



# **U.S. PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DRONE STRIKES**

**When Do Americans Prefer Unmanned over Manned Platforms?**

Jacquelyn Schneider and Julia Macdonald

## About the Author



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## Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, the United States has increasingly used drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), as tools of foreign policy. Since the Bureau of Investigative Journalism began tracking U.S. drone activity in 2002, the U.S. government has authorized approximately 574 drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan, and since January 2015, at least 404 additional drone strikes in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> This increased use of drones has received support from senior decision makers, and has also been met with high approval ratings from the U.S. public. A February 2013 Gallup poll, for example, reported that 65 percent of Americans agreed with the U.S. government's decision to launch drone strikes against terrorists overseas.<sup>2</sup> In the same month, 75 percent of respondents to a Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind poll approved of the U.S. military's use of drones to carry out attacks overseas on targets deemed a "threat to the United States."<sup>3</sup> And in May 2015, a Pew public opinion poll reported that 58 percent of U.S. adults approved of the use of drones to carry out missile strikes against extremists in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia: a 2 percent increase from the same Pew poll of February 2013.<sup>4</sup>

What is driving U.S. public support for drones? Despite the large number of opinion polls available – there is very little known about the reasoning behind U.S. public preferences for unmanned air strikes, how strong these preferences are, and in what situations the American public would prefer unmanned over manned air strikes. There are two reasons for this.

First, the formulation of questions in current surveys fails to compare the use of drones to other options available to decision makers. Second, they rarely, if ever, explore why the public holds this preference. For example, a Pew Research Center survey question of February 10, 2013, asked respondents: "Do you approve or disapprove of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircraft called drones to target extremists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia?" The CBS News Poll of February 6, 2013, asked: "Do you favor or oppose

the United States using unmanned aircraft or drones to carry out bombing attacks against suspected terrorists in foreign countries?" In neither case do these binary formulations help in understanding how the U.S. public perceives the use of these weapons, or how the U.S. public views UAVs in comparison to other weapons available. As a result, existing polling data may simply be capturing American opinions about air strikes delivered from any platform, rather than gauging preferences for unmanned air strikes specifically.

So how does taking the human out of the conflict affect what the American public views as acceptable uses of force? Under what circumstances does the American public favor the use of unmanned over manned aircraft? And is it true that the U.S. public is more likely to support the use of force generally when drone strikes are an option?

We designed a survey with seven experimental scenarios and a series of survey questions in order to understand the circumstances under which the American public favored unmanned air strikes, manned air strikes, either platform, or no strikes. This experimental design allowed respondents to make choices among different platforms, and also provided individuals with the option to explain their reasoning. Our results revealed a much more nuanced set of opinions on the use of force than is generally conveyed in existing surveys. Our findings also shed light on political and demographic divides that characterize this debate. These divides have significant implications for domestic support for the future use of U.S. military force overseas.

An online survey of a representative sample of 2,148 U.S. citizens age 18 or older was conducted through Survey Sampling International on November 5–6, 2015. Survey respondents were given a set of demographic questions, followed by a randomized selection of seven scenarios that each introduced different policy trade-offs, a series of current policy preference questions, and three knowledge questions about UAVs. When possible, answer order and question order was randomized to avoid introducing systematic bias.

## What Does the American Public Know About Manned and Unmanned Aircraft?

How much does the public actually know about manned or unmanned aircraft? We set out to understand public knowledge about UAVs by first asking participants to identify, from a list of aircraft names, which aircraft were both unmanned and armed. The results showed that the U.S. public is largely unable to differentiate between armed manned and unmanned aircraft. Over half of the respondents (54 percent) were unable to identify the MQ-1 Predator correctly while 66 percent were similarly unable to identify the MQ-9 Reaper as an armed, unmanned aircraft. Further, a sizable fraction (21 percent) of our respondents incorrectly identified the manned F-16 fighter jet as an unmanned aircraft, and 26 percent believed the Global Hawk, which is an unarmed, unmanned intelligence aircraft, was capable of launching air strikes.

We then asked a more challenging question about the weapons capabilities of the current U.S. inventory of unmanned aircraft. While 55 percent of the respondents correctly identified the Hellfire missile as an armament currently fielded on unmanned aircraft, nearly one-third (32 percent) thought that UAVs employed guns (they do not), and 31 percent believed the unmanned platforms (which carry at maximum 500 lb bombs) were capable of carrying 1000 lb bombs. These misperceptions about weapons capabilities have significant implications for how the U.S. public forms its preferences for unmanned aircraft.

Perhaps most significantly, these knowledge gaps have influenced misconceptions about the ways in which unmanned platforms are currently used and regulated on the battlefield. In general, the U.S. public believes that UAVs are not only more accurate and more likely to survive battlefield encounters than manned aircraft,<sup>9</sup> but also that they are more likely to launch air strikes and are less constrained by rules of engagement (ROEs). In fact, 60 percent

all respondents believed that UAVs are subject to different combat rules of engagement than manned aircraft (however, a majority did recognize correctly that use of UAVs and use of manned aircraft are both subject to the same laws governing armed conflict).

## Perceptions of Risk and Preference for Air Strikes

The most common assumption about public approval for drone strikes is that the public significantly prefers drones over their manned counterparts because the use of UAVs mitigates risk to U.S. military personnel. However, risk is a complicated concept: while normally “risk” is associated with risk to pilots and air crew, conflict also involves the risk of crisis escalation, risk to civilians, risk to friendly ground troops, and risk of failing to achieve national security objectives. We explored how the public reacts when explicitly presented with different risk scenarios, and specifically whether the public thought that UAVs mitigated all forms of risk, or some more than others.

In order to test these assumptions, we designed five experimental scenarios that treated for high and low risk in five types of risk scenarios: 1) risk to air crew, 2) risk to friendly ground troops, 3) risk to national security objective, 4) risk to civilians, and 5) risk of crisis escalation. Each survey respondent was presented with a randomly selected high or low risk scenario and then asked to choose a preference for a type of air platform to conduct the air strike: unmanned, manned, both, or neither. (See Table 1.)

**The results showed that the U.S. public is largely unable to differentiate accurately between manned and unmanned armed aircraft.**

believed UAVs are both more precise and more likely to launch air strikes than manned (not true); 64 percent believed UAVs can fly effectively in the same weather as manned aircraft (they cannot); and 67 percent believed that UAVs are more capable of survival in high threat environments (also not true). Finally, half (50 percent) of

TABLE 1. **Risk Scenarios****EXPERIMENTAL SCENARIO 1: RISK TO AIR CREW**

<b>Low Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. The adversary does not have an anti-aircraft defense system and cannot threaten U.S. pilots and air crew.	<b>High Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. The adversary has a robust anti-aircraft defense system that presents a significant threat to U.S. pilots and air crew, including advanced surface to air missiles and top of the line fighter aircraft.
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**EXPERIMENTAL SCENARIO 2: RISK TO FRIENDLY GROUND TROOPS**

<b>Low Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation in which U.S. ground troops are not expected to take fire from the adversary.	<b>High Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation in which U.S. ground troops expect to take heavy fire from the adversary.
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**EXPERIMENTAL SCENARIO 3: RISK TO NATIONAL SECURITY OBJECTIVES**

<b>Low Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. The operation's objective is of low value to U.S. national security.	<b>High Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. The operation's objective is of high value to U.S. national security.
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**EXPERIMENTAL SCENARIO 4: RISK TO CIVILIANS**

<b>Low Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. There are highly credible reports that there are no civilians in the vicinity of the strike.	<b>High Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. There are highly credible reports of civilians in the vicinity of the strike.
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**EXPERIMENTAL SCENARIO 4: RISK OF CRISIS ESCALATION**

<b>Low Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. There is a low risk of adversary retaliation and subsequent conflict.	<b>High Risk Scenario:</b> The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. There is a high risk of adversary retaliation and subsequent conflict.
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*In each scenario, respondents were told that “both manned and unmanned aircraft are available and able to conduct the strikes” and asked “which type of aircraft would you favor in this scenario?”*

In all but two of the ten experimental scenarios, the public favored unmanned aircraft over manned aircraft, confirming existing perceptions that the American public generally prefers unmanned air strikes over manned strikes. The first exception was in a scenario involving high risk to civilians: those respondents preferred manned over unmanned strikes, indicating either a belief that UAVs are less accurate or a belief that they are more likely to take risky air strikes when civilians are present. The second exception was in response to a scenario with low risk to air crew: in that case, there was no clear preference between the two platforms. These findings suggest that the American public is generally more likely to support unmanned than manned, but that this preference will be lower in situations where there are civilians present or where there is little threat to air crew.

Of the five risk scenarios, the one with the greatest effect on preferences for manned or unmanned aircraft was that involving risk to air crew. This experimental scenario generated an effect twice that of any other and was statistically significant at the .05 level. Of those given a scenario with a high risk to air crew, 58 percent

respondents to shift between supporting both platforms or towards supporting neither. When the risk to objectives was high, respondents supported either platform to conduct air strikes; when the risk was low, respondents did not support air strikes by either platform. This seems to suggest that when a strike is of high value to national security, the American public has no preference between manned and unmanned aircraft, and when an objective is of low value, they do not support strikes of either kind. This counters a commonly heard assumption that the U.S. public is more likely to support drone strikes when the targets are of low value, and that therefore the public is supportive of conflicts that they would otherwise be reluctant to engage in. Instead, our survey suggests that the American public would prefer no air strikes if the target is of low value, regardless of whether the strikes would be conducted by manned or by unmanned aircraft.

The other experiment that demonstrated a significant effect involved risk to civilians. This was the only experiment that resulted in preference for manned over unmanned aircraft. When presented with a scenario involving high risk to civilians, 25 percent of respondents favored manned aircraft, while only 16 percent favored

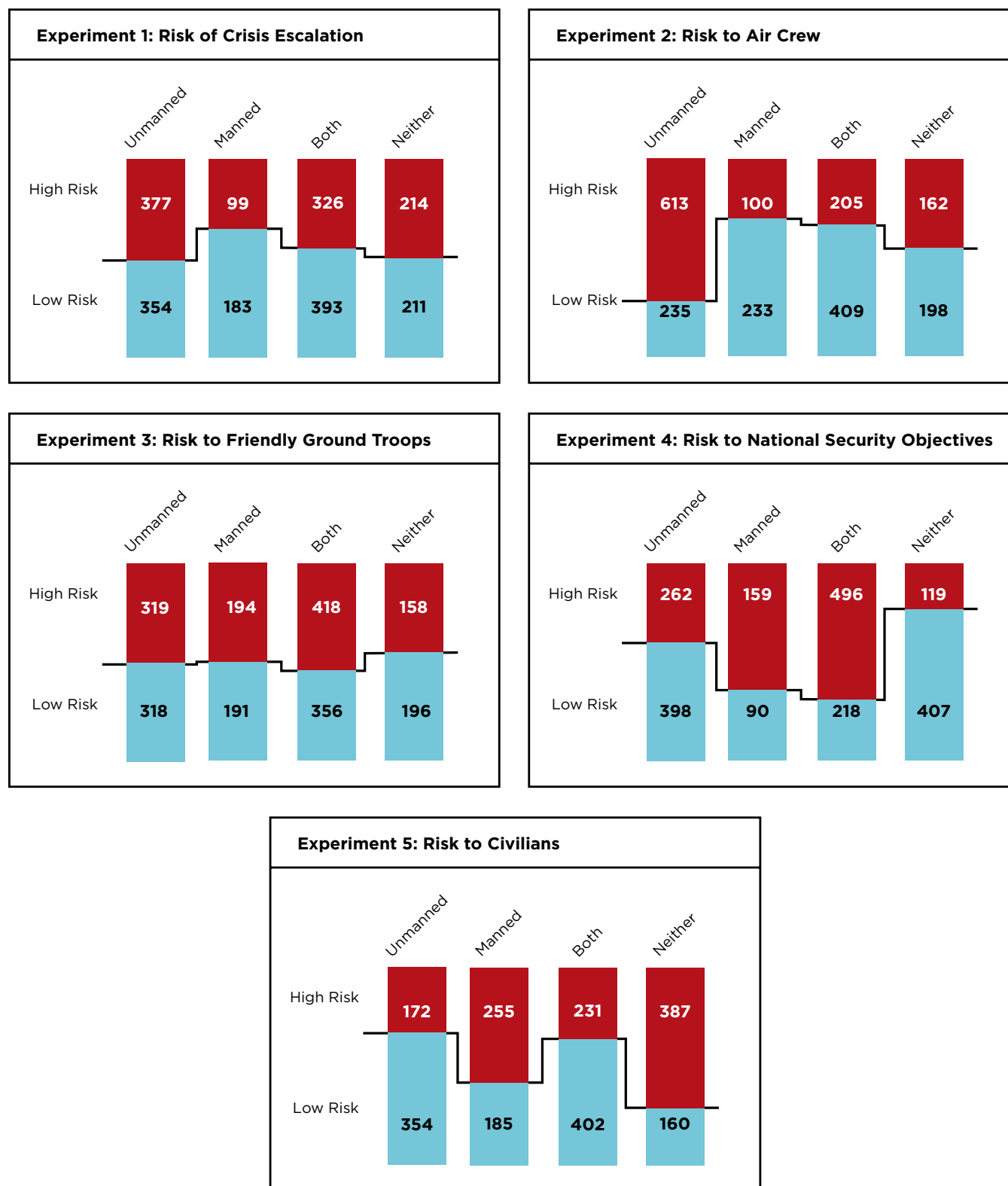
## **Findings suggest that the American public is generally more likely to support unmanned uses of force than manned, but that this preference will be lower in situations where there are civilians present or where there is little threat to air crew.**

chose unmanned aircraft, while only 23 percent chose unmanned aircraft in the scenario specifying low risk to air crew. Also, while the preference for no air strike didn't change significantly between the two risk treatments, individuals were twice as likely to favor manned or either platform in the low risk scenario than the high risk scenario.

The manipulation of risk in two other scenarios also had a statistically significant effect on preferences for aircraft. In experiment 4, we introduced a scenario in which survey respondents were presented with scenarios involving either high risk or low risk to national security objectives. Unlike the air crew risk experiment, which demonstrated large shifts between manned and unmanned preferences depending on risk levels, a high or low risk to national security objectives caused

unmanned. Respondents presented with a scenario of high risk to civilians were twice as likely to say that they did not support strikes from either platform, compared to a scenario in which the risk to civilians was specified as low.

Finally, there was no significant effect from the risk manipulation in two experiments: risk of crisis escalation and risk to friendly ground troops. Both scenarios revealed a strong preference for unmanned aircraft over manned aircraft whether the scenario involved high risk or low risk. We also saw no significant effect of high vs. low risk on support for the use of "either" platform over "neither" in those experiments. These results suggest that the risk of crisis escalation and the risks to ground troops are not major considerations in shaping American public preferences for unmanned vs. manned air strikes.

FIGURE 1. **Preference for Manned Versus Unmanned Platforms Based on Risk Scenario**<sup>10</sup>



## Impact of Legal Issues on Preferences for Unmanned Aircraft

Another major variable in the discussion about the American public's preference for unmanned aircraft is the role that legal consensus plays in generating support. Significant debate exists about the legality of U.S. drone strikes under both international and domestic law. Implicit in this debate is the assumption that the U.S. public is more likely to support drone strikes when, first and foremost, there is domestic legal precedent and, secondarily, when international legal precedent supports unmanned air strikes. In order to test these assumptions, we presented two scenarios to survey respondents. (See Table 2.) The first examined the effect of domestic legal support: respondents were randomly presented with either a scenario in which the legislative branches agreed about the legality of strikes or another scenario specifying that opinion on the legality of strikes is divided. The second presented a similar set of treatments, focused on support in international law for air strikes.

Both the domestic and international experiments revealed a significant effect between scenarios with full legal support and those with divided opinion. (See Figure 2.) However, that effect did not generate significantly greater support for unmanned air strikes. Instead, in both domestic and international scenarios, respondents were more likely to choose “either” platform to conduct air strikes when they were presented scenarios with legal

support and were more likely to favor “none” (that is, no air strikes) when legal support was divided or absent. In contrast, there was almost no difference in support for unmanned vs. manned platforms when respondents were presented with the different legal scenarios. This finding indicates that the public is more concerned about the legality of air strikes in general than with what type of aircraft conducts the air strike. This is significant for those who worry that unmanned aircraft are more likely to be used for air strikes that would be otherwise deemed illegal. While the public prefers unmanned in all of these scenarios, the preference for unmanned air strikes over manned strikes does not increase when there is no consensus on legal support.

Perhaps most interestingly, we saw almost no difference between domestic and international scenarios in the respondents' answers. This suggests that the American public is indifferent between domestic and international legal norms when determining their preferences for air strikes. (There is a more nuanced result when Democrats are compared with Republicans, as discussed below.) Therefore, both divided domestic and divided international legal opinion will make the U.S. public less supportive of air strikes conducted.

TABLE 2. **Legality Scenarios**

**DOMESTIC LEGAL SUPPORT EXPERIMENT**

**Support Consensus:** The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. Congress and the President agree about the legality of the strike.

**Divided Support:** The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. Congress and the President disagree about the legality of the strike.

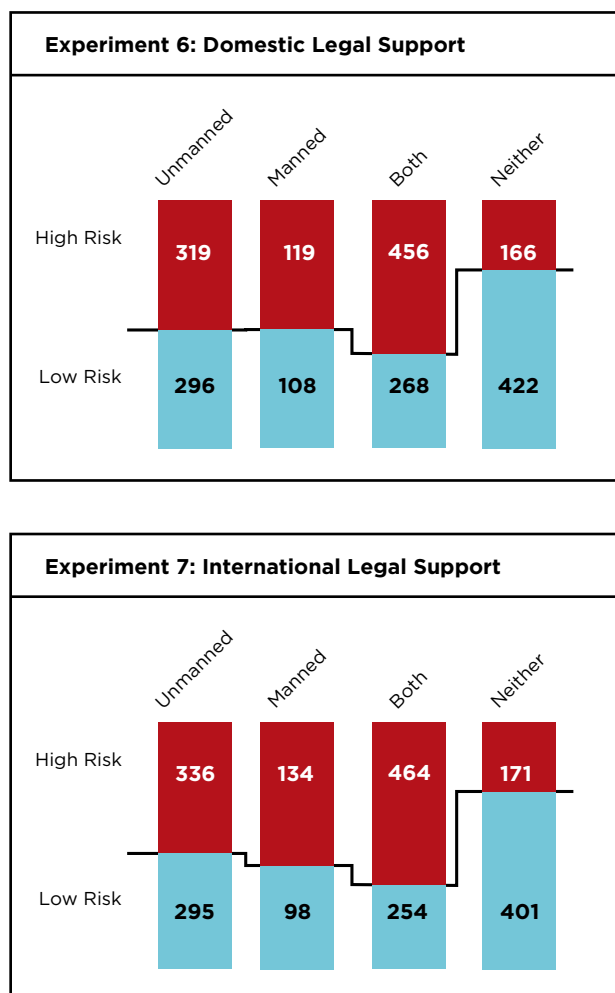
**INTERNATIONAL LEGAL SUPPORT EXPERIMENT**

**Support Consensus:** The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. The international community is generally in agreement about the legality of the strike.

**Divided Support:** The U.S. government is planning to launch air strikes in support of an operation. The international community is generally in disagreement about the legality of the strike.

*In each scenario, respondents were told that “both manned and unmanned aircraft are available and able to conduct the strikes” and asked “which type of aircraft would you favor in this scenario?”*



FIGURE 2. **Preference for Manned Versus Unmanned Platforms Based on Legality**

The public is more concerned about the legality of air strikes in general than with what type of aircraft conducts the air strike.

## Impact of Current Policy Issues on Preferences for Unmanned Aircraft

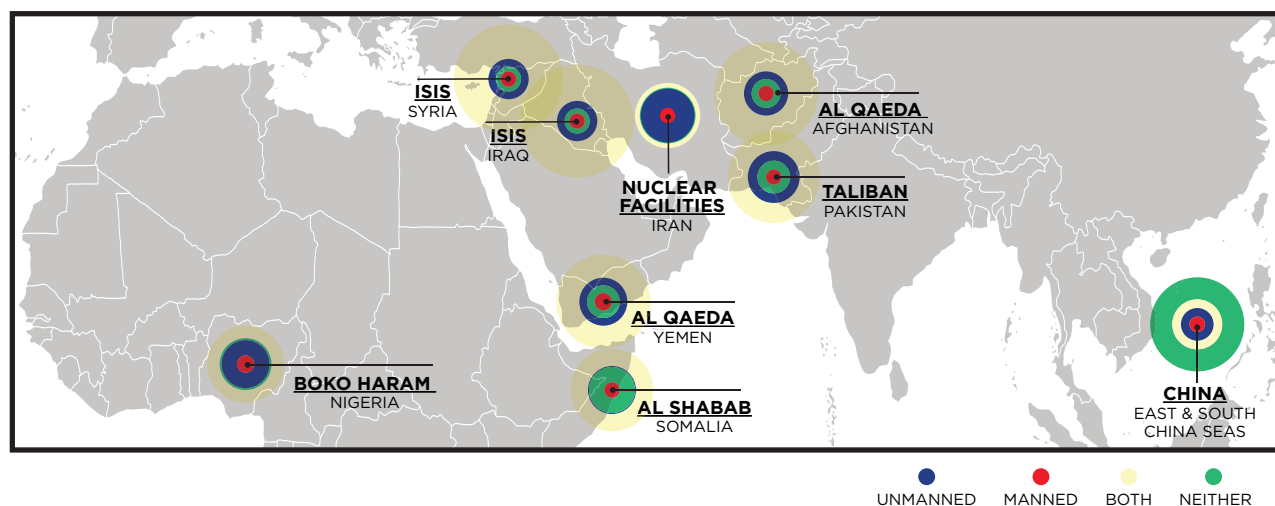
The previous scenarios asked respondents to choose between manned and unmanned aircraft in a series of hypothetical scenarios. This helped us understand the rationales behind when and why Americans preferred unmanned air strikes. However, it is also useful to understand in what real world scenarios and against what threats the U.S. public is more likely to prefer unmanned aircraft vs. manned aircraft, or to have no preference between them. In order to accomplish this, we asked a series of questions about existing adversaries to gauge how the preferences uncovered in previous experiments result in support for specific air strike targets. (See Figure 3.)

Our findings validated the general preference for unmanned over manned strikes. In all ten scenarios, respondents were more likely to choose unmanned rather than manned, by an average difference of 15 percentage points. However, the majority of responses did not differentiate between manned or unmanned aircraft and instead indicated either that they supported neither platform or that they would choose either platform to conduct air strikes. The highest percentage of support for air strikes with either platform was in scenarios where the target was Islamic State Group (in Iraq or in Syria) or al Qaeda in Afghanistan, while the lowest support for air strikes of any kind was against China in the East or South China Sea or against nuclear facilities

in Iran. This pattern of support for air strikes – and specifically for unmanned air strikes – is consistent with traditional concerns about laws of armed conflict and the power politics between states. The American public is most likely to support air strikes against an adversary where there is a legal foundation, such as in a declared conflict or in support of allies, or against adversaries that, while potential security threats, are not serious near-peer adversaries.

The scenario involving Iranian nuclear facilities showed the greatest preference for unmanned aircraft, while the scenario involving China revealed the greatest preference of all the scenarios for no air strike. In general, these findings suggest that U.S. public support tends not to differentiate between manned or unmanned air strikes and that a preference for use of unmanned over manned aircraft may increase approval for air strikes by only 10–15 percent.

FIGURE 3. Preference for Manned vs. Unmanned Platforms Based on Hypothetical Target



## Demographic Variations

We delved further into the results to try to understand whether specific segments of the population have identifiably consistent opinions about manned versus unmanned air strikes. In our analysis, we separated respondents by income, education, age, gender, political affiliation, and military experience.<sup>11</sup> We found no significant or consistent correlations of income or education with preference for manned vs. unmanned aircraft. However, gender, political affiliation, military experience, and age did correlate with such preferences. While no demographic group consistently supported manned over unmanned air strikes, our data indicates that the demographic cohort most likely to support manned air strikes were Republican men with military experience, while the cohort least supportive of manned air strikes were Democratic women with no military experience.

### Gender

In general, women were less likely to support air strikes than men: women were 59 percent more likely than men to support “neither” platform to conduct air strikes (27 percent to 17 percent) and less likely to support “both” platforms (32 percent to 43 percent). (See Figure 4.) However, women and men had similar patterns of preference between unmanned and manned aircraft.

This effect was especially pronounced in the scenario involving risk to civilians (see Figure 5): almost twice as many women than men preferred no air strikes in the scenario specifying a high risk to civilians, and women were only about half as likely as men to support “both” platforms to conduct air strikes.

Men and women had very similar preferences when they were presented with scenarios involving the use of force against a state. (See Table 6.) In the China scenario, both men and women were reluctant to support airstrikes with similar distributions of support for unmanned vs. manned aircraft. Similarly, the Iran scenario also showed consistent preference for unmanned over manned air strikes.

TABLE 3. **Demographic Groups with the Greatest and Smallest Average Support for Manned vs. Unmanned by Platforms**

**Demographic with Greatest Average Support for Platforms and Air Strikes**

UNMANNED	MANNED	BOTH	NEITHER
DEMOCRATS	VETERANS	REPUBLICANS/ VETERANS	MILLENNIALS

**Demographic with Lowest Average Support for Platforms and Air Strikes**

UNMANNED	MANNED	BOTH	NEITHER
VETERANS	BOOMERS	MILLENNIALS	VETERANS

FIGURE 4. **Average Preference for Platforms by Gender**

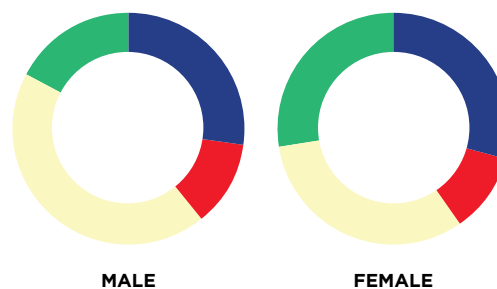


FIGURE 5. **Preference for Platforms by Gender: Scenario Involving Risk to Civilians**

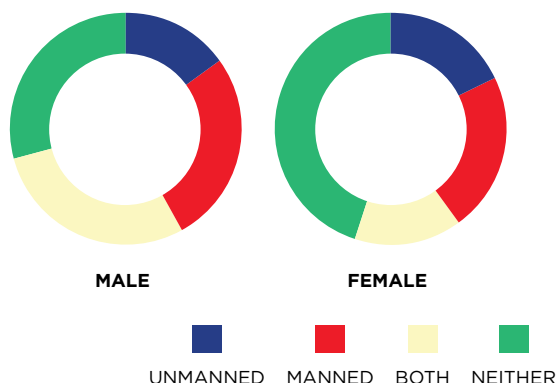
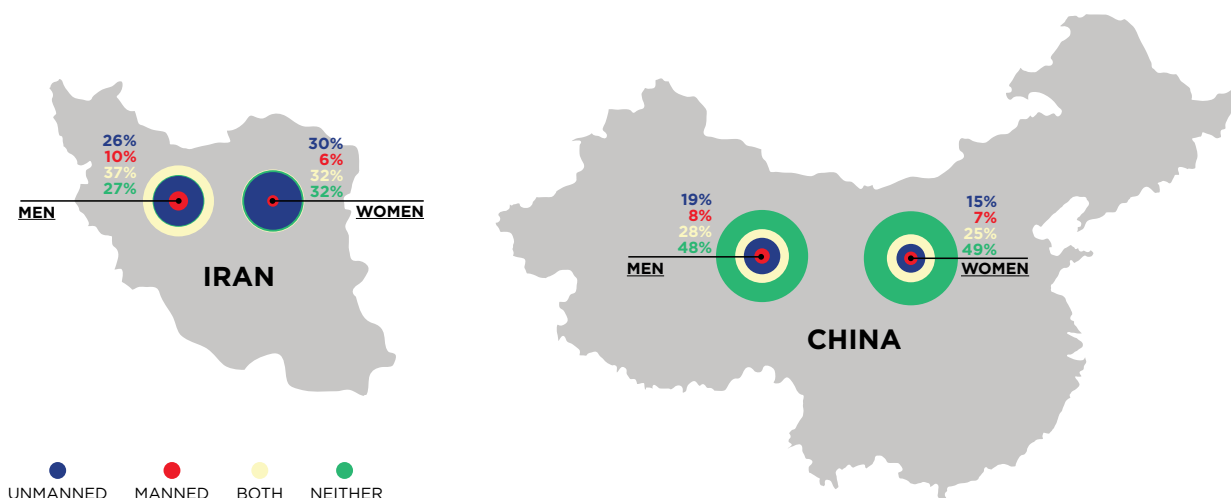


FIGURE 6. Preference for Platforms by Gender: China and Iran



### Political Affiliation

Republicans were more likely to support air strikes than Democrats. (See Figure 4.) On average, they were 41 percent more likely than Democrats to support air strikes from either platform, and 61.5 percent less likely to support no air strikes. However, Republicans and Democrats had very similar preferences for manned vs. unmanned aircraft, with Democrats slightly more supportive of unmanned and Republicans slightly more supportive of manned. Independents were the least likely to support manned air strikes, and struck a middle ground between Republicans and Democrats in their support for either platform to conduct air strikes.

There are some important nuances to these preferences. First, introducing high risk to civilians created the largest divide between Republicans and Democrats. 42 percent of Democrats didn't support air strikes when there was a high risk to civilians. In comparison, only 29 percent of Republicans didn't support air strikes and 26 percent of Republican respondents supported air strikes from both platforms. (See Figure 8.)

A second significant distinction between Democrats and Republicans was seen in scenarios that varied legal support for air strikes. (See Table 4.) When we introduced scenarios with divided domestic legislative support, Republican support for unmanned air strikes increased by seven percentage points while Democrat support for unmanned air strikes decreased by ten percentage points. And we saw similar results in our international scenario with increases in support for unmanned by Republicans in situations with divided legal opinion and a significantly greater increase in

FIGURE 7. Average Preference for Platform by Political Affiliation

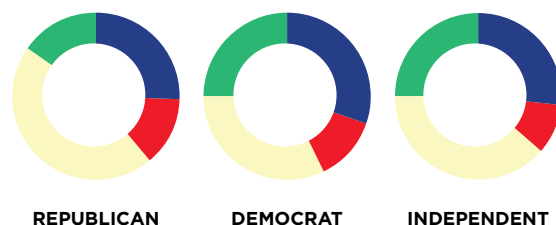
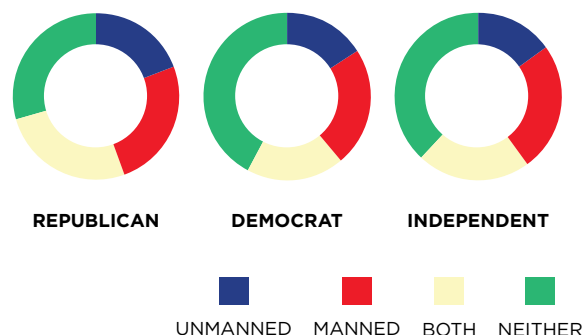


FIGURE 8. Preference for Platform by Political Affiliation: Risk to Civilians



Note: Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding error.

opposition to air strikes from Democrats. Our results suggest that while both parties are less likely to support air strikes when domestic or international legal opinion on air strikes is divided, Republicans are more likely overall to support air strikes and more likely to turn to unmanned air strikes when there is divided domestic legal support.

Results from real world policy questions revealed divergences that may have significant implications for future foreign policy. The vast majority of the scenario questions reflected similar results: Democrats, Republicans, and Independents all preferred unmanned over manned aircraft (at about a 2:1 ratio), with Democrats showing the greatest preference for unmanned over manned. (See Figure 9.) Democrats and

Independents were more likely to not support air strikes, regardless of platform, whereas Republicans were more likely to support air strikes from either platform. However, two scenarios demonstrated more pronounced differences between the political affiliations: those scenarios that hypothesized air strikes against China or Iran. These two scenarios represented the largest preference delta between Democrats/Independents (who shared very similar preferences) and Republicans, with Republicans almost 50 percent more likely to support air strikes from either platform and Democrats/Independents approximately 25 percent more likely to not support any air strikes. This data thus suggests that Republican voters are more likely than others to support air strikes from either manned or unmanned aircraft against emerging threats from China or Iran.

TABLE 4. **Preference for Platform by Political Party: Legal Support**

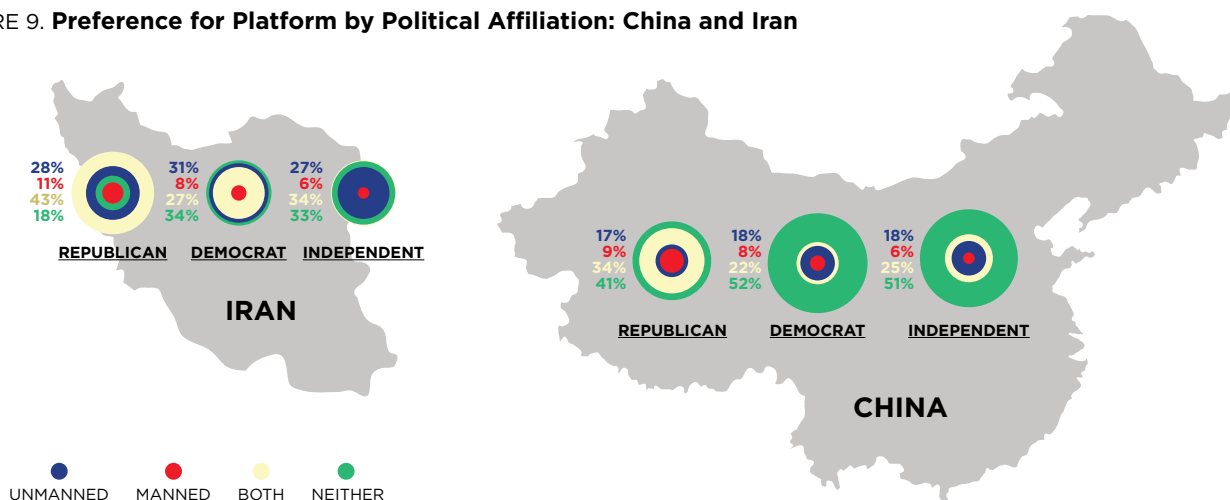
**EXPERIMENT 6: CONSENSUS EXISTS ON DOMESTIC LEGAL SUPPORT**

	Unmanned			Manned			Both			Neither		
	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind
Legal Support	24%	35%	30%	12%	11%	11%	<b>53%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>41%</b>	11%	17%	18%
Divided	31%	25%	26%	11%	11%	8%	28%	21%	25%	<b>30%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>41%</b>

**EXPERIMENT 7: CONSENSUS EXISTS ON INTERNATIONAL LEGAL SUPPORT**

	Unmanned			Manned			Both			Neither		
	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind
Legal Support	26%	36%	29%	14%	13%	9%	<b>52%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>43%</b>	8%	17%	20%
Divided	32%	25%	29%	12%	11%	6%	31%	21%	22%	<b>26%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>43%</b>

FIGURE 9. **Preference for Platform by Political Affiliation: China and Iran**



## Military Experience

Military experience plays a significant role in determining preferences for air strikes with veterans showing a strong preference for air strikes. (See Figure 10.) Of all the demographic cohorts we examined, respondents with military experience were the most likely to support manned strikes. Also, though on average they supported unmanned more than manned, military veterans demonstrated the smallest preference for unmanned of all the demographics we examined.

Veterans preferred manned over unmanned platforms in three scenarios: high risk to ground troops (26 percent, compared to non-veterans at 20 percent, as seen in Figure 11), high value mission (20 percent veterans to 18 percent non-veterans, as seen in Figure 12), and high risk to civilians (32 percent veterans, compared to 14 percent non-veterans, as seen in Figure 13). In fact, in the scenario of high risk to civilians, those with military experience favored manned aircraft (32 percent) even over a “both” selection (30 percent) (see Figure 13). The two scenarios where veterans showed the highest preference for manned aircraft both involved risk to humans on the battlefield (civilians, or friendly troops), indicating that veterans trust unmanned systems less than manned systems when lives are at placed at risk.

This data demonstrates a strong divergence between veterans and those with no military experience, a result that is consistent with the findings from the policy scenarios described above. As opposed to veterans, non-veterans were more likely to prefer unmanned in all of the scenarios, with an almost 2:1 preference for unmanned in current conflicts. These findings also comport with our results from the risk scenarios in which veterans are less likely to support unmanned platforms when ground troop lives are held at risk. Additionally, veterans were more likely than non-veteran respondents to support strikes from either platform, especially for these conflicts in which the United States is currently engaged. However, in the China scenario, veterans aligned much more with non-veterans, and demonstrated significantly less support for air strikes of any kind.

FIGURE 10. Average Preference for Platform by Military Experience

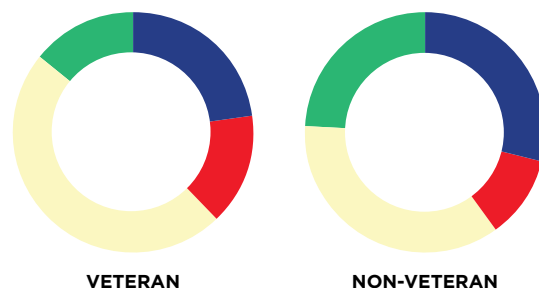


FIGURE 11. Preference for Platform by Military Experience: High Risk to Ground Troops

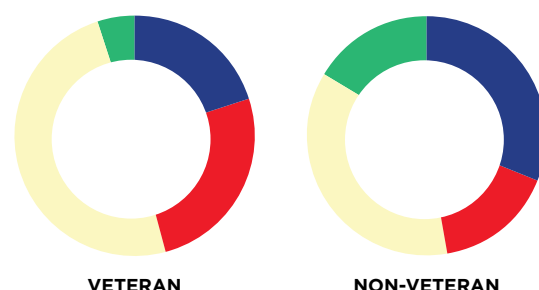


FIGURE 12. Preference for Platform by Military Experience: High Value Missions

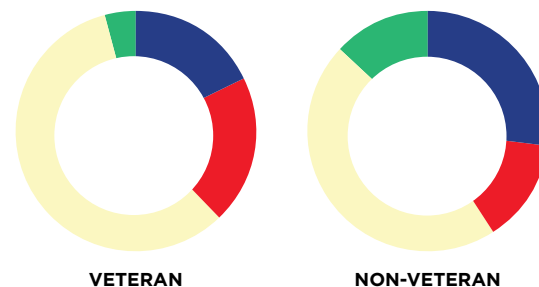
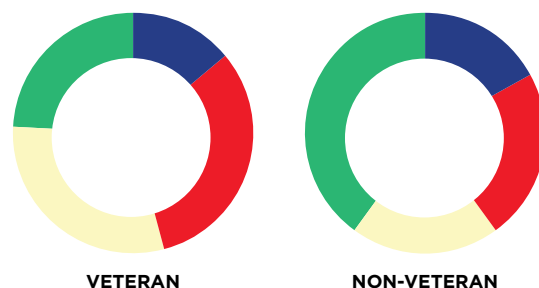


FIGURE 13. Preference for Platform by Military Experience: High Risk to Civilians



Note: Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding error.

TABLE 5. Preference for Platforms by Military Experience, Based on Target

	Unmanned		Manned		Both		Neither	
	Vet	Not vet	Vet	Not vet	Vet	Not vet	Vet	Not vet
al Qaeda in Yemen	23%	26%	10%	8%	58%	47%	9%	19%
ISIS in Syria	13%	24%	11%	8%	69%	54%	8%	15%
ISIS in Iraq	14%	22%	10%	8%	70%	56%	7%	14%
Taliban in Pakistan	21%	28%	8%	8%	59%	46%	8%	11%
al Qaeda in Afghanistan	14%	25%	11%	8%	66%	51%	9%	16%
al Qaeda in Pakistan	23%	26%	12%	8%	55%	47%	10%	18%
Boko Haram in Nigeria	21%	25%	12%	8%	49%	38%	17%	29%
al Shabab in Somalia	22%	25%	13%	8%	51%	41%	14%	26%
China	15%	18%	10%	7%	30%	25%	45%	49%
Iran	26%	29%	13%	7%	40%	33%	21%	31%



## Age

We examined the role that age played in preferences for air strikes, looking at four generations: millennials (ages 18-32), Generation X (33-51), baby boomers (52-70), and the World War II Generation (71+). We found that preferences for air strikes were remarkably consistent by age cohort, with millennials the most likely to not support any strikes and the World War II Generation the most likely to support air strikes from either platform. (See Figure 15.) Support for unmanned aircraft was very similar across all age groups, but there was about a 50 percent difference in support for manned aircraft strikes by millennials (15 percent) compared to the World War II Generation (10 percent).

Despite the fact that the World War II Generation shows the most support for air strikes from any platform, that generation was also most sensitive to the risk to air crew. (See Figure 11.) When scenarios involved high risk to air crew, the World War II Generation had the largest preference for unmanned aircraft compared to any other demographic: 72 percent supported unmanned air strikes rather than manned, both, or neither. Millennials, although the most likely (at 16 percent) to prefer no air strikes in this scenario of high risk to air crew, were also the least likely of the generations (at 46 percent) to prefer unmanned aircraft when there was high risk to air crew.

The World War II Generation also showed significantly greater support for unmanned rather than manned aircraft when there was divided international legal support for air strikes, with more of the World War II Generation favoring unmanned platforms than did their millennial counterparts (35 percent to 22 percent). (See Figure 16.) Further, the World War II Generation was the least likely to have their support for air strikes affected by divided international support: 31 percent still supported strikes from either platform in with divided international support. This is in comparison to millennials: when international support was divided, only 18 percent supported air strikes by either platform, while 46 percent preferred no air strikes.

FIGURE 15. Average Preference for Platform by Age

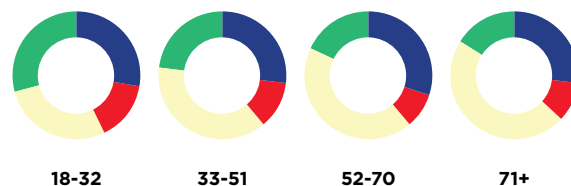


FIGURE 16. Preference for Platforms by Age: High Risk to Air Crew

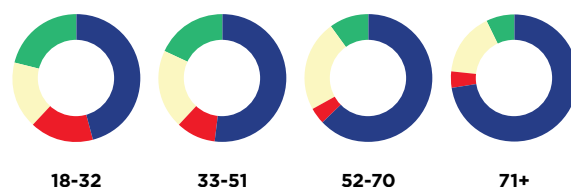
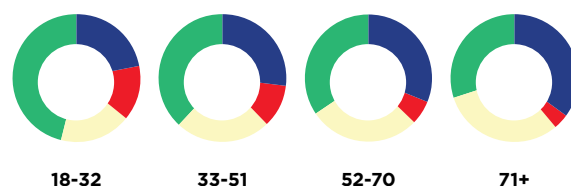


FIGURE 17. Preference for Platform by Age: Divided International Support



UNMANNED MANNED BOTH NEITHER

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding error.

## Conclusion

These results provide a much more nuanced understanding of U.S. public preferences for drone strikes. First, and perhaps most strikingly, despite the high degree of concern among critics that drones make the public more likely to support uses of force overseas, our survey results suggest that the American public is in fact far more platform-agnostic when it comes to preferences for air strikes than is currently understood. In many of the scenarios, survey respondents expressed a preference for or against air strikes, irrespective whether the platform was manned or unmanned. This indicates that in many cases the U.S. public does not perceive drones as fundamentally different tools of military force, and casts doubt upon concerns that unmanned airstrikes increase U.S. public support for conflict overseas.

The findings also reveal that the U.S. public is particularly sensitive to air crew risk, the scenario that generated the strongest preference for unmanned aircraft. When air crew are in danger, the U.S. public's preference for unmanned aircraft increases markedly – a potentially important finding given the U.S. government's arguably increased reliance on air campaigns over large and costly ground invasions. The availability of drones, however, combined with the U.S. public's strong aversion to placing pilots in harm's way, may result in decreased public support for manned air strikes in the future. Thus, while the public is not averse to air strikes per se and may support the use of force in some scenarios, U.S. leaders sensitive to public opinion may face constraints on what type of platform they can employ. This may have implications for future U.S. military effectiveness.

Despite the heated policy debates that have surrounded the legal status of drones and their use overseas, our survey findings suggest that the U.S. public does not differentiate between the legality of manned and of unmanned air strikes. Contrary to concerns that the U.S. public will support unmanned air strikes irrespective of their legal status, our results show that the U.S. public is more likely to support air strikes, whether manned or unmanned, when there is domestic and international legal authorization, and is less likely to favor air strikes – whether manned or unmanned – in the absence of legal support. The U.S. public does not perceive drones as fundamentally different tools of force in the context of domestic or international law.

A number of the survey's findings – and especially the preference in a number of scenarios for unmanned air strikes – can be explained by the lack of accurate public knowledge about the relative capabilities of

manned vs. unmanned aircraft. A majority of respondents consistently over-estimated the capabilities of drones, and incorrectly believed them comparable to (or exceeding) the capabilities of manned platforms. These results highlight the importance of perceptions in driving preferences for uses of force among the U.S. public, and the role of the media and public discourse in shaping such beliefs. Frequent media references to the risk-mitigating qualities of drones, and to their ability to deliver “precision strikes,” may help explain the public's unfounded perceptions of drones as uniquely accurate and survivable platforms.

Finally, our data provides an in-depth look at how preferences for manned vs. unmanned air strikes vary among demographics. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to support unmanned air strikes; veterans and Republicans are most likely to prefer manned strikes. Additionally, Democrats, women, and non-veterans were much more likely to prefer no air strikes at all, while Republicans, men, and veterans were more likely to support air strikes by either manned or unmanned platforms. What is perhaps most surprising is how age and generation affect preferences. The Greatest Generation was substantially more likely to support air strikes than millennials, but they were also a much greater supporter of unmanned air strikes than millennials in scenarios with high risk to civilians and to ground troops.

So what do these results mean for America's uses of force? First, political affiliations will continue to have a large role in designing use of force strategies, but it will be related more closely to decisions to launch air strikes than to whether these strikes are manned or unmanned. Secondly, our findings show that the support for unmanned strikes is stronger than manned, providing some evidence that the U.S. public may increasingly call for foreign policy options that mitigate or remove the risk to U.S. personnel. That said, the U.S. public is still sensitive to domestic and international legal support for air strikes and so may not increase its support for illegal air strikes simply because the platform is unmanned. Finally, these preferences are exacerbated by age and we may find that as millennials become a larger and more active advocacy group in U.S. politics, we will see less and less support for strikes of any kind.

## Endnotes

1. We use here lower numbers in the stated ranges in Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Get the Data: Drone Wars." Accessed August 30, 2016, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>.
2. Alyssa Brown and Frank Newport, "In U.S., 65% Support Drone Attacks on Terrorists Abroad," March 25, 2013. Accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161474/support-drone-attacks-terrorists-abroad.aspx>
3. Farleigh Dickinson University PublicMind Poll, "Some Say It's Illegal to Target Americans Abroad as Some Question CIA Drone Attacks," February 7, 2013. Accessed March 3, 2016, <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2013/drone/>. Between 2011–2013, on average 65 percent of the U.S. public approved of the use of UAV program to target suspected terrorists overseas. Micah Zenko, "U.S. Public Opinion on Drone Strikes," Council on Foreign Relations, March 18, 2013. Accessed March 3, 2016, <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2013/03/18/u-s-public-opinion-on-drone-strikes/>.
4. Pew Research Center, "Public Continues to Back U.S. Drone Attacks," May 28, 2015. Accessed March 3, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2015/05/28/public-continues-to-back-u-s-drone-attacks/>
5. See e.g. Bob Dreyfuss, "Amnesty, HRW Document Civilian Deaths in Drone Attacks," *The Nation*, October 23, 2013; Marina Fang, "Nearly 90 Percent of People Killed in Recent Drone Strikes Were Not the Target," *Huffington Post*, October 15, 2015.
6. See e.g. Micah Zenko and Sarah Kreps, "How Drones Make War Too Easy," *Defense One*, October 26, 2015.
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8. Ibid. See also Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens, Matt Flannes, "Drone Warfare: Blowback from the New American Way of War," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 (2011); Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Why Drones Fail: When Tactics Drive Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (July/August 2013): 44-54; Hassan Abbas, "How Drones Create More Terrorists," *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2013.
9. This is generally not true, see Jacquelyn Schneider and Julia Macdonald, "The Ground Truth About Drones: Manned vs Unmanned Effectiveness on the Battlefield," June 16, 2014; <http://ciceromagazine.com/features/the-ground-truth-about-drones-manned-vs-unmanned-effectiveness-on-the-battlefield/>.
10. The Cohen's d and effect size r coefficients for the statistical significance for all scenarios listed in the report are available from the authors.
11. We used the U.S. census break-out for income and race. To understand age, we broke out our respondents into four generations: millennials (ages 18–32), Generation X (33–51), baby boomers (52–70), and the World War II Generation (71+).

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