger or more secure since 2008. Still, Tea Party Conservatives are less likely, by 22 percentage points, to believe that the US has grown stronger since 2008. Similar results obtain when we turn to perceptions of American security: 40 percent of Establishment Conservatives are disinclined to believe that the US is more secure, versus 70 percent of Tea Partiers.

The next two retrospective questions ask respondents to evaluate the US's war efforts in Afghanistan. In the first question, respondents indicate whether they agree that the war in Afghanistan increased the threat of terrorism. In the second, respondents are asked whether they thought the war in Afghanistan was "worth it."

Here, the contrast between the two types of conservatives is less dramatic than in the previous retrospective questions. Neither group completely convinced that the war in Afghanistan increased the threat of terrorism, with



only 23 percent of Establishment Conservatives and 32 percent of Tea Party Conservatives falling in the “agree” category. Many possible explanations for this exist, including an association of this war effort with Republican President George W. Bush. When asked to retrospectively evaluate whether the war was worth it, however, both groups negatively evaluated the war, indicating that the efforts were not worth it—here, 66 percent of Establishment conservatives and 63 percent of Tea Party conservatives. While both groups of conservatives were unwilling to say that the war in Afghanistan increased contemporary terrorism threats, neither looked on the war fondly.

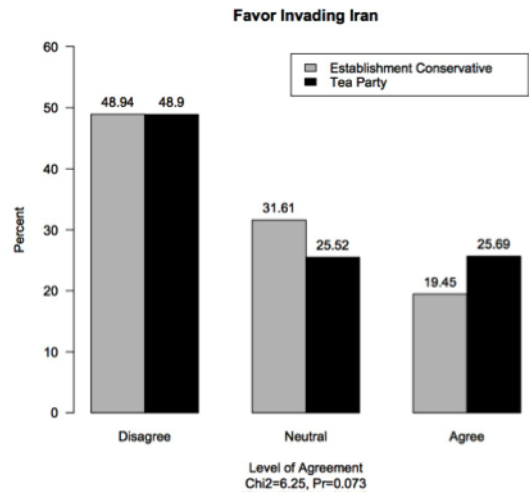
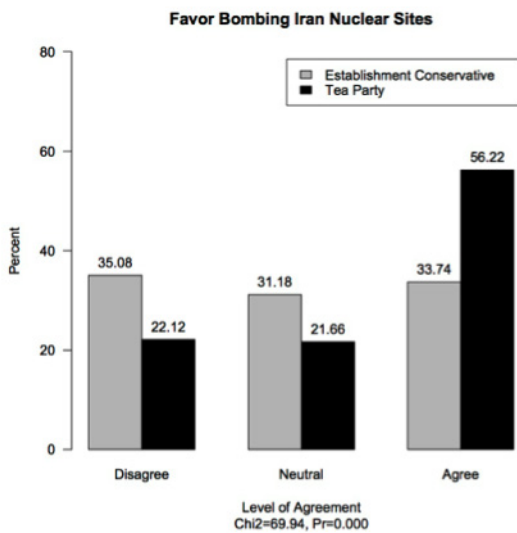
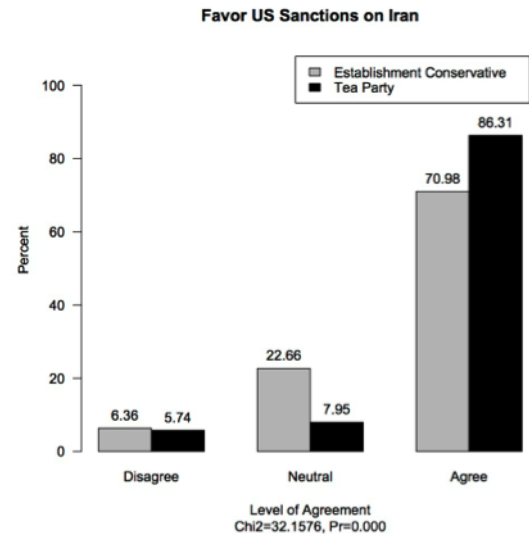
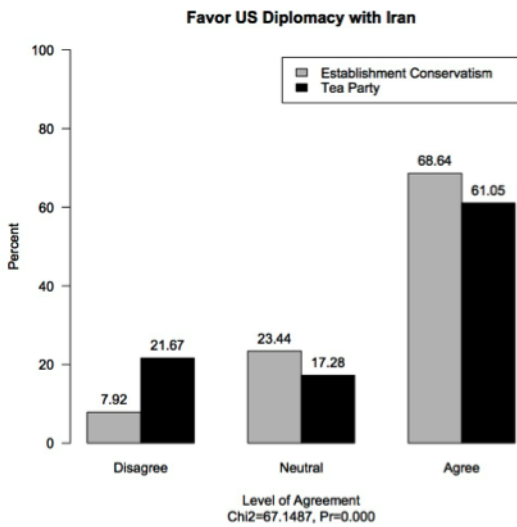
PROSPECTIVE ISSUES

We included questions on prospective foreign policy for the purpose of assessing where the competing camps stand on dilemmas that challenge US security in the immediate future. The four questions in the prospective category ask respondents about their attitudes on different actions the United States could take towards Iran. At the time of the latest ANES study, Iran was one of the main existing ‘threats’ to the United States, and responses to these questions can be interpreted as preferred ways of dealing with threats.

If we are correct that Tea Partiers’ foreign policy attitudes contain a strong strain of nationalism (in that they see ethno-cultural differences as a threat), we might expect to see them react in a more hawkish fashion to perceived threats to the United States. We might also expect Establishment Conservatives to take somewhat more cautious positions when it comes to intervention.

Here, we group the four questions about Iran into two categories. The first category deals with ‘softer’ forms of engagement: diplomacy and economic sanctions. The second includes more hostile forms of engagement: bombing Iran’s nuclear sites and invading Iran.

In the first category, the attitudes of Tea Party Conservatives and Establishment Conservatives again trend in the same directions. Both groups favor diplomacy with Iran, although Establishment Conservatives favor this almost 8 percentage points more than Tea Party Conservatives do. Although both groups also favor economic sanctions on Iran, Tea Party Conservatives are 15 percentage points more supportive of sanctions than are Establishment Conservatives.



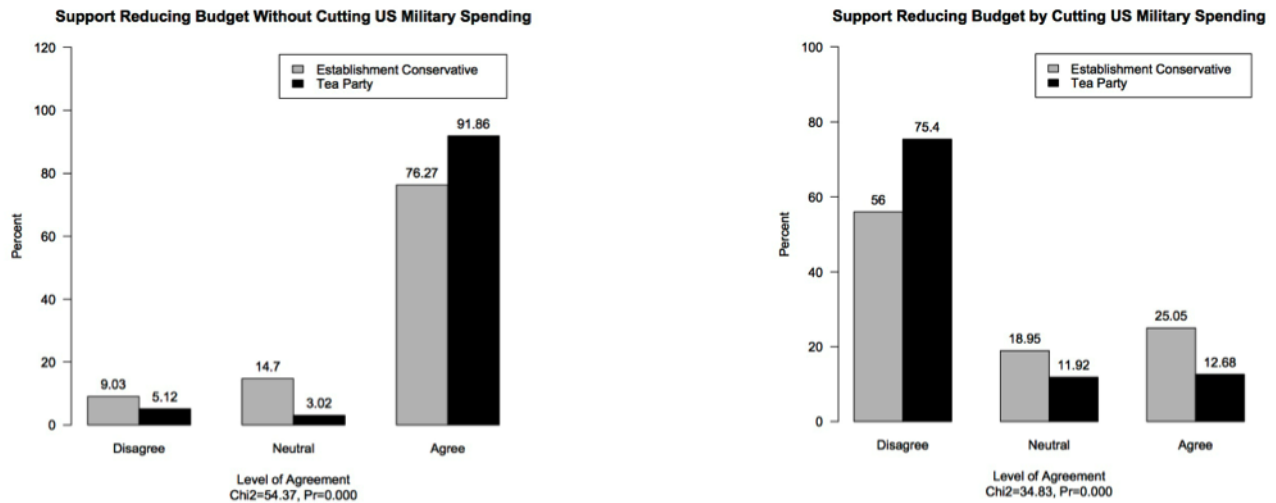
As the questions begin to involve more hostile actions, Tea Party Conservatives continue to favor more aggressive responses than Establishment Conservatives. The most striking contrast lies in the groups' attitudes towards bombing Iran's nuclear sites. Here, Tea Party Conservatives favor such bombing efforts at 56 percent, in contrast to 34 percent of Establishment Conservatives. This trend towards hostile actions is less stark when respondents are asked about invading Iran. While Tea Partiers favor invading Iran more than Establishment Conservatives do (by 6 percentage points), the most common response for both groups is to disagree that we should invade Iran, with 49 percent of both groups disagreeing with invasion. This response may reflect the shared negative evaluations of the war in Afghanistan, or indicate that both groups see this sort of engagement with Iran as inimical to US interests.

CURRENT ISSUES

The final section, current issues, includes several questions about contemporary issues such as US military spending, Department of Homeland security initiatives, China, and Israel.

In the first set of questions, respondents are asked for their opinions on reducing the US budget, an issue that is traditionally important to conservatives, but is especially central to Tea Party Conservatives. These questions do not simply ask respondents if they favor reducing the budget.

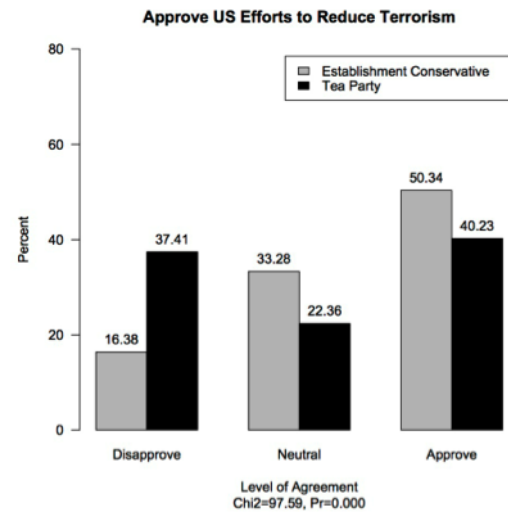
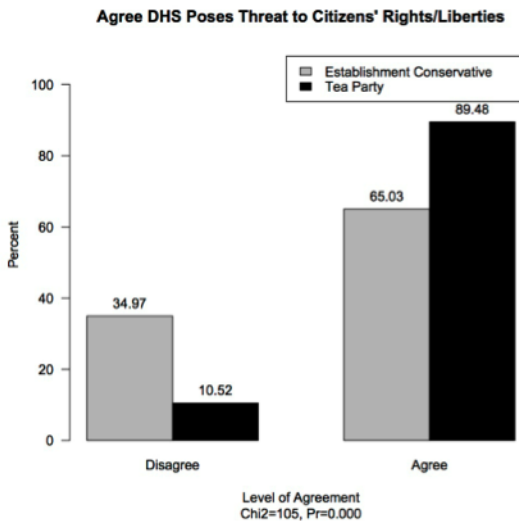
Instead, they include military spending components. Respondents are asked if they support reducing the budget if it does *not* involve cutting US military spending, and then if reducing the budget *does* involve cutting US military spending.



Not surprisingly, both groups overwhelmingly support reducing the budget if it *does not* involve military spending cuts, although Tea Party Conservatives approve of this at 92 percent, in contrast to 76 percent of Establishment Conservatives. When asked if they would support reducing the budget at the expense of military spending, the highest response categories flip. Now, both groups *oppose* reducing the budget. Again, Tea Party Conservatives do so at a higher rate than Establishment Conservatives, with 75 percent of Tea Party conservatives opposing this action, versus 56 percent of Establishment Conservatives. These observed differences are important. If both camps held fast to the tenets of conservative doctrine—realist or otherwise—we can say that preferences on defense spending are driven by *protecting* American interests. But since differences are observed, we conclude that Establishment preferences are motivated by the protection of American interests, but the policy preferences of Tea Party Conservatives are grounded in a fear that ethno-cultural others pose a threat to American dominance, which helps explain the Tea Party’s heightened willingness to finance a strong military.

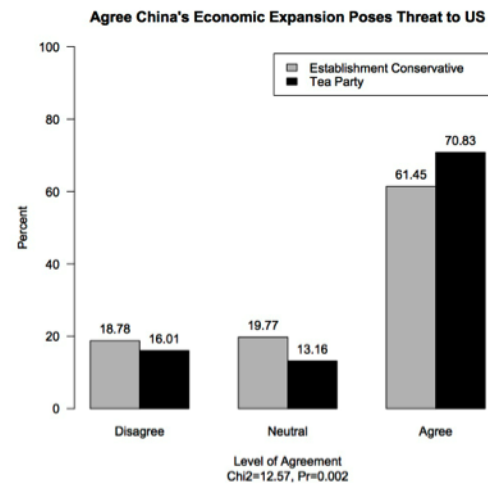
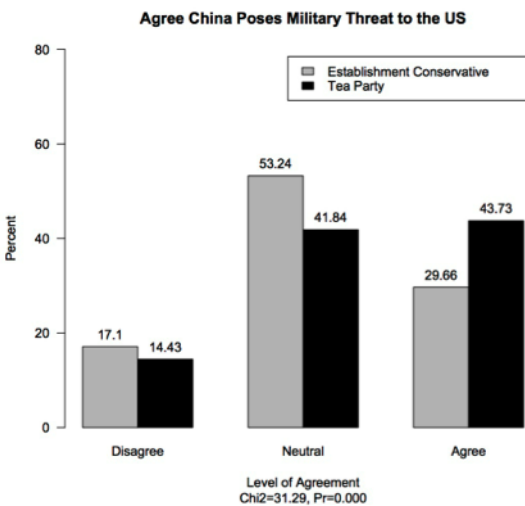
Next, we turn to responses to US security initiatives under the Obama administration. In the following two questions, respondents are asked about the Department of Homeland Security and the Obama administration’s efforts to reduce terrorism. The first question asks respondents if they feel that the DHS poses a threat to US citizens’ rights and liberties. The second asks them whether they approve of America’s effort to reduce terrorism.

In response to the DHS question, both groups evaluate the DHS negatively. Perhaps recalling controversies about airport security or simply because they distrust a branch of the Obama administration, conservatives do not look favorably upon the DHS. Both agree that the DHS poses a threat to their rights and liberties, although Tea Party Conservatives agree with this statement at 89 percent, whereas Establishment Conservatives only agree at 65 percent. The evaluations of contemporary efforts to reduce terrorism are more mixed, however. Here,

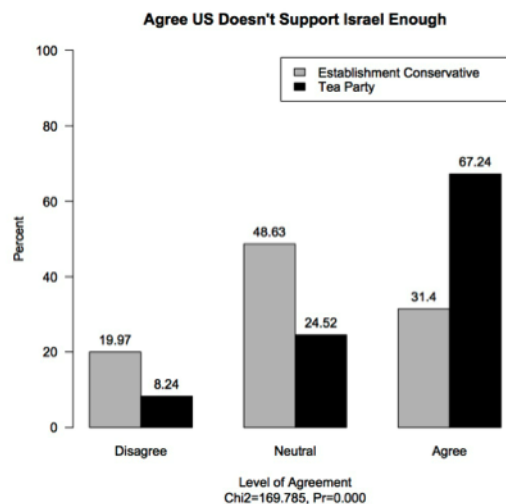


Establishment Conservatives mainly approve, at 50 percent, of contemporary efforts to reduce terrorism. Tea Partiers, conversely, are almost evenly split between disapproving and approving of these efforts, with only 40 percent approving. This may signal higher levels of distrust in the Obama administration on the part of Tea Partiers.

Finally, China and Israel are top foreign policy priorities for American policymakers, and for good reason: the former is often perceived as a threat, and the latter as an ally. As a result, we examined questions pertaining to each country.



In regards to China, respondents are asked about their perceptions of threats from China's military and from China's economy. The two groups disagree on whether or not China poses a military threat to the United States. Only 30 percent of Establishment Conservatives agree, whereas 44 percent of Tea Party Conservatives agree that China poses a military threat, perhaps reflecting a heightened sense of nationalism. The two groups' opinions more closely align when asked about China's economic expansion. Both groups regard this as a threat, although Tea Party Conservatives agree at 71 percent, versus 61 percent of Establishment Conservatives. Still, the observation of tangible differences suggests that the observed differences may be attributed to different motives. If Establishment Conservatives concerns about China are motivated by the defense of American interests, their



Tea Party counterparts are motivated by the fear that rising Chinese influence will result in the decline of American ethno-cultural dominance.

When evaluating Israel, the two groups again differ. However, unlike with China in which Tea Partiers took a hardline relative to Establishment types, they are willing to assist Israel. The question asks respondents whether the United States supports Israel enough. 31 percent of Establishment Conservatives think that the United States does not support Israel enough, in contrast to 67 percent of Tea Party Conservatives. This is again consistent with the prediction that Establishment Conservatives will take a more cautious approach to foreign policy, whereas Tea Party Conservatives are motivated by a version of nationalism that is sympathetic to Israel for various cultural reasons.

CONCLUSION

Like Parker demonstrated in an earlier Brookings policy brief in which he outlined the ways in which conservatives failed to reach a consensus on domestic policy, we reach a similar conclusion here: conservatives remain a fractured lot on foreign policy, too.¹² We realize that there are many other foreign policy issues not discussed above, chief among which is the current threat posed by ISIS/ISIL, which was not on the national radar when the survey was conducted. Even so, it is valuable to consider general foreign policy issues that are likely to persist—at least into the near future: stability in the Middle East, identifying threats to American security, and perceptions of American strength, among other factors. Given the significance that foreign policy considerations will play in the upcoming midterms, especially among GOP partisans, the importance of our findings should not be gainsaid.

To what can we attribute the fact that on everything from assessments of American strength to the willingness to bomb Iran, we observed differences between Tea Party Conservatives and Establishment Conservatives? We account for these differences by recognizing what motivates Tea Party and Establishment Conservatives. In the case of the former, nationalism provides one of their main motivations, a commitment that promotes foreign policy based on ethno-cultural chauvinism, a chauvinism sharpened by fear and anxiety of American global dominance being overtaken by non-European “others.” (In this way, our findings in the current paper about Tea Partiers’ foreign policy preferences are similar to Parker and Barreto’s results in the domestic sphere.) In contrast, relative to Tea Party Conservatives, Establishment types take a less aggressive path, assuming a more defensive posture than Tea Partiers.

Because conservatives appear split on these important issues, the midterms promise to pose a challenge, especially in Senate where some seats—and perhaps the balance of power in the upper chamber—may hinge on foreign policy.¹³ Consider the following: As we pointed out in the introduction, foreign policy considerations can have electoral consequences—especially in a polarized electorate. Further, as we indicated in the introduction, foreign policy will weigh heavily on the decisions conservatives make in the voting booth in the coming midterm election. If these two conditions hold, conservatives have their work cut out.

A final implication rests on what, until now, were perceived as competing schools of thought on Tea Party foreign policy preferences. If Tea Partiers adhered to Sarah Palin's approach to foreign policy, they would prefer intervention to caution. On the other hand, if Rand Paul's views are ascendant in the Tea Party, it was believed that Tea Partiers would favor a slower, more deliberate approach to international threats.¹⁴ We know which view prevails—at least for now. If Rand Paul plans on running for the White House in 2016, he needs to pay attention to our results. For, as Parker and Barreto have demonstrated, Tea Party Conservatives are far more politically engaged than their Establishment counterparts.¹⁵

GOVERNANCE STUDIES

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ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.people-press.org/2014/09/10/growing-concern-about-rise-of-islamic-extremism-at-home-and-abroad/>
- 2 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/175721/fewer-americans-say-terrorism-top-problem.aspx>
- 3 <http://online.wsj.com/articles/republicans-hold-advantage-as-midterms-near-1413345746>
- 4 Somaya Anand and Jon Krosnick, "The Impact of Public Attitudes toward Foreign Policy Goals on Public Preferences among Presidential Candidates: A Study of Issue Publics and the Attentive Public in the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33 (1), pp. 31-71.
- 5 Philip A. Klinkner, "Mr. Bush's War: Foreign Policy in the 2004 Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (2), pp. 281-296.
- 6 <http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/28/as-new-dangers-loom-more-think-the-u-s-does-too-little-to-solve-world-problems/>
- 7 Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton, 2013).
- 8 Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton, 2013).
- 9 Walter Russell Mead, "The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* (2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67455/walter-russell-mead/the-tea-party-and-american-foreign-policy>.
- 10 http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/anes_timeseries_2012/anes_timeseries_2012.htm
- 11 A skeptic might rightfully argue that other factors likely contribute to the differences we observe between Tea Party Conservatives and their Establishment counterparts. In a separate paper, we've controlled for various and sundry alternatives, including financial anxiety, religiosity, sex, race, education, income, even region. The differences observed in the following analysis hold even after accounting for the aforementioned confounds.
- 12 <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/06/04-tea-party-future-political-movement-parker>
- 13 <http://online.wsj.com/articles/tom-cotton-mark-pryor-race-tests-appetite-for-active-military-1413241941>
- 14 Since Paul's views continue to evolve, it's difficult for us to get a hard fix on them. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/06/revenge-rand-paul>
- 15 Parker and Barreto, Chapter 6.