


Thinking generically and specifically in International Relations survey experiments

Research and Politics
April-June 2023: 1–6
© The Author(s) 2023
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20531680231165871
journals.sagepub.com/home/rap


Clara H Suong¹ , Scott Desposato² and Erik Gartzke²

Abstract

Does treatment abstraction affect treatment effects in International Relations survey experiments in countries outside of the US? We assess whether treatment effects are conditional on the anonymity of country actors among respondents in Brazil, China, Sweden, Japan, and Ukraine. We examine whether the effects of the United Nations' approval of military force and regime type of the target country on support for war are moderated by respondents' compliance with our abstraction encouragement. We find that around 20% of the respondents across all samples think of specific countries and do not comply with our abstraction encouragement. However, we fail to find evidence of a change in the average treatment effects by non-compliance, implying that the treatment effects are not likely to be conditional on respondents' compliance (thinking of specific cases) or schema inconsistency (thinking of specific cases that are implausible given the context). At the same time, we find that treatment inconsistency (thinking of specific cases that are inconsistent with the assigned treatments) can affect the main treatment effects.

Keywords

Public opinion, survey experiment, Brazil, China, Japan, Sweden, Ukraine, war support

Introduction

How does country identity in International Relations (IR) survey experiments affect their results? Does it matter whether the country actors in survey experiments are hypothetical or real?

Existing studies have expressed concerns about treatment abstraction in IR survey experiments (Dafoe et al., 2018). Yet, recent studies fielded on US respondents show that the effects of treatment abstraction on main treatment effects are more nuanced regarding country actors (Brutger et al., 2022a, 2022b).¹ Brutger et al., 2022b's experiment manipulates the identity of the country pursuing nuclear weapons and shows that country identity conditions do not affect or moderate the main treatment effects (11). It shows that whether the experiments are about an unidentified country, a fictional country, or a real and schema-(in)consistent country does not prevent researchers from assessing the existence or the size of the average treatment effects. At the same time, Brutger et al., 2022a's experiments on the

democratic peace find that a treatment-inconsistent country actor “significantly attenuates each study's average treatment effects” (47).

We extend existing work on treatment abstraction, examining the effect of treatment abstraction in other countries—Brazil, China, Sweden, Japan, and Ukraine. In particular, we assess the effect of actor anonymity on the effectiveness of treatments in survey experiments on public support for the use of force against a nuclear proliferator. In our experiments, we study the effects of 2 treatments—the United Nations' endorsement of the use of force and the regime type of the target country—on public support for war

¹Department of Political Science, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

²Department of Political Science, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA

Corresponding author:

Clara H Suong, Department of Political Science, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA.
Email: clara.suong@vt.edu



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

and whether the effects are moderated by the respondents' compliance with our instructions to not think of specific countries.

We find some evidence that abstraction in survey experiments unfolds similarly in non-US countries. First, we find that the large majority of our respondents report complying with our encouragement: 80% report thinking of no specific countries, with only 20% reporting thinking of particular countries. Additionally, we fail to find evidence that respondents' non-compliance (thinking of specific cases), including schema-inconsistent non-compliance (thinking of specific cases that are implausible given the vignette), affects the main effects of our two treatments about UN approval and the target regime. At the same time, we find that treatment inconsistency (thinking of cases inconsistent with the assigned treatments) suppresses the effect of our democratic target treatment.

Research design and data

Following previous work (Press et al., 2013; Tomz and Weeks 2013), our survey experiment asks subjects in each country to read a short scenario ("vignette") about crises involving two hypothetical countries ("Country A" and "Country B") over Country B's nuclear weapons development and to express their support for the use of force. Prior to reading the vignette, subjects are advised that the scenario is hypothetical and should not be read as if it referred to any particular country. In the vignette, two treatments are randomly assigned: the regime type of Country B and UN authorization for Country A's use of force against Country B.² The subject is then asked a battery

of attitudinal and demographic questions. At the end of the survey, we include an instrument to measure the respondents' compliance with actor hypotheticality. They are asked whether they "thought of Country B as a generic case, or as if it were some specific country" and, if they did, which specific country they thought of.³

Results

Patterns of non-compliance

We define compliance as following survey instructions and considering the use of force without regard to a particular case. Figure 1 shows percentages of compliant and non-compliant respondents as well as the country considered by non-compliers by sample. Compliant respondents are those who follow instructions and report not thinking about a specific case. Non-compliant respondents are those who report thinking about a specific case.

About 20% of the respondents in all samples are non-compliant about actor anonymity. The percentage of non-compliers is the highest among our Japanese sample—53.15% admit thinking of specific countries. Many respondents in other samples also admit their non-compliance—25.98% in China, 24% in Ukraine, 22.73% in Brazil, and 18.81% in Sweden.

Of which countries are the non-compliers thinking? Figure 1 shows countries frequently mentioned by them.⁴ The country most frequently mentioned is North Korea—by 34.30% of all non-complying respondents. Iran and Syria are also mentioned frequently—by 11.36% and 8%, respectively. This is not surprising. Iran and North Korea are

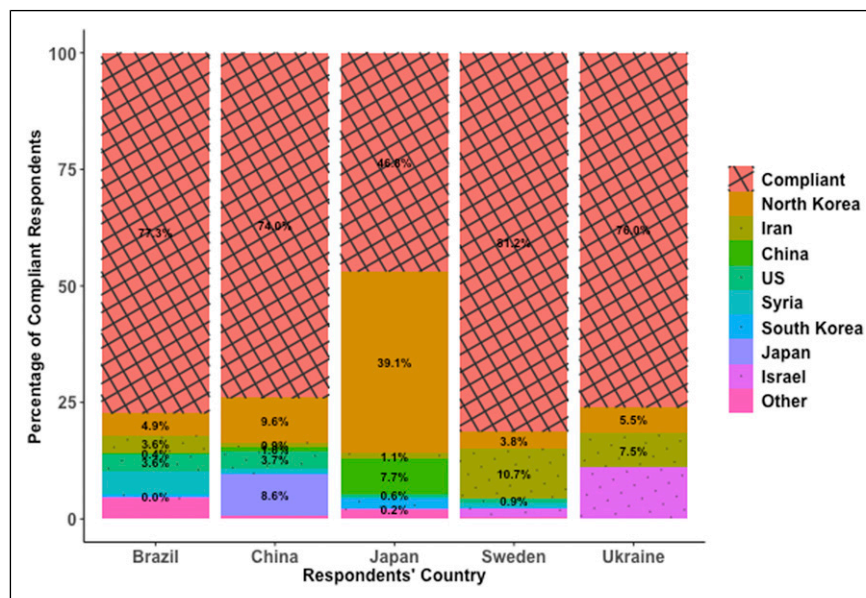


Figure 1. Actor anonymity compliance by country.

the “usual suspects” in that they are frequently mentioned in the news in relation to nuclear weapons development. At the time of the survey, Syria was mired in a civil war and featured frequently in news.

Differences across countries partly reflect regional security issues. 69.89% of Chinese non-compliers mention Japan or North Korea, and 87.5% percent of Japanese non-compliers mention China or North Korea. Respondents from countries with fewer perceived (at the time) local security threats have more diverse non-compliance. 18.27% of Brazilian non-compliers mention the US, Argentina, Bolivia, and Cuba, and only 0.57% of Swedish non-compliers mention Finland.

Among our non-compliers, there is little schema inconsistency but some treatment inconsistency regarding country actors. Schema inconsistency refers to the identity of a fixed country actor not being “reasonable given the scenario in which the actor is embedded” (Brutger et al., 2022a: 42). Countries mentioned by our non-compliers that do not possess or pursue nuclear weapons as of 2013 or do not have a history of seeking them—such as Bolivia, Canada, and Sudan—are schema-inconsistent, and countries such as Iran and Syria schema-consistent, following other work (Brutger et al., 2022a, 2022b; Majnemer and Meibauer, 2023).⁵

Figure 2 shows that schema inconsistency among our non-complying respondents is rare. All responses by non-compliers in Japan and Ukraine are schema-consistent. Most of the non-compliant responses by the other three samples are also schema-consistent; 98.1% of the Brazilian non-compliers, 99.2% of the Chinese non-compliers, and 99.4% of the Swedish non-compliers are schema-consistent.

However, treatment inconsistency is common among the non-compliers. Treatment inconsistency refers to the situation “all levels of the treatment [about the country] being assigned are seen as equally plausible by respondents” (Brutger et al., 2022a: 43). In our experiment, democratic (or non-democratic) countries mentioned by non-compliers assigned to the vignette about a non-democratic (or democratic) nuclear proliferator are treatment inconsistent responses.

Figure 3 shows a pattern of some treatment inconsistency among the non-compliers. It is the most prevalent among the non-compliers from China (48.8%), followed by those from Brazil (47.3%), Japan (44.7%), and Sweden (40.5%). However, few Ukrainian non-compliers (only 6.2%) are treatment-inconsistent.

The coefficient estimates are shown with 95% confidence levels.

Treatment effects by actor anonymity compliance and inconsistency

In this section, we examine whether the effects of our treatments on war support vary by target identity. Figure 4 shows coefficient estimates for the interaction terms for the treatments and non-compliance from the difference-in-differences models of war support.⁶

We fail to find that non-compliance moderates the effects of treatments on UN approval and regime type of the target; our analysis implies that non-compliance may not meaningfully change the average treatment effects (ATEs) of UN approval and target regime type. None of the interaction

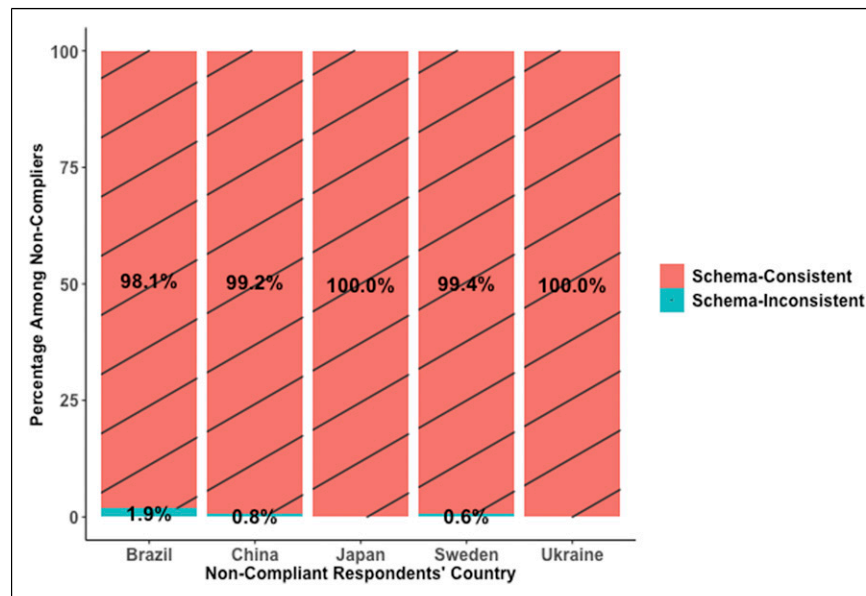


Figure 2. Schema inconsistency among non-compliers.

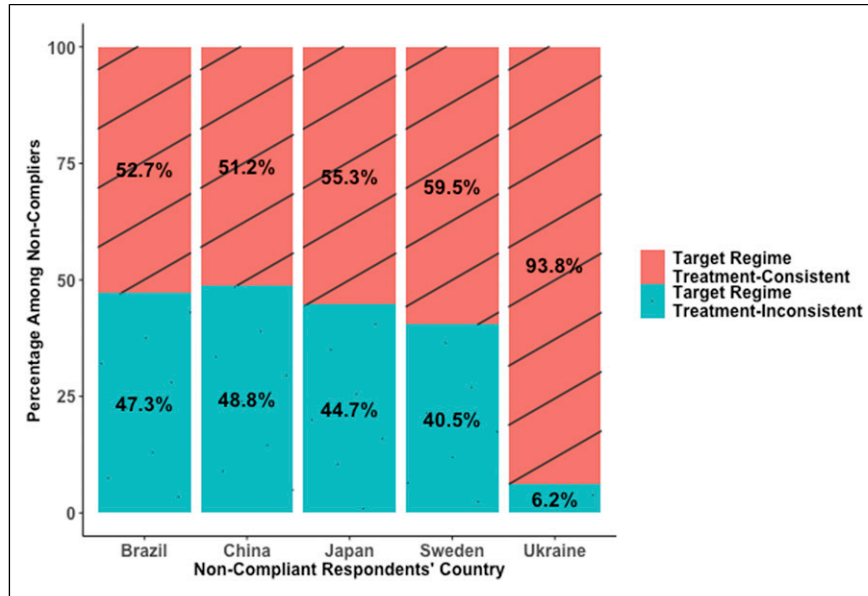


Figure 3. Target regime treatment inconsistency among non-compliers.

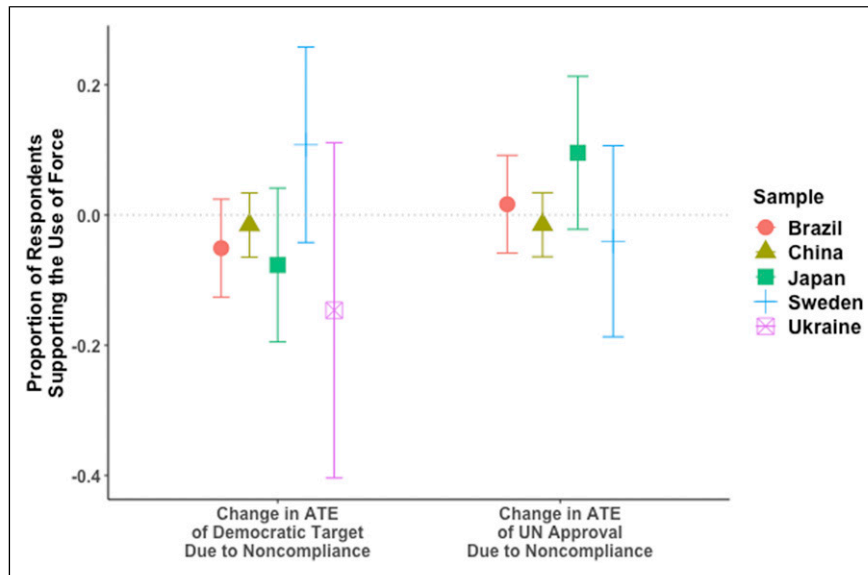


Figure 4. Changes in ATEs due to noncompliance.

terms for non-compliance and the treatments are significant at the 0.05 level. The null moderating effect of non-compliance contrasts with the strong main effects of UN approval—increasing war support by 13.6% points (Brazil), 9.8% points (China), and 19.2% points (Sweden)—and of a democratic target—decreasing it by 6.6% points (Brazil), 13.4% points (Sweden), and 51.4% points (Ukraine). These main effects are significant at the 0.05 level.

We also find that among non-compliers neither types of non-compliance-schema inconsistency nor treatment

inconsistency-significantly change the ATE of UN approval. Figure 5 shows coefficient estimates for the interaction terms for the treatments and schema inconsistency from the difference-in-differences models of war support among non-compliers that are available. None of them are significant at the 0.05 level. The main effect of UN approval on non-compliers' war support remains significant in all available samples—Brazil, China, Japan, and Sweden—at the 0.05 level.

However, we find that treatment inconsistency affects the effect size of the democratic target treatment among

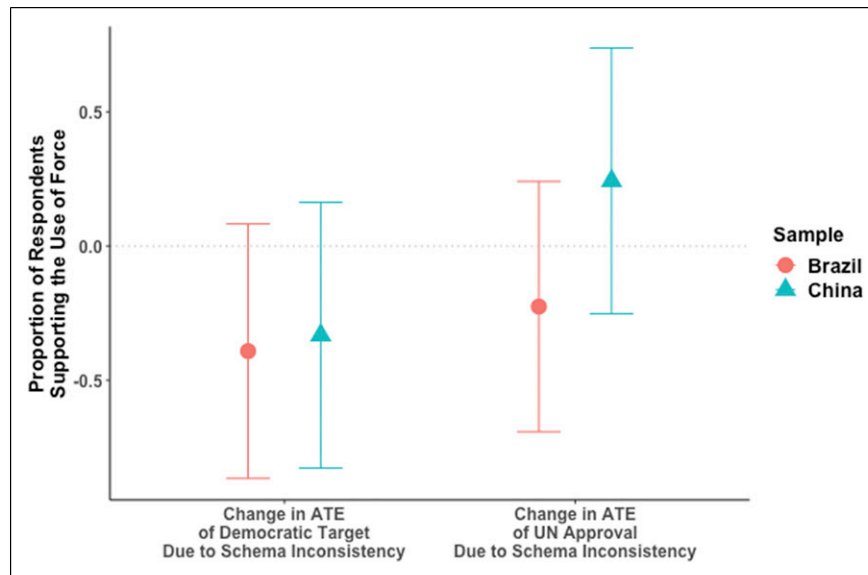


Figure 5. Changes in ATEs due to schema inconsistency among non-compliers. The coefficient estimates are shown with 95% confidence levels.

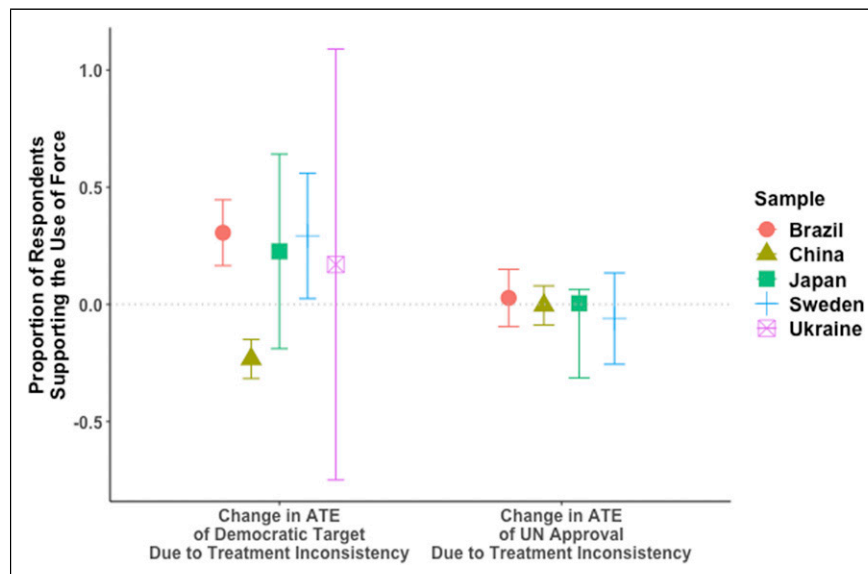


Figure 6. Changes in ATEs due to treatment inconsistency among non-compliers. The coefficient estimates are shown with 95% confidence levels.

non-compliers. Figure 6 shows coefficient estimates for the interaction terms for the treatments and treatment inconsistency from the difference-in-differences models of war support among non-compliers. Among the Brazilian, Chinese, and Swedish non-compliers, treatment inconsistency nullifies the positive (in the Chinese case) or negative (in the Brazilian and Swedish cases) effect of a democratic target on their support for the use of force. Such effects are significant at the 0.05 level.⁷

Conclusion

Many IR researchers using survey experiments have agonized over the degree of abstraction in them, particularly whether to use specific examples or generic cases. In our surveys, we asked respondents to think generally about potential conflict between hypothetical countries. However, some respondents did not comply with our instructions—they reported that they were thinking about specific cases when considering whether the use of force was justified.

When comparing those who reported complying with those who reported not complying, we see no overall difference in estimated treatment effects between the two groups. Respondents who reported thinking about specific cases were not significantly different than the respondents complying with our instructions, when examining the impact of regime type and UN approval on willingness to use force. There were a few suggestive specific cases, but the overall impact of non-compliance was insignificant. At the same time, we find that treatment-inconsistent non-compliance, such as thinking of specific non-democratic (or democratic) countries despite being assigned to read about a generic democratic (or non-democratic) target, can affect the average treatment effect of the treatment.

There are several limitations to this result's generalizability. Our analysis only examined respondents in five countries. While more than previous research, it is only a small fraction of cases that might be examined. Note that we do not randomize non-compliance. Non-compliers may be different than compliers in other ways that offset the impact of country specificity. In fact, among our respondents, avid readers of international news were likely to think of specific countries.⁸ Respondents may also be lying when reporting compliance. Future research should contrast more specific and generic cases to clarify the best way to measure treatment effects.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to many sources of inspiration and assistance. We thank the editor and anonymous reviewer for their support and detailed feedback. University of Gothenburg's Laboratory of Opinion Research, Atsushi Tago of Waseda University, and Vera Mironova, formerly of the University of Maryland, generously collected data on our behalf and shared them with us. We would also like to thank Bruno Hoepers, Jason Kuo, and Jack Zhang for their superb research assistance. The study was approved by the UCSD Human Research Protections Program, #121619S.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Minerva Initiative, Office of Secretary of Defense and the Army Research Office, Grant No. W911NF-12-1-0355, UCSD Committee on Research, UCSD Center for Emerging and Pacific Economies, UCSD Academic Senate Committee on Research Grants, and Virginia Tech Open Access

Subvention Fund. The views and conclusions of this paper are those of the authors only, and should not be interpreted as representing sponsor or federal government policies or endorsements.

ORCID iD

Clara H Suong  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0558-5111>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Additionally, there is evidence that country identity can directly affect a dependent variable, such as U.K. respondents' support for military action against a nuclear proliferator (Majnemer and Meibauer 2023).
2. For Ukraine, only the regime type treatment is randomized.
3. Full details are in Appendix 1.
4. See Appendixes 4.1 for a list of the top 10 countries mentioned by non-compliers.
5. See Appendixes 4.2 for the full list of schema-and treatment-consistent and inconsistent countries.
6. Full details are available in Appendixes 5.1, in particular Table 11.
7. See Appendixes 7.1, Table 16 in particular, for more information.
8. See Appendixes 7.3 for full details.

References

- Brutger R, Kertzer JD, Renshon J, et al. (2022a) *Abstraction in Experimental Design: Testing the Tradeoffs (Elements in Experimental Political Science)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brutger R, Kertzer JD, Renshon J, et al. (2022b) Abstraction and detail in experimental design. *American Journal of Political Science*. Online First.
- Dafoe A, Zhang B and Caughey D (2018) Information equivalence in survey experiments. *Political Analysis* 26(4): 399–416.
- Majnemer J and Meibauer G (2023) Names from nowhere? Fictitious country names in survey vignettes affect experimental results. *International Studies Quarterly* 67(1): sqac081. doi: [10.1093/isq/sqac081](https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac081), In press.
- Press DG, Sagan SD and Valentino BA (2013) Atomic aversion: experimental evidence on taboos, traditions, and the non-use of nuclear weapons. *American Political Science Review* 107(1): 188–206.
- Tomz MR and Weeks JLP (2013) Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace. *American Political Science Review* 107(4): 849–865.