

Losing on the Home Front? Battlefield Casualties, Media, and Public Support for Foreign Interventions

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Fatalities increase media coverage of the Afghan conflict and public demand for withdrawal; however, this effect is significantly weakened when coverage of conflict is overshadowed by other news events, highlighting the crucial role that media play in shaping public support for foreign military interventions.

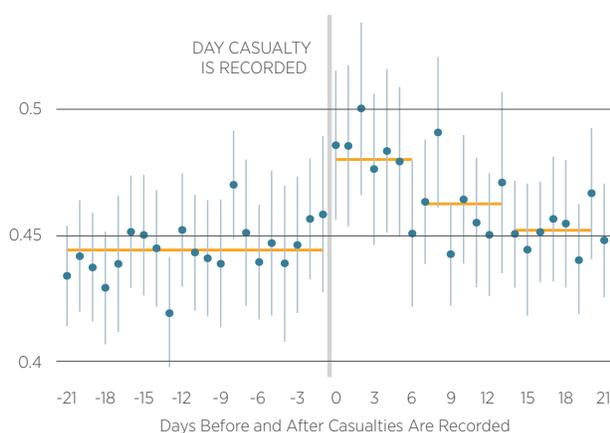
Understanding how wartime casualties influence public support for withdrawal and which mechanisms underlie this relationship remains an important challenge, especially in the context of conflicts fought through military coalitions. In these coalitions, the political costs of losses can induce free-riding, where some coalition partners limit the combat operations of their troops—under-providing security in areas of operation—to avoid political backlash at home.

The authors study these and other dynamics in a highly relevant context—the ongoing military campaign in Afghanistan—where North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) affiliated forces have conducted operations since 2001. The authors employ granular, nationally representative individual-level public opinion survey data collected across eight major troop-sending NATO countries from 2007-2011, including the United States,

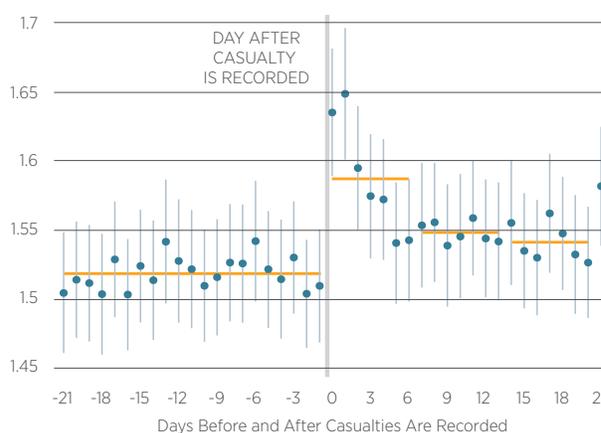
Figure 1 • Whither Public Support for War?

Impact of hostile events with casualties on media reporting and support for troop withdrawal from Afghanistan – evidence from event study design.

Support for NATO Troop Withdrawal Increases Following Fatal Casualties



Newspaper Reports on Afghanistan Increases Following Fatal Casualties



— Means Before and After Event

Note: This Figure shows event study results for a window of 21 days. Zero indicates the day a casualty is recorded in Panel A (which may be later than the exact day of the event), and the day after a casualty is recorded in Panel B (to account for the news cycle in the written press). Yellow lines represent the means before and after the event; 90% confidence intervals are obtained from clustering standard errors (two-way) at the (interview) date and event level. Panel A shows that the support for withdrawal of NATO troops clearly increases after casualty events. The small lead before the event is consistent with some fuzziness in the reporting date (e.g., when soldiers succumb due to earlier injuries). The effect is most marked in the 7 days immediately following the event. Panel B shows that newspaper coverage of Afghanistan similarly increases in the aftermath of fatal casualties. This result suggests that media coverage could be a channel through which casualties affect support for the war.

United Kingdom, and other key troop-contributing coalition partners. These surveys cover a critical phase of NATO operations in Afghanistan, including the troop surge.

The authors identify combat events involving casualties of a troop-sending nation around the interview date specific to each respondent and specific to the nationality of the respondent. Using a series of quasi-experimental designs, the authors provide novel and compelling causal evidence linking battlefield losses to public demand for withdrawal in troop-sending countries and demonstrate the role of media coverage in shaping civilian attitudes toward the war. Specifically, they show that country-specific casualty events are associated with a significant worsening of public support for continued engagement in the conflict.

To assess this finding, the authors take advantage of the otherwise exogenous timing of prominent events that crowd out coverage of troop fatalities. In other words, if other news events—in this case, major sporting matches—exert news pressure such that war coverage is likewise diminished, would this alter public opinion about the war in meaningful ways? The answer is yes. The authors find compelling evidence that the elasticity of conflict coverage on own-country casualties diminishes significantly when sporting events introduce news pressure. They also find that public support for the war is unaffected by own-country casualties when news coverage has been crowded out by sporting matches.

Bottom line: the authors provide credibly causal evidence that public demands for withdrawal increase with war-related casualties and demonstrate that media coverage is likely a central driver of changes in sentiment. These results are important and relevant in understanding the economics of conflict and the policy implications of battlefield dynamics. When democratic countries participate in a foreign military intervention, public support for the war is a key constraint, to which multilateral military interventions may be particularly sensitive.