

Targeting and Public Opinion: An Experimental Analysis in Ukraine

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Abstract

How does targeting in armed conflict affect public opinion? Armed actors choose between targeting militaries and targeting civilians, and further choose whether to target civilians discriminately or indiscriminately. Existing work suggests these choices are based in part on the effects of targeting on public opinion, yet the causal link between these variables has not been clearly established. We conduct a survey experiment in the Donbass region of Ukraine, an area that has witnessed protracted fighting, to analyze this relationship. We find that reports of civilian targeting robustly reduce approval of both the government and separatist forces. However, we find that the effects of *discriminate* civilian targeting are not statistically distinguishable from those of *indiscriminate* civilian targeting. Finally, we find that our respondents generally preferred a restrained, rather than reciprocal, response from actors in this armed conflict. Our findings have implications for theories of wartime violence and the role of domestic actors during armed conflict.

1. Introduction

How do the strategies of violence in armed conflict affect public opinion? Armed actors, including states and non-state groups, face crucial choices of whether to target each other's militaries and/or the surrounding population. When targeting civilians, under some circumstances actors do so based on civilians' preferences or identities, while in other instances they do so on an indiscriminate basis. These decisions can have tremendous impacts on the death tolls from the fighting, the course of such conflicts, and the levels of external backing for the warring parties.

The causes and effects of these targeting decisions have therefore generated important debates (e.g., Balcells 2017; Stanton 2016; Cohen 2013; Lyall 2009; Downes 2008; Kalyvas 2006). Violent targeting decisions may affect many aspects of conflict, such as final outcome (Downes and Cochran 2010; Lyall and Wilson 2009; Fortna 2015); the frequency or lethality of subsequent attacks (Lyall 2010; Condra & Shapiro 2012; Johnston and Sarbahi 2016; Souleimanov & Siroky 2016; Balcells 2010); and local reporting of armed groups' activities (Schutte 2017). Many of the theories underlying how targeting decisions affect these outcomes rest, in part, on claims about how such strategies affect attitudes toward armed actors among individuals living in conflict zones. Research using such observational data has generated valuable insights into the causes and consequences of strategies of violence, but we have less direct evidence about how differences in violent targeting affect the views of locals on the ground.

We build on existing work by systematically examining the causal relationship between violent targeting and civilian attitudes. A growing literature demonstrates the importance of analyzing the micro-foundations of theories of violent conflict (Chaudoin 2016; Chilton 2014,

2015; Chilton and Versteeg 2016; Grossman et al. 2015; Wallace 2013, 2015; Lupu and Wallace 2019; Kertzer et al. 2014; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Huff and Kertzer 2018; Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014; Arves et al. 2019). We also seek to make connections to a burgeoning area of research examining individual attitudes in the contexts of armed conflict and political violence.¹ A relationship has long been acknowledged between exposure to violence, such as war deaths, and public attitudes in times of war (Gelpi et al. 2009; Mueller 1973; Pechenkina et al. 2019). Individual attitudes may also correspondingly change when exposed to different sorts of violence during wartime (Kalyvas 2006; Lyall et al. 2013).

We develop a series of hypotheses about the relationship between targeting choices in armed conflict and public approval for armed groups. We test these hypotheses by conducting a survey experiment of individuals residing in the Donbass region of Ukraine, which since 2014 has been home to an armed conflict between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatist groups in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR respectively), and has witnessed a range of violent strategies employed by both sides.² In our experiment, we randomized the information provided to respondents about the reported targeting choices of competing armed groups – military, discriminate targeting of civilians who support the armed actor's opponents, or indiscriminate targeting of all types of civilians.

The experiment yields three primary results. First, we find that civilian targeting reduces approval of armed actors relative to military targeting. What is particularly surprising is the robustness of this finding to alternative scenarios. The finding holds for both actors, regardless of

¹ For a review of some of the literature in this area, see Bauer et al. 2016.

² Although sometimes referred to by their short-form English names of DPR and LPR, for consistency we employ the more commonly used DNR and LNR acronyms based on their names in both Ukrainian (*Donets'ka Narodna Respublika* and *Luhanska Narodna Respublika*) and Russian (*Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika* and *Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika*) respectively.

the order in which their actions were presented, and regardless of what the other actor chose. Thus, even respondents who were told that the first actor to move targeted civilians still preferred the second actor to move to target the military. We also find that, while respondents consistently disapproved of civilian targeting even when conducted by the party they support, the extent of this disapproval depended in part on their attitudes toward the Ukrainian government (and toward the EU, a proxy for sentiment against the DNR/LNR). Second, we find that we cannot statistically distinguish the effects of discriminate civilian targeting from those of indiscriminate civilian targeting. While we encourage caution in avoiding the over-interpretation of a null finding, the result is nonetheless striking because it holds even when indiscriminate violence is used in response to indiscriminate violence, and even when we eliminate subjects who could not correctly recall the details of the scenario provided. We discuss the possibility that this result may be driven by elements of our survey design and/or the features of the Donbass conflict, but we also provide evidence suggesting these may not be the only reasons and suggest implications from our analysis that are relevant to other conflicts. Finally, we find that the relationship between the actors' strategies also has important effects on individual attitudes. Specifically, our respondents generally preferred restraint over revenge: that is, they preferred that actors respond to harsh targeting decisions with less harsh targeting.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the main differences between strategies of violence and discusses key arguments about their causes and effects.

Section 3 lays out our theoretical expectations about the relationship between targeting and

public opinion. Section 4 describes our experimental design. Section 5 provides our empirical results, while section 6 offers conclusions and avenues for future research.

2. Strategies of Violence

Armed actors, whether government or opposition forces, use a wide range of violent strategies. These can include particularly abusive practices such as mass killing (Harff 2003; Midlarsky 2005; Valentino 2004), genocide (Finkel and Straus 2012), terrorism (Crenshaw 1981), sexual violence (Cohen 2013; Wood 2006), forced recruitment of child soldiers (Beber and Blattman 2013), and torture (Wallace 2015). Armed groups have also at times decided to deploy weapons viewed by the international community as especially heinous, such as anti-personnel land mines (Jo 2015), or chemical weapons (Price 1997).

In addition to variation in the *form* of violence, another important facet of armed conflict is combatants' choice of target. One salient distinction is between military and civilian targeting. Although differing in their particular intellectual tradition and development, both just war theory and the laws of war (commonly known international humanitarian law, or IHL) represent normative and legal attempts to place meaningful limits on the extent and type of violence armed actors employ when fighting (Howard 1994). According to both, one of the fundamental questions when evaluating wartime conduct concerns *who* is being targeted, with certain individuals or groups viewed as largely acceptable to attack, while others are deemed exempt from violence. The military or combatants (i.e., those who have taken up arms) are generally considered to be legitimate targets during war even if certain restrictions exist on what can be done to them, such as prohibitions on certain weapons or rights for prisoners of war (Rodley 2009). By contrast, non-combatants, or civilians, are usually viewed as possessing a special status of being *hors de combat* ("out of combat"), meaning they should be spared the excesses of

war. This concept of non-combatant immunity is at the core of the principle of *distinction*, asserting that civilians and civilian property cannot be the object of attack, unlike military forces and installations (Best 1980; Walzer 2000).³

Nonetheless, many combatants, whether government or opposition, decide to target civilians rather than limit their attacks to enemy forces (Eck and Hultman 2007; Chenoweth and Lawrence 2010; Rothbart et al. 2012). International law and norms often do not constrain abuse against civilians (Valentino et al. 2006).⁴ These constraints may also be overshadowed by leadership ideology (Valentino 2004); regime or rebel group type (Rummel 1995; Downes 2007; Jo 2015: 95); organizational structures (Legro 1997; Cohen 2013; Weinstein 2007;); prevailing technologies (Lyall and Wilson 2009); and battlefield dynamics (Downes 2008; Kalyvas 2006; Hultman 2007), among others.

Civilian targeting further varies in terms of its level of *discrimination*. We use the term indiscriminate civilian targeting to refer to acts perpetrated against civilians with little or no concern for whether the intended victims support or approve of enemy forces. Similarly, Downes (2007: 421) defines this form of violence as “targeting everyone in a particular village or district with no effort to determine guilt or innocence.” Notable examples include collective reprisals by Nazi forces against nearby towns in occupied Belarus (Zhukov 2017), and the widespread bombing of German cities by Allied air forces (Pape 1996) during the Second World War. At an extreme, attacks take on a near random character, such as Russian artillery forces’ arbitrary shelling of Chechen villages during the Second Chechen War (Lyall 2009).

³ It should be noted that distinction is far from the only principle guiding either just war theory or IHL. Other notable precepts include military necessity, unnecessary suffering, and proportionality. Yet in many respects, “Distinction...is the most significant concept a combatant must observe” (Solis 2010: 251).

⁴ Some find a more nuanced role for international law, which is conditioned by the role of reciprocity or other attributes of armed actors (Morrow 2014; Wallace 2015).

By contrast, we use the term discriminate civilian targeting to refer to acts purposely targeted against civilians based on their individual characteristics. Civilians may not directly take up arms, but can contribute in a myriad of other ways to an armed group, whether by providing supplies, shelter, information, or broader political support (Downes 2007; Valentino et al. 2004). Discriminate violence is often perpetrated against civilians based on such support for the adversary. Discriminate violence can be quite brutal, such as many of the massacres that took place during the Spanish and Algerian Civil Wars (Kalyvas 1999; Balcells 2010).

Why do armed combatants target civilians, and, when they do, how do they choose between indiscriminate and discriminate targeting? Attacks against civilians entail substantial costs, including the opportunity cost of not focusing as much on enemy combatants and potential condemnation at home and abroad. Armed actors often decide to target civilians, despite the potential downsides, as a second-best alternative to directly defeating the adversary militarily.⁵ Armies desperate to improve their chances of victory or to reduce fighting costs may shift to targeting civilians when more conventional approaches fail to yield sufficient results (Downes 2008:29-35). Rebel groups are similarly more likely to turn to attacking civilians after suffering particular heavy battlefield losses that reduce their ability to compete directly with enemy forces (Hultman 2007). Both sides sometimes attack civilians to consolidate newly conquered territories, suppress restive populations, and coerce their opponents (Kalyvas 2006; Downes 2007; Zhukov 2015; Stanton 2016).

Discriminate civilian violence is also often much more difficult to conduct than indiscriminate targeting. Armed actors often lack the local knowledge needed to identify partisans (Kalyvas 2006: 171-176). They can overcome this problem by using widespread

⁵ For instance, Downes (2008:39) remarks that “Civilian victimization is thus a calculated risk, not an irrational gamble.”

electronic surveillance (Bhavnani et al. 2011) or engendering co-ethnic defections (Lyall 2010; Lyall et al. 2015), but such tactics are costly, take time, and ultimately may come to nothing, while armed actors face the immediate and continuing pressures of fighting. Indiscriminate violence may thus offer a less than ideal, but still relatively attractive, “third-best” option for those combatants who have neither the capability nor the desire to engage in more discriminate forms of violence.

The effects of indiscriminate violence on armed combatants’ war aims remain heavily debated. In one of the most systematic treatments of the subject, Kalyvas (2006: 190) argues that, to the extent lethal coercion against civilians can be effective, it must be highly discriminate. Violence should target individuals on the basis of their actions in support of a rival group, or at least be perceived as such by the local population. Indiscriminate violence, by contrast, is futile, if not counterproductive. Given the risk of being attacked regardless of their actions, civilians are likely to evade, resist, or perhaps even seek protection from rival groups where such options are available (Kalyvas 2006: 144-145). Similarly, scholars have found that indiscriminate violence has detrimental effects in the contexts of aerial bombing (Pape 1996:10), containment of insurgent violence (Toft and Zhukov 2012), rebels who turn to terrorism (Abrahms 2006), and collateral damage to surrounding civilians in civil war (Condra and Shapiro 2012). Others argue that indiscriminate attacks against civilians may not be so harmful to combatants’ war aims after all. Widespread civilian victimization has been shown to be a potential recipe for victory in conventional inter-state conflicts (Downes and Cochran 2010). Drone strikes in Pakistan – widely condemned for frequent collateral damage to civilians and their property – may reduce both the frequency and lethality of terrorist attacks (Johnston and Sarbahi 2016). Even the seemingly random shelling of villages by Russian artillery units during the Second Chechen War

was associated with a decline in subsequent insurgent attacks (Lyall 2009).⁶ Although sometimes coming to very different conclusions about the effects of targeting choices existing work acknowledges that targeting strategies have important effects on the attitudes of individuals on the ground.

3. Targeting and Public Opinion

3.1 Civilian Targeting

Violence can affect the beliefs and attitudes of ordinary people living in conflict zones.⁷ Existing arguments about the effects of such violence on combatants' war aims often rest on explicit or implicit micro-foundational assumptions about its relationship to civilian attitudes. If the approval of ordinary people is an important determinant of the long-term viability and success of belligerents, then understanding how the violence those groups choose to engage in influences public approval represents a crucial link in the causal chain. Change in preferences and beliefs is often a precursor to any subsequent willingness to take risky or costly actions in support of, or in opposition to, a warring party. In this section, we develop a series of hypotheses examining how violent targeting by combatants affects public attitudes toward those groups.

We begin by examining how civilian targeting in general (i.e., as opposed to military targeting) affects public opinion. Civilian targeting may produce two effects on individuals living in a conflict zone: it causes (or enhances) fear that they might also be victims of the conflict; and it creates a normative outrage against the perpetrators. One of the key purposes of civilian targeting is to instill fear in the population (Crenshaw 1981; Hoffman 2006: 40-41).

⁶ Though subsequent research questions these conclusions, arguing subsequent attacks may take place during a longer time window, or be displaced to areas farther away to avoid retribution (Souleimanov and Siroky 2016).

⁷ While other work has sought to measure or trace changes in individuals' behavior in response to violence, we focus on attitudinal consequences.

When civilians see other noncombatants being targeted, they may come to worry more about their own fates or those of their compatriots (Valentino et al. 2004). This fear can lead to a backlash against, or reduction of approval for, groups targeting civilians (Stanton 2016: 6-9).⁸

Civilian targeting also has the potential to generate moral outrage against the perpetrators. Prohibitions against attacking civilians in just war theory and IHL both derive from, and have enhanced, the sense in many societies that civilian targeting is an illegitimate practice. Resorting to brutal methods of warfare is contrary to deeply held societal norms of humanity and restraint (Merom 2003:19-20). One of the central tenets of just war theory and the modern laws of war is the principle of distinction between the military and civilians (Best 1980, 1994). The concept of non-combatant immunity is at the core of principles of distinction, asserting that civilians and civilian property cannot be the object of direct attack (Walzer 2000:153). While IHL is often difficult to enforce, it shapes individuals' understanding of appropriate conduct during war (Wallace 2019).

Both governments and rebel groups may therefore pay a price amongst the wider population for operations that lead directly, or indirectly, to civilian deaths. The outrage and fear effects of civilian targeting lead to a backlash against armed groups. In terms of attitudes, this backlash manifests as disapproval of groups that use civilian targeting relative to those who limit their attacks to military targets. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Civilian targeting hypothesis: Public approval for armed groups will be lower for those groups using any type of strategy primarily targeting civilians compared with a strategy primarily targeting enemy military combatants.

⁸ Stanton (2016) goes on to note that certain characteristics can make armed actors more or less sensitive to these costs (see also Fazal 2018; Jo 2015). Our focus is on directly analyzing the costs of these decisions in terms of public approval.

We nonetheless acknowledge important counter-arguments that suggest the particular type of wartime strategy employed by an armed group may have little to no impact on public attitudes. War disrupts the functioning of “normal” politics, representing a disjuncture and potentially creating a sense that, under such high stakes, anything goes. The U.S. Civil War Union General William T. Sherman’s blunt proclamation that “War is hell” stresses the inescapably violent nature of conflict.⁹ Under this view, while combatants may vary in their particular uses of force, they are all on an equal moral plane that is undifferentiated in evaluations of the merits, or lack thereof, of overall strategies of violence. A corollary can be seen in the argument that war itself is so inherently destructive – such a departure from normal interactions – that anything that can be done to hasten its conclusion should be not only morally permitted, but encouraged (Kennedy and Andreopoulos 1994:217-218).

With war’s own internal logic, any possible distinctions in the conduct of combatants, such as the targeting of enemy troops versus civilians, may be viewed as minor compared to the destructive nature of the organized use of military force. The public may make few distinctions between the conduct of combatants, giving little weight to rules intended to distinguish who is a legitimate or illegitimate target on the battlefield. Indeed, publics have been accepting – sometimes reluctantly, other times enthusiastically – of a wide range of abuses and restrictions against both combatants and civilians (Huddy et al. 2005; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009:76-78; Reiter and Stam 2002: 151-152; Valentino 2004: 30-39). This is especially the case to the extent individuals identify with the political, ethnic, or ideological characteristics of the group committing such acts, while seeing the victims as an enemy. Torture provides a case in point,

⁹ Sherman nonetheless accepted some limits on wartime conduct, even if these were severely circumscribed by military necessity (Neely Jr. 1991: 13-19).

where publics have been quite supportive of the use of harsh interrogation techniques against enemy prisoners when they feel a strong sense of threat, made all the more severe in times of war (Conrad et al. 2018; Gronke et al. 2010; Rejali 2007). These perspectives inform the following null hypothesis:

Null Hypothesis: There is expected to be no difference in public approval for armed groups based on whether they target civilians or enemy combatants.

3.2 Discriminate and Indiscriminate Civilian Targeting

Thus far, we have focused on the distinction between military and civilian targeting. However, once they have decided to target civilians, armed actors then often have a choice of whether to do so discriminately or indiscriminately. The effects of this choice on combatants' war aims is a matter of debate (Valentino 2014), and we analyze an important causal pathway by which this choice might be crucial: its effects on civilian attitudes.

Arguments pointing to the utility of indiscriminate violence in advancing war aims often look at factors other than public approval, such as saving lives on one's own side or conquering territory (Downes 2008: 29-39), demonstrating that the adversary has low prospects for winning the conflict (Stoll 1993: 20), or creating logistical problems and resource limitations for the other side (Lyall 2009). Yet to the extent indiscriminate violence generates these positive effects for perpetrators, it likely does so *despite* its negative effects on public attitudes. Indiscriminate violence is often argued to be futile, if not counterproductive, at least when it comes to winning the hearts and minds of the targeted population (Kalyvas 2006: 151). Indiscriminate violence leads individuals to believe they may be targeted regardless of their beliefs or actions, which can lead them to evade, or resist, perhaps seeking protection from the rival group. Heightened anger and resentment are common emotional responses, as Tishkov (2004: 142) documents in the case

of Chechen civilians following indiscriminate attacks. In some contexts, indiscriminate violence can even drive civilians into the arms of the adversary as their best chance to survive, because siding with the perpetrator offers little relief or guarantee of being spared from attack (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). Also in Chechnya, indiscriminate attacks by Russian forces often had an opposite effect than intended, pushing villagers further into the rebels' camp (Souleimanov and Siroky 2016).

The extent to which indiscriminate targeting affects civilians' willingness to collaborate or otherwise provide support to armed groups also has implications for the effects of violence on attitudes. In the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, for example, indiscriminate violence by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) led to increased insurgent support (Lyall et al. 2013).¹⁰ Indiscriminate bombings by Hamas militants made Israeli citizens more likely to support right-wing parties, who adopted a more aggressive stance toward the insurgents (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014). In addition, indiscriminate violence can have long-lasting, inter-generational effects of hardening group boundaries and fostering negative perceptions of groups associated with the perpetrators (Lupu and Peisakhin 2017; Rozenas et al. 2017). While civilians are likely to often disapprove of the brutality of discriminate violence, these findings indicate that indiscriminate attacks have especially important effects on civilian attitudes. This leads to our second main hypothesis:

H2: Indiscriminate civilian targeting hypothesis: Public approval for armed groups will be lower for those groups using a strategy primarily targeting civilians indiscriminately compared to a strategy primarily targeting civilian supporters of the enemy discriminately.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Lyall et al. (2013) further find that insurgent violence does not correspondingly translate into increased support for ISAF, suggesting asymmetric reactions by civilians depending on the perpetrator's identity.

3.3 Relative Strategies

We have thus far analyzed actors' strategies in isolation from each other, yet individuals likely also evaluate armed actors' choices of violence, in part, based on their relationship to each other. Scholars have long theorized that, in the context of violent armed conflict, the effects of a group's strategy depends on interactions with other actors' strategies (Arreguin-Toft 2001).

In some contexts, showing restraint by not targeting civilians (or at least engaging in less violence) can be used to win both domestic and international approval (Fazal 2018: 63-64; Stanton 2016: 25-30). Perfect humanitarian conduct is a rarity in times of war, but the relative level and type of violence employed by contending belligerents can be crucial in shaping public perceptions. Exerting even some moderation in violence can increase local approval and legitimacy for an armed group, especially when contrasted against a particularly abusive or harsh adversary (Jo 2015: 61-65; Weinstein 2007: 203-206). Even factions within the same rebel group can enjoy remarkably different levels of civilian approval based on their treatment of the surrounding population, as was evident across various Shining Path contingents in Peru (Weinstein 2007: 248-258). As a result, armed actors may gain more approval by being (or appearing to be) less brutal than their adversaries.

Despite incentives to exert a certain amount of restraint, the norm of reciprocity also plays a prominent role in law, military strategy, and public opinion during wartime (Chu 2019; Morrow 2014). On the one hand, reciprocity can engender mutually moderating conduct on both sides (Axelrod 1984: 73-87). On the other hand, a darker side of reciprocity is that abuse by one side can lead to an escalating cycle of violence. The Eastern Front of the Second World War descended into what one historian called the "barbarisation of warfare," as Nazi and Soviet forces adopted increasingly brutal tactics toward enemy soldiers and civilians alike (Bartov

2001: 4). In a study of atrocities during the Spanish Civil War, Balcells (2017) shows that when an armed group took over a locality, it tended to act with similar levels of violence to the opponent who previously controlled it. Some societies have deep-seated norms of revenge or retaliation by which individuals prefer a strong response to harsh violent tactics and disapprove of attempts to de-escalate such confrontations (Lieberman 2013; Stein 2015). This leads to the following three hypotheses about how the public evaluates the interaction of armed groups' strategies; the first more general, while the latter two suggest contrary tendencies:

H3: *Relative strategy hypothesis*. The effect of an actor's strategy of violence on public opinion is conditional on the other actor's strategy.

H3a: *Restraint hypothesis*. The use of less-harsh tactics than the other actor increases public approval for an actor.

H3b: *Revenge hypothesis*. Following harsh tactics with similarly harsh tactics increases public approval for an actor.

4. Research Design

To test these hypotheses, we employ a survey experiment that systematically varies information about armed actors' strategies of violence. The main strength of survey experiments in this context is random assignment to the treatment. This allows us to compare groups of survey recipients who are similar to each other on average across both observed and unobserved factors. By comparing differences in responses between experimental groups, we can infer with greater certainty the causal effects of belligerents' strategies of violence on individual attitudes. One of the key limitations of such designs concerns external validity, i.e., the extent to which the phenomena we observe are generalizable to other contexts. Individuals may react differently when taking a survey than they would when faced with a similar real-world situation. Survey

experiments also necessarily reduce complex and often changing social phenomena to a limited set of information, treatments, and outcome items. Nevertheless, the benefits of an experimental approach outweigh the costs in the study of topics like the effects of strategies of violence on public opinion, given the prevalence of contradictory findings in existing observational research, as well as obstacles posed by selection effects and issues of strategic interaction (Druckman et al. 2011).

4.1 Sample – Ukraine’s Donbass Region

With external validity concerns especially in mind, we chose an ongoing wartime context in which information about strategies of violence by armed groups would be more meaningful and salient, rather than asking respondents to react to a hypothetical conflict. We fielded our survey in the Donbass region of Ukraine, which provides a number of advantages for evaluating our argument. Donbass is the easternmost region of Ukraine, consisting of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, and bordering Russia to the east and North. Since the Ukrainian Revolution of February 2014, the Donbass region has been home to unrest, escalating into violent conflict involving the Ukrainian armed forces and two separatist groups – the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) – both supported by Russia’s active intervention. Fighting was heaviest during the first year of hostilities, but has continued to the present, with dozens of ceasefires brokered and broken. As of mid-2019, approximately 10,000 combatants and over 3,000 civilians have been killed, though estimates vary (OHCHR 2019: 6-8).

Armed groups have used differing strategies of violence throughout the course of the conflict. While fighting and casualties have taken place primarily between the armed forces of the two sides, deliberate attempts to target civilians have been noteworthy. Both sides have used indiscriminate shelling of residential areas and anti-personnel landmines (OHCHR 2016: 10).

Likewise, Ukrainian government and separatist forces have deployed violence against civilians in a more discriminate manner, targeting individuals suspected of being affiliated with or supporting the opposing side (OHCHR 2016: 15; HRW 2014). The War in Donbass thus offers remarkable variation in the main strategies of violence forming our core theoretical expectations – military, discriminate civilian, and indiscriminate civilian– making all three more salient for residents on the ground.

The Donbass conflict can generally be understood as a civil war pitting against each other two forces of political nationalism, one domestic (Ukraine) and one foreign (Russia). The role of identity is complex and contested, both as a legacy of the ethno-territorial policies of the Soviet era, the country's particular domestic political context (Brubaker 1994), and ongoing cross-border economic ties (Zhukov 2016). The conflict is sometimes portrayed in the media as setting ethnic Russian separatists against Ukrainians loyal to the central government in Kiev (Thompson 2017), but for several reasons it is not fundamentally an ethnic conflict. First, a majority of the region's residents identify as ethnically Ukrainian but speak Russian. Second, whether or not a given individual is ethnically Russian or Ukrainian is unlikely to be obvious, even to locals, based on their physical appearance or even how they speak, which distinguishes Donbass from other conflicts in which ethnic differences are clearer. Third, ethnic Russians have backed the Ukrainian government side, while support for independence before the conflict was not uncommon amongst ethnic Ukrainians (Giuliano 2018). Even the DNR/LNR forces include a mix of ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians. Rather than an ethnic conflict, therefore, the war is largely a nationalist conflict organized around civic and political terms. For the DNR/LNR forces, the notion of Ukrainian political control of the Donbass is illegitimate, whereas Ukrainian ethnic identity is acceptable so long as it is within the umbrella of Russian political authority.

Within the context of this civil conflict over political nationalism is an international component in the sense that one side claims a foreign government, Russia's, is the legitimate political authority and receives assistance accordingly.

While it has some distinctive characteristics, the Donbass conflict is a useful case in which to test general theories about the relationship between violent targeting and civilian attitudes. The varying use of targeting strategies in the conflict is consistent with many other conflicts, both civil and international, including many cases used to develop theories about the effects of such targeting, such as the wars in Greece (Kalyvas 2006), Spain (Balcells 2017), and Vietnam (Arreguin-Toft 2001). Insights from Donbass therefore offer an opportunity both to understand broader dynamics of violence in the post-Soviet region, as well as to test theories of the relationship between violence and civilian attitudes more generally. The Donbass conflict differs in certain respects from other post-Soviet conflicts, such as Chechnya, Georgia, and the North Caucasus, in which opposing sides belonged to different ethnic groups, and which have been the subject of considerable empirical study into the consequences of violence (e.g., Lyall 2009, 2010; Souleimanov and Siroky 2016; Toft and Zhukov 2012). Further below, we discuss how our results may be interpreted in light of the more modest role of ethnicity in the Donbass conflict.

We conducted our survey using phone interviews in conjunction with the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), a private polling company that administers surveys in Ukraine.¹¹ The survey was fielded in September and October of 2018 – several years after some of the worst fighting, but with hostilities still ongoing on a daily basis, especially in the large “frozen zones” between the two sides in the region. The timing of the survey strikes a balance by

¹¹ Data from KIIS surveys has been used extensively in other scholarly research on Ukraine, including in eastern regions of the country (e.g., Kulyk 2016; Giuliano 2018).

being conducted a considerable time after some of the harshest acts of violence, while the treatments given would nonetheless still resonate quite deeply because of continued fighting. Due to logistical limitations caused by the ongoing conflict, we were able to survey only individuals living in the areas of the Donbass controlled by the Ukrainian government. A representative sample of 1,501 respondents, aged 18 and over, were surveyed from these areas. Respondents were given a choice of taking the survey in Russian or Ukrainian; 1,451 of them chose Russian and 50 Ukrainian, which is not surprising because most Donbass residents primarily speak Russian. Figure 1 displays a map of the Donbass region. The area shaded in vertical lines was controlled by the DNR/LNR during our survey, so our respondents were located in the areas of Donbass shown in dark gray. Municipalities with five or more respondents surveyed are shown in circles, and those with the most respondents are named. Appendix B provides additional information regarding participants, including demographic data and a list of all the municipalities where our respondents were located.¹² Results of balance tests are provided in Appendix C.

¹² Because both oblasts are divided into government- and separatist-controlled areas, reliable baseline socio-demographic data for only the areas surveyed are difficult to obtain. A further challenge is considerable internal displacement due to the fighting, meaning residents may have lived elsewhere before the conflict. Nevertheless, comparing our sample to benchmarks for the entire Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts from the last Ukraine census conducted in 2001 reveals our sample was representative across a range of common covariates. See Appendix B for further details.

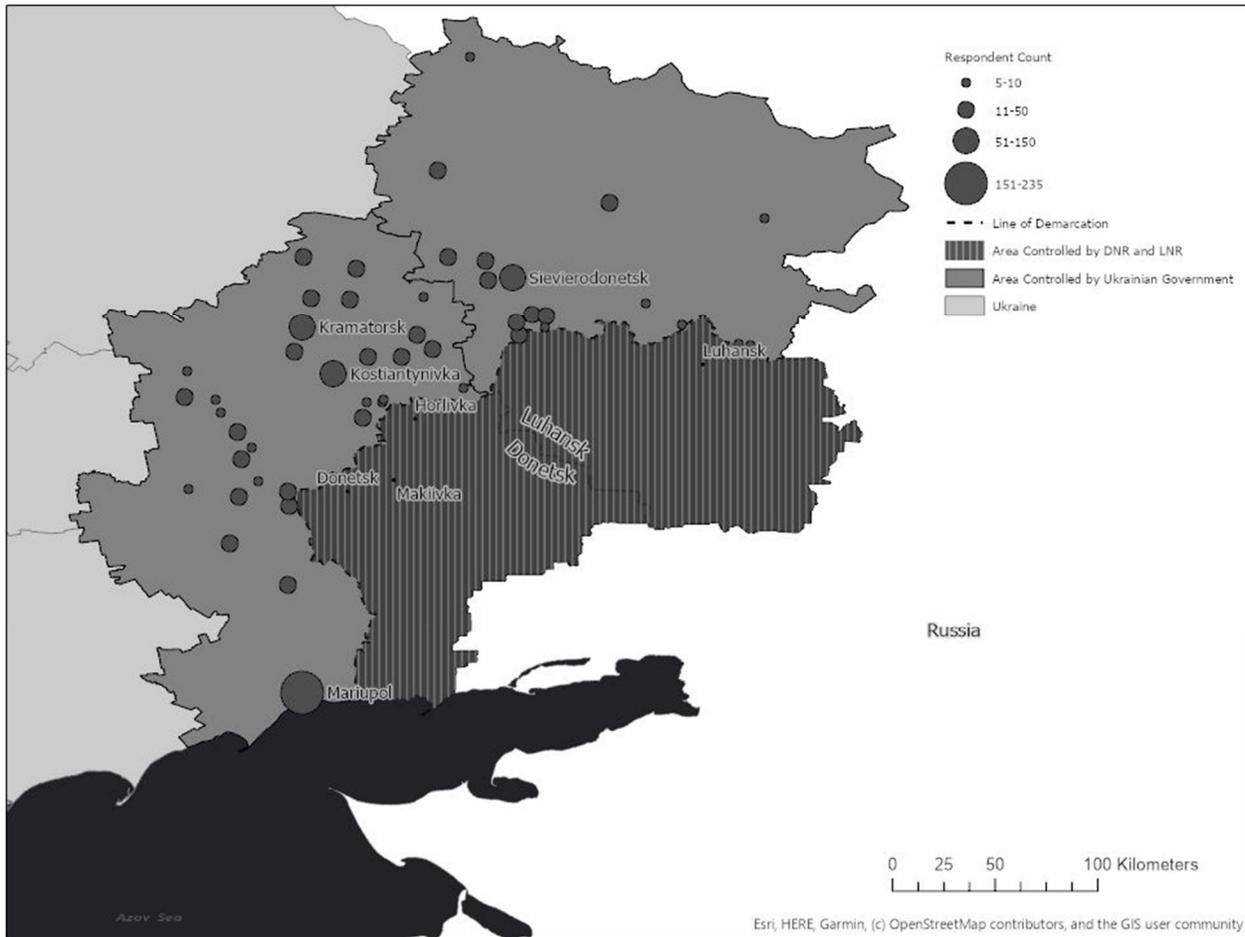


Figure 1: Respondent Locations in the Donbass Region, Eastern Ukraine

4.2 Experimental Design

All respondents were presented with an introductory statement providing some background both on contentious politics in general and the conflict in Ukraine:

“In various countries around the world, some opposition groups decide to take up arms and fight against the government. During the fighting, both sides can use various types of violence. Sometimes they attack soldiers and military targets of the enemy, and sometimes they also attack civilians.

The following questions are about ongoing fighting between the armed forces of the Ukrainian government and separatist forces. There have been several reports about the conduct of both sides during the conflict. Some parts of the description may strike you as important; other parts may seem unimportant.”

The experimental component of the survey involved randomly assigning respondents to additional information concerning reports centered on the belligerents’ strategies of violence. Each respondent was told about a strategy used by the Armed Forces of Ukraine and a strategy used by the DNR\LNR forces. We also randomized the order in which respondents were told the actions by the two actors. The main treatment involved three possible conditions corresponding to the target of the relevant armed group – military forces, civilian discriminate, and civilian indiscriminate. The strategies adopted by the government and separatists were allowed to vary separately; along with randomizing the order in which each group’s strategy was presented, this resulted in a 3 x 3 x 2 factorial design with 18 total experimental groups. The language for the three strategies was as follows:

Military target: “There have been reports that in recent fighting [Actor A] have mostly attacked soldiers and military facilities of [Actor B]. Most of the victims of these attacks were troops from the [Actor B] who were involved in the fighting.

Civilian discriminate target: “There have been reports that in recent fighting [Actor A] have mostly attacked civilians and civilian facilities that have supported

[Actor B]. Most of the victims of these attacks were supporters of [Actor B], but were not involved in the fighting.”

Civilian indiscriminate target: “There have been reports that in recent fighting [Actor A] have attacked civilians and civilian facilities whether or not they have supported [Actor B]. The victims of these attacks included supporters of both forces in the conflict, but were not involved in the fighting.”

Thus, for example, a respondent assigned to receive the Armed Forces of Ukraine information first, with the Armed Forces of Ukraine using military targeting and the DNR\LNR using civilian indiscriminate targeting, would have been read the following text:

“There have been reports that in recent fighting Armed Forces of Ukraine have mostly attacked soldiers and military facilities of the DNR\LNR forces. Most of the victims of these attacks were troops from the DNR\LNR forces who were involved in the fighting. There have also been reports that in recent fighting DNR\LNR forces have attacked civilians and civilian facilities whether or not they have supported the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The victims of these attacks included supporters of both forces in the conflict, but were not involved in the fighting.”

Word choices for the experimental conditions were shaped by several considerations. In the military target treatment, we avoided wording such as “limited to military targets” or references to the conduct being consistent with the laws of war in order to avoid explicitly

introducing legal and normative elements into the treatment. In the civilian treatments, we did not explicitly use descriptors such as “indiscriminate” on the one hand, or “selective” and “discriminate” on the other, which could likewise have biased respondents. Rather, we sought to construct conditions featuring structure and language that were as similar as possible *except* for the identity of the victims being targeted. While trade-offs are inherent in any item construction, this design offers a more internally valid approach that allows for direct comparisons focused on the primary phenomenon of interest concerning strategies of violence.

For our main outcome, respondents were then asked to evaluate each actor’s actions: “Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way [Actor] conducted themselves in the recent fighting described in these reports?” Our aim in these questions was to measure approval of an actor’s use of a violent strategy, although responses are likely to also reflect the respondents’ general approval levels of that actor. When we compare across experimental groups, however, differences among average responses to these outcome questions will net out background approval and allow us to isolate the effects of violent strategies. We randomized the order in which the item for each armed actor was presented to guard against order effects. For each question, respondents gave an answer on a 5-point scale ranging from “Strongly approve” to “Strongly disapprove”. In addition, responses equivalent to “difficult to say” or “refuse to answer” were coded accordingly.¹³ In order to evaluate the extent to which respondents could correctly recall the details of the vignette, we included manipulation checks at

¹³ Of our sample of 1,501, 1,096 respondents answered the outcome question about their approval of the government’s actions, and 1,095 respondents answered the outcome question about their approval of the opposition’s actions. Analyses below only include these individuals. Missingness in the outcome can potentially bias results if non-response is related to treatment. Such patterned missingness can be one reflection of social desirability bias, which is a concern when asking respondents about sensitive topics like violence. However, we find no significant differences in non-response rates across experimental groups that would be suggestive of such bias.

the end of the survey where respondents were asked to recall the strategy of violence used by each armed actor. As an additional check, we asked all respondents to tell us the extent to which they considered the information we had provided them trustworthy. The full instrument is provided in Appendix A.¹⁴

5. Results

We begin our analysis of the survey results by comparing the average levels of approval across the experimental groups, which we normalized on a scale ranging between 0 and 1. The left-hand plot in Figure 2 shows the average levels of approval of the government’s actions conditional on the government’s strategy, while the right-hand plot shows analogous results with respect to the opposition. In both cases, the average approval for military targeting is larger than the other two choices. Across all strategies, approval of the government is higher than that of the opposition, which likely reflects the fact that survey respondents were residing in areas under government control.¹⁵

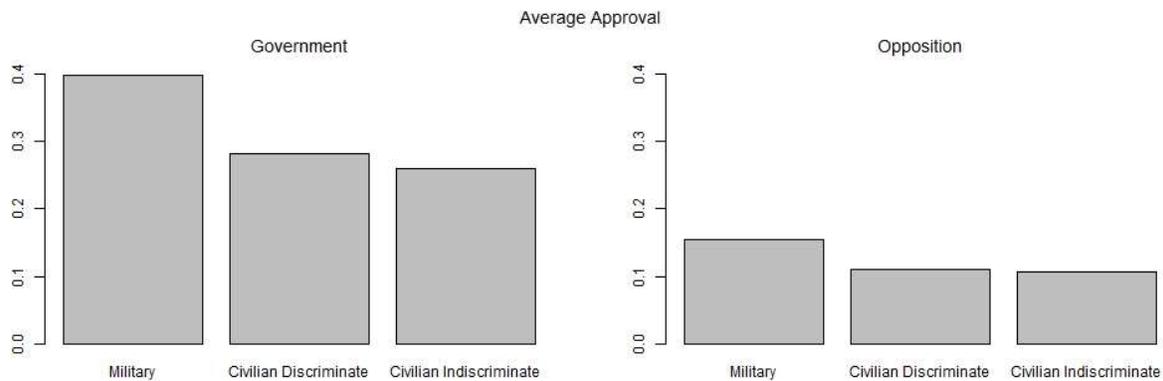


Figure 2: Approval by Experimental Group

¹⁴ The translated Russian and Ukrainian instruments are available from the authors upon request.

¹⁵ Responses across several items, such as trust in government and economic attitudes, are generally consistent with other polls conducted around the same time, increasing confidence in the validity of the sample.

We are most interested in analyzing possible *differences* in approval based on the reported targeting strategy employed by each armed group. We continue our analysis by testing Hypothesis 1, which predicted that civilian targeting would reduce actors' approval in conflict. Figure 3 shows the percentage change in approval of the government caused by government civilian targeting. To estimate the results shown in Figure 3, we compared the military target experimental group to the two civilian target experimental groups aggregated together. The first row shows the estimated effect across the full sample. The second row shows the estimated effect in the subsample that was told the government moved first. The third row shows the estimated effect in the subsample that was told the government moved first and that the opposition responded by targeting civilians. The fourth row shows the estimated effect in the subsample that was told the opposition moved first. The final row shows the estimated effect in the subsample that was told the opposition moved first and that the opposition targeted civilians.

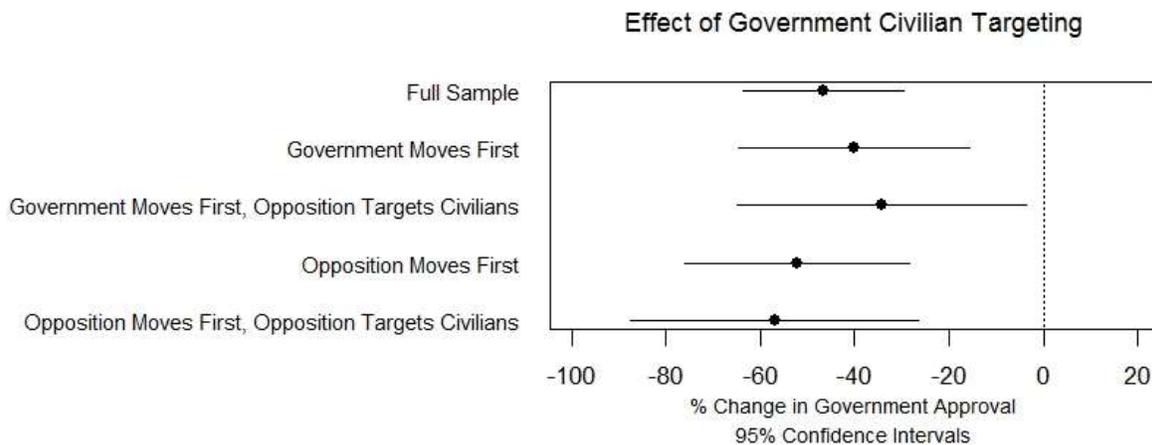


Figure 3: Effects of Government Civilian Targeting on Approval of Government

As Figure 3 shows, civilian targeting robustly reduces approval of the government. Not only is this the case in the full sample, but the effect does not depend on the order in which the actors' actions were presented to the respondents, nor does it depend on whether the opposition targeted civilians. Even if the opposition moved first and attacked civilians, a government response of also attacking civilians reduced approval of the government, indicating that our respondents preferred government restraint over a reciprocal response.

Figure 4 shows the results of analogous tests of the effect of opposition civilian targeting on approval of the opposition. We consistently find that civilian targeting reduces approval of the opposition.¹⁶ This result holds even if the government moved first and attacked civilians, which suggests that our respondents preferred restraint not just on behalf of the government but also on behalf of the opposition. Overall, we find robust support for Hypothesis 1.¹⁷

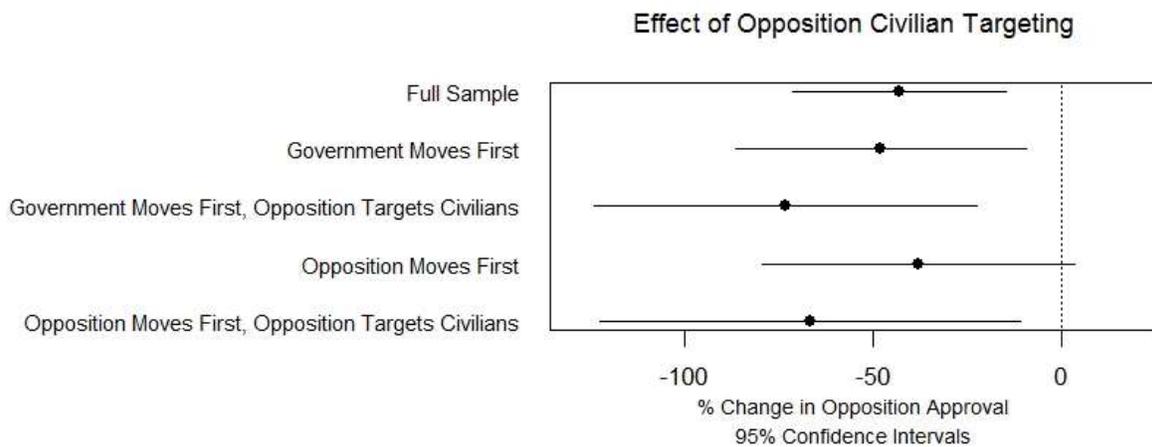


Figure 4: Effects of Opposition Civilian Targeting on Approval of Opposition

¹⁶ In the subsample who were told the government moved first, this effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p \sim 0.07$).

¹⁷ Results from robustness tests are provided in Appendices D and E. Results using the manipulation check and trustworthiness check are provided in Appendix F.

To further analyze these results, we tested whether the effects of the military targeting treatment vary with several demographic and attitudinal characteristics of our respondents. The results of these tests are provided in Appendix G. We did not find significant heterogeneous treatment effects based on key demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, income, and educational attainment. In addition, the treatment effects did not significantly vary based on the respondents' proximity to the line of demarcation (a proxy for relative personal threat of violence) nor based on their choice to take survey in Ukrainian or Russian (which may be a proxy for underlying support for the Ukrainian government or opposition).

Several significant heterogeneous treatment effects, however, may provide some insight into our results. First, while civilian targeting decreased approval of both armed actors, the size of these effects depended significantly on our respondents' attitudes toward the European Union. We asked our subjects to respond to the following prompt: "Do you think Ukraine should seek closer economic relations with...", with the options being the European Union, Russia, both, or neither. Civilian targeting decreased approval of the Ukrainian government *less so* for our pro-EU respondents as compared to other respondents, but decreased approval of the DNR\LNR *more so* for our pro-EU respondents as compared to our other respondents. In other words, those individuals with pro-EU attitudes were relatively more likely to reward the Ukrainian government for avoiding attacks on civilians, but relatively less likely to reward the DNR\LNR for doing the same. Given that the individuals who were pro-EU are more likely to support the Ukrainian government than the separatists, this suggests that individuals' reactions to targeting depend in part on their *ex ante* attitudes toward that actor. Thus, the relatively small extent to which civilian targeting reduced approval of the DNR\LNR among pro-EU respondents may be because those individuals generally held unfavorable views of those groups to begin with.

Similarly, we also asked respondents to report the extent to which they trust the Ukrainian government, with four options ranging from “Just about always” to “Never”. The greater the level of trust of the government reported by our respondents, the *smaller* the extent to which civilian targeting by the Ukrainian forces decreased approval of the government. At the same time, the greater the level of trust of the government, the *greater* the extent to which civilian targeting by the DNR\LNR decreased approval of those forces. As above, these heterogeneous treatment effects suggest that the magnitude of the treatment effects depends in part on ex ante attitudes toward armed actors. More specifically, this shows that the effects of targeting depend, in part, on respondents’ general levels of trust in the armed actors.

We now turn to testing Hypothesis 2. We do so by comparing approval in the subsample that was told the actor targeted civilians discriminately to the subsample that was told the same actor targeted indiscriminately. As Figures 5 and 6 show, we are generally unable to reject the null hypothesis that civilian indiscriminate targeting does not reduce approval. With respect to both actors, the estimated effects in the full sample are not statistically significant and are smaller than the estimated effects shown above comparing civilian to military targeting. Interestingly, these null findings are unlikely to be the result of respondent inattention or lack of recall, or of respondent distrust in the information provided. As demonstrated in Appendix F, with respect to both actors, the estimated effect remains statistically insignificant in the subsamples that correctly responded to the manipulation check and those that indicated they found the information trustworthy. The only case in which the effect of civilian indiscriminate targeting is statistically significant is when the opposition moves first and conducts indiscriminate targeting (Figure 5, row 5). There, the effect on approval of the government is negative as Hypothesis 2 predicts, further suggesting that our respondents have a preference for restraint on the part of the

government. The analogous effect in terms of opposition approval, however, is close to zero and statistically indistinguishable from zero (Figure 6, row 5). Overall, we find little support for Hypothesis 2.

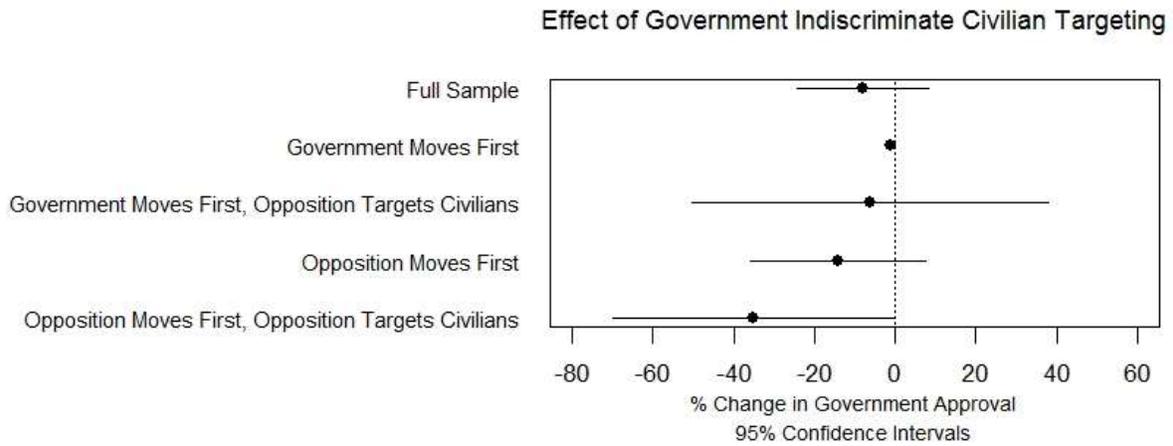


Figure 5: Effects of Government Indiscriminate Civilian Targeting on Approval of Government

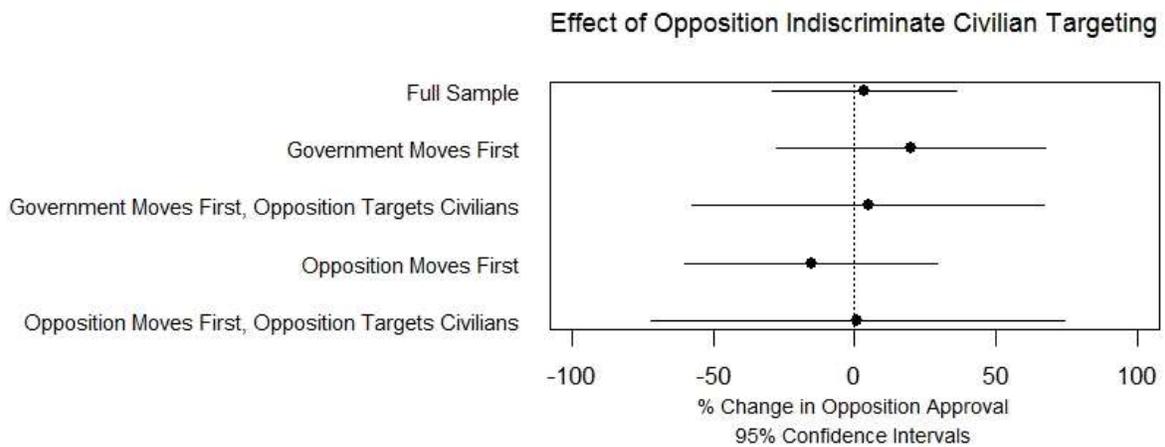


Figure 6: Effects of Opposition Indiscriminate Civilian Targeting on Approval of Opposition

Several factors might be influencing the null results with respect to Hypothesis 2. To guard against over-interpretation, we risk stating the obvious by noting our results *do not* imply that indiscriminate violence does not reduce approval for perpetrators; instead, our results indicate that we cannot be sufficiently certain whether or not it does so relative to discriminate civilian targeting. In addition, as with any other research design, ours is limited by the scope of our data; while we do not have a good reason to suspect the Donbass conflict to be unique in this respect, a circumspect interpretation of our results still leaves open the possibility that indiscriminate violence may reduce public approval in other contexts.

One way in which specifics to the Donbass conflict may be affecting these results is the role of ethnicity. As discussed above, the Donbass conflict is not primarily conducted along ethnic terms, and the ethnicity (i.e., Russian or Ukrainian) of individuals in the Donbass is often non-obvious, even to locals. It is possible that some of our respondents who were told that an armed actor attacked civilians who supported the adversary may have implicitly assumed this would be difficult to do given the challenge of identifying pro-Ukraine versus pro-opposition supporters; if and to the extent this was the case, the discriminate civilian targeting condition may have been interpreted as being similar to the indiscriminate civilian targeting condition. That said, we should not overstate the relative challenges of identifying supporters and opponents in ethnic versus non-ethnic conflicts. In non-ethnic conflicts ranging from the American Civil War to the Spanish Civil War, support for combatants could be identified through a variety of other ways (Kalyvas 2006:181-182). Conversely, in many ethnic conflicts individuals break ranks with their co-ethnics to support the other group (e.g., Lyall 2010).

Nevertheless, it is possible that some respondents interpreted the discriminate violence treatment we gave them in a manner similar to the other respondents' interpretation of the

indiscriminate violence treatment. If this were the case, however, then they may not have been able to correctly identify whether they had received the discriminate or indiscriminate treatment in subsequent manipulation checks – in other words, they would be unable to distinguish between the two forms of civilian targeting afterward. Our subsequent analysis shows that many respondents were able to correctly classify the type of civilian targeting reports they received, yet their attitudes toward the perpetrator did not differ significantly. What this means is that individuals could tell the difference between discriminate and indiscriminate violence, even if they evaluated them in similar terms. The historical record of the Donbass war reinforces this point about meaningful differentiation between each form of civilian targeting. Numerous instances of both discriminate and indiscriminate targeting have taken place, with reports showing the differences between such types of violence have been understood both by armed forces and by ordinary Donbass residents (HRW 2014; OHCHR 2019: 4-8).

Another possible explanation for these results is that our treatments intentionally included non-emotional language when describing violent strategies. It may be the case that more dramatic descriptions of indiscriminate violence would have resulted in lower levels of approval compared to discriminate violence. Yet this choice would involve its own trade-offs, since any differences in effects could be due to the vividness of the treatment language rather than the actual nature of the violence, which is the main quantity of interest in theories of targeting. Along similar lines, we told our respondents whether or not the victims “supported” the other side, but did not inform them about any activities these individuals conducted. One possibility is that informing respondents about specific support activities (e.g., providing resources or informing or other locals) would generate larger differences between the effects of discriminate versus indiscriminate violence. These conjectures suggest several avenues for future research.

The results above also provide some indication that the effect of one actor’s targeting choice depends, in part, on the other actor’s actions. We directly test Hypothesis 3 on relative strategies in Figure 7. To do so, we operationalize military targeting as the least harsh tactic and indiscriminate civilian targeting as the harshest tactic. We then estimated the effects on approval of both actors when (a) the government used a harsher tactic than the opposition; (b) the actors used the same tactic; and (c) the opposition used a harsher tactic than the government. As Figure 7 shows, when the opposition uses a harsher tactic than the government, approval of the government increases. And when the government uses a harsher tactic than the opposition, approval of the opposition correspondingly increases. Interestingly, when the government used a harsher tactic than the opposition, doing so significantly reduced approval of the government. The analogous effect with respect to opposition approval was not statistically significant. These results suggest our respondents’ approval of the government was quite sensitive to the relative tactics used by the two actors, but that their approval of the opposition might be less consistently sensitive to these relative tactics. This pattern is in line with other research showing an asymmetry in attitudes, with civilians more sensitive to changes in government violence than that committed by opposition forces (Lyll et al. 2013).

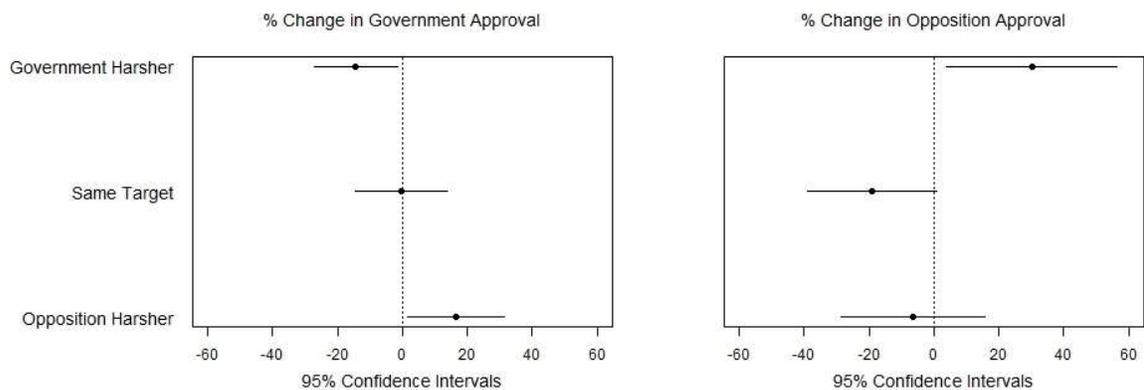


Figure 7: Effects of Relative Tactics

These results support Hypothesis 3 by showing that the effects of one actor's strategy depend, in part, on the other actor's strategy. In conjunction with the results reported above, these results also demonstrate that respondents exhibited a general preference for restraint (Hypothesis 3a) rather than revenge (Hypothesis 3b). One reason for this may be that, because our respondents were all located in the relatively small Donbass region, they feared that reciprocal responses to harsh tactics targeting civilians could endanger their own safety. This concern may be especially pronounced in the Donbass region because of the difficulty armed actors might have of determining whether potential targets support one side or the other, as noted above.

6. Conclusions

The causes and effects of targeting in armed conflict have become one of the key questions in the political violence literature over the last few decades, generating a wealth of theory and empirical evidence on the sources and consequences of these decisions. Much of what we know is based on claims and assumptions about the underlying effects of these targeting decisions on public opinion, yet direct tests of the micro-foundations of these claims are generally lacking. What is the relationship between targeting strategies and civilian attitudes? Do these effects depend on the strategies used by the opposing side?

We aim to contribute to answering these questions by systematically analyzing these micro-foundations. We conducted a survey experiment analyzing the public opinion effects of military, civilian discriminate, and civilian indiscriminate targeting by government and separatist forces in the ongoing Donbass War. Our first key finding is that civilian targeting reduces

approval of both armed actors across a wide range of scenarios. The robustness of this finding is perhaps more notable than the baseline finding. Even after being told that one side targeted civilians, the individuals we surveyed on average still preferred that the other side respond by targeting only combatants. This finding reinforces arguments that armed actors pay a significant cost in terms of public approval when they target civilians and that, when, they choose to use this strategy, they do so in the belief that other factors outweigh this cost.

Our second key result is that the effect of civilian discriminate targeting is generally not statistically distinguishable from that of indiscriminate targeting. As noted above, additional research is needed to build on these results and assess the effects of such strategies. It might be the case that civilians are not sensitive to the distinction between discriminate and indiscriminate targeting, but we cannot rule out several other possibilities, including that (1) the result is driven by the non-emotional language in our prompts; (2) the result is particular to the type of conflict ongoing in Donbass; and, at a more basic level, (3) while we cannot distinguish between these effects statistically, the true difference between them is non-zero. Nonetheless, we can infer from our results that (1) our respondents were less sensitive to the discriminate/indiscriminate distinction than to the civilian/military distinction; and (2) the effects of indiscriminate violence on civilian attitudes likely depend on the specific contexts of an armed conflict and the ways in which they are informed about, and experience, this violence. These results suggest the need for further analysis of the conditions under which civilians are sensitive to distinctions between discriminate and indiscriminate violence, which we hope can be used to refine theories about the broader effects of these targeting decisions on conflict dynamics.

Finally, we find that respondents generally preferred restraint over revenge. In most scenarios, when one actor used a harsher tactic than the other, the former was penalized in terms

of public support and the latter rewarded, which suggests an overall preference for restraint. Along similar lines, when the first actor to move used a harsh tactic, respondents generally preferred a less harsh, rather than reciprocal, response, suggesting they did not hold strong norms of revenge. As above, we encourage readers to interpret these results carefully as they are not intended to conclusively resolve debates about whether individuals generally prefer restraint over revenge, but rather to provide evidence within our particular design and context.

Our results suggest several additional directions for future research. To create a more parsimonious design, we have conceptualized discriminate and indiscriminate violence as ideal types, yet research suggests reality is usually more complex. Armed actors target civilians along a spectrum ranging from fully discriminate to fully indiscriminate, with additional variation in terms of intensity, arbitrariness, and other factors. Indiscriminate violence can be almost completely random with any and all civilians liable to be attacked, while in other cases it can be more retributive against particular groups – though such groups may be conceived in the broadest of terms (Souleimanov and Siroky 2016). Even genocide can involve some quasi-selective elements as it represents a collective form of violence, but directed at particular categories of the population (Straus 2015: 18-20). Furthermore, violence against civilians need not be only conceived of as varying along the discriminate/indiscriminate dimension, but may also vary in terms of levels victimization (Downes 2008), a particular numerical threshold above which violence constitutes mass killing (Valentino 2004), the deliberateness of killings through one-sided violence (Eck and Hultman 2007), or the direct versus indirect nature in the application of violence against civilians (Balcells 2011). Future work should incorporate insights from these additional dimensions and conceptualizations of civilian targeting to develop a fuller understanding of the dynamics of violence during war and the role of ordinary individuals.

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