



# Military careers of politicians matter for national security policy<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Do politicians with a military background vote differently on military affairs? We investigate the informative institutional setting of the Swiss conscription army. Politicians who served in the military have a higher probability of accepting pro-military legislative proposals, even when controlling for party affiliations and the revealed preferences of their constituents. Although conscription requires all able-bodied man to serve at least as soldiers, we can exploit variation in exposure to enforced and voluntary service. We find evidence that intrinsic motivation to serve in the military, instead of compulsory service, plays a substantial role in explaining legislative decisions on military affairs.

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*War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men.*

—Georges Clemenceau, “Soixante Années d'Histoire Française,” 1932, by Georges Suarez.

## 1. Introduction

Political decisions on military and defense issues affect national security and welfare. Politicians are not totally neutral toward, nor are they independent of, the military. They often have a personal background in the military because they have served in their youth or held a high-ranking military post before being elected. Over two-thirds of U.S. presidents have served in the armed forces. The current French president François Hollande and his prime minister Manuel Valls both served as sub-lieutenants. Vladimir Putin's domestic and foreign policy is commonly said to be shaped by his military and secret service training. Innumerable representatives in parliaments around the world have served in the military. They decide on crucial military and army issues today.

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The economic literature is astonishingly silent on how members of parliament with a military background decide on issues related to the military. Previous studies in political science suggest that the military background of politicians may differentially affect the probability of militarized disputes (see [Huntington, 1957](#) and [Nordlinger, 1977](#) for seminal contributions and, more recently, [Feaver and Gelpi, 2004](#)). Since parliamentary decisions have an important effect on military budgets as well as national and international security policy, we empirically analyze whether politicians with a military background decide differently on military affairs, holding constituents' policy preferences constant. More precisely, we investigate whether members of parliament who served in the military vote more often in favor of pro-military affairs than do representatives without such a background, accounting for the wishes of the constituents they are supposed to represent. We then explore whether differences in voting behavior are due to self-selection into higher military ranks or to socialization.

Any endeavor to analyze this issue is confronted with at least two major challenges: (1) members of parliament are elected by constituents and are supposed to represent them. Constituents may elect representatives with or without a military background because they feel that voting "correctly" on military affairs is important. Unfortunately, preferences of constituents regarding military issues are usually unobservable, which makes it difficult to distinguish whether decisions of members of parliament are influenced by their personal background or by their duty to represent their constituents. (2) While it is fairly easy to identify parliamentary decisions affecting the military, it is more difficult to identify whether they are pro- or anti-military. Thus, an external classification by military experts, independent of the parliamentary decision itself, is required. In this article, we address both challenges and analyze differences in legislative voting on pro- and anti-military issues by parliamentary representatives with different military backgrounds.

In Switzerland, constituents reveal their preferences for parliamentary proposals in popular referenda (see [Schneider et al., 1981](#); [Portmann et al., 2012](#)). The wording of each referendum is identical to the corresponding legislative proposal dealt with in parliament. Thus, we directly observe both constituents' preferences and decisions of members of parliament in final roll call votes on the same proposals. To identify military affairs and military preferences, we use official voting recommendations for referenda issued by military experts. These expert sources are two official military organizations, the Swiss Officers Society and the Noncommissioned Officers Society. Finally, we collect personal data on the military service and military ranks of all Swiss legislators in office from 2000 to 2011. In this setting, we investigate how a military background affects the voting behavior of members of parliament on military affairs, always taking into account revealed constituents' preferences for the same legislative issues.

Our empirical results unequivocally show that members of parliament with a military background exhibit a statistically significantly higher probability of voting pro-military. The size of this effect is not influenced by other personal characteristics or party affiliations or by controlling for constituents' preferences. This is a relevant result, and no previous study has been able to account for constituents' preferences in such a natural way. However, it is challenging to interpret the finding: although it suggests that bringing more politicians with a military background to parliament increases the likelihood of pro-military proposals being accepted, it remains unclear whether military service makes politicians more pro-military or whether pro-military individuals are more likely to serve in the armed forces.

Our setting provides evidence that military service does not make individuals more pro-military but rather that a politician's motivation to voluntarily advance in the military explains pro-military voting behavior in parliament. Conscription is compulsory in Switzerland, but over time conscription requirements were relaxed. We observe politicians who served only as soldiers, others who usually chose to become noncommissioned officers, and a third group whose members almost certainly chose to become officers. Exploiting differences between age groups and military ranks allows us to distinguish a potential selection effect of advancing in the military from the treatment effect (socialization effect) of serving in the military. The results indicate that differential voting patterns occur due to self-selection into higher military ranks, i.e. pro-military motivated individuals tend to be promoted to higher military ranks and to vote more pro-military when in parliament later on. In contrast, simply serving as a soldier as a result of conscription does not induce future politicians to vote more pro-military compared to politicians who did not serve in the military.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 relates our contribution to the existing literature. Section 3 presents the institutional setting, our data, and the identification strategy. Empirical results for the influence of military service on the probability of representing military interests in parliament are presented in Section 4. Section 5 elaborates on whether differences in voting behavior emerge from individual selection into higher military ranks or whether compulsory service in the military affects attitudes toward the military. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding remarks.

## 2. Related literature and theoretical considerations

This paper is related to at least three different strands of research.

First, it relates to the literature on military budgets, institutions, and conflicts (see, among others, [Collier and Hoeffler, 2004, 2006](#); [Dunne et al., 2008](#); [Gadea et al., 2004](#); [Yildirim and Sezgin, 2005](#); [Nikolaidou, 2008](#); [Dunning, 2011](#); [Gebremedhin and Mavisakalyan, 2013](#)). Democratic institutions regulate the allocation of power and help to prevent conflicts (see [Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006, 2008](#)). However, commitment and accountability problems may exist in democratic as well as autocratic societies (see [Geddes, 1999, 2003](#); [Fearon, 2004](#); [Powell, 2004](#)). Recently, [Weeks \(2012\)](#) has shown substantial variation in belligerence and suggests that civilian autocratic regimes with powerful elites are just as likely to initiate conflict as democracies. Our analysis of military background as an individual characteristic of politicians helps to clarify

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