Historical Analogies and Public Support for Foreign Policy Action*

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Abstract

Politicians frequently use historical analogies to justify their preferred foreign policies. However, despite their prevalence, it remains unclear whether, how, and why they shape public opinion. We conduct the most comprehensive experimental test to date of the impact of historical analogies on the U.S. public's foreign policy preferences and find compelling evidence that analogical appeals increase mass confidence in leaders' foreign policy decisionmaking. We also illustrate several of the key mechanisms underlying this dynamic and show that historical analogies are more effective at shaping public opinion than (arguably) less rational presidential justifications like "gut" or intuition. Finally, we demonstrate that analogical reasoning is no more effective at moving public opinion than other types of rational justifications leaders use, such as appeals to experts, and that these other communication strategies impact public opinion through similar mechanisms as analogies. This suggests analogies are just one of many potentially effective devices in leaders' broader rhetorical toolkits. Our results reveal the logic and limitations of an important elite communication strategy in foreign policymaking, and contribute to the growing literature on foreign policy attitudes and political communication.

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"From the experience of the past we derive instructive lessons for the future."

— John Quincy Adams, 1825 Inaugural Address

"History teaches..."

— Multiple U.S. Presidents in Public Speeches[1]

Politicians frequently use historical analogies to justify their policy proposals. For example, household budget analogies are frequently deployed to advocate for fiscal austerity policies (Barnes and Hicks, 2022); analogies are used to rationalize domestic policy changes, such as police (Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger, 2023) and healthcare reforms (Barabas, Carter and Shan, 2020); and, perhaps most prominently, historical analogies are often used to explain courses of foreign policy action to the mass public (e.g., May, 1973; Khong, 1992; Shimko, 1994; Tierney, 2007; Axelrod and Forster, 2017; Flanik, 2017; Valentino and Weinberg, 2017). By likening a policy proposal to salient past events, policymakers can frame the stakes of a current crisis and signal to the public and other elites their views on the appropriate and optimal policy response. For instance, President Lyndon Johnson publicly invoked the 1938 Munich Agreement with Hitler as a justification against conciliation in Vietnam (Record, 2002). This analogy has also been omnipresent in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War (e.g., Kalhousová, Finkel and Kocián, 2024). In fact, it has been used by both sides to justify hawkish policies. The Holocaust is often analogized by pundits advocating U.S. intervention in humanitarian crises (Valentino and Weinberg, 2017). More recently, former President Biden publicly likened U.S. support for Ukraine to America's Lend-Lease program during World War II, and argued that America should once again serve as the "arsenal of democracy" (Zeitz, 2023).

While analogies are pervasive in politics, their impact on public opinion is the subject of significant debate. Some research suggests analogies are compelling tools for political communication, helping politicians advocate and justify proposed policies. By invoking history, officials' analogical appeals help ground their policy proposals in a salient, identifiable, and authoritative foundation—the past (Vertzberger, 1986). Particularly when policymakers' appeals accord with citizens' political memories or experiences, analogies are likely to form a persuasive base for policy arguments (Schuman and Rieger, 1992; Dyson and Preston, 2006). Some existing qualitative (Angstrom, 2011) and experimental (Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011; Barabas, Carter and Shan, 2020) work shows analogies increase support for key foreign and domestic policies.

[1]For example, see speeches by John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush.

On the other hand, analogical appeals could simply be "cheap talk," with little substantive impact on mass opinion. For one, partisan motivated reasoning often outweighs the influence of factual appeals in elite rhetoric (Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010). This suggests citizens' partisan ideologies may supersede the effects of analogies in the formation of attitudes. Indeed, analogies employed by policymakers often fulfill simple ideological functions (Mumford, 2015). For example, analogizing police brutality to repression under the Pinochet regime only increased support for police reform among segments of the Chilean public already predisposed to support reform, like left-leaning citizens (Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger, 2023). Further, even when officials wield analogies with the intent to persuade, historical invocations may fail to influence public attitudes. This could occur because citizens who are poorly-informed about international politics fail to appreciate the subtle implications of analogies (Valentino and Weinberg, 2017), or because politically-aware citizens rebut policymakers' analogies on the basis of inaccuracies or incongruities between historical and current events. For these reasons, the balance of existing evidence suggests analogical and metaphorical appeals have weak or null impacts (Valentino and Weinberg, 2017; Barnes and Hicks, 2022; Blumenau and Lauderdale, 2024; Menon et al., 2025).

Whether or not historical analogies impact public opinion on foreign policy has important implications for politics. Prior research—including on elites themselves—demonstrates that public views on foreign policy issues constrain the policies that leaders can pursue in foreign affairs (Chu and Recchia, 2022). If leaders cannot effectively sell their foreign policies to the public, they may lack the domestic political support to sustain them, especially in the long-term. Elite-public gaps have also been empirically shown to be smaller than is commonly assumed (Kertzer, 2022). If historical analogies impact the foreign policy preferences of the public, they may also impact the views of policymakers themselves, which is a contested question (Khong, 1992). Therefore, it is important to understand the effect of historical analogies on mass attitudes.

To advance this debate we investigate three research questions: (1) whether analogizing is an effective communication strategy for leaders interested in mobilizing public support behind foreign policy proposals; (2) what the mechanisms are by which analogies influence mass attitudes; and (3) whether analogies are more persuasive than other types of policy justifications, such as experts' recommendations or leaders' intuition. The stakes of this empirical debate are high. Political leaders employ analogies to garner support for major foreign poli-

cies relating to war, human rights, economic welfare, and international cooperation. Moreover, understanding the mechanisms underpinning the effects of analogies on public opinion helps illuminate neglected political microfoundations of analogical reasoning, an important communication strategy (Khong, 1992; Schlesinger and Lau, 2000). Only by unpacking the effectiveness of leaders' various tools for policy justification can we make progress in understanding important questions relating to elite decisionmaking and democratic accountability in the foreign policy process.

We argue that foreign policy analogies are an effective way to increase public support for proposed policies because they ground policy proposals in an authoritative source—the past. We further outline and test various mechanisms—including perceptions of policy success and costs, and beliefs about analogy-invoking leaders—by which historical analogies may persuade the public. Finally, we argue that analogizing holds greater persuasive impact than other types of policy justifications leaders use, such as those based on instinct or emotion (e.g., leaders' "gut" intuition). By contrast, historical analogies should hold comparable persuasive impact to other rationalizations that are *relatively* more fact- and logic-based, like expert assessments. This is not to imply that analogies lack an affective dimension—many historical analogies conjure strong emotions (Tierney, 2007). Nevertheless, they are rationalizations explicitly rooted in a (purportedly) logical process based on historical facts and case-based reasoning (Sylvan, Ostrom and Gannon, 1994).

To test our argument, we conducted three pre-registered survey experiments on the American public (n = 4,444). In each experiment, we randomly exposed respondents to different foreign policy scenarios, varying whether and how historical analogies were used by a president to justify a course of foreign policy action. Contrary to mixed results from previous studies, we find robust support for our core hypothesis that historical analogizing is an effective rhetorical strategy in international politics. On average across our three studies, the use of an historical analogy increased perceptions that the president chose the best foreign policy strategy by 7.4 percentage points compared to a control where no analogy was used. We also find evidence that analogies work by shaping perceptions of success, costs, leaders' qualities, and normative considerations. Additionally, we show that historical analogies have a relatively greater impact than intuition-based justifications. Still, all types of policy justifications (historical analogies, intuition-based arguments, and appeals to experts) increase policy support relative to conditions in which no justification is given. Moreover, we find that these different justification

strategies operate through similar mechanisms. These findings suggest that leaders can use all three types of policy justifications, perhaps in combination with each other, as effective political communication strategies.

Overall, our studies make three major contributions to scholarship on public opinion, communication, and international relations. First, adjudicating the debate on the impact of historical analogies on public opinion is important given the frequency with which policymakers use analogical reasoning—especially in the realm of international politics—and mixed evidence in prior studies. Most extant work has focused on understanding how historical analogies impact elites' decisionmaking during foreign policy crises (e.g., May, 1973; Jervis, 1976; Khong, 1992; Jones, 2022). We shed light on the downstream consequences of analogical appeals for public opinion, a question that warrants particular attention given politicians' increasing use of direct messaging strategies to communicate policy proposals with citizens during important foreign political crises (Barberá et al., 2024). Our study represents one of the most comprehensive experimental tests of the impact of historical analogies on the public's foreign policy preferences to date (see also Menon et al., 2025).

Second, and relatedly, our project offers the most extensive evaluation of the mechanisms by which historical analogies shape mass opinion. As Khong (1992, p. 10) explains, careful consideration of mechanisms is essential for progress in the research program on analogies and metaphors in political speech: "the challenge [for scholars is to]...specify what it is that historical analogies do and demonstrate how, if at all, such tasks influence decision outcomes." By clarifying mechanisms, our work illuminates heretofore neglected political microfoundations of analogical appeals. Developing evidence on mechanisms is also important for bridging divides between the literature on historical analogies and broader scholarship on leaders and elite political communication. For instance, existing work highlights incentives leaders have for justifying policies in terms of moral obligation (Tomz and Weeks, 2013, 2020, 2021; Maxey, 2020) and for using policy proposals to shape public perceptions of leaders' own traits (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015; Friedman, 2023). In showing that historical analogies work by generating a sense of moral obligation, shaping leaders' images, and fostering perceptions of success while reducing perceptions of costliness, our project extends insights from this broader literature.

Finally, this project's theory and results bear crucial implications for our understanding of elite foreign policy rhetoric, gridlock, and democratic accountability. To the extent elites can build broad-based support for sensible foreign policies through analogical invocations, our

findings are sanguine. Given domestic political gridlock in the realm of foreign policy (Friedrichs and Tama, 2024), generating policy consensus on key international affairs issues is challenging. Historical analogies and appeals may offer policymakers one means for overcoming this gridlock by grounding policy proposals with reference to salient past events. On the other hand, ample evidence suggests public officials often misapply historical analogies—deliberately or as a result of cognitive errors (May, 1973; Jervis, 1976). If policymakers systematically wield analogical appeals but draw mistaken inferences from history, our findings suggest that analogies could be used to persuade the public in support of strategically unwise or normatively dubious foreign policies. For instance, Jones (2022) shows how inappropriately applied analogies to the Vietnam and Soviet-Afghan wars enabled destructive and losing engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11. It is thus important for democratic accountability that scholars, political activists, and journalists pay attention to and correct politicians' misappropriated historical invocations.

Analogical Reasoning in the Policymaking Process

Humans resort to a variety of cognitive tools and heuristics to simplify the complex processes of policy deliberation, one of which is analogical and metaphorical reasoning (Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky, 1982). Broadly speaking, analogies and metaphors are "figures of speech that represent one thing in terms of something else" (Flanik, 2017, p. 3). Both analogies and metaphors work by offering individuals a recognizable lens through which to view contemporary events. In the absence of analogies or metaphors, current-day events might be difficult to understand due to truly novel developments or simply a lack of detailed knowledge about the circumstances surrounding events (e.g., not knowing about the countries involved in a crisis).

Despite their notable similarities, it is important to distinguish analogies from metaphors. Whereas analogies equate similar things and thus can be considered "within-domain" comparisons, metaphors associate unlike things and so can be considered "between-domain" comparisons (Shimko, 1994). For example, equating Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait to Adolf Hitler's European conquests (Jones, 2022) would be an analogy because it involves comparing two events that are in the same domain—interstate conflict. On the other hand, saying Hussein's annexation of Kuwait is akin to rape, as General Schwarzkopf did during the Gulf War (Flanik, 2017), is a metaphor because it involves comparing two phenomena in different domains—interstate conflict and sexual violence. Another famous (or, perhaps, infamous) metaphor in the foreign

policy space is that of falling dominoes. On balance, analogies tend to offer a closer "match" with contemporary events, whereas metaphors "are more abstract and remote" (Shimko, 1994, p. 665). As such, "analogies almost always draw on antecedent events, while metaphor seldom does" (Flanik, 2017, p. 6). Given that the core goal of this study is to assess whether policymakers' use of history to justify foreign policy decisions impacts public opinion, we focus on analogies rather than metaphors.

Following Khong (1992, p. 6-7), we define historical analogies as "inference[s] that if two or more events separated in time agree in one respect, then they may also agree in another." Jervis (1976, p. 217) elaborates on the cognitive impact historical analogies can have: "[w]hat one learns from international history is an important factor determining images that shape the interpretation of incoming information." In other words, by positing a correspondence between unfamiliar present circumstances and familiar past events, analogies and historical appeals assist individuals in responding to complex foreign policy crises (Houghton, 1996). More specifically, analogical reasoning helps individuals by anchoring the frames they use to interpret the stakes and consequences of current events to salient past events. In this way, memories and allusions to prior developments offer individuals "scripts" and "schema" for understanding complex and uncertain contemporary crises (Shimko, 1994). Drawing historical analogies is an essential way individuals learn from the past to refine future foreign policymaking (Levy, 1994; Reiter, 1994). Further, these impacts of analogical (and especially metaphorical) reasoning often operate subconsciously, wielding covert influence over the frameworks individuals apply (Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011).

Existing political psychology scholarship offers important evidence on the precise cognitive functions that analogical appeals support. For instance, Schlesinger and Lau (2000) show that analogies facilitate description, prediction, and prescription. By benchmarking complex real-world events against more readily-understandable "templates" from the past, analogizing can help individuals define interests and determine strategic consequences. More recently, Ghilani et al. (2017) highlight key social functions of analogical invocations. In their framework, historical analogies facilitate understanding by defining normative stakes, ascribing social roles to actors involved, prescribing appropriate responses, and persuading audiences about the correct course of action. This perspective harkens to earlier work by Vertzberger (1986), who shows how analogies bolster the perceived authority of analogy-invoking decisionmakers by framing their policy proposals as motivated by objective circumstances of the past. A third way his-

torical analogies can shape decisionmaking is by conjuring emotions tied to salient past events (Valentino and Weinberg, 2017). With an applicable analogical bridge, emotions linked with historical events are carried forward to present crises, lending emotive weight to policy decisions. Although having lived through a historical event may increase its emotional salience (Schuman and Rieger, 1992; Crawford, 2000), historical events that are learned secondhand in school or elsewhere can also be emotionally-resonant and readily "available" to individuals (Dyson and Preston, 2006).

Unsurprisingly, historical analogies are invoked frequently in foreign policymaking (Axelrod and Forster, 2017). Explicit analogical appeals have been voiced by policymakers in diverse crises ranging from the Korean War (Record, 2002), the Cuban Missile Crisis (Tierney, 2007), and the Vietnam War (Khong, 1992) to the Gulf War (Schuman and Rieger, 1992), the Balkan wars (Hehir, 2006), the wars in Afghanistan (Miller, 2016), Iraq (Angstrom, 2011), and tensions in the South China Sea (Kopper and Peragovics, 2019). Appeals to events a policymaker lived and governed through are particularly common and salient (Schuman and Rieger, 1992; Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger, 2023), though policymakers also frequently reference prominent historical events that they did not live through (Dyson and Preston, 2006). Policymakers' recurrent employment of historical analogies is easy to understand from a political psychological perspective. Analogies are an example of case-based reasoning—the use of previous actions to inform current decisions. Sylvan, Ostrom and Gannon (1994) show that this form of reasoning is particularly common among foreign policy experts appointed into the echelons of the U.S. national security bureaucracy. Outside the U.S. as well, elites are prone to form foreign policy preferences on the basis of case-based reasoning about historical policy successes (Goldsmith, 2005; Kalhousová, Finkel and Kocián, 2024).

For their purported benefits, the educative efficacy of analogies—and more broadly, policymakers' capacities for correctly learning from the past through analogies—is limited. First, analogies may mislead and distract political decisionmakers from important nuances about contemporary situations that do not comport with past, analogized scenarios (Gilovich, 1981). In a prominent study, May (1973) finds that analogies tend to mislead because policymakers do not test their relevance to contemporary circumstances, and instead rely on the first comparison that comes to mind. As Jervis (1976, p. 281-282) also explains, "[t]here is often little reason why those events that provide analogies should in fact be the best guides to the future...because outcomes are learned without careful attention to details of causation, lessons are superficial and

overgeneralized...[and] decisionmakers do not examine a variety of analogies before selecting the one that they believe sheds the most light on their situation." Second, psychological biases often plague human judgment as individuals learn and update (Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky, 1982; Levy, 1994). For instance, recency bias, the tendency to discount older information in favor of vivid, proximate events, can lead policymakers to draw inappropriate analogies (Reiter, 1994). Likewise, negativity bias, the tendency to focus on past failures rather than past successes, may also reduce the quality of analogical reasoning (Johnson and Tierney, 2018). These tendencies are a reflection of broader cognitive barriers that may inhibit rational decisionmaking in the foreign policy process.

Historical Analogies and Policy Justifications to the Public

As the preceding discussion suggests, scholars have a well-developed understanding of the ways historical analogies shape the first stage of the policymaking process. That is, whether and how historical analogies affect elite policy decisionmaking. The second stage of the policymaking process requires elites to justify policies, once they are decided upon, to the public.

Because of institutional and electoral constraints in democracies, leaders must sell their preferred policies to citizens and other elite decisionmakers (Aldrich et al., 2006). To do so, politicians use speeches, television advertisements, and social media to communicate their policy choices. In the U.S. context, presidential communications are uniquely noteworthy and important since presidents can wield their privileged and important role to command media attention and "speak directly and at length to the general public" (Nelson, Oxley and Clawson, 1997, p. 238), and because presidential rhetoric is echoed by other political elites (Peterson, 1994). Through mass media messaging, policymakers aim to shape public opinion by priming and framing issues and stakes, and persuading audiences to support leaders' beliefs and policy convictions (Zaller, 1992; Druckman and Holmes, 2004). The influence of elite political communication is particularly great in the realm of foreign policy since the mass public is generally less knowledgeable about foreign than domestic political issues ex ante (Wildavsky, 1966). At the outset of foreign crises, information gaps between leaders and publics are particularly large, giving presidents and other policymakers latitude to shape mass beliefs through rhetoric (Baum and Potter, 2008; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017; Berinsky, 2019).

In order to build political coalitions and swing public opinion in favor of their preferred

policies, politicians must justify their policy proposals. The process of justification involves outlining why a designated course of action is superior to other possible alternatives for meeting the political challenge at hand. The ultimate goal is to mobilize political action behind a policy by convincing audiences to support both the substance and procedure of a proposal (Kornprobst, 2012). When successful, justifications help convince citizens that proposed policies are wise, legitimate, merited, and consistent with past policy practice (Anderson, 1981). In the realm of foreign policy, elites invoke a range of policy justifications, which vary in both their content and their form or evidentiary basis. In terms of content, foreign policy justifications tend to highlight either security or humanitarian motivations for taking action (Finnemore, 2004; Nelson, 2010). Security-based justifications often rely on manipulating citizens' fears about grave, imminent threats to vital national interests (Köhler, 2019) and citizens' concerns about resolve and reputation (Anderson, 1981). In contrast, humanitarian justifications are other-regarding. The security and welfare of foreign populations are the aim of policies justified in these terms (Finnemore, 2004; Nelson, 2010). Importantly, leaders may invoke both types of substantive policy justifications at different times to win support from different audiences predisposed to security-based or humanitarian frames (Maxey, 2020).

Apart from their content, policy justifications also vary in their form or evidentiary basis. In particular, leaders may justify policies on the basis of "hot" or "cold" cognition. "Hot" cognition justifications rely on appeals to emotions or instinct, whereas "cold" cognition justifications rely on logic and rational calculation (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017, p. 547).[2] Instinctual (i.e., "hot" cognition) justifications often rest on appeals to "gut" feelings.[3] While not rationally-reasoned, these justifications often hold emotive weight, and are particularly appealing to powerful political actors in foreign affairs (Pomeroy, 2025). Examples abound. For instance, President Trump has said, "I have a gut, and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else's brain can ever tell me" (Zhang, 2019). In justifying the Iraq war, President George W. Bush similarly noted, "I'm not a textbook player. I'm a gut player. I rely on my instincts" (Woodward, 2002).

Rational (i.e., "cold" cognition) justifications take various forms—the key is that these policy arguments are rooted in (seemingly) thoughtful and objective assessments of the circumstances at hand. One important class of rational justifications are based on appeals to expertise and intelligence, such as when presidents claim that proposed policies are endorsed

[2] Leaders regularly use both types of justifications in their political communications.
[3] Another category of "hot" cognition justifications hinge on widely-held stereotypes, which might lead individuals to reflexively judge a situation without measured reflection (Schwartz and Blair, 2020).

by military and diplomatic experts or classified assessments (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012). Analogical appeals are another class of rational justifications.[4] By grounding present proposals in the context of past cases and decisions, historical analogies attempt to justify policies on the basis of precedent (Anderson, 1981). These justifications communicate that analogy-invoking policymakers have measured current circumstances against salient past examples while deciding on a course of action. In turn, rational justifications like analogical appeals or expert-based assessments should give citizens greater confidence in their leaders' foreign policy proposals, and thereby increase popular support (Gowa, 2000, p. 26).

Reconciling Mixed Evidence on Historical Analogies

Extending these insights, a small but growing literature examines the political efficacy and attitudinal consequences of analogical justifications for public policies (e.g., Valentino and Weinberg, 2017; Barabas, Carter and Shan, 2020; Barnes and Hicks, 2022; Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger, 2023). Existing findings on this question are mixed. While some work shows analogical appeals mobilize substantial public support for policy proposals (Angstrom, 2011; Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011; Barabas, Carter and Shan, 2020), other studies find weak effects (Valentino and Weinberg, 2017; Barnes and Hicks, 2022; Blumenau and Lauderdale, 2024), or show that analogies only resonate with certain narrow subsets of the mass public (Schuman and Rieger, 1992; Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger, 2023).

Reasons for this indeterminacy are four-fold. The first explanation is methodological. Qualitative studies of analogical appeals offer detailed and well-contextualized accounts of specific analogies used in historical cases (e.g., Goldsmith, 2005). However, qualitative designs are infrequently optimized to identify the effects of analogies on public attitudes. For instance, in real-world settings leaders and experts on different sides of an issue are likely to deploy competing arguments and historical analogies—or even the same historical analogies framed differently—to suggest opposite courses of action. In case studies and other qualitative examinations, dueling analogies can have countervailing effects on public opinion, attenuating the aggregate effects of analogical appeals. In this respect, our experimental approach offers infer-

[4] To be sure, historical analogies are not wholly objective or rational—various psychological biases and differences in context between historical and contemporary events might cause the invocation of an analogy to be inappropriate. Particular analogies may also be salient for emotional rather than entirely logical reasons (Crawford, 2000). Still, attempts to use historical cases to shed light on the present may be considered comparatively more rational than justifications focused solely or primarily on "gut" instincts, which presidents frequently fall back on to defend their policy preferences.

ential advantages. In our experimental setting we can isolate the effect of a single historical analogy used to advocate for one particular policy. Ceteris paribus, this clean, internally valid approach should lead to stronger estimated effects.

Second, prior work may find mixed effects of analogical appeals because the effectiveness of these appeals varies across analogical types. Analogies vary in diverse ways, including in their themes, prescriptions, and valences. Two particularly important dimensions of difference concern the recognizability and polarization of analogized events. Better-known and less polarizing historical events are more likely to yield strong, unifying public responses. Consider analogies to repression under Chile's Pinochet regime. Many Chilean citizens fundamentally disagree about whether Augusto Pinochet's legacy is positive or negative. This contested legacy helps explain why Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger (2023) find weak aggregate but significant heterogeneous effects of analogies to Pinochet-era repression. In contrast, analogies to well-known and more uncontested events are more likely to have large persuasive impacts.

Third, as suggested above, the effects of analogical appeals may also vary across domestic and foreign policy issues. Past experimental work generally tends to focus on domestic policy issues, such as budget deficits (Barnes and Hicks, 2022). While more research is needed on the subject, there are reasons to think that the effects of historical analogies are particularly strong in the realm of foreign policy. This follows because the public is generally less knowledgeable about foreign issues than domestic ones (Wildavsky, 1966; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017). Consequently, they rely heavily on elite messaging to form opinions (Berinsky, 2019).

A final explanation for mixed findings in previous work is conceptual. In particular, while a large literature examines rhetorical devices in political communication, some past research surveyed above examines metaphors rather than analogies (e.g., Blumenau and Lauderdale, 2024). Since metaphors equate unlike things by making "between-domain" comparisons, they offer less concrete policy guidance than analogies, which associate like things through "within-domain" comparisons. For example, as Shimko (1994) highlights, while the Munich analogy directly indicates the appropriate policy to adopt in the face of an expansionist power (stand firm rather than appease), the domino metaphor does not directly suggest whether the optimal policy is to intervene in an attempt to prevent dominoes from falling or simply to allow them to fall where they may. Metaphors, such as domino theory, are often more useful for defining a problem or challenge than for solving it (Schlesinger and Lau, 2000). Weaker effects of metaphorical than analogical appeals are intuitive given this. Because we focus on the impact

of historical *analogies*, ours is a somewhat easier test than if had we studied metaphors.[5]

Fully disentangling whether and how these different factors shape the persuasive effects of historical analogies is beyond the scope of this article. However, our results offer initial evidence that both methodological and theoretical factors matter. Experiments are clearly well-suited for focusing analytical attention on individual analogies in more internally valid but abstract vignettes. At the same time, we also document important variation in the effectiveness of analogical appeals across analogized events. Future work should explore whether historical analogies can also be deployed to undermine policy support, and how competing or contested analogies shape public preferences.

Theory: The Impact of Historical Analogies on Public Opinion

Our core contention is that historical analogies are effective rhetorical devices for persuading audiences to support a particular foreign policy decision. Historical analogies provide accessible and emotionally-evocative "scripts" for audiences thinking through potential policy responses to complex foreign policy crises (Sylvan, Ostrom and Gannon, 1994). These predefined and easily recognizable lenses ease the otherwise cognitively-taxing process of foreign policy preference-formation. Lau, Smith and Fiske (1991) show that officials can engage in political persuasion by shaping the information environment, and especially by offering "interpretations" of contemporary policies. This is precisely the function of historical analogies. By offering salient interpretations of current events, analogical appeals help align audiences' understandings of events with policymakers' proposed frames, rendering analogies a politically persuasive rhetorical device.

A countervailing argument suggests that historical analogies may lack the resonance required to move public opinion if publics are poorly-informed about foreign policy specifically and history in general. Since analogies work most effectively when they offer familiar scripts of which the public has some knowledge (Schuman and Rieger, 1992; Shimko, 1994; Dyson and Preston, 2006), a lack of requisite information among the masses could cause leaders' analogical invocations to fall flat. However, on balance, we expect analogies to move the public's views. Even if the public lacks *detailed* knowledge about foreign policy history and did not experience

[5]Given the frequency with which policymakers deploy historical analogies to justify foreign policies, our core research question remains a substantively meaningful one to address. Whether our results generalize to metaphorical justifications is an important question for future research.

an event firsthand, citizens are often broadly familiar with particularly salient past events, like World War II and the Cuban Missile Crisis, through education and the media (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Berinsky, 2019). Moreover, historical analogies can still impact public opinion when the public is unfamiliar with the historical event being referenced by a policymaker. This is because analogical appeals convey to citizens that policy proposals are grounded in measured considerations of historical precedent (Vertzberger, 1986). In other words, they suggest to members of the public that a policymaker has some amount of evidence for their policy preferences through case-based reasoning (Sylvan, Ostrom and Gannon, 1994).

> H_1 **(Policy Credibility): When a leader uses a historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more likely to believe the invoking leader chose the best foreign policy strategy.**

Mechanisms: Why Analogies Increase Policy Support

We argue there are a variety of ways historical analogies may help leaders justify their proposed foreign policies. Theorizing and testing all possible mechanisms underpinning analogies' persuasive effects is beyond the scope of this paper, but represents an important avenue for future research. Here, we outline and test several primary pre-registered mechanisms that could explain the persuasive effect of historical analogies. Specifically, we argue that historical analogies can influence perceptions of (1) success, (2) costs and benefits, (3) ethics, and (4) presidential traits. Importantly, multiple of the mechanisms we identify may operate in parallel—a possibility our empirical approach explicitly allows.

It is also important to recognize at the outset that different analogies likely work through different mechanisms. For example, some analogies may be more strategic in nature and thus impact perceptions of success, whereas others may be more ethical in nature and therefore impact views about morality (Tierney, 2007). We do not contend that each of the four primary mechanisms we identify will hold for every analogy. Nevertheless, each of these mechanisms has been shown by prior work to be an important determinant of public support for foreign policies (e.g., Tomz and Weeks, 2013, 2020, 2021; Maxey, 2020), and thus they can potentially help explain how an analogy would impact an individual's views. Below, we explain exactly how analogies relate to each of these four mechanisms.

The most intuitive way historical analogies may work to persuade audiences to support leaders' policy proposals is by shaping audiences' estimations of policy success. A large literature in international relations confirms that publics are "defeat-phobic" and care overwhelmingly

about whether enacted foreign policies succeeded in furthering national priorities (e.g., Feaver and Gelpi, 2004; Eichenberg, 2005). We argue that historical analogies may persuade audiences by shifting their expectations about the probability that a proposed policy will succeed in an ongoing crisis. For instance, analogies to the Cuban Missile Crisis—widely considered an American victory—may cue respondents to think a similar strategy will succeed, while analogies to the Munich Agreement—a disastrous example of appeasement—are likely to convince the public similar policies will fail. In line with this view, prior work shows that analogies to the Iraq "surge," which helped quell insurgent violence in western Iraq in 2006–2007, fueled optimism about the application of a similar approach in Afghanistan in 2010–2011 (Miller, 2016). Thus, analogies may persuade by increasing audiences' perceptions of the probability of policy success. Indeed, scholars that have studied historical analogies qualitatively have made similar theoretical arguments. Khong (1992, p. 10) posits that analogies "help evaluate options by predicting their chances of success", and Shimko (1994, p. 665) argues analogies "help to answer the decision maker's implicit question: What should I do now? What policies will succeed? What policies will fail?" This discussion suggests the following hypothesis:

> H_2 **(Success Mechanism): When a leader uses a historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more likely to believe the chosen policy will lead to a successful outcome for their country.**

Naturally, considerations about policy success must also involve the relative distribution of costs and benefits. The public and elites tend to judge foreign policy effectiveness both in terms of whether policies succeed in furthering important national aims and in terms of how much policies cost (Baldwin, 2000). If a policy is expected to bring meager benefits relative to its costs, then it is unlikely to foster public support. Analogies that imply a proposed policy could offer success, but only at a massive expense in blood or treasure, may not foster public support. For instance, during the Second Lebanon War analogies Israeli policymakers drew to the First Lebanon War altered estimations of policy costs and benefits (Siniver and Collins, 2015). Israeli officials opted for an airpower-centric strategy precisely because analogies they focused on suggested that airpower would be relatively less costly than a ground invasion. In line with this logic, Baldwin (2000) shows that elites often attempt to generate public support for proposed policies by framing their proposals as relatively less costly than alternatives. We argue analogies can be a particularly effective tool for indicating the benefits of a policy outweigh its costs. For example, an analogy to the Vietnam War implies intervention will be a costly

quagmire, while an analogy to the Gulf War or Cuban Missile Crisis would imply a cheaper and faster military intervention.

> H_3 **(Cost-Benefit Mechanism): When a leader uses a historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more likely to believe the benefits of the chosen policy outweigh the costs.**

Policy effectiveness and cost are important to the public for instrumental reasons. However, publics also hold policy-relevant moral values, and care about the normative contours of contemporary crises. For instance, attitudes about foreign policy are shaped by perceptions of harm, fairness, and reciprocity (Kertzer et al., 2014). For this reason, policymakers often frame their policy proposals in morally-laden, prescriptive terms (Busby, 2010; Maxey, 2020). In the context of analogies, moral frames hold particularly persuasive weight. Tierney (2007) shows how President Kennedy's moral interpretation of the Pearl Harbor attacks impacted his preferences over military responses during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy felt it was morally inappropriate to inflict a "Pearl Harbor in reverse" on Cuba. Similarly, politicians advocating humanitarian interventions often invoke the Holocaust analogy, with a desire to frame engagement as a moral obligation (Valentino and Weinberg, 2017). Historical analogies' persuasive effects may be attributable to audiences' normative perceptions of analogized policies. In other words, analogies may persuade by bolstering perceptions that a proposed policy is morally justified. As Khong (1992, p. 10) put it, analogies "help evaluate options by...evaluating their moral rightness." Of course, some analogies are more strategic in nature and do not implicate ethics much at all (Tierney, 2007). Nevertheless, for those that do touch on morality, we expect the following to hold:

> H_4 **(Morality Mechanism): When a leader uses a historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more likely to believe that the leader's chosen policy is morally just.**

The success, cost-benefit, and morality mechanisms outlined above emphasize how historical analogies may persuade audiences by shifting perceptions of *policies*. A fourth way historical appeals may persuade audiences to support analogized policies is by shifting perceptions of analogy-invoking *leaders* (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015; Friedman, 2023). We argue that invoking historical analogies may help leaders convey to relevant audiences information about three especially beneficial qualities: competence, intelligence, and knowledge of history. Leaders with reputations for competency and consistency are perceived as most likely to implement policies that comport with the national interest. These traits are important because they "serve as

an umbrella for a variety of qualities used to evaluate a leader" (Sorek, Haglin and Geva, 2018, p. 662). Ample evidence in social psychology suggests the persuasiveness of messages is tied to source characteristics. Of particular importance is expertise. When a message is perceived as being conveyed by a subject matter expert, audiences are more likely to view the message as compelling and persuasive (Clark et al., 2012). Citizens and policymakers value intelligent leaders because they anticipate that these leaders implement more effective policies. For example, politicians' educational attainments bolster perceptions of their economic leadership. By contrast, leaders perceived of as "irrational" garner less support (Schwartz, 2023). Through the use of historical analogies, leaders demonstrate analytical skills and related characteristics useful in foreign policy. For publics generally less-informed about foreign policy history, analogizing may help build confidence in leaders' policy proposals by increasing confidence in leaders' own capabilities, even if citizens are not familiar with the specifics of an analogy.

> H_5 **(Leader Traits Mechanism): When a leader uses a historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more likely to believe that the leader is competent, intelligent, and knowledgeable about history.**

Factors that Impact the Effectiveness of Historical Analogies

Under what conditions are historical analogies more effective at moving public opinion? Again, while theorizing and testing every possible relevant condition is beyond the scope of this paper, we focus on two core features of analogies that we expect to be especially salient based on prior research: valence and familiarity.

Valence reflects whether an analogy is positive (i.e., suggests repeating a prior action), or negative (i.e., suggests avoiding a prior action). We expect that analogies that prime past failures should have a greater impact on public opinion than positive analogies that prime prior successes. This follows from "negativity bias," a tendency in human cognition to prioritize bad over good (Baumeister et al., 2001). Negativity bias exerts a powerful impact in international relations. For example, Johnson and Tierney (2018) find that negativity bias can help explain dynamics like the security dilemma, threat inflation, loss aversion, and war. Research also finds that learning in international politics is more likely to occur after failures than successes (Levy, 1994), and policymakers are more likely to draw historical analogies to prior negative events (May, 1973). Thus, we expect negative historical analogies to have a greater impact.

> H_6 **(Negative vs. Positive Analogies): When a leader uses a negative historical analogy that primes a prior failure to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more likely to believe that the leader chose the best foreign policy strategy than when they use a positive historical analogy that primes a prior success to justify a foreign policy decision.**

We also consider whether analogies that are more familiar to respondents have a greater impact on attitudes. As discussed above, analogies work by making a current, unfamiliar situation more familiar through reference to a past situation. If an analogy is not familiar to respondents, either in terms of firsthand or secondhand experience, then it may not effectively fulfill this function. More unfamiliar analogies may also lack emotional resonance (Crawford, 2000). In accordance with our argument, prior research has found that distinct cohorts tend to use different analogies (Foster and Palmer, 2006) and that respondents who lived through a historical event are more likely to be persuaded by analogies to it (Schuman and Rieger, 1992). For example, Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger (2023) show that analogies to the repressive Pinochet regime in Chile are more impactful among subjects who lived during Pinochet's reign. We thus expect that familiar analogies have a greater effect on public attitudes.[6]

> H_7 **(More Familiar vs. Less Familiar Analogies): When a leader uses a more familiar historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more likely to believe that the leader chose the best foreign policy strategy than when they use a less familiar historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision.**

Historical Analogies vs. Other Policy Justifications

Finally, we consider the relative effectiveness of historical analogies versus other evidentiary bases for justifying foreign policies.[7] Following Jervis (1976) and Kahneman (2011), we distinguish two categories of policy rationales: instinctual (based on "hot" cognition) versus rational (based on "cold cognition"). Instinctual justifications are based on leaders' intuition, emotions, and "gut" feelings. Rational justifications, by contrast, are rooted in concrete, deliberate, measured, and fact-based assessments.[8]

[6] Alternatively, it is possible that less familiar historical analogies may have a greater impact on actors' beliefs. Specifically, since unfamiliar historical analogies provide more *new* information than familiar ones, unfamiliar analogies may spur more learning and Bayesian updating (e.g., Hill, 2017).

[7] We recognize that leaders likely have incentives to utilize multiple types of justifications, and that various rhetorical strategies leaders use may be complementary. For the sake of parsimonious testing, we focus on comparing the effect of analogical appeals to other types of policy justifications. Future work should more formally examine complementarities between diverse justification strategies.

[8] While scholars sometimes use these terms to describe how the public reacts to leaders' rhetoric (e.g., in rational or emotional/intuitive ways), here we use the terms to describe whether leaders themselves are making arguments

Historical analogies are a form of rational justification because they represent efforts to ground policy proposals in the context of past cases and decisions (Sylvan, Ostrom and Gannon, 1994). Attempts to use historical cases to shed light on the present are substantially better reasoned than justifications focused solely on "gut" feelings, which presidents frequently fall back on to defend their policy preferences. This is not to say that leaders always reference their intuition to justify policies, or do so more frequently than referencing historical analogies or expert opinions. However, instinctual appeals provide a useful theoretical contrast to more logically-rooted historical analogies. On balance, we expect historical analogies to have a greater persuasive impact than instinctual justifications since the former are more evidence-based than the latter. In other words, holding the content of the justification constant (e.g., humanitarian or security rationale), we expect the evidentiary basis (historical analogy versus gut instinct) to matter.

> H_8 **(Historical Analogies vs. Gut Instinct): When a leader uses a historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should be more positively disposed towards the policy compared to when a leader uses their intuition/gut to justify a policy.**

Of course, leaders can also justify policies on rational grounds apart from analogical invocations. For example, leaders can justify proposals by appealing to advisors' expertise. We expect historical analogies to have similar effects on public opinion as other forms of rational policy justifications, such as appeals to expertise or intelligence. All types of rational justifications are evidence-based and thus should increase the public's perception that a policy choice is wise (Blumenau and Lauderdale, 2024). Historical analogies invoked by leaders may have the capacity to influence public opinion, but not a unique capacity to do so.

> H_9 **(Historical Analogies vs. Expert Justification): Relative to other forms of expert justification, when a leader uses a historical analogy to justify a foreign policy decision, then audiences should not be more positively or negatively disposed towards the policy.**

rooted in logic or intuition.

Experimental Design

To test our theory, we conducted three pre-registered survey experiments on American citizens.[9] The studies were carried out online via Lucid.[10] We used quota sampling to obtain a respondent pool that approximates the adult population of the U.S. with respect to census benchmarks for race, ethnicity, gender, age, and region (appendix section B). Survey instruments and vignettes are described in the appendix (section F).

In Study 1 (n = 1,166), respondents were randomly assigned to one of two issue conditions set in 2030—a hypothetical crisis with China over Taiwan or a hypothetical crisis with China over the construction of a military base in Panama. Within each issue condition, respondents were also randomly assigned to read either a control vignette or a treatment vignette containing an analogical appeal. These conditions were designed to loosely mirror central elements of actual historical crises.

The first scenario involves a Chinese invasion of Taiwan meant to evoke comparisons with the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938. The second scenario involves Chinese construction of a military base in Panama meant to evoke comparisons with Soviet base construction in Cuba in 1962. We chose to study crises between the U.S. and China in Study 1 because U.S.-China competition is geopolitically important and because a major crisis unfolding between these countries in the near future is plausible. In the scenario where China invades Taiwan, the president proposes a strong military response to Chinese aggression in both the control and treatment conditions. The only difference between treatment and control is that in the former the president uses the infamous Munich analogy to justify his proposed course of action. Since the Munich analogy indicates appeasing Hitler's territorial demands was counter-productive and only led to further land conquests, allowing China to annex Taiwan might also be foolish.[11] In the scenario where China is building a military base in Panama, the president opts to impose a naval blockade to prevent Chinese access to the base in both the control and treatment conditions. The only difference between the treatment and control vignettes is that

[9] Study 1 was conducted in April 2023, Study 2 in May 2024, and Study 3 in June 2024.

[10] We included a pre-treatment screener to maximize respondent attentiveness. Appendix section B describes our sample and research ethics.

[11] This experimental design helps overcome a challenge observational work faces, which is that different leaders may deploy competing historical analogies, or the same analogy framed differently, to make the case for opposite courses of action. We offer a controlled test of the effect of analogies. The Munich Agreement and Cuban Missile Crisis are also clearly analogies rather than metaphors since they involve associating two similar things—historical foreign policy events and contemporary foreign policy crises. As such, and given that these are foreign policy rather than domestic policy analogies for which there is not a pre-existing and sharp disagreement about their meaning, we expect to find stronger results than prior studies.

in the former the president justifies his policy by analogizing the Cuban Missile Crisis. Since the United States' imposition of a naval quarantine during the Cuban Missile Crisis was ostensibly effective, so might a similar policy in response to China's base construction. The analogy treatments we utilize are relatively detailed in that they explain the context of the historical event and why it is relevant to the contemporary crisis. This way of constructing the treatments may have the effect of strengthening the analogy for respondents that had not previously had firsthand or secondhand knowledge of the historical event. Future work could test whether the results might change if the treatment language was less detailed and more abstract.

To help ensure information equivalence across conditions (Dafoe, Zhang and Caughey, 2018), our vignettes explicitly hold constant information about the U.S. president, China's regime type, the relative power and relationship between the U.S. and China, and the policy response the U.S. president proposes. In all conditions, we also randomize the stated partisan affiliation of the U.S. president.

Study 2 (n = 1,809) probes the external validity of our findings by testing the impact of different historical analogies in two distinct foreign policy scenarios (again set in 2030). We also test our hypotheses related to valence and familiarity. The first scenario involves the mass killing of Rohingya ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Instead of a scenario involving international competition (as in Study 1), this scenario entails a humanitarian crisis. In both the control and treatment conditions, the president decides to intervene militarily to protect the Rohingya. In the treatment condition, the president employs a historical analogy to the NATO humanitarian intervention in the Bosnian War to justify this policy. To test our expectations related to negativity bias, in the "positive analogy" treatment condition the president points to the Bosnian intervention as a humanitarian success, whereas in the "negative analogy" treatment condition the president points to the delay intervening as costing many lives and being a failure. We thus hold constant the historical episode being analogized and just experimentally vary the analogy's valence.

The second foreign policy scenario in Study 2 involves a nuclear crisis with Iran. The president is deliberating between different policy options, including regime change. In both the treatment and control conditions, he ultimately decides to launch a limited military operation to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities. As before, the only difference between the treatment and control vignettes is that in the former the president deploys an analogy—either to the Vietnam War or the Philippine–American War—to explain why a regime change operation is not the

optimal policy. Both the Vietnam and Philippine Wars were costly examples of regime change, and are thus used by the president to argue that adopting a similar strategy against Iran does not make sense. We use the exact same language in the Philippine and Vietnam war treatments, swapping only country names. Undoubtedly, the U.S. war in Vietnam is more familiar to the general public on average than the U.S. war in the Philippines. Data we gathered from our study bears out this assumption. While over 50% of respondents indicated that they were "not at all familiar" with the Philippine–American War, less than 7% of respondents answered similarly when asked about the Vietnam War. Comparing effects across these conditions allows us to assess whether more or less familiar analogies are more persuasive.

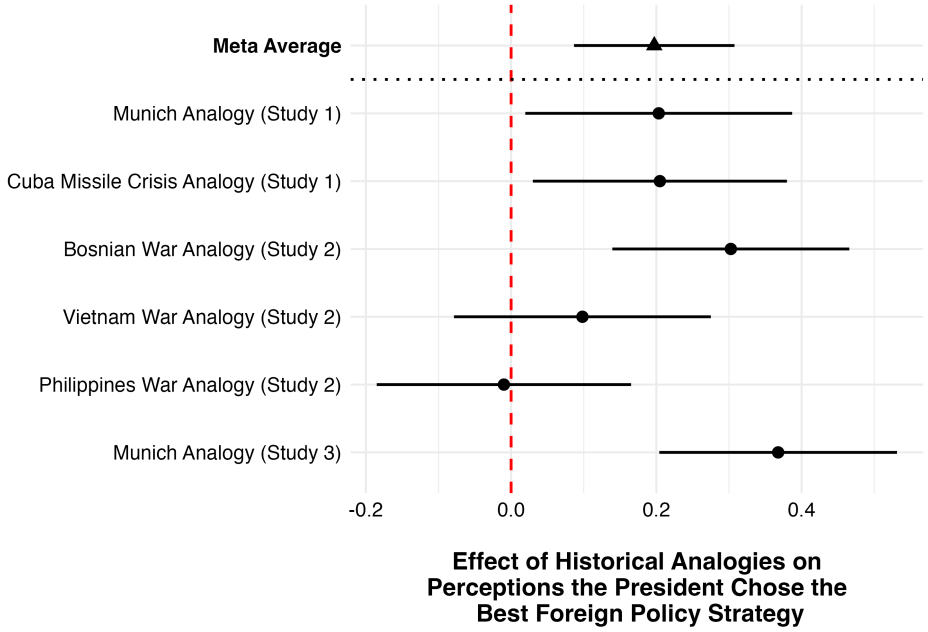
In Studies 1 and 2, the counterfactual against which we compare historical analogies is one in which the president does not invoke an alternative justification. In Study 3 (n = 1,469), we test whether the nature of the counterfactual matters. This study closely resembles the invasion of Taiwan scenario from Study 1, except we add two additional experimental conditions. One involves the president justifying his decision by appealing to his intuition, which tells him (just as the Munich analogy suggests) that China "has expansionist goals" and "allowing China to take over Taiwan would likely just embolden them to pursue future land conquests." The other involves a justification based on the recommendations of experts from the Defense and State Departments, who also conclude based on their experience that China "has expansionist goals" and "allowing China to take over Taiwan would likely just embolden them to pursue future land conquests." The lesson (do not appease aggressive countries) and logic or content (doing so will just embolden them further) of each justification is thus held constant, but we vary the evidentiary basis of the lesson and content (history, intuition, or expert assessment). Overall, by varying the counterfactual our studies offer easier (Studies 1 and 2) and harder tests (Study 3) of the impact of analogies.

In all three studies, our primary outcome variable is a five-point measure of perceived policy credibility—the extent to which respondents believe the president "chose the best strategy for dealing with [the crisis]" (Blair and Schwartz, 2023). This question allows us to assess whether historical analogies accomplish their primary public relations goal: increasing mass confidence in a proposed policy. We also ask several questions to test our hypothesized causal mechanisms (appendix section A). Each study further includes a pre-treatment battery of demographic and attitudinal questions. The appendix contains the full design of our experiments (section F) and a list of our pre-registered hypotheses (sections C.4, D.5, and E.5).

Results

We begin by assessing our core hypothesis that historical analogies increase perceptions of policy credibility. Our findings across all three studies are summarized in Figure 1 and reveal support for our theoretical expectations. The top estimate reflects the meta-analytic average effect of analogical appeals across the three studies.[12] On average, analogies increase perceptions the president chose the best foreign policy strategy by 0.2 points on a 5-point scale ($p = 0.0005$) or 7.4 percentage points on a binary outcome scale ($p < 0.0001$).

Figure 1: Effect of Historical Analogies on Policy Credibility



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals. Plots depict the effect of historical analogies compared to a control condition where no policy justification is given.

Across studies we observe variation in the efficacy of analogies. Specifically, estimates for the Vietnam and Philippines war analogies in Study 2 are not statistically significant. The likely explanation is that these analogies suggest a regime change intervention against Iran is unwise, but do not directly support the president's chosen policy—a limited strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure. By comparison, the Munich, Cuban Missile Crisis, and Bosnian analogies more directly suggest that the president's chosen policy is the correct course of action. This result represents suggestive evidence that the efficacy of historical analogies depends on how closely analogies hew to the president's chosen course of action. Future research should test

[12] This effect is calculated using the `metafor` package in R using random effects, which allows for the effect of historical analogies to vary depending on the foreign policy scenario and the specific analogy used.

this implication more directly and assess whether the public is less moved by "bad" analogies that are an ill-fit for directly justifying the president's policy preference.

In the appendix we test a range of heterogeneous effects across socio-demographic factors like political identification, education, and gender.[13] We take two approaches to examining effect heterogeneity. First, in Tables C-3, D-3, D-4, and E-3 we interact our analogy treatment indicator with relevant respondent-level covariates. Across these specifications we find mostly null results.[14] Of course, one caveat is that these models are statistically underpowered. To further probe heterogeneity, we adopt a more flexible Bayesian hierarchical approach (Alley, 2023) in Figures C-1, D-1, D-2, and E-1. Reanalyzing the heterogeneous effects of treatment in these additional specifications shows that, per our pre-registered expectations, our historical analogy treatments have a greater effect among very hawkish respondents in Studies 1 and 3, perhaps because the Munich and Cuban Missile Crisis analogies suggest hawkish courses of action are relatively wise, which accords with hawkish respondents' priors.

In contrast to some prior work (Schuman and Rieger, 1992; Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger, 2023), we also find no compelling statistical evidence across either approach that the effects are stronger among older respondents who lived through the analogized historical event (see appendix sections C.3, D.3, and E.3). As discussed above, there are logical reasons why analogies may impact individuals' views even if they lack firsthand (or prior secondhand) knowledge of the historical event. However, given concerns about statistical power, and particularly since our samples have relatively few older individuals, we caution against making strong inferences from these findings. The absence of evidence for age as a moderator should not be taken as evidence that there is no effect heterogeneity whereby older respondents are more receptive to analogies. Future work should continue to explore this angle.

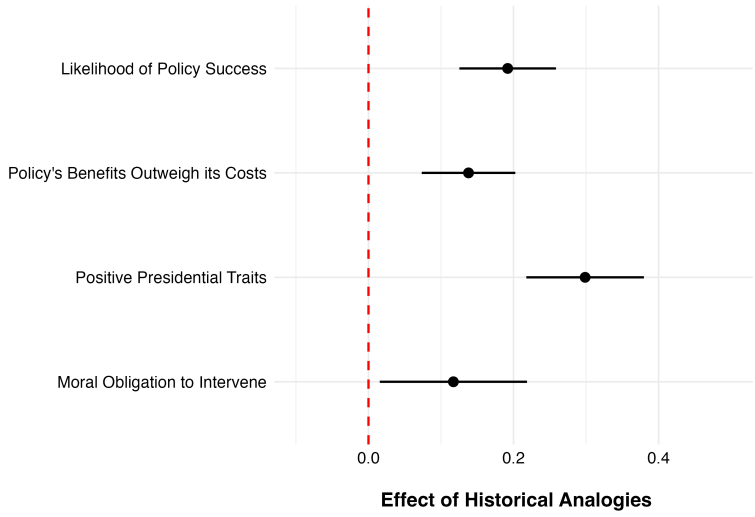
We also find evidence for our pre-registered hypotheses concerning causal mechanisms. Figure 2 plots meta-analytic averages for our four hypothesized mechanisms across all three studies. On average, analogies increase: the perceived likelihood of policy success by 0.19 points on a 5-point scale or 7.8 percentage points on a binary outcome ($p < 0.0001$); beliefs that the policy's benefits outweigh its costs by 0.14 points on a 5-point scale or 5.8 percentage points ($p < 0.0001$); perceptions of positive presidential traits by 0.30 points on a 5-point scale

[13] That the effects outlined in Figure 1 generally hold across demographic divides suggests that the impact of historical analogies is cross-cutting and general.

[14] The one exception is that the Bosnian War analogy is less effective among Republican respondents, likely due to ceiling effects.

or 14.2 percentage points ($p < 0.0001$); and perceived moral obligation to intervene by 0.12 points on a 5-point scale or 4.6 percentage points ($p = 0.024$). As we discuss more in the appendix (sections C.3, D.3, and E.3), there is important heterogeneity in mechanisms across our studies. For example, the results for morality are only significant for the Munich analogy.[15] Intuitively, the Munich analogy primes clear ethical considerations given its connection with the Nazis and their atrocities. More broadly, heterogeneity in mechanisms across our studies supports our aforementioned contention that different analogies shape public opinion through different pathways depending on the particular nature of the analogy. These core results are robust across a range of additional specifications, including regression with covariate adjustment (appendix sections C.1, D.1, and E.1) and causal mediation analysis (appendix sections C.2, D.2, and E.2). While our findings indicate that relatively rational mechanisms, such as cost-benefit analysis, mediate the impact of analogies, future work could focus more on the potential emotional mechanisms underpinning analogies' effectiveness.[16]

Figure 2: Mechanisms Explaining the Effect of Historical Analogies



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals. Plots depict the effect of historical analogies compared to a control condition where no policy justification is given.

Our third set of tests (appendix section E.4) considers how effective historical analogies are compared to other types of policy justifications. In line with our expectations, we find that compared with instinctual justifications based on "gut" and intuition, historical analogizing increases public confidence that the president chose the best strategy ($p = 0.034$). On the other

[15] They are null for the Bosnian analogy due to ceiling effects.
[16] In the appendix (section C.4), we note null results for some emotion-related mechanisms we had pre-registered.

hand, there is no distinguishable difference in perceived policy credibility between foreign policy decisions explained using historical analogies versus other rational justifications like expert assessments ($p = 0.413$). Although we find that historical analogies are more effective than intuition-based justifications ceteris paribus, it is important to note that all three justification strategies we study (i.e., analogy, intuition, and expertise) increase public support for proposed policies relative to the control condition in which no justification is given (Figure E-2). Moreover, in Figure E-2 we also show that analogical, expert, and instinct-based appeals operate through similar mechanisms. As a communication device, then, analogies remain one of several effective options policymakers can use to justify policy decisions and persuade publics in support of their proposals. More broadly, our results strengthen the external validity of prior work that finds leaders and policymakers benefit when they can successfully manipulate public perceptions of policies' likelihood of success, costs and benefits, and moral importance, and leaders' images (e.g., Tomz and Weeks, 2013, 2021; Maxey, 2020; Friedman, 2023).

Extending these findings, future work should probe why leaders choose to justify their policy decisions using analogies when we find other rational justifications are equally persuasive. One possibility is that leaders regularly mix justification strategies, pairing analogies with intuition- and expert-based appeals. Examining when and how leaders combine justification approaches is an important avenue for further study. A second possibility, supported by qualitative research (Khong, 1992), is that analogies are uniquely effective at helping leaders themselves make decisions. A third possibility is that leaders simply believe, perhaps mistakenly, that historical analogies are a more effective rhetorical strategy. To disentangle these implications, future scholarship would benefit from replicating our studies on elite samples.

Finally, in supplementary analyses of Study 2 we also tested our expectations about whether certain types of historical analogies are more effective (see section D.4 of the appendix for a more detailed discussion). Surprisingly, we find no evidence that negative analogies are more effective than positive ones. We also find only mixed evidence that more familiar analogies are more persuasive than less familiar ones. On balance, these weak findings suggest that different types of historical analogies can impact public opinion, rather than effects only holding for specific types (e.g., negative or more familiar analogies). Still, investigating variation across different types of analogies is a ripe avenue for future work. For instance, besides valence and familiarity, there may be other salient factors, such as whether the historical analogy is a good fit for explaining the contemporary scenario and what source it is coming from, that could

impact its effectiveness.

Conclusion

In this study, we conduct the most comprehensive experimental test to date of the impact of historical analogies on the public's foreign policy preferences. We find compelling evidence that the use of historical analogies to justify different courses of foreign policy action is an effective political communication strategy. Consequently, this project contributes to the high-stakes debate about the political efficacy of analogical policy justifications. By elucidating and testing the causal mechanisms underlying analogical persuasion, and by testing the effectiveness of historical analogies vis-à-vis other types of justifications, this paper also contributes to our understanding of the political microfoundations of foreign policy attitudes and elite messaging.

Overall, our findings help explain why leaders so frequently use historical analogies to justify their chosen foreign policies. By increasing support for policy action and burnishing perceptions of leaders themselves, analogical appeals can generate mass favorability for proposed policies and help overcome decisionmaking gridlock. The downside is that historical analogies may be misapplied—purposefully or accidentally—to build support for strategically-unwise or morally-dubious courses of action (May, 1973). This means citizens should be cautious when confronted with analogical appeals, and should carefully reflect on historical analogies to judge their relevance to current crises. Above all, given the persuasive power of analogies, the press must be prepared to help the public understand and interpret connections between the present and the past in order to constrain leaders from generating policy support on the basis of misapplied historical comparisons.

Future work should build on this study to address several outstanding questions. First, to what extent do these results generalize? We believe that the mechanisms underlying analogical persuasion should theoretically apply in other contexts, but future work could test this formally. Second, does the effectiveness of analogies vary based on issue-area? Mixed findings in research on other issue domains (e.g., fiscal policy) and the unique dynamics of foreign policy may mean historical analogies are most effective in the international political realm. Third, when a leader deploys a competing historical analogy to try and undermine support for a policy or argue for an entirely different course of action, to what extent does that weaken the aggregate effect of analogies on public opinion? Future work could test the impact of counter-arguments and

counter-analogies experimentally. Fourth, do "inappropriate" historical analogies, which shed little light on a current foreign policy situation, have a smaller impact on public opinion than analogies that are a better fit? This study provides some suggestive evidence that they do, but future work is needed to understand whether and when misapplied analogies yield similar effects. Fifth, are some types of historical analogies more effective than others? We studied the impact of valence and familiarity, but there may be other salient features of analogies that impact their efficacy. Sixth, if other types of justifications, such as appeals to authority, are just as effective as historical analogies, then why and under what conditions do policymakers sometimes utilize the latter rather than the former in their public messaging? One potentially promising approach is to examine how paired justifications using analogical and other complementary policy justifications shape public opinion. This approach would help identify synergies between leaders' available communication strategies.[17] Making progress on these questions is an important priority for future work given the widespread prevalence of analogies in political communication.

[17] Of course, leaders may also have incentives to be responsive to narrow interests (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015), which could cause them to rely more on one communication strategy than another, depending on their expectations about which appeals are most likely to satisfy core constituencies. For example, appeals to experts may be less appealing to leaders whose key audiences are skeptical of expertise.

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