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The Political and Strategic Phenomena of Military Spending: A Comparative Analysis of Public Opinion and Milex in the United States and Germany

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Abstract

When is public opinion dictated and when does it dictate? This study examines the political-cultural determinants and consequences of defense spending policy focusing on the relationship between public opinion and military expenditures in the United States and Germany during the post-Cold War time-period. Specifically, it considers how defense policy directs public opinion through the manipulation of media effects, especially the glamorization of force. While these patterns are generally reciprocal, this study examines whether the latter will have a stronger unidirectional relationship in the United States rather than in Germany, with defense policy swaying public opinion via media manipulation. Therefore, in the United States, the institution type (independent variable) should sway military expenditures (dependent variable) more readily than both variables will persuade each other; in Germany this relationship should be more reciprocal. To test this question, we use budgetary figures from 2000 to 2020 along with public opinion data inspired by Hartley and Russett's model from American and German sources to assess the direction of influence. We suspect that this pattern would be stronger in the United States due to a smaller number of political parties that creates an individualized pluralism where presidents prosper from a direct mode of public appeal rather than from traditional bargaining techniques of institutionalized pluralism. We found that public opinion shapes military expenditures in Germany and the opposite holds true in the United States, with policymakers shaping public opinion rather than reflecting it.

Introduction

Originating in 1947, the creation of the Department of Defense (DOD) represented the emersion of the United States as an international world power. Prior to World War II, a modest military organization was sustained with the exception of wartime necessities. With World War II, however, prominent military and civilian leaders as well as Congress recognized the need to unite all command forces to engage in modern military warfare. The Department of Defense marked the official amalgamation of the army, the navy, and the air force to serve this purpose [1].

Headquartered in the Pentagon, this expensive merger has generated plenty of debate regarding the economical and political effects of military expenditures (or milex) since its inception [2]. Favoring military spending, several scholars contend that increased milex enhances economic growth by providing governmental funding for deficient private, aggregate demand thereby facilitating the residual benefits (or spinoffs) such as improved infrastructure and technological advances [3]. Military expenditures can also provide training and employment opportunities through military bases [4].

Alternatively, opposing viewpoints argue that increased milex diverts needed governmental funding away from civilian programs, impedes economic growth through the lack of investment which ultimately harms such programs (i.e., education) and reduces the exportation of goods thus dampening economic growth overall [5]. Still others lament the consequent inflationary effects caused by continuous military burdens and some forewarn the impending economic demise of strong military nations through extensive military spending [6]. Lastly, several scholars contend that class interests determine military expenditures illustrating greater armament spending during periods of leftists governments rather than conservative (right-winged) regimes [7].

While many scholars have studied the economical determinants and effects of defense spending policy, several authors remind us that military expenditures are politically calculated [8]. Such political decisions have important economical consequences and "cannot be determined by economic analysis alone [9]." For a comprehensive understanding of defense spending policy, the political element must therefore be incorporated into the analysis [10]. For example, earmarking or pork-barreling initiatives directed toward military bases, areas with higher military industrial capacity, and defense contracts are often employed for political purposes to enhance a congressional member's chances for reelection [11]. Furthermore, military expenditures are utilized when the economy is performing poorly and an upcoming presidential election is imminent (political business cycle model) although milex can also be applied to elevate approval ratings at any time during the president's tenure (referendum model) [12]. Moreover, military engagements can often enhance a

president's approval ratings prior to elections (diversionary theory of war) or at any point during his presidential term (diversionary theory of force model) when warranted by economic downturns. These models assume that public opinion helps to determine defense spending policy although public opinion might also be swayed by such models through the political manipulation of the media including the glamorization of force [13].

When is public opinion dictated and when does it dictate? This study examines the political-cultural determinants and consequences of defense spending policy focusing on the relationship between public opinion and military expenditures in the United States and Germany during the post-Cold War time-period. Specifically, it considers how defense policy directs public opinion through the manipulation of media effects, especially the glamorization of force. While these patterns are generally reciprocal, this study examines whether the latter will have a stronger unidirectional relationship in the United States rather than in Germany, with defense policy swaying public opinion via media manipulation. Therefore, in the United States, the institution type (independent variable) should sway military expenditures (dependent variable) more readily than both variables will persuade each other; in Germany this relationship should be more reciprocal.

Political Dynamics

While many scholars have studied the economical determinants and effects of defense spending policy, several scholars stress that military expenditures are politically calculated [14]. For example, public opinion generates significant influence on defense spending policy as evidenced through the political business cycle (PBC) model and the referendum model [15]. In assessing the effects of aggregate public opinion on milex, Hartley and Russett discover that alterations in military expenditures invariably reflect changes in public opinion [16]. Because public opinion exerts this strong influence, nationally elected figures, especially presidents, are careful to consider how it will impede or facilitate their defense spending policy agendas. According to the **political business cycle**, poor national economic conditions such as high unemployment will induce presidents to employ milex in order to counter declining approval ratings before an election takes place. Indeed the defense budget has been employed for this purpose as the president does not command the primary methods of "macroeconomic control," including the money supply and rates of interest, which are controlled by the Federal Reserve Board [17]. Nor does he directly control the tax and spending operations of Congress. Therefore, the manipulation of the defense budget offers his administration a politically savvy way to provide instant stimulation to the national economy thus achieving recognition for campaign promises to retrospective voters [18]. So prior to an election, his administration will endeavor to encourage economic growth and full employment through "expansionary economic policy [19]" and following an election, his administration will strive to contain inflation through "a more restrictive policy." Yet, overall unemployment is not efficiently reduced through military expenditures as non-military spending provides more job opportunities including public service employment [20]. Other scholars find a tenuous and sometimes reciprocal relationship between defense spending and electoral cycles [21].

Alternatively, the **referendum model** anticipates the presidential manipulation of military expenditures, especially defense contracts whenever approval ratings are low, and not only when an election is imminent. Since the president is subjected to what Lowi has termed the pathological condition of the plebiscitary presidency, which is aroused by continual polling and intensified examination by the media, he will employ defense expenditures to his benefit during times of low public approval [22]. This pathological condition drives him to constantly monitor and to rapidly respond to volatile approval ratings in order to secure public support and congressional cooperation. Without this approval, his critical policy agenda will not be fulfilled and his reputation will suffer. Because the health of the economy is a formidable determinant of such approval, the president will employ innovative policies that "create jobs and boost the economy such as ….strategically tim(ed) contract awards [23]." These prime contract awards or legal agreements between the government and private contractors to fulfill orders for military goods and services, are made with minimal public awareness in comparison to the entire annual defense budget, which must be approved by Congress through a budget resolution. Drawn from appropriated defense monies, prime contract awards can often be used at the discretion of the president to "boost economic performance" which enhances his overall approval ratings [24]. Such contracts also encourage private, entrepreneurial resourcefulness, which would be improved with increased deregulation [25]. Moreover, prime contract awards rather than aggregate defense budgets take much less time to generate employment [26].

While national defense contracts garner public support for presidential ratings via enhanced economic performance, such contracts are not distributed equitably nor accounted for effectively [27]. While the president may enjoy public approval in the short term as a result of such contracts, these agreements benefit special corporate interests disproportionately, enabling the top one hundred American corporations to obtain a majority of the prime contract monies. Fifty firms typically accumulate sixty percent of these contract monies annually [28]. According to Matthews and Parker, a similar pattern is found in the United Kingdom [29]. Accountability of such funding has also become problematic with increasing deregulation and privatization of defense spending through federal contractors, particularly to no-bid contractors. For example, the Pentagon is not able to provide accurate estimates of their total numbers of Army contractors and their total costs [30]. Therefore, besides being expansible, lucrative, and politically savvy, milex benefits major corporations in the American and German economies thus averting significant corporate antagonism as well as effective government oversight [31].

Instead of focusing directly on how public opinion influences the apportionment of defense contracts for political gain, **the diversionary theory of war** and the **diversionary theory of force models** assume that aggressive stance on foreign policy, including military acts, are conducted to incite nationalistic support [32]. This support is especially relevant in the secularized plebiscitary era where the leadership of popular opinion has transformed the presidency into a permanent reelection campaign. In this perpetual state of preemption, presidents must constantly create and legitimize their policy platforms in order to survive politically [33]. This is especially true for countries like the United States where the limited number of political parties has generated an individualized pluralism in which presidents prosper from a direct mode of public appeal rather than from the traditional bargaining techniques of institutionalized pluralism [34]. The president's individualized pluralism is abetted by the **diversionary theory of war**. This theory suggests that high levels of public support are maintained by synchronizing inexpensive military engagements with impending presidential elections during weak economies, similar to the political business cycle rationale. The public is thus distracted from their economic plight as they respond to the rallying effect of their national leader seeking patriotic solidarity in his time of reelection.

Alternatively, the diversionary theory of force model (or force model), like the referendum model, assumes that presidents will use military force to elevate their low ratings whenever this is necessary and not just during election time. It is therefore wise for them to appear competent in their commander and chief roles articulating strategic military agendas. Fortunately, uses of military force are

widely covered by the media and provide positive affirmation for presidential administrations. Rather than focus on long term (domestic) objectives for the general welfare of society, presidents often opt for dramatic events, generally involving force to ameliorate low approval ratings throughout their tenures [35]. They may even resort to fabrication, occasionally thriving on international crises when the opportunities present themselves, a circumstance known as the *oversell syndrome*. Indeed, to maintain favorable ratings and to avoid the pathological condition of the plebiscitary presidency, the Chief Executive may exaggerate international conflicts until they become serious enough to require reinforced military action. Of course, in seeking to democratize executive control, the president endeavors to promote the illusion of public accessibility by making his policy objectives appear to represent the will of the people [36]. Yet this "electoral connection" has especially devastating consequences for genuine democracy, first because it often neglects congressional will and secondly, because the manipulation of popular opinion is not indicative of majoritarian preferences. While certain foreign policy decisions may be constrained by the president's need for public approval, "this does not preclude the presidential management of opinion via manipulation of the media and the framing of decisive military actions [37]." Although, Hartley and Russett do not find evidence to support this manipulation thesis, they admittedly do not consider media effects [38]. Therefore, as far as the force model is concerned, perhaps there is a reciprocal relationship between force and public opinion or maybe minor military engagement is the determinant of public opinion rather than the outcome.

In summary, the political business cycle model, the referendum model, the diversionary theory of war model and the force model all imply that defense spending is influenced by public opinion. Although it seems plausible that a reciprocal or a reverse relationship exists with the force model and that an indirect relationship inheres in the referendum model. First, increased milex provides a short term impetus to economic growth and in doing so enhances the reputations of national policy makers, especially the president. However, in the longer term, such spending arguably hinders economic growth by impending investment in civilian (domestic) programs for the general public.

Secondly, because defense contracts are highly concentrated in their distribution to major corporate interests and their allocation eschews public awareness, such governmental funds do not offer the same direct public benefits as non-military expenditures. Thirdly, because the president enjoys a monopoly of control over information dissemination heightened by favorable media coverage, other political bodies such as Congress are not in a position to effectively challenge his use of force agenda, which essentially justifies his foreign activities.

Strategic Culture

One non-quantifiable variable that can also be used to explain the United States' and Germany's differences is by their strategic culture, which has been defined first by Snyder in 1977 as Germany's lower defense budget and military operations overall, distinguishes them from the United States with regard to military force and strategic culture, particularly after the Cold War period. The United States came out of World War II as the leading superpower and has used this newfound status to project its ideals throughout the globe, in part through military force; first during the Cold War against the Soviet Union, then a post-Soviet era during a period of economic globalization and UN-backed peacekeeping missions, and finally in curbing terrorism in the ongoing War on Terror. On the other hand, Germany has backpedaled their military adventurism, both during and after the Cold War, in part influenced by collective memory of the Nazis and the Holocaust that has been influential in foreign policy decision making [39].

The guiding force behind this conduct can be aptly encapsulated in the infamous slogan "nie wieder" [never again], which held a dual meaning of "nie wieder Krieg" [never again war] as a principle of pacifism that slowly morphed into and exists congruently with "nie wieder Auschwitz" [never again Auschwitz] [40]. After German reunification, these principles created an acceptable path for military intervention strictly on humanitarian grounds as a way to prevent genocide. Rarely has German leadership since the 1990s broken this long-standing norm of reluctance to engage in military operations, doing so not of their own accord, but through coalitions under United Nations peacekeeping operations in countries like Cambodia (UNTAC) and Somalia (UNOSOM II), or NATO-led operations like the 1999 Kosovo bombing campaign and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission during the War in Afghanistan [41].

Theoretical Overview

This study examines the political-strategic determinants and consequences of defense spending policy focusing on the relationship between institution type (institutionalized pluralism or individualized pluralism) and military expenditures in the United States and Germany during the post-Cold War period. Specifically, it examines how public opinion via the diversionary theory of force model and the referendum model influence defense policy as well as how defense policy directs public opinion through the manipulation of media effects, especially the glamorization of force. From this, we formulate the following hypotheses;

H_1: Countries with individualized pluralism will have a stronger recursive relationship or a unidirectional relationship on military expenditures than countries with institutionalized pluralism, where it would have a stronger reciprocal relationship.

H_2: Military expenditures will have a direct influence on public opinion.

In other words, countries with a multi-party system offer more potential roadblocks by veto players to obstruct policy implementation compared to a two-party system. This occurs because policy making power is divided between greater numbers of effective veto players, which, according to Tsebelis, policy achievement is stymied due to the greater transaction costs that must be surmounted in order to initiate the change [42]. Put another way, as the number of veto players increases, the likelihood of policy change decreases.

In Germany, institutionalized pluralism occurs by virtue of the government's structure as a parliamentary democracy and the number of parties in governing and opposing coalitions, the latter affecting the number of veto players that could block the initiative of the executive, whose power largely resides with the Chancellor [43]. By contrast, as a presidential system, the United States has three constitutionally developed institutional veto players (House, Senate, and President) with formal veto powers, and components of these veto players perform important roles in the creation and implementation of public policy.

Using the United States and Germany as examples of how to count combinations of institutional party actors, Tsebelis (pg. 310) [44] wrote;

"Countries like the United States generally have three institutional veto players. The number of players will be reduced to two or one to the extent that an argument can be made that the two houses are congruent (absorption rule), or that all three actors are congruent. […] Federal countries like Germany will have two institutional actors, but varying numbers of veto players. For most of the post-war period, Germany has had a coalition government that included [the FDP, and either the CDU/CSU or the SPD]. In the periods when both houses are controlled by the government, the number of veto players is two (the two partners of the coalition) […] while if the opposition controls the Bundesrat [45] the number of veto players becomes three."

To test these hypotheses, this study will replicate and combine the components of several other studies including Hartley and Russett's assessment of the recursive relationship between public opinion and defense policy, DeRouen's analysis of the non-recursive relationship between the diversionary theory of force and presidential approval ratings, and DeRouen and Heo's examination of the referendum model indicating a direct relationship between low presidential approval and greater disbursements of prime contract awards during economic downturns.

In assessing the effects of aggregate public opinion on milex, Hartley and Russett [46] (1992) discover that alterations in military expenditures invariably reflect changes in public opinion. Their dependent variable was represented by total outlays from the Department of Defense (DOD) (total obligational authority), as these figures reflect more accurate assessments of military expenditures rather than budgetary projections. For public opinion, their independent variable, a comprehensive data set was employed covering between 1965 through 1990. These data were compiled from six different houses including Gallup, the Roper Organization, National Opinion Research Center, General Electric, CBS, and Time [47]. Several other explanatory variables involved the national security priorities of top military specialists and officials regarding Soviet military spending in comparison to defense spending in the United States. While controlling for these effects through a regression analysis, Hartley and Russett detect a one-way causal relationship between public opinion and military spending. When public opinion favors increases in military spending then military spending positively reflects this mood and when public opinion opposes such increases, there are decreases in military spending [48].

More importantly, Hartley and Russett test the hypothesis that governmental initiatives exercise considerable influence on publicly supported military spending. Employing a Granger test of causality to determine the direction of influence between public opinion and milex, their results, however, do not substantiate this hypothesis. Instead their findings consistently indicate that public opinion sways governmental defense policies although other items such as the arms race are also important. Unfortunately, their study does not consider how public opinion will be instrumental in governmental decision making in the "absence of superpower arms race [49]." Nor does it directly consider the effects of media on public opinion especially since the uses of military force are widely covered by television networks and provide positive affirmation for presidential figures. Presidents thus monopolize the mechanisms of public opinion on foreign policies with the continuous coverage and non-scientific polling of dramatic foreign events. This monopoly of air time arguably enhances their reputations as competent leaders but it neglects the publicity of congressional opposition or the authentic majoritarian preferences of the American public. While certain foreign policy decisions may be constrained by the president's need for public approval, "this does not preclude the presidential management of opinion via (the) manipulation of the media and the framing of decisive military actions [50]." Therefore, it is probable that a reciprocal or even a reverse relationship exists between public opinion and defense policy.

The reciprocal relationship between public opinion and defense policy is examined by DeRouen who evaluates the diversionary theory of war model and the diversionary theory of force model (or force model). Such models assume that military acts are conducted to incite both nationalistic support and, at the same time, stigmatization of domestic political opponents [51]. For example, the diversionary theory of war model suggests that high levels of public support are maintained by synchronizing inexpensive military engagements with impending presidential elections during weak economies while the force model assumes that presidents will use military force to elevate their low ratings whenever this is necessary and not just during election time [52]. Examining the force model DeRouen finds an "indirect link between the economy, politics and the use of force" during the years of 1949 through 1984 [53].

Employing variables representing uses of military force, electoral cycles, the economy, and public opinion, DeRouen notices that the economy and presidential approval ratings are significantly and directly related while the economy, presidential approval, and the uses of force are indirectly related. Furthermore, he detects a "nonrecursive linkage" or reciprocal relationship between uses of force and presidential approval [54]. Although it is probable that this relationship may be skewed in favor of force determining presidential approval in some countries such as the United States where the decline in political parties generates and individualized pluralism in which presidents prosper from a direct mode of public appeal rather than from the traditional bargaining techniques of institutionalized pluralism as in Germany.

The current study will examine American and German data during the post-Cold War time period to account for patterns of defense spending. It will retest DeRouen's thesis regarding the non-recursive nature of the relationship between presidential approval and force hypothesizing that this recursive or unidirectional relationship will be more prominent in the United States than in Germany. In the United States, this relationship may favor a more unidirectional pattern with the uses of force influencing public opinion and hence presidential approval through the manipulation of media coverage and non-scientific polling coupled with the glamorization of force. This pattern is stronger in the United States due to the smaller number of political parties, relative to other advanced industrialized democracies, generating an individualized pluralism in which presidents prosper by engaging in plebiscitary politics rather than traditional bargaining techniques of institutionalized pluralism. Therefore, in the United States, individualized pluralism will sway military expenditures more readily than both variables will persuade each other and in Germany this relationship will be reciprocal (H_1).

Because public opinion exerts this strong influence on nationally elected figures, presidents are especially careful to consider how it will impede or facilitate their defense spending policy agendas. According to the political-business cycle model, poor national economic conditions such as high unemployment will induce presidents to employ milex in order to counter declining approval ratings before an election takes place. Alternatively, the referendum model anticipates the presidential manipulation of military expenditures, especially defense contracts whenever approval ratings are low, not only when an election is imminent [55]. Testing the political-business cycle model and the referendum model with data from 1953 through 1992, DeRouen and Heo demonstrate that the referendum model is especially relevant a time when the president is viewed as a key player in the economy and the strength of the party system is negligible [56]. As a result, his success in Congress is no longer tied to his power as an institutional negotiator but as a starring plebiscite with the people. Because the health of the economy is a formidable determinant of such approval, the president will employ innovative policies to enhance job growth including timely contract awards. Such awards are made with minimal public awareness in comparison to the rest of the annual defense budget. Drawn from appropriated defense monies, prime contract awards can often be employed at the discretion of the president to improve the performance of the economy as well as his overall approval ratings [57].

While national defense contracts garner public support for presidential ratings via improved economic performance, such contracts are not distributed equitably with fifty firms benefitting from sixty percent of the military contract dollars each year [58]. Therefore, a direct relationship between presidential approval and defense contracting could arguably not exist as implied by DeRouen and Heo. By employing both American and German data for the post-Cold war time period, this study will endeavor to demonstrate that there is an indirect relationship between presidential approval and defense contracting through the improvement of economic

performance. Presidential approval is the outcome of the short-term economic boost provided by the dispersion of defense contracts to major corporate interests and the creation and retention of American jobs established by these contracts. Likewise, public approval for the Chancellor is the result of the ephemeral economic improvements advanced by the allocation of Federal Ministry of Defense payments and the creation and retention of German jobs made possible from such payments. In sum, there is a direct relationship between military expenditures and public opinion (H_2).

Methodology

This study will use time-series panel data survey that was conducted for the years 2000-2020 to determine the effects of military expenditure and institutional type. We decided to start in 2000 to account for the German reunification a decade prior in 1990, allowing time for Germany to become independent from the Allied powers that occupied the country since the end of World War II and the retreat of their military forces from Germany near the end of 1994. For military spending, we extracted budget outlays pertaining to the American Department of Defense and the German *Bundesministerium der Verteidigung/BMVg* (Federal Ministry of Defense) between fiscal years 2000 and 2020 and cross-checked them with the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. The American fiscal year is a 12-month period that begins in October of the calendar year and ends in September the following calendar year. By contrast, the German fiscal year lines up with the calendar year. See Appendix A for further information on the budgetary process for the two countries.

For institutional type, we used a dichotomous variable where 0=individualized pluralism (the United States) and 1=institutionalized pluralism (Germany). This can largely be explained by the structure of the government (presidential vs. parliamentary) and the number of parties (two-party vs. multi-party). The United States has two viable parties including the Republicans and Democrats. By contrast, Germany is a multi-party system, where six major parties hold political dominance; *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* (Christian Democratic Union of Germany/CDU), *Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* (Christian Social Union in Bavaria/CSU), *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic in Germany/SPD), *Freie Demokratische Partei* (Free Democratic Party/FDP), *Die Grünen* (The Greens), and the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (Party of Democratic Socialism/PDS), which merged with another minor party in 2007 to form *Die Linke* (the Left) as its successor. These six parties have constantly held seats in the Bundestag during the period we examine, with the exception of the FDP holding no seats in the 18th Bundestag during the 2013 election. While the CDU and CSU have forged an electoral alliance since 1949, for the purposes of electoral ballots in Germany, and for this study, they are listed as separate parties. Furthermore, the left-wing PDS party merged with the Wahlalternative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit party in 2007, and largely kept the economic policies that the PDS party held prior [59]. The late addition of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany/AfD) party in 2013, who picked up 94 seats in the 19th Bundestag during the 2017 elections added an additional party for the opposition in Chancellor Merkel's 4th cabinet. These three caveats aside, the parties in German society have been constant throughout the period examined.

There is an additional caveat that distorts the measurement of budget outlays in the German case. First, the adoption of the Euro in 1999 poses an additional problem in measuring budgetary data. During the transitionary period (1999-2002), the Deutsche Mark (DM) remained the currency used to calculate the final budget, although the appropriations bill included numbers for both the Euro and DM until 2002. The German budget for FY2002 was the first year that used the Euro to calculate the final budget, coinciding with the circulation of Euro banknotes and coins in the German financial system. Because of this, German budget data between FY2000 and FY2002 is also separately calculated using the historical exchange rate of 1 Euro equaling 1.95583 DM set by the Council of the European Union at the beginning of 1999. The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database has accounted for this issue by giving all expenditure numbers in Euros. Because of the large variation in the raw spending data between both countries, we also employ other variables to capture how military expenditure is measured, using military expenditure as a percentage of national spending, percentage of GDP, and spending per capita with figures from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database.

Public opinion data came from a variety of polling institutions based in America and Germany. We use surveys from Pew and Gallup for the United States and ZMSBw (Center for Military History and Social Sciences of the German Armed Forces) and Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (IfD Allensbach) for Germany. Concentration on keywords such as "öffentliche Meinung" (public opinion), "Grundhaltungen" (basic attitudes), "Einstellungen zum Militärausgaben [oder] Verteidigungsausgaben" (attitudes towards military [or] defense spending) were focused on. In some cases where data was sparse or not found, a proxy of need for the Bundeswher (German armed forces) or approval of NATO been used if aforementioned data could not be found for a given year. In support of using NATO as a proxy variable, Fayfinds that individuals who view NATO as essential for security policy are consistently more likely to support increases in military spending, barring changes in the contextual environment that would alter preferences (i.e. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022) [60]. Data for NATO support comes from Pew's Global Indicators Database (GID). In the case of Germany, we also found a third survey that asked respondents about the necessity of maintaining a military force from the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (IfD). Due to the limited data we found during the course of data collection with regards to German public opinion data, we surveyed six survey houses total, three for the United States and three for Germany. We averaged pooled public opinion measurements for all three survey organizations per country over annual periods. Some of these survey houses consist of a binary choice (i.e. favorable or unfavorable) with others presented respondents with several choices on a Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In cases where there were choices that presented varying degrees of agreeableness and disagreeableness (i.e. strongly agree and somewhat agree), we merged and coded these responses to a single option (1 for agree and 2 for disagree). Adding to Hartley and Russett's model, we introduce a third variable of "neither agree or disagree" (coded as 3) which would provide a indicator people who want military spending to be kept as is.

Findings

Our findings indicate that in both comparative cases, the institution type is highly correlated with military spending measured in several different ways as mentioned above. In each of the models below, different measures of military expenditure all show unidirectional negative trends when comparing an individualized system (the United States) to an institutionalized one (Germany). Institutionalization has allowed German politicians to utilize coalition building to leverage their bargaining position on major policy issues [61]. By contrast, in the United States, individualization has made bargaining more difficult. Hence going public on major issues related to the President's agenda has been used to rally public opinion and pressure individual legislators [62].

In Table 1, we find that the type of government has a strong negative association with military expenditure: countries that are institutionally pluralized (i.e. Germany) tend to have less military expenditures and the result is statistically significant. When looking at the raw expenditure data, the United States budget is going to naturally be bigger due to the amount of spending in general compared to a smaller country. Because of this, we also employ other variables to capture how military expenditure is measured, namely, using military expenditure as a percentage of national spending, percentage of GDP, and spending per capita. In these other measurements, the statistical significance remains high, and we get a better account for the impact of strong negative associations much like the raw expenditure data.

Furthermore, each model also indicates that anywhere between 87.5% and 95.6% of the variance in the various measures of military spending is explained by the government institution type, making it a strong indicator for how military expenditures are measured.

	Milex	Milex as % of GDP	Milex as % of National Spending	Milex per capita
(Intercept)	603136666666.666***	3.892***	10.859***	1924.275***
	(21420400694.207)	(0.089)	(0.201)	(62.141)
Govtype	-570086801694.667***	-2.660***	-8.180***	-1435.710***
	(30293021173.213)	(0.126)	(0.281)	(87.880)
Num.Obs.	42	42	41	40
R2	0.899	0.918	0.956	0.875
R2 Adj.	0.896	0.916	0.955	0.872
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001				

Table 1

As previously noted, the institutionalized system in Germany, can be explained by the number of parties in governing and opposing coalitions, the latter affecting the number of veto players that could block the initiative of the executive, whose power largely resides with the Chancellor [63]. Tsebelis's writings on the veto player theorem suggests that as the number of veto players increases, the likelihood of policy change decreases due to the potential in a veto player utilizing their veto to block a particular policy [64].

Additionally, we also wanted to see how the military expenditures levels would affect public opinion with regards to how they perceive current levels of military spending and signal preferences for change in a dichotomous direction (increase or decrease) or maintain neutrality (no change). Table 2 looks at the relationship between military expenditures and public opinion across three American survey houses. The findings imply that there is a positive but minimal association between military expenditure and the likelihood that people think military spending should increase. We find in Table 2 that people in the United States supporting an increase in military expenditures or holding a favorable attitude towards NATO are statistically significant, mostly when it comes to a decrease in expenditures. The results further show military expenditures have a varied, generally small impact on public opinion in the United States. Where it does have an effect, it tends to be positive, and these effects are modest in magnitude. The models with Gallup data show moderate explanatory power, while those with Pew data fit better, suggesting that Pew's measurements may capture more of the variance in public sentiment on this topic.

	Increase (Gallup)	Decrease (Gallup)	No Change (Gallup)	Increase (Pew GID (US))	Decrease (Pew GID (US))	Increase (Pew)	Decrease (Pew)	No Change (Pew)
(Intercept)	44.202***	9.667+	42.738***	48.159*	42.215*	69.186***	-6.829	35.573**
	(5.828)	(5.089)	(6.570)	(20.117)	(13.143)	(9.178)	(6.938)	(6.110)
milex_local	0.000*	0.000***	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000*	0.000*	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Num.Obs.	21	21	21	9	9	7	7	7
R2	0.294	0.512	0.044	0.010	0.200	0.662	0.740	0.000
R2 Adj.	0.257	0.487	-0.007	-0.132	0.085	0.595	0.687	-0.199
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001								

Table 2

Tables 3 examines the same comparison with three German survey houses, each of them measuring an increase in military expenditures vs. a decrease, whereas some surveys also include an option for holding military expenditures as they currently stand at a particular point in time. In both the GID surveys for the United States and Germany, the proxy of support for NATO is used. Similarly in Germany, people supporting an increase in military expenditures and holding a favorable attitude towards NATO have marginal significance, explaining 1.5%-31% of the variability in military spending, or 15.4% on average. By contrast, people supporting a decrease in military expenditures is not statistically significant and the model does not explain any meaningful variation in the dependent variable. The model with the most significant relationship in the German case comes from people who wish to keep military expenditures as they are, (not favoring any increase or decrease) with the model being the most statistically significant and explaining a more moderate proportion (28%) of the variability in the dependent variable.

	Increase (ZMSBw)	Decrease (ZMSBw)	No Change (ZMSBw)	Increase (Pew GID (GER))	Decrease (Pew GID (GER))	Increase (IFD)	Decrease (IFD)
(Intercept)	-5.925	33.907***	66.712***	63.084***	30.270**	50.080*	31.635+
	(14.282)	(6.116)	(8.686)	(10.607)	(8.546)	(16.035)	(13.738)
milex_ local	0.000*	0.000**	0.000*	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Num.Obs.	19	19	19	9	9	7	7
R2	0.311	0.341	0.278	0.015	0.003	0.213	0.169
R2 Adj.	0.270	0.302	0.235	-0.126	-0.140	0.056	0.003
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001							

Table 3

Finally, Table 4 looks at the relationship between the pooled averages for both countries. Thus, findings across both countries' pooled averages show moderate significance for people supporting an increase in military expenditures and more significance for people who favor a decrease or no change to current levels, with the variance highest for those who support a decrease.

	Increase (GER)	Decrease (GER)	No Change (GER)	Increase (US)	Decrease (US)	No Change (US)	Increase (All)	Decrease (All)	No Change (All)
(Intercept)	13.582	22.192*	66.712***	35.710***	11.928+	40.437***	44.402***	19.218***	45.033***
	(16.762)	(8.058)	(8.686)	(8.583)	(6.880)	(5.818)	(2.442)	(1.419)	(1.490)
milex_ local	0.000+	0.000	0.000*	0.000	0.000*	0.000	0.000**	0.000***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Num.Obs.	21	21	19	21	21	21	42	42	40
R2	0.154	0.004	0.278	0.001	0.249	0.027	0.162	0.393	0.321
R2 Adj.	0.109	-0.049	0.235	-0.052	0.210	-0.024	0.141	0.378	0.303
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001									

Table 4

Conclusion and Implications and Future Research

In conclusion, our hypotheses appear to be supported by the data. There is a stronger relationship on military spending when accounting for institution type. This is further shown when looking at public opinion, where the public is more receptive and vocal to changes in military expenditures in Germany. By contrast, in the United States, the effect is minimal and they are more guided by persuasion by the executive than anything else. While strategic culture does explain some of the choices that the United States and Germany have made, historically or in the present time, they are primarily guided by the institutions that have shaped their political decision-making processes, security policies, and defense strategies. These institutions, rooted in each country's unique political system, create formal and informal norms that often outweigh strategic factors, steering actions through established channels and procedures.

During our timeframe, the United States has steadily increased military expenditures following the 9/11 attacks, only to be interrupted by a policy of downsizing overseas operations during the Obama administration. This was followed by increased expenditures on equipment and modernization during the Trump administration and, thus far, the Biden administration. Increases in expenditures have been made in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, with monies being diverted from our (now former) military presence in Afghanistan towards focusing on deterrence in the Pacific Ocean against China, nuclear modernization, and additional warfighting vehicles and ships among other priorities [65].

Likewise, throughout our timeframe German support for military spending per the ZMSBw has slowly waned until 2014, when several congruent events broke Germany's hesitance into expanding their role militarily, and consequently shifted public opinion on the approval of military spending, during several significant events throughout the year. First, the 50th Munich Security Conference during the Maidan revolution in Ukraine prompted German leadership via then-German President Joachim Gauck and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen to express the need for Germany to "take more resolute steps to uphold and help shape the order based on the European Union, NATO and the United Nations" and outlined these reforms [66]. Second, weeks after the security conference, Russia covertly invaded and subsequently illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula, creating a security crisis that propelled Germany alongside France to serve as mediators between Russia and Ukraine during the Minsk agreements. Third, the rapid territorial gains of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East, which lead to the declaration of a "caliphate" in June 2014 and a swath of ISIS-linked terrorist attacks in the years that followed, leaving 14 killed and 79 injured in Germany alone [67]. Finally, the NATO Wales Summit in September 2014 produced a communiqué where member states, in part, "agree to reverse the trend of declining defence [sic] budgets, to make the most effective use of our funds and to further a more balanced sharing of costs and responsibilities [68]." Furthermore, the communiqué pledged that nations, Germany among them, who haven't met the "minimum of 2% of GDP spent on defense" NATO guideline will do so by 2024 [69]. These events have been described by the ZMSBw's 2021 "Trendradar" as "a turning point for the attitude of the German population towards the development of the defense budget […] from 2015, an absolute or relative majority of citizens [approved] higher spending on the armed forces [70]."

Yet for all that spending it has attempted in the past decade, all of Germany's attempts to play catch up and increase military capabilities have largely been too little, too late. In essence, we find evidence for what previous scholarship has alluded to when it comes to the relationship between public opinion and military expenditures. Lending largely to political and strategic environments over the past two decades, Germany has seen itself, and perhaps still does to some extent, more of a follower than a leader in terms of military expenditures and in military decision making overall. Although German leadership made several attempts to reform its armed forces throughout the past two decades, and cautiously navigate ad hoc military operations during the post-Cold War period, they were largely blind-sighted to the greater regional at hand, Russia, until it was too late.

The impact of institution type according to Kernell has shown to be a promising variable to use in measuring military expenditures. Our model can be expanded upon and used in different countries across different expenditure categories, such as environmental expenditures, healthcare expenditures, and so on. One particular case of potential interest would be the case of military spending in Israel. Like Germany, Israel has an institutionalized system of government, yet has, as of 2023, 5.32% of its GDP and 14.6% of national spending allocated to its defense budget alone, more than both the United States and Germany [71]. This is the product of a highly military-oriented culture with a mandatory draft and a presence of military soldiers in everyday life, blending in and participating as local citizens (which one of the authors witnessed on a visit in 2019); from passengers on trains to customers shopping in local markets.

This study highlights important lessons for foreign policy issues beyond our timeframe, namely the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the latter of which occurred shortly after the authors started working on this paper together, partly prompting them to switch from the initial comparison case from Great Britain to Germany, which has gone through some shifts in defense policy after our timeframe that require a general overview.

Since the Zeitenwende was announced in February 2022, some significant literature has been produced as of this writing that warrants further study as the policies surrounding the German defense

policy shift continue in the coming years, which have considered the Zeitenwende to be [72]. Polling in Germany conducted a week after the Russia invasion of Ukraine found that 78% of Germans supported and 16% opposed the 100 billion Euro increase in military expenditures [73]. However, initial assessments by Mader and Schoen [74] show that while policy attitudes towards military spending have become more assertive (i.e. favored an increase), there is not (yet, as of October 2024) a steady and continuing policy shift that might eventually add up to significant change. Other assessments throughout the past two years have lent to similar conclusions thus far [75].

A second issue that arises out of the Zeitenwende is Germany's long-standing reluctance to increase military spending in a meaningful way has led to prominent logistical and procurement issues that would, in a worst-case scenario would rapidly exhaust military resources within two days [76]. This sentiment has been echoed by the Bundestag Commissioner for the Armed Forces Eva Högl in her annual inspection report in March 2023, summarizing that "the Bundeswher has too little of everything [77]." As of this writing, procurement issues are starting to be addressed, with Germany aiming to have the "best equipped" NATO army division in Europe by 2025 [78], coupled with a partial-return to a conscription-based model [79].

By contrast, the United States has greatly benefited from its already high military budget and active presence in several major counterterrorism hotspots in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, despite polarized public opinion in recent years. The withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 has allowed the United States to refocus its defense priority on its two primary geopolitical rivals, China and Russia, partly though the funding of Taiwan and Ukraine respectively, while posturing military forces throughout the Pacific Ocean and Europe.

We hope this study serves as a valuable case study for policymakers and scholars in order to assess the role of public opinion on military expenditures, and what causes the public to fluctuate and base belief on in these two countries.

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