



## Estimating the defense spending vote<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Systematic evidence linking defense spending preferences to electoral choice has evaded scholars. This is surprising, given the relative importance of defense spending in terms of the overall budget, as well as the popular conception that increases in defense spending must be offset by decreases in social spending. I develop a theory that identifies the conditions *where*, *when*, and *for whom* defense spending preferences influence vote choice. I then introduce a new method that isolates the *defense spending vote* with a series of survey-specific models that account for factors unique to the particular situation in that country. I find that—contrary to conventional wisdom—defense spending preferences consistently influence vote choice. This presents an opportunity for right-wing parties and those that emphasize military buildups to attract votes, especially during times of heightened international tensions. These results highlight a strong connection between voters' preferences and electoral support in terms of national security issues, and speak to a number of important literatures including the constraining effects of public opinion on foreign policy and democratic representation.

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### 1. Introduction

Thus far, systematic evidence linking the preferences of the public regarding the size of the military to electoral choice has evaded scholars. The only evidence that we can draw originates from single-country examinations of vote choice in times of extremely high salience of foreign affairs in highly unique countries, such as support for Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Miller and Shanks, 1982), and to a lesser extent 1984 (Shanks and Miller, 1990), or the British Conservatives in 1987 (Miller et al., 1990).

The lack of evidence is somewhat puzzling considering a few realities of democratic politics. First, defense spending occupies a considerable, but highly variable, component of

the budget in advanced democracies, typically only second to welfare spending. Second, parties often take strategic decisions to make foreign and defense issues points of contention around which parties can compete in elections (e.g., Miller and Shanks, 1982). Finally, members of the elite, in addition to opinion leaders and members of the media, often characterize budgetary decisions as a zero-sum proposition where increases in one area must be offset by decreases in others. If the political discourse operates in this manner, then even if one is concerned more generally about the budget but not military spending in particular, then these fiscal preferences should be reflected in electoral decisions.

I develop a theory that explains *why* and *when* defense spending preferences have a substantively meaningful effect on vote choice in advanced democracies. The beneficiaries of such preferences are right-wing parties and/or those that emphasize military buildups in their party programs. The effects of partisan emphasis on the defense spending vote are conditioned by the presence of international hostilities—which increases the salience of national

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security issues—and the party's credibility as a governing alternative. I test these hypotheses on International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data from 26 democracies and 51 surveys ranging from 1985 to 2008. I define what I call the *defense spending vote*, which is the direct relationship between defense spending preferences and support for a party. This extremely flexible research design offers a variety of advantages over the pooled model, most principally the ability to demonstrate the conditions where there is a defense spending vote as well as which parties benefit from these preferences.

From a standpoint of representative democracy, the lack of evidence of electoral representation is somewhat puzzling given the wealth of evidence connecting spending preferences to policy outcomes. These studies of political moods tie overall shifts in public opinion to policy outputs (e.g., Stimson et al., 1995; Stimson, 1999), and provide consistent evidence that the public responds to deviations in policy away from the public's preferred position (Wlezien, 1995, 1996). Aside from actually incentivizing the leaders to shift their preferences closer to those of the public, one mechanism through which we can connect public preferences to policy outputs is by using elections to either change the bargaining position of government parties, or change the government parties altogether. Failure to see a relationship between defense spending preferences and the vote would suggest that leaders largely have free range to choose from a variety of budgetary tools to accomplish their political objectives. If, on the other hand, that we observe electoral accountability in reasonable ways according to individual-, party- and nation-specific determinants, then it would contradict pessimists who question the extent to which individuals can formulate and access their foreign policy preferences (e.g., Almond, 1950). Furthermore, identifying the defense spending vote might elucidate the credible mechanism linking foreign policy behavior (such as international conflict) to public opinion.

This project examines a central component of accountability in advanced democracies. First, I briefly review the literature connecting spending preferences and foreign policy issues to electoral considerations. Next, I present a model that explores how defense spending attitudes influence vote choice decisions. Finally, I offer a number of explanations for the variation in the defense spending vote across parties. The collective body of results suggests strong representative links in terms of defense spending, and offers evidence that national security influences electoral outcomes in a wide range of contexts.

## 2. Literature review

The primary means of ensuring policy responsiveness in modern democracies is through frequent elections. Simply by either rewarding or sanctioning politicians for their policy performance, voters can alter the composition of government and ultimately attempt to draw future policy closer to their preferred point. While individual-level studies of electoral choice have typically focused on the role of demographic variables such as class (e.g., Alford, 1963), partisanship (Campbell et al., 1960), income (Gelman, 2008),

perceptions of economic performance (Lewis-Beck, 1988), or other valence variables (Clarke et al., 2009), the role of foreign affairs has been minimized (see Aldrich et al., 2006 for a review). Exceptions include individual-level surveys that track the electoral consequences of foreign policy after a war (Page and Brody, 1972; Norpoth, 1987; Clarke et al., 2009), or studies of public opinion in one country across multiple wars (Berinsky, 2009). Defense spending represents a massive component of the budgets of modern democracies, so one might assume that there is relatively close convergence between the positions that politicians take and their electoral consequences.

Clear evidence for this type of accountability is elusive, and is limited to a few American elections where defense spending is quite salient. For example, in the 1980 presidential election, Reagan is judged to have benefited greatly from his position advocating a massive increase in defense spending (Miller and Shanks, 1982). The impacts of taking this position are substantively meaningful, and are second only to welfare spending attitudes in terms of influencing which candidates respondents support (Jacoby, 1994). The defense spending vote is elusive in that even the same candidate might no longer take advantage of ownership of the same issue in the following election. Shanks and Miller (1990) show that the advantage Reagan gained from this position in 1980 was drastically reduced in 1984, presumably due to a shift in public opinion toward reduced spending.<sup>1</sup>

We can look at the thermostatic model for guidance as to the connection between spending preferences and policy representation. The thermostatic model consistently shows that deviations in spending away from the public's preferred level are met with public opinion shifts in the opposite direction (Wlezien, 1995). The US represents the most common example of this response, but the pattern has also been demonstrated in Canada (Soroka and Wlezien, 2004) and Great Britain (Soroka and Wlezien, 2005). Though the correlation is not that novel in the US, the credible mechanisms linking preferences to output are not obvious. Two mechanisms are most likely. First, changes in preferred levels of spending are observed by forward-looking politicians motivated by reelection, and so they modify their spending priorities to be more consistent with the public's preferences (Wlezien, 1996; Stimson et al., 1995). In the metaphor of a thermostat, this is the case where the furnace responds to the thermostat's signal to turn up the heat. The second mechanism is that the public votes against parties that fail to respond to their preferences (the thermostat sends another signal to the furnace regarding preferred temperature). Both of these mechanisms ensure representation by leaders through electoral accountability, either through anticipation of elections, or through the electoral results themselves. Identifying and estimating a defense spending vote would provide additional support for the thermostatic model, since it would

<sup>1</sup> The shift in defense spending attitudes between 1980 and 1984 is quite substantial: "four years later the balance was almost reversed as a better than 4-1 margin favoring increased defense spending was replaced by a 3-1 margin favoring reduction" (Shanks and Miller, 1990: 169).

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