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At Any Cost: How Ukrainians Think about Self-Defense Against Russia



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Abstract: *How do populations facing external aggression view the costs and benefits of self-defense? In Western countries, war support has been shown to follow cost–benefit calculations, resembling the moral principle of proportionality. A categorical position, in contrast, means supporting self-defense regardless of the costs. To evaluate which moral principle populations facing external aggression follow, we conducted a conjoint experiment with 1,160 Ukrainians in July 2022. We examine support for different strategies Ukraine could pursue against Russia, which vary regarding the political autonomy and territorial integrity they afford and three costs: civilian and military fatalities, and nuclear risk. We find that Ukrainians do not trade off autonomy or territory against these costs. A new method to rank conjoint-attributes, computing “nested” marginal means, shows that respondents categorically reject political or territorial concessions, regardless of costs. This provides first experimental evidence that populations resisting external aggression do not subject war outcomes to cost–benefit calculations.*

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/B6ZNAI>.

Two months into Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called on Ukraine to cede territory to Russia to end the war.¹ He was not alone. Statesmen, scholars, and pundits have urged Ukrainians to give up self-defense, citing the likelihood that Ukraine will be defeated by its much bigger neighbor (Posen 2022), the toll of resistance on civilians, and the risk of nuclear escalation.² Ukraine has a just cause for war against Russia: self-defense. This is rarely contested, except by Russia.

Yet, a war with a just cause can still be an unjust war. It can be morally wrong to pursue armed self-defense if the expected costs of fighting exceed the projected benefits (Haque 2012; McMahan 2009). Such a defensive war would be disproportionate (Fabre 2015). Public calls on Ukraine to negotiate or surrender often imply that Ukraine’s armed self-defense is not worth its costs.

How do people facing external aggression view the costs and benefits of armed self-defense? Seeking proportionality involves weighing the consequences of

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¹Kissinger quoted in Bella (2022).

²Chomsky quoted in Current Affairs (2022), Mearsheimer in CNN-News18 (2022), and Lukashenko in Al Jazeera (2022).

³Quoted in The Washington Post (2022).

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alternative strategies and potentially accepting less desirable outcomes if it reduces the costs of war. However, self-defense can also be viewed in categorical terms: Some outcomes are unacceptable regardless of the costs of resistance. In this view, cost–benefit considerations should not prevent effective self-defense (Walzer 2008, p. 91). Ukraine’s President Zelensky has publicly taken a categorical stance, declaring “[w]e will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost.”³ We investigate whether Ukrainians follow the logic of proportionality or, as their president suggests, support self-defense at any cost.

Despite significant advances in the study of conflict-affected populations, we lack evidence on how people facing external aggression over territory view the costs and benefits of self-defense. Studies of *Western* populations that wage wars abroad suggest they trade off projected deaths against the prospect of victory (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005), in line with the principle of proportionality (Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022). However, direct exposure to violence (Canetti et al. 2013) and threat (Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019; Mironova, Mrie, and Whitt 2019) has been shown to harden individuals’ attitudes (Bauer et al. 2016). Populations affected by interstate wars over territory become “intransigent” (Driscoll and Maliniak 2016, p. 277) and withdraw support from negotiations (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014). Yet, a nuanced literature on civil war termination reveals that populations can also become willing to settle to reduce the costs of war (Matanock, Garbiras-Díaz, and Garcia-Sanchez 2022; Tellez 2019a). Studies have not investigated how precisely populations affected by different types of conflict trade off various costs and benefits of resistance or whether they may, instead, take a categorical stance.

We have at least three urgent reasons to better understand how populations facing aggression think about the costs and benefits of self-defense. First, strategic choices in war are uncertain. Would territorial concessions by Ukraine really save civilian lives, as pundits claim? When even experts risk choosing the wrong strategy, we have a moral reason to consider the preferences of those who primarily bear the costs of a mistake (McMahan 2010, p. 53). Second, public preferences should inform how decision makers define the costs and benefits of self-defense. For instance, we cannot know how much weight to attribute to the restoration of Ukraine’s political autonomy without understanding Ukrainians’ views on Russian control.⁴ Third, the success of any wartime

strategy depends partly on its popular support (Reiter and Stam 1998). Ukraine could hardly recapture its eastern and southern territory if the public overwhelmingly favored concessions. In turn, a peace settlement against public preferences would likely prove unstable.

We used a conjoint survey experiment to examine whether Ukrainians trade off Ukraine’s territorial integrity and political autonomy against the costs of the war or take a categorical stance. Our experiment was fielded between July 16 and 24, 2022 with 1,160 respondents across all Ukrainian regions considered safe for face-to-face interviews.⁵ We asked respondents about their support for different strategies their government could pursue in the war against Russia. These strategies randomly varied along five attributes: upfront territorial concessions, expected civilian fatalities, expected deaths among Ukrainian fighters, the risk of a nuclear attack against Ukraine, and the projected political outcome of the war, all after three more months of fighting.

We find that Ukrainians strongly prefer strategies that fully restore Ukraine’s political autonomy and territorial integrity. All three types of war costs—Ukrainian civilian and military fatalities, and the risk of a nuclear strike—depress support for a strategy, but have much smaller effects than territorial concessions and limits on political autonomy. Crucially, we find that our respondents do not trade off the costs of self-defense against its benefits as the principle of proportionality suggests. Instead, they categorically oppose compromising Ukraine’s political autonomy and conceding territory, even if concessions would reduce the costs of fighting Russia.

To substantiate these findings, we introduce a new method to rank the importance of conjoint attributes. The method exploits variation in the extent to which attribute features vary in a strategy pair and allows us to compute “nested” marginal means that decompose overall marginal means. We find that 79% of strategies leading to a Russian-controlled government are never supported by respondents, regardless of the costs. Respondents accept the remaining 21% of strategies not to avoid costs, but to prioritize territorial integrity. The lower ranked costs of war have substantively larger effects when limits to political autonomy and territorial integrity are invariant in a respondents’ choice set.

ists would allow that the preferences of Ukrainians are important for establishing this objective moral value (Railton 1986), a point to which we return below.

⁵The sample excludes internally displaced individuals and refugees. The study was approved by the ethical review board of the University of Oxford and preregistered, see Appendix in the Supporting Information (SI).

⁴If we think of morality as objective, the moral value of Ukraine’s political autonomy depends on its intrinsic features, not on the views of Ukrainians (Shafer-Landau 2003). However, moral real-

We make two main contributions. Substantively, we show that Ukrainians do not subject war outcomes to cost–benefit calculations as many calls for negotiations assume, but prefer resistance at any cost. This first evidence of a categorical stance on self-defense among a population facing aggression against their territory advances the literature on war support in conflict-affected populations. Methodologically, we show that marginal mean and average marginal component effect estimates from conjoint experiments can be sensitive to the co-occurrence rate of *unrelated*, yet substantively important, attributes. While likely impacting many conjoint experiments, this issue can be mitigated by our proposed disaggregation and ranking method through “nested” marginal means, which helps better interpret and predict the respondents’ decisions.⁶

Cost–Benefit Calculations about War

How do populations facing interstate aggression over territory think about the costs and benefits of self-defense? Two bodies of existing work are instructive. First, literature on war support in Western societies, specifically in the United States, shows negative effects of civilian and military fatalities on war support (Johns and Davies 2017). These effects depend on war aims (Jentleson and Britton 1998) and the likelihood of victory (Eichenberg 2005; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005), with respondents trading off the costs and benefits of war (Drezner 2008; Sagan and Valentino 2017; Record 2002). This reflects the logic of proportionality (Sagan and Valentino 2018, 2019), which also structures war support in other Western countries (Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022). Yet, crucially, Western publics have different stakes in their overseas wars of choice compared to populations who bear the immediate costs of war.

A second literature thus focuses on the attitudes of populations directly affected by conflict, finding partial evidence for cost–benefit calculations about war. Populations affected by both civil wars and U.S.-led military interventions withdraw their support from parties that kill civilians, showing sensitivity to the costs of war (Condra and Shapiro 2012; Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013; Silverman 2019). The literature on support for civil war termination suggests that exposure to violence increases individuals’ support for peace agreements (Tellez 2019a; Zartman 1995), as they seek to avoid the personal costs of war, for instance, in Burundi (Voors et al. 2012) and Syria (Fabbe,

Hazlett, and Sımmazdemir 2019). Similarly, Matanock, Garbiras-Díaz, and Garcia-Sanchez (2022) propose that cost–benefit calculations explain individuals’ support for the Colombian peace process. Yet, other studies have found that individuals who bear the costs of war become intransigent and *less* likely to support settling with the enemy (Balcells 2012; Bauer et al. 2016). It remains unclear when war-affectedness in- and when it decreases individuals’ cost-sensitivity.

Moreover, much of this literature investigates populations affected by civil or U.S.-led wars seeking regime change. In contrast, Ukraine faces a war of annexation: Its political autonomy and territorial integrity are at stake.⁷ Although this is the historically dominant form of war, the attitudes of populations affected by wars over territory have been studied less often.⁸ In the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict, for instance, exposure to violence (Canetti et al. 2013) and restrictions of movement (Longo, Canetti, and Hite-Rubin 2014) have been shown to reduce Palestinians’ support for negotiations with Israel, whereas exposure to rocket fire increases Israelis’ support for right-wing parties (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014) and participation in combat hardens them against negotiations (Grossman, Manekin, and Miodownik 2015). Driscoll and Maliniak (2016) find that Georgians favored military escalation over Abkhazia and South Osetia before, and even more after, Russia’s 2008 invasion.⁹ Though this research points toward populations’ intransigence in the face of territorial threats, it does not directly investigate whether and how these populations trade off different costs and benefits of self-defense or whether they take a categorical stance.

Proportionate or Categorical Resistance?

In this section, we outline our theoretical argument. We first define the costs and benefits of self-defense, drawing on just war theory. We then explain the logics

⁷In principle, threats to the nation can also emanate from within a state. Kaltenthaler, Silverman, and Dagher (2020) argue that Iraqis who saw ISIL as a threat to the survival of the Iraqi nation were more favorable of outside intervention.

⁸The support-depressing effect of civilian casualties has been corroborated, for instance, in Israel (Hatz 2020) and Donbas (Lupu and Wallace 2023).

⁹Notably, Chiego (2023) argues that Georgians in regions invaded by Russia were more likely to abandon the disputed territories in exchange for security guarantees than those not directly affected by the 2008 invasion.

⁶Available as R-package here: <https://github.com/carl-mc/cjRank>.

that Ukrainians' preferences should follow if they reflect either the moral principle of proportionality or a categorical stance on self-defense. We close with a discussion of the context in which we expect either logic to prevail.

Ukraine has a just cause for war against Russia. Just war theorists think of this cause as a collective right to defend the nation (Walzer 2022) or individual Ukrainians' rights of self-defense (McMahan 2022). From a legal perspective, Ukraine is exercising the state's right of self-defense, enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter (Haque 2022). Yet, a war with a just cause can still be an unjust war. It can be morally wrong to pursue just self-defense if the expected costs of fighting outweigh the benefits. Most philosophers argue that even defensive wars must be proportionate (Frowe 2015; Hurka 2005). What exactly counts as a morally relevant benefit of armed self-defense is nevertheless contested. Although some philosophers argue that self-defense should only seek to protect individuals' rights (Rodin 2004), most argue that defending a nation's territory (Tesón 2004; Walzer 2022) or political autonomy (Frowe 2014; Renzo 2018) count as important moral benefits of self-defense.

In the case of Ukraine, restoring territory or autonomy likely helps protect Ukrainians' individual rights in the long run. We therefore define "benefits of self-defense" as outcomes that constitute an improvement over Ukraine's status quo in July 2022 along two dimensions: territorial integrity and political autonomy. We expect that upfront territorial concessions have a negative effect on Ukrainians' support for a strategy for self-defense and that Ukrainians are more likely to support conceding Crimea than conceding Donbas as well (Hypothesis 1).¹⁰ As a political outcome, some Ukrainians may find a ceasefire and continued Russian influence in Ukraine tolerable, whereas others may accept only a full withdrawal of Russian troops. We expect that a ceasefire with a Russian-controlled government attracts less support than withdrawal of Russian forces. Moreover, a Russian withdrawal with Ukrainian neutrality is likely less popular than a restoration of Ukraine's full political autonomy, permitting Ukraine to pursue NATO and EU memberships (Hypothesis 2).

The most important moral cost of self-defense is the loss of life. We therefore expect that a higher projected death toll among Ukrainian civilians (Hypothesis 3) and more fatalities among Ukrainian fighters (Hypothesis 4) depress support for a strategy. In this conflict, the risk of

nuclear escalation is another significant cost of resistance. We expect that a higher risk of nuclear escalation has a negative effect on support for a strategy (Hypothesis 5).

The moral principle of proportionality demands not only that expected benefits *increase* and costs *decrease* support for self-defense. Proportionality requires that considerations of costs and of benefits interact: A better projected moral outcome justifies higher expected costs. Moreover, proportionality implies that there is a point at which costs and benefits are "in balance." Although moral realists hold that there is a true answer to when self-defense is proportionate (Shafer-Landau 2003), this balance is, in reality, difficult to determine. How many civilian and military deaths are "worth" not conceding Crimea, for instance? How high can the risk of a nuclear strike be to still be proportionate to the moral value of Ukraine's political autonomy? Prior studies finding that Western publics trade off the costs and benefits of military interventions have rarely enquired whether individuals or populations agree on where costs and benefits are in balance.¹¹

Given the epistemic intractability of proportionality judgements, we do not articulate firm expectations about *how* Ukrainians trade off deaths and nuclear risk against their political autonomy and territorial integrity. If their attitudes follow the logic of proportionality, however, considerations of costs and benefits should interact. We therefore expect that the closer a strategy is to re-establishing Ukraine's full political autonomy, the more likely respondents are to accept higher death tolls and a greater nuclear risk (Hypothesis 6). Similarly, the fewer territorial concessions a strategy involves, the weaker the support-depressing effect of costs in lives and nuclear risk (Hypothesis 7).

When the costs of self-defense exceed its projected benefits, proportionality may demand that Ukrainians settle for less than full territorial integrity and political autonomy. Yet, an opposing philosophical position casts self-defense in categorical terms: Some outcomes are too awful to accept, regardless of the costs of resistance. Michael Walzer (2008) most famously argues that self-defense against aggression is permissible no matter the costs.¹² Some international lawyers likewise argue that proportionality should not undercut states' effective self-defense (Dinstein 2017; Gardam 1993). In this

¹¹Dill, Sagan, and Valentino (2022) find significant differences in how different Western populations trade off civilian casualties against gains in military effectiveness. A study of legal experts found much disagreement about proportionality (Statman et al. 2020).

¹²See Benbaji and Statman (2019) and Nagel (1979) for similar arguments.

¹⁰Polls in May 2022 found that around 80% of surveyed Ukrainians opposed territorial concessions (Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2022; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2022).

view, international law “is not entitled to demand the self-abandonment, the suicide” of a state (International Court of Justice 1996, p. 5).

If Ukrainians took a categorical stance on self-defense, we would not expect an interaction between considerations of costs and benefits. Instead, we would see that Ukrainians prioritize the restoration of their political autonomy and territorial integrity regardless of the costs, and take heed of minimizing deaths and nuclear risk only if their fight is projected to have an acceptable outcome.

When should we expect populations to subject war outcomes to cost benefit trade-offs, as proportionality demands, and when might they take a categorical stance? Just as most moral philosophers demand that self-defense is proportionate, we have reason to expect that most people subject violence to cost–benefit calculations most of the time. When confronted with a so-called trolley problem, almost 90% of respondents kill one person to save five (Hauser et al. 2007), meaning they disregard the categorical prohibition on killing and make a cost–benefit trade-off. We have even less evidence for public opinion on war following a categorical logic. Western publics not only favor withdrawals from their military interventions abroad if costs become too high. They also do not categorically reject direct attacks against civilians (Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022) or even the use of nuclear weapons, if either increases the chance of victory. The absence of evidence for the so-called “nuclear taboo” in public attitudes in the United States (Koch and Wells 2021; Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013; Smetana, Vranka, and Rosendorf 2022), South Korea (Sukin 2020), and various European countries (Onderco and Smetana 2021) corroborates that publics not directly affected by war subject war outcomes to cost–benefit calculations.

And yet, the literature on conflict-affected populations is, as discussed above, much less conclusive, showing evidence both for cost–benefit calculations and for intransigence among individuals directly affected by war. Of course, intransigence could be understood as either reduced cost-sensitivity or a categorical rejection of concessions, with existing literature not differentiating between the two. Psychologists associate categorical decision making with emotional arousal (Greene et al. 2001). But not every individual in a conflict-affected population is angry, afraid, or vengeful. Can an entire population take a categorical stance? The philosophical position that self-defense is permissible, even if it is disproportionate, is associated specifically with resistance against external aggression that threatens the survival of the nation (Nagel 1979). When the nation’s existence is threatened, Walzer (2008, p. 91) argues, “it is our abhorrence of

aggression that is authoritative here, while the maxim ... of proportionality play[s] only [a] marginal and uncertain role.” Going beyond our preregistered expectations, we therefore explore the extraordinary state of exception that is external aggression threatening national survival as a context in which a population might take a categorical stance on resistance. This means not only citizens most directly affected by war become less cost-sensitive (i.e., more “intransigent”), but the population collectively rejects cost–benefit trade-offs altogether. As Russia’s aggression poses a threat to the survival of the Ukrainian nation, some possible war outcomes may be categorically unacceptable for Ukrainians.

Research Design

We conducted a face-to-face conjoint survey experiment among 1,160 Ukrainians between July 16 and 24, 2022. The following section outlines our survey design, sampling procedure and implementation, and estimation strategy.

Survey Experiment Design

We asked respondents to “[p]lease imagine that [Ukrainian] President Zelensky and his team are considering different military-political strategies for pursuing the war over the next 3 months.”¹³ Respondents were then presented with four pairs of strategies, eight in total, each with different predicted consequences after three additional months of fighting. Respondents first rated each strategy in a pair on a 6-point scale (score, re-scaled to vary between 0 and 1) and, thereafter, made a forced choice between them.

Table 1 shows the attributes of the conjoint profiles. The strategies vary according to upfront territorial concessions, expected civilian deaths, expected military deaths, the risk of a nuclear strike, and the projected political autonomy their outcome affords, all after three additional months of fighting. Attribute levels reflect a range of values that the attribute can realistically take, considering the war dynamics prior to the survey. Realistic attribute levels were crucial because we asked individuals to assess strategies in a war they are currently experiencing. We minimized the risk of (re-)traumatization (Wood 2006) by excluding hypothetical scenarios that could be more distressing than what respondents were experiencing at the time.

¹³See our preanalysis plan for the full set of questions.

TABLE 1 Conjoint Experiment: Attribute Levels

Attribute	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
1. Upfront concessions	No concessions	Recognize Crimea as part of Russia	Recognize Crimea and Donetsk and Luhansk regions as part of Russia
2. Projected number of civilian casualties in the next 3 months	Approximately 6,000 (about half of the total number of people killed so far)	Approximately 12,000 (the figure is close to the total number of people killed so far)	Approximately 24,000 (about twice the total number of people killed so far)
3. Projected number of military casualties in the next 3 months (Armed Forces of Ukraine, National Guard and Police, SSU Security Services of Ukraine, Territorial Defense, and volunteer battalions)	Approximately 6,000 (about half of the total number of people killed so far)	Approximately 12,000 (the figure is close to the total number of people killed so far)	Approximately 24,000 (about twice the total number of people killed so far)
4. Likelihood of a nuclear strike on Ukraine by Russia	None (0%)	Low (approximately 5%)	Moderate (approximately 10%)
5. Likely outcome after 3 months	Withdrawal of Russian troops and preservation of sovereignty (includes possibility to join the EU and/or NATO)	Withdrawal of Russian troops and negotiated neutral status of Ukraine (no possibility to join the EU and/or NATO)	A ceasefire and a Russian-controlled government in Kyiv

Concretely, we varied Ukrainian civilian and military fatalities between 6,000, 12,000, and 24,000, which is roughly half, the same, and twice the number of fatalities between February and July 2022.¹⁴ Estimating the risk of a nuclear strike is notoriously difficult. In the three months prior to the survey, experts indicated the probability of a nuclear strike to be between 0% and 10% (Gottemoeller 2022; Mecklin 2022; Metaculus 2022). Those who designated the risk “low” gave numbers below 5% (de Neufville 2022). More urgent warnings still estimated the risk to be below 10% (Gottemoeller 2022). We therefore include levels of risk designated as “low (5%)” and “moderate (10%).” We did not include a “high” level because the dominant narrative in Ukraine prior to July was that the nuclear threat was not in fact high (Izhak 2022; Forest 2022). Forecasts with probabilities higher than 10% were criticized as alarmist

also by international experts (Nelson and Montgomery 2022).

The levels for the territorial integrity attribute include “no concessions” or concessions of areas occupied by Russia at the time of the survey (i.e., Crimea and Donbas), as it was widely discussed in Ukrainian and international media whether Ukraine should concede these territories. As potential political outcomes, we include a full restoration of Ukraine’s political autonomy (permitting application for EU and NATO membership), Russian withdrawal and Ukrainian neutrality, and a ceasefire with Russian control of the government in Kyiv.¹⁵ Although possibly a distressing prospect for many respondents, political control of Ukraine was an articulated Russian aim even before the invasion (Putin 2021) and a likely outcome should Russia prevail militarily, particularly before Ukraine’s later counteroffensive.

¹⁴These estimates lie in the middle of a range of reported numbers, see OHCHR (2022), Habershon et al. (2022), and Santora and Bengali (2022).

¹⁵We do not include “continuation of fighting” as an outcome as this treatment would have bundled costs and benefits in indiscernible ways.

Moreover, as shown in the introduction, a chorus of pundits, following Russia's 2022 invasion, suggested that Ukrainians might have to accept such an outcome to avoid the staggering costs of resistance.

The strategies were drawn with a constant probability of 1/3 for each attribute level. We chose this uniform distribution as we have little indication of the real-world distribution of attributes of the Ukrainian government's possible strategies (De la Cuesta, Egami, and Imai 2022). To avoid overgeneralizing conclusions, we estimate compositional effects through innovative subgroup analyses that produce fine-grained conclusions of attributes' effects, conditional on experimentally controlled values of and variance in other attributes. This advances our ability to apply the results to real-world choices over *Average Marginal Component Effects*. To analyze order-effects, we randomized the order of attributes 2–4 at the level of respondents (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Because attributes 1 and 5 logically precede (follow) attributes 2–4, we did not include them in the randomization.¹⁶

Sampling and Survey Implementation

Our sampling scheme excluded actively contested regions (oblasti),¹⁷ as well as respondents who had been displaced since February 24, 2022. Across all remaining oblasti, we randomly sampled a total of 120 primary sampling units (PSUs)—voting precincts—proportional to their population, stratified by rural versus urban status. Maximizing representativeness within the current circumstances, we randomly selected 10 households per PSU and interviewed one household member stratifying by PSU-specific age and sex quotas, which were derived from the latest prewar official statistics.¹⁸

Enumerators were trained to ensure their own and respondents' safety (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). Following the approved protocol of Oxford University's ethical review board, all respondents gave their informed consent and could withdraw at any time. We assured our Ukrainian partners that failing to complete interviews due to security concerns would (and did) not have monetary consequences for them, and that enumerator and respondent safety should always take precedence. After safety concerns were raised in Sumy oblast, its 40 interviews were immediately cancelled and dropped from

¹⁶In line with recent evidence (Rudolph, Freitag, and Thurner 2022), Appendix Figure A6 in the SI shows no systematic order effects.

¹⁷Crimea and the regions of Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Mykolaiv, and Russian-controlled areas of Zaporizhzhia.

¹⁸See Appendix A.1 in the SI for details.

the study. Interviews in the remaining oblasti were conducted without concerns.

Figure 1(a) shows the geographic distribution of respondents, compared to violent events led by the Russian army and its proxies in (b). Respondents cooperated at a rate of 62% in successfully contacted households and completed initialized interviews in 94.2% of cases; 44% of all interviews were double checked, with 10 unverified interviews being repeated. Given the sensitivity and circumstances, we take these figures as indicative of the survey's high quality.¹⁹

Estimation Strategy

We test our main hypotheses by estimating "Average Marginal Component Effects" (AMCEs), the marginal effect of the levels of an attribute on our choice or score outcomes averaged across all other attributes (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). We assess Hypotheses 6 and 7 by estimating AMCEs conditional on the level of territorial concessions and political autonomy attribute levels. Appendix B.1 in the SI presents the empirical specifications in detail.

Results

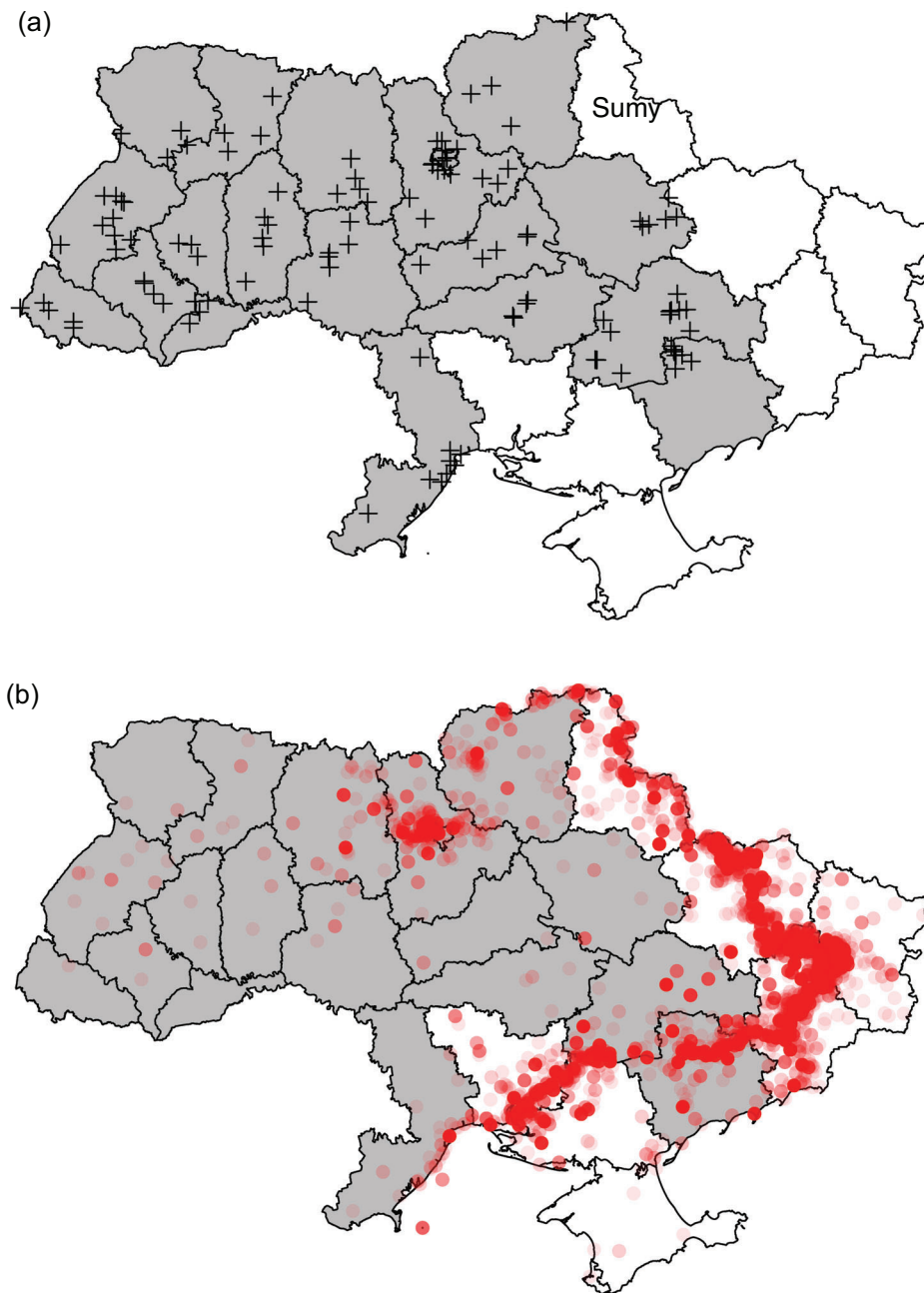
Main Estimates

We find strong support for Hypotheses 1 to 5. Territorial concessions, civilian and military deaths, nuclear escalation risk, and restrictions on Ukraine's political autonomy all negatively affect respondents' score and choice of strategies. Yet, Figure 2 shows that AMCEs differ notably: AMCEs for "cost" attributes 2–4 are up to six times smaller than those of territorial concessions and political autonomy restrictions. On the cost side, 24,000 prospective civilian casualties have the largest effect, decreasing a strategy's score by -0.024 [-0.04 ; -0.0084]²⁰ and choice probability by 0.065 [-0.089 ; -0.041]. In contrast, upfront concessions of Donbas and Crimea decrease these outcomes by 0.22 [-0.24 ; -0.2] and -0.2 [-0.22 ; -0.18], respectively. The possibility of a Russian-controlled government elicits even stronger resistance, with an effect on both outcomes of 0.32 [-0.35 ; -0.3] and -0.36 [-0.38 ; -0.33], respectively.

We put these results into perspective by analyzing average scores and choice probabilities of strategies with given attribute levels (Leeper, Hobolt, and

¹⁹Further details in Appendix A.2 in the SI.

²⁰Square brackets contain 95% confidence intervals throughout.

FIGURE 1 Survey Sample (a) and Conflict Events (b) in Ukraine

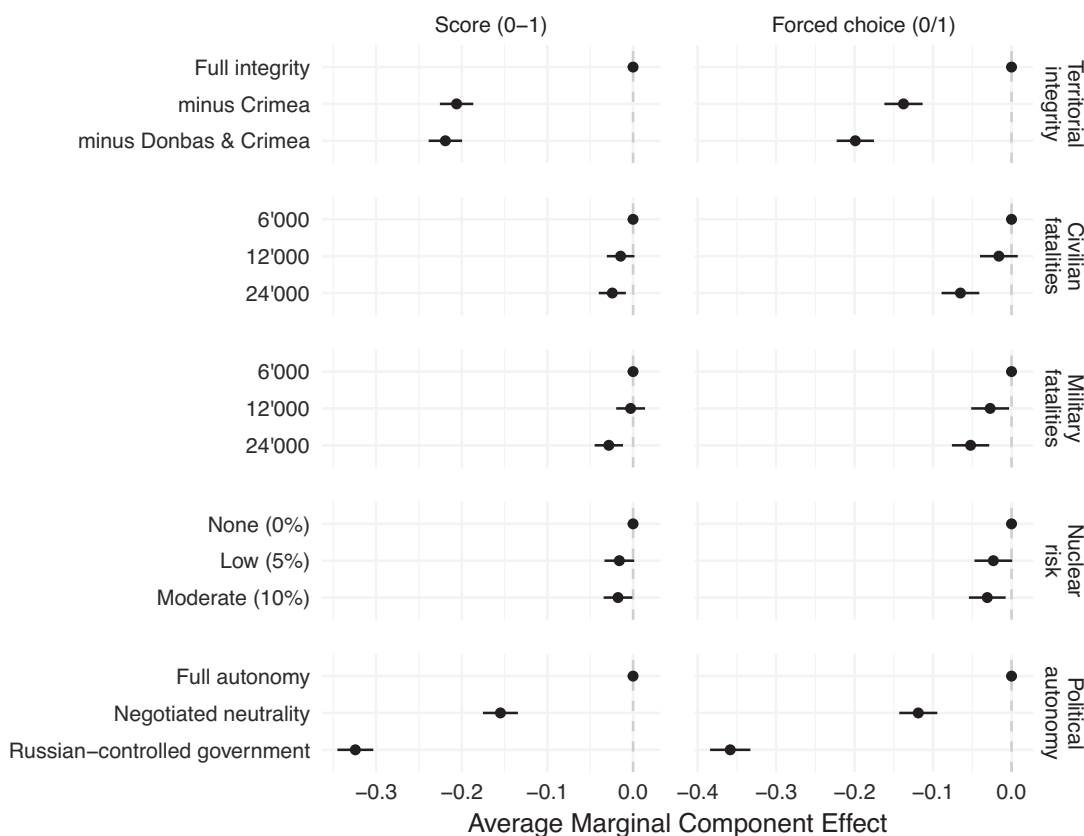
Note: PSUs in (a) are anonymized through random displacement of up to .2 decimal degrees. Conflict event data in (b) from Raleigh et al. (2010).

Tilley 2020).²¹ Plotting such “marginal means,” Figure 3 confirms that Ukraine’s political autonomy restrictions move average outcomes along much of the range between 0 and 1. Although the average rating for strategies with full political autonomy amounts to a score of 0.45

²¹For choice probabilities, we drop profiles without variance on a given attribute to prevent bias.

[0.44; 0.47], this reduces to 0.13 [0.12; 0.14] for strategies featuring a Russian-controlled government. Even more starkly, the average choice rate changes from 74% [72; 76] to 21% [19; 23]. The range of marginal means for differing levels of territorial concessions is smaller yet still substantive. Respondents chose “no concession” strategies in 67% [64; 69] of tasks, whereas they conceded

FIGURE 2 Support for Self-Defense Strategies: AMCEs



Note: This figure shows the estimated effects of the randomly assigned attribute values on the rating outcome (left panel) and on the probability of a strategy being preferred (right panel). It shows that territorial concessions and limits on autonomy have larger negative AMCEs than civilian and military fatalities and nuclear risk.

Donbas and Crimea only at a rate of 21% [19; 23].²² In comparison, respondents choose strategies with low and high numbers of civilian fatalities in a small range of 54% [52; 56] and 45% [43; 47] of tasks, respectively. This range is even smaller for different levels of military fatalities and nuclear risk.

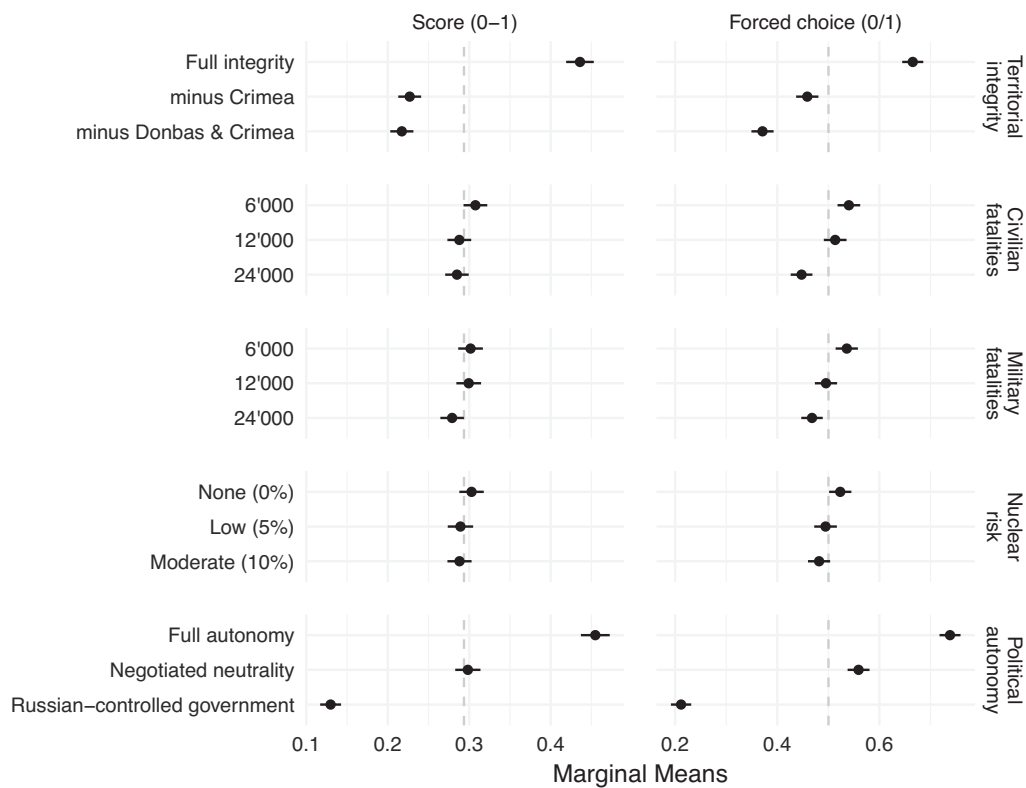
Thus, Ukrainians' overriding preference is avoiding limits to political autonomy and territorial concessions. But how much weaker is their concern for the costs of war? To compare the effects of attributes of different substance and scale, the following illustrative extrapolation asks about hypothetical levels of war costs that might have produced AMCEs equivalent to those of territorial concessions and autonomy restrictions. Although our attribute treatments are bounded for reasons of realism and ethics, we can base this strictly illustrative exercise on the logarithmic (Attributes 2 and 3) and linear (Attribute 3) scales that characterize our attribute levels. Assuming

²²We show below that such concessions are caused by respondents' priority for political autonomy rather than war costs.

respondents' preferences are proportional to these scales beyond the experiment's empirical domain,²³ we can gauge the hypothetical attribute level (e.g., civilian fatalities) estimated to yield an approximately similar AMCE as, for example, the concession of Donbas and Crimea (see Appendix B.2 in the SI for details).

Table 2 presents this comparative exercise for Attributes 2 to 4 paired with territorial concessions and political autonomy restrictions. Extrapolating our AMCE estimates for civilian fatalities in the first row and column shows that treating respondents with a death toll of 110 [33; 380] thousand civilians over three months is estimated to yield an AMCE of similar size as the effect of conceding Crimea upfront. This would amount to

²³This assumption may be invalid, for example, if there are cost thresholds respondents are categorically opposed to crossing. Figure 2 shows that effects of Attributes 2 and 3 are roughly linear in their scale, whereas respondents' marginal aversion against higher nuclear risk appears to be decreasing in risk levels, which would make our linear extrapolation somewhat more conservative.

FIGURE 3 Support for Self-Defense Strategies: Marginal Means

Note: This figure shows the marginal means for the rating outcome (left panel) and the forced choice outcome (right panel). Marginal means drop pairs without variance on a given attribute. The figure shows that there is little support for territorial concessions and limits to political autonomy.

1,200 deaths/day or 10 times the average before July. The civilian fatalities treatment estimated to yield an AMCE similar to that of giving up Donbas and Crimea amounts to 410 [78; 2,200] thousand fatalities in comparison.

The results also suggest that a treatment of 75 [26; 220] thousand civilian fatalities might generate an effect equivalent to that of negotiated neutrality. Finally,

the extrapolation suggests that the AMCE of a Russian-controlled government equates treating individuals with an estimated 12 [0.72; 220] million Ukrainian civilian casualties—a staggering figure well beyond current risk assessments or ethically defensible conjoint treatments. The corresponding estimates for military fatalities and nuclear risk treatments follow the same pattern.

TABLE 2 Linear Extrapolation of AMCEs

Limits to...	Territorial Integrity		Political Autonomy	
	2: Crimea	3: Donbas+Crimea	2: Neutrality	3: Russian gov.
Civil. fatal. (millions)	0.11 [0.03, 0.38]	0.41 [0.08, 2.20]	0.08 [0.03, 0.22]	12.43 [0.72, 220.00]
Milit. fatal. (millions)	0.23 [0.04, 1.30]	1.16 [0.10, 14.00]	0.14 [0.03, 0.65]	79.57 [1.04, 6100.00]
Nuclear risk (percent)	39.00 [5.26, 72.27]	58.00 [10.27, 100.00]	33.00 [3.33, 62.42]	100.00 [23.54, 100.00]

Although we note the substantive uncertainty of these results, this illustrative extrapolation of AMCEs suggests that the average respondent of our survey would only be willing to give up on full territorial integrity and political autonomy to avoid costs of armed self-defense over the next three months that are orders of magnitude beyond realistic assessments at the time of the survey.

Our main estimates are robust to permutations of the empirical specification. In particular, our results remain consistent when (1) estimating a logistic regression of the forced choice outcome, (2) modeling attribute levels as continuous rather than categorical, (3) weighting respondents by their household size, and (4) accounting for attributes' ordering (see Appendix C in the SI). Finally, our results are not driven by the "worst-case" political outcome: a Russian-controlled government. Analyzing strategy pairs without this outcome increases primarily the effect of conceding Donbas and Crimea, and only slightly strengthens that of other attributes (Appendix Figure A7 in the SI). This suggests reactions to attributes that put most weight on political and territorial concessions, a point to which we return below.

Effect Heterogeneity

Although most respondents likely have the same preference directions, their intensity might vary. If this were the case, some of our estimates might be driven by potentially small subsets of respondents (Abramson, Koçak, and Magazinnik 2022). We test for heterogeneous treatment effects along respondents' (1) demographic characteristics, (2) affectedness by the war, and (3) self-reported attitudes toward the war and the nation.²⁴ Of the 20 variables that we test, only 6 are associated with statistically significant heterogeneity in AMCEs on respondents strategy choice ($p < .05$, Bonferroni-adjusted).

Demographics. Presented in full in Appendix D in the SI, we find that demographics barely affect our results with the exception of ethno-linguistic characteristics.²⁵ The absence of substantive heterogeneity given age, family status, gender, education, economic, and urban status might be due to the widespread impact of the war. Although Ukraine's eastern regions are by far the worst affected, Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure, hospitals, and schools across the country; massive internal

displacement; and trauma following the uncovering of mass atrocities in liberated cities may all have fostered a collective experience of the conflict. Experts also argue that Ukrainians in all regions now increasingly identify with the Ukrainian state (Onuch 2022). Notably, respondents who answered in Russian or are native Russian-speakers did exhibit smaller, yet substantively and statistically significant AMCEs of the territorial integrity and political autonomy items. Customarily spoken Russian thus correlates with individuals' preference *intensity* but not *direction*. This belies the simplistic notion that Russian speakers and ethnic Russians are sympathetic to Russia's aims, and corresponds to evidence showing a growing civic identification among these subgroups (Barrington 2021; Kulyk 2019; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2018) and in the Ukrainian population generally (Onuch and Hale 2022)

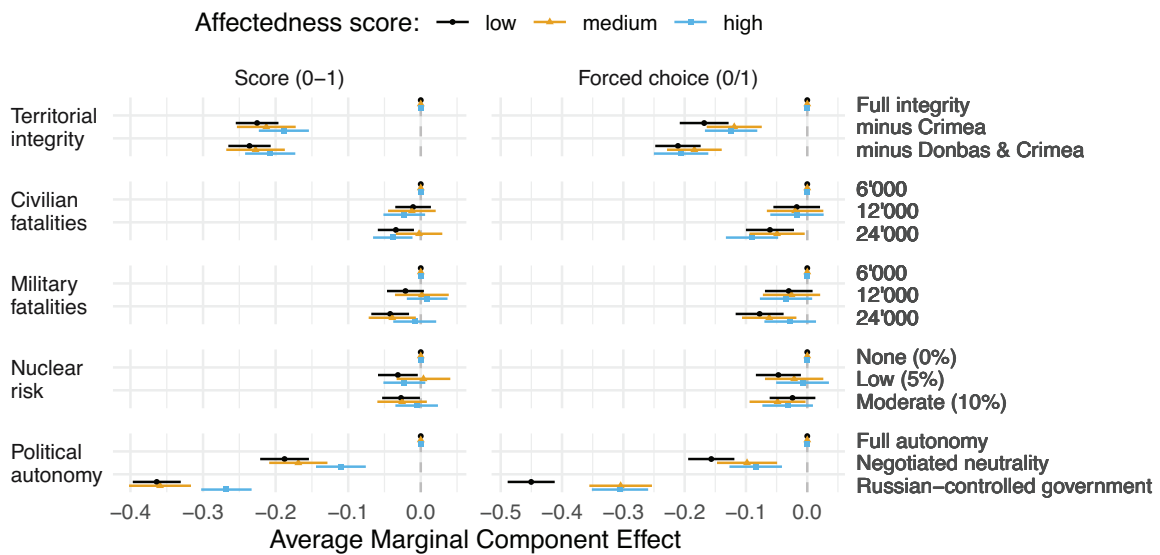
Affectedness. Some previous studies suggest that direct war-affectedness can make individuals more sensitive to wars' costs and more willing to make concessions (Chiego 2023; Tellez 2019b). However, in Ukraine, those most affected are also those whose place of residence is most likely to come under Russian rule, thus increasing their stakes in *not* conceding Ukraine's territorial integrity and political autonomy. We investigate how far respondents' choices coincide with these arguments by analyzing heterogeneous treatment effects along terciles of an "affectedness score" that combines information across eight measures of individual and geographic affectedness by the war. We then disaggregate its components.

We find that the least war-affected respondents oppose political and territorial concessions more than the most affected respondents (Figure 4). The latter do, however, also react very negatively to territorial concessions and limits on political autonomy, with AMCEs that are substantively larger than those of the cost attributes. Showing no increased cost-sensitivity, highly affected respondents do not react more negatively to higher war-costs than the least affected tercile. Further analyses in Appendix D in the SI show this heterogeneity to be mostly driven by geographic exposure to the war. Respondents in regions first attacked by Russia and those living within 10 km of one-sided violence and battle events tend to exhibit smaller (yet still substantive) AMCEs of territorial integrity and political autonomy restrictions. Various types of self-affectedness or family members' affectedness do not systematically or significantly moderate the results. These findings suggest that a sample of respondents from the most-affected eastern

²⁴See Appendix A in the SI for summary statistics on the variables.

²⁵This is robust to modeling age and education linearly.

FIGURE 4 Heterogeneity by Terciles of Affectedness Score



Note: Affectedness score is the first principal component of affectedness measures: residence in (1) eastern Ukraine; (2) oblast first attacked; (3) self or (4) family affected by war; location 10 km to (5) one-sided violence, (6) battle events; and (7) shelling.

oblasti excluded from the survey would not have yielded starkly different results.²⁶

Attitudes. Finally, we assess heterogeneity along respondents' political attitudes. We find that respondents who are less concerned about Ukrainian national survival and victory in the war and trust their president less exhibit smaller, yet still substantive, effects of limitations on Ukraine's territorial integrity and political autonomy while not differing on the cost attributes. The results show that even the few respondents who are unaligned with the current government reject concessions on Ukraine's territory or autonomy.

Proportionate Resistance?

We test whether respondents' scores and choices reflect the logic of proportionality (Hypotheses 6 and 7). Under a logic of proportionality, the negative effects of cost attributes would increase as strategies exhibit greater infringements on territorial integrity and political autonomy: Respondents should accept more deaths and nuclear risk in exchange for better war outcomes and should accept worse outcomes to save costs.

²⁶Little heterogeneity along levels of victimization is consistent with other research conducted since Russia's invasion (Onuch 2022).

We find no support for this expectation. Figure 5 shows estimated AMCEs for subgroups defined by the attribute levels of territorial integrity and political autonomy assigned to a strategy.²⁷ Overall, estimated effects of fatalities and nuclear risk do not differ between these subgroups with substantive or statistical significance. Results for the score outcome in Appendix Figure A23 in the SI show consistent patterns, as does an analysis among most affected respondents (Figure A24).²⁸ An omnibus *F*-test of subgroup differences among the effects of cost attributes rejects our expectation that attitudes follow a logic of proportionality ($p = .92$ and $.44$). Because the many contrasts may cause false positives, we do not interpret the few, small, and mostly statistically insignificant subgroup differences in Figure 5.

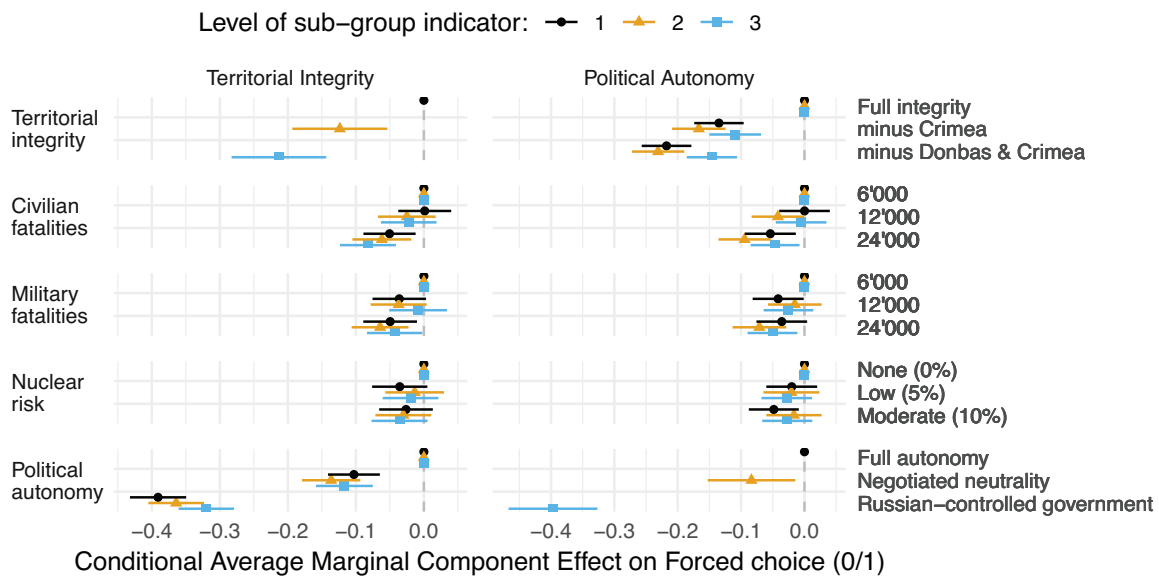
Categorical Resistance?

Rather than trading off the costs against the benefits of self-defense, respondents may take a categorical stance. A categorical logic implies a clear ranking of (un)desirable features so that a strategy characterized by the most resisted (desired) feature f_1 across all attributes and levels

²⁷Due to full randomization, differences between subgroups can be causally interpreted. Appendix E in the SI reports interaction effects.

²⁸Appendix Figures A27 and A28 in the SI show equivalent results when modeling attribute effects linearly.

FIGURE 5 Heterogeneity by Levels of Territorial Integrity and Political Autonomy



Note: This figure shows heterogenous AMCE estimates by levels of Attribute 1 (territorial integrity) in the first column and Attribute 5 (political autonomy) in the second column.

is rejected (accepted) *irrespective of all lower ranked features*. If f_1 characterizes either none or both strategies in the pair, choices are guided by categorical reactions to the second-ranked feature f_2 , etc.²⁹ Such decision making does not contradict the assumptions underlying conjoint experiments and AMCE estimates (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Yet, AMCEs depict such decision making inadequately as they average over preference directions and intensities (Abramson, Koçak, and Magazinnik 2022) across all tasks.

Going beyond our preanalysis plan, we test whether forced choice patterns are consistent with categorical reactions to (restrictions on) Ukraine’s political autonomy and territorial integrity as the highest ranked features. If so, the effects of cost attributes should increase in pairs with invariant integrity and autonomy attributes. Figure 6 supports this conjecture. We find that the effects of 24,000 civilian and military fatalities and moderate nuclear risk more than quadruple once all concession attributes are invariant, each reaching a conditional AMCE of 0.2. These increases are causally identified as variance in attribute levels is randomized. They are also not the mechanical result of suppressing variance in just *any* two attributes.³⁰ Consistent with categorical choices,

²⁹This logic does not affect strategy ratings, which can be assigned independently.

³⁰Splitting the sample by (in)variance in pairs of cost attributes yields no significant subgroup differences.

respondents strongly react to the costs of the war only once concessions are off the table or invariant.

But what is the full ranking of attribute features? We answer this question with a new heuristic approach that deepens causal analysis of conjoint data. We start choosing the first-ranked feature f_1 as that with a co-occurrence adjusted marginal mean closest to either 0 or 1, being the feature with the greatest predictive power over respondents’ choices. We then identify the second-ranked feature f_2 , but using only strategy pairs in which f_1 is either absent or invariant.³¹ For this subsample we proceed as before, estimating “nested” marginal means to delineate f_2 . Again only keeping pairs without variation in f_2 , we proceed in the same manner until all features are ranked. Bootstrapped standard errors clustered at the respondent level capture the rankings’ uncertainty.

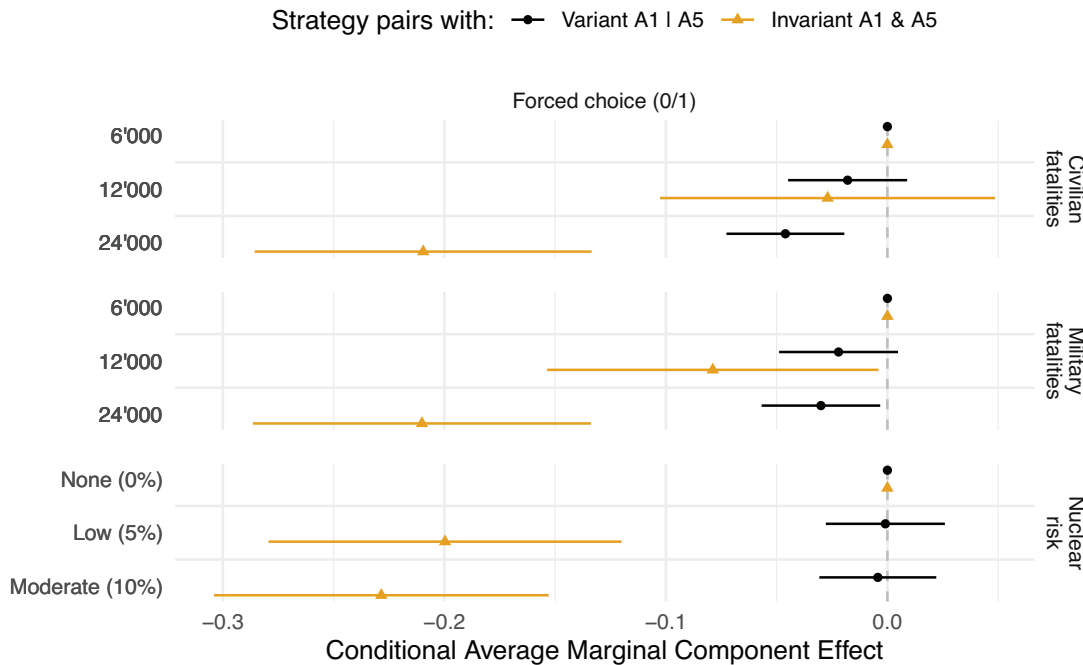
Figure 7 presents the resulting nested marginal means until the fourth-ranked feature.³² These remain substantively similar among the most war-affected respondents.³³ The first column presents marginal means from the entire data set, which identify a Russian controlled government as the first-ranked feature f_1 . It is chosen in only 21% [19; 23] of cases with any acceptances

³¹This is assuming no interaction effects.

³²See Table A7 in the SI for a full ranking.

³³Appendix Figures A30 and A31 in the SI.

FIGURE 6 Heterogeneity by Pair-Level Variation in Territorial Integrity and Political Autonomy



Note: This figure shows heterogenous ACME estimates by (no) variance in Attribute 1 (territorial integrity) in the first column and Attribute 5 (political autonomy) in the second column.

caused not by high war costs but *exclusively* by rejections of territorial concessions (Appendix Figure A29 in the SI).

In column 2, we drop all strategy pairs with variation in f_1 , the Russian-controlled government. In the remaining sample ($N = 5,008$), full territorial integrity reaches an acceptance rate of 72% [69; 74], thus being the second-ranked feature f_2 . Rejections of territorial integrity in this subsample are mostly caused by choices for full political autonomy over political neutrality, with small and mostly insignificant effects of cost attributes (Figure A29).

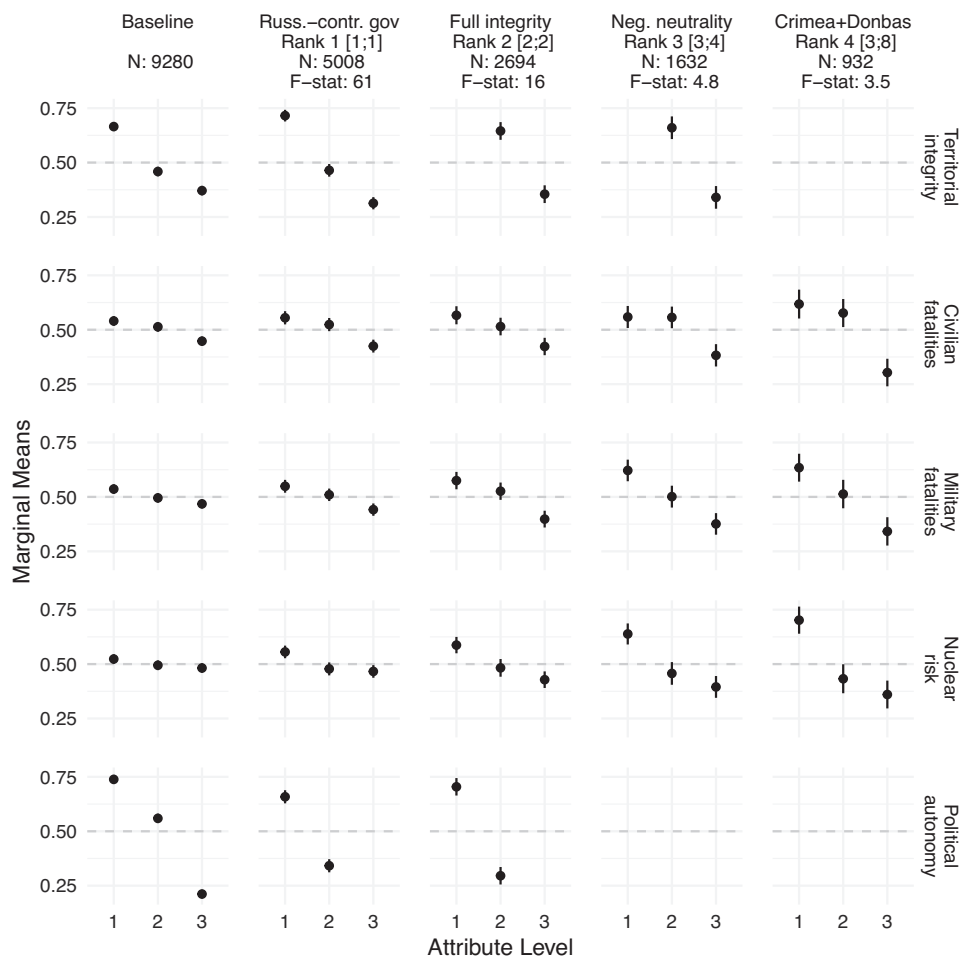
In column 3, acceptance of full political autonomy (70% [66; 74]) versus negotiated neutrality yields the largest nested marginal means that mirror each other mechanically, thus receiving the same rank 3 [3;4]. Its confidence interval is overlapping with rank 4 [3;8], conditional acceptance of giving up only Crimea (column 4; mean of 66% [61; 71]) versus giving up Crimea and Donbas. These two features are ranked with substantial uncertainty due to the smaller sample size ($N = 1,632$) and increasing effects of the cost attributes. In sum, these ranking estimates then reaffirm that concerns over full political autonomy and territorial integrity significantly override respondents' sensitivity to the costs of the war.

Yet, cost attributes' nested marginal means show a substantively increasing spread. This reiterates that respondents react to war costs once their choice set does not reflect their primary concerns for the reestablishment of the 2014 status quo ante (column 5). They then select strategies without nuclear risk in 70% [64; 76] of tasks and seldom select strategies that lead to high levels of civilian and military fatalities. In sum, Ukrainians' choices are congruent with a categorical rejection of strong limits on political autonomy and territorial integrity, and lower ranked concerns over the costs of war.

Our methodological innovation also promises an improved evaluation of conjoint experiments more generally. Co-occurrence of features over which respondents hold inelastic preferences can affect AMCEs and marginal means for *other* features in theoretically meaningful ways. This expands Abramson, Koçak, and Magazinnik's (2022) insight on the effect of including important attributes, to the effect of the variance of these important attributes.³⁴ Our ranking-based disaggregation into "nested" marginal means can help analyze such

³⁴Co-occurrence rates have been shown to affect attributes' own AMCE estimates (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020; Ganter 2023).

FIGURE 7 Nested Marginal Means of Ranked Strategy Features in Categorical Decision-Making



Note: Column header identifies the feature and its rank used to identify the subset to be dropped in comparison to the previous column to the left, the remaining number of strategies in the sample, as well as the *F*-statistic of a Wald-test of no difference between the estimates in that and the previous column. Marginal means are computed after dropping pairs with no variance on a given attribute to avoid bias.

patterns, which likely affect conjoint responses on issues with high-valence attributes, such as migration intentions (see, e.g., Arababab et al. 2023), and attitudes on crime or human rights. Additionally, our disaggregated feature effect estimates allow for more targeted examination of choices from a given set of profiles. These may be valuable in their own right and in situations where the full distribution of profiles is ex ante unknown but where a political (or other) process yields two (or more) concrete profiles, the choice between which researchers may want to inform or predict based on existing data.

Conclusion

Most moral philosophers hold that even a war with a just cause like self-defense is only justified if the costs of fighting do not exceed the benefits. The chorus of statesmen, scholars, and pundits calling on Ukraine to settle for less than full political autonomy and territorial integrity to limit the costs of armed self-defense reflects this logic of proportionality. This study, instead, shows that Ukrainians overwhelmingly prefer strategies that do not concede territory or limit Ukraine’s political autonomy.

Respondents are sensitive to the costs of armed self-defense, but only if they are choosing between strategies with acceptable outcomes. None of the costs they contemplated exceeded the value Ukrainians place on political autonomy and territorial integrity.

One might think that these findings mean Ukrainians follow the logic of proportionality, but place much more value on the benefits of successful self-defense than the outside observers calling for concessions.³⁵ How much value? Our illustrative extrapolation of treated attribute levels yielded staggering results. For example, we estimate that the average effect of a Russian-controlled government on the rate of rejection is, to our respondents, equivalent to accepting 12 [0.72, 220] million additional civilian deaths, more military fatalities than the country has inhabitants, or a certain nuclear attack. This extreme cost-inelasticity points to a more radical divergence of Ukrainians' attitudes from the logic of proportionality.

Instead, we demonstrate that Ukrainians' preferences follow a categorical logic. We find no significant interactions between the expected costs and projected benefits of armed self-defense, suggesting that respondents do not make trade-offs. Moreover, based on a newly developed method to rank attributes and decompose marginal mean estimates, we find that 79% of strategies with a Russian-controlled government as the projected outcome are rejected, regardless of the costs. When respondents accept strategies with this projected outcome, they do so not to save costs but to avoid territorial concessions. Respondents thus have a clear preference ranking among the outcomes they accept: A large majority supports self-defense at any cost.

This first evidence showing that a population facing aggression takes a categorical stance on resistance has three important implications for research on attitudes of conflict-affected populations. First, we highlight the need to differentiate between decreased cost-sensitivity and the outright rejection of trade-offs in response to exposure to threat or violence. Both can look like intransigence but follow different logics. Second, at the individual level, we find little effect-heterogeneity by war-affectedness. This corroborates observational evidence for the unifying force of interstate war that threatens national survival. Third, our results highlight the need for future research to investigate whether populations affected by conflicts with qualitatively different

stakes, such as regime contestation without threats to territorial integrity, likewise adopt a categorical stance.

For policy makers, our results underscore the urgent need to take Ukrainians' determination seriously. Making demands on Ukraine's political elites that are entirely divorced from Ukrainian mass preferences is politically unwise as the success of any strategy depends partly on popular support. If Ukraine's leadership sought a political settlement or conceded territory due to international pressure, our study suggests, this settlement could destabilize the Ukrainian government and would be of short duration. Commentators calling on Ukraine to make concessions tend to be confident that they come from a position of hard-headed realism. Barry Posen (2022) recently warned that "Ukraine and the West should ... shift from a strategy of winning the war toward a more realistic approach ... that ends the fighting." In his call for Ukrainian concessions, Noam Chomsky famously exhorted Ukraine and its Western allies to "pay attention to the reality of the world" (Current Affairs 2022). The reality is that Ukrainians prefer self-defense at any cost.

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³⁵This may seem plausible not least because Russian political or territorial control would have significant *long-term* costs, including Ukrainian lives lost.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A: Data

Appendix B: Methods

Appendix C: Robustness checks of main analysis

Appendix D: Heterogeneous treatment effects

Appendix E: Additional proportionality results

Appendix F: Ranking analysis

Appendix G: Pre-analysis plan

Appendix H: References (Appendix)