Regular Article

Journal of Peace Research

Drafting restraint: Are military recruitment policies associated with interstate conflict initiation?

Journal of Peace Research
1–15

DOI: 10.1177/00223433241255010
journals.sagepub.com/home/jpr
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Abstract

Are countries that use conscription more restrained in their use of military force? A common argument holds that military conscription restrains leaders from using force because it increases the political cost of war and distributes them more evenly and broadly across the population. Despite this intuition, empirical evidence to support it is at best inconclusive. This article introduces a novel perspective on the relationship between military recruitment (MR) policies and conflict initiation (CI) by arguing that the military's size relative to society – its military participation rate (MPR) – is an important and overlooked part of this story. MPR is a more direct measure of the population's exposure to the costs of war, but high MPR may also increase CI by enhancing military capacity. By incorporating MPR into the analysis of CI, both independently and in interaction with conscription, this article provides a more comprehensive understanding of how MR practices shape CI. It tests these new hypotheses about the relationship between MPR, conscription and CI using a variety of time-series models that cover all country-years from 1816 to 2011. The findings do not support the conventional wisdom, instead revealing that neither conscription nor volunteerism is independently associated with restrained initiation of military conflicts abroad. On the contrary, these recruitment practices are more likely to be associated with an increase in the likelihood of CI. These findings indicate that we should be skeptical of traditional arguments that assume conscription leads to restraint in the use of force, either independently or conditional on MPR. These counterintuitive results underscore the need for additional research on the complex relationship between MR practices, civil–military relations and foreign policy.

Keywords

conscription, military recruitment, conflict initiation, militarized interstate disputes, civil–military relations

Introduction

Do military recruitment (MR) policies affect a country's likelihood of using military force abroad? Pundits and politicians alike seem to think so. This common argument holds that states can more easily send volunteer armies into combat because they insulate the public from the cost of war, while conscript armies constrain leaders' freedom of action for fear of political backlash (Ackerman, 2019; Bacevich, 2013; De Gregorio, 2018; Matishak, 2015; Mittlestadt, 2019). While some scholars have found support for the idea that conscription decreases the public's support for war (Bergan, 2009; Erikson and Stoker, 2011; Horowitz and Levendusky, 2011; Kriner and Shen, 2016), there is little evidence that conscription reduces conflict initiation (CI) in practice (Choi and James, 2003; Pickering, 2011). How can we explain these divergent results?

I resolve this debate with new, large-N tests of the argument that MR can constrain foreign policy. Statistical tests of this hypothesis assume that conscription practices look similar across all states and time – that any use of conscription raises the costs of war sufficiently to restrain

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leaders. In reality, extensive variation in the purpose and enforcement of conscription makes this unlikely. I offer new arguments and empirical tests about how the military's size relative to society (the military participation rate (MPR)) is an important and overlooked feature that is more likely to induce the same restraining effect, either independently or by moderating the effects of conscription. MPR should affect the public's experience of the costs of war; failure to account for this could explain the absence of consistent findings that conscription alone produces foreign policy restraint. Therefore, this article paints the most complete picture of how conscription, MR and CI are intertwined to-date.

My findings show not only that conscription is not independently associated with reduced CI, but also that armies are rarely large enough to make a difference in any effect of recruitment methods on CI. These results are both counterintuitive and important. They relocate the causal mechanism in many scholarly and policy debates away from conscription in its own right and toward other MR policies that affect how domestic populations experience the costs of war. Fairly distributing the burden of war is one of the principal goals of democratic civil–military relations. Military service is arguably one of the most extreme forms of this burden, so debates about who should serve are frequently a contentious element of public policy and have the potential to shape national identity, citizenship and political participation (Krebs, 2005, 2006; Wilson and Ruger, 2020). The results also indicate either that elites are relatively unconstrained by public opinion in their decisions to use force abroad, or that efforts to tie the military to society fail to activate public opinion in the ways that scholarship expects. This has implications for the literatures on civil–military relations, CI and audience costs, in that it forces us to reexamine common assumptions about how both public opinion and personal cost shape key foreign policy decisions.

This article proceeds by first, evaluating scholarship on the relationship between conscription and CI. Second, I explain why MPR is a necessary addition to our understanding of how conscription and volunteerism are associated with CI. Next, I present my research design and statistical results. I conclude with a discussion of implications for defense policies and civil–military relations, in the United States and elsewhere.

Conscription and support for war

The idea that MR can affect interstate conflict goes back at least to Immanuel Kant. His 1795 *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* offers two explanations for this relationship. The first is his argument against standing armies, which are too easy to use because their 'constant readiness to fight' raises the cost of peace and reduces the barriers to waging war (Kant, 1795). The other is that the common people oppose war because they are most likely to pay its costs. In this way, MR policies resemble a range of similar tools that give states a freer hand in foreign policy by offsetting or hiding the costs of war from the public, including war financing, military technology, inequality, private security companies, covert operations and foreign recruits (Avant and Sigelman, 2010; Caverley, 2014; Flores-Macias and Kreps, 2017; Gleditsch et al., 2019; Grasmeder, 2021; Hanson and Lin-Greenberg, 2019; Joseph and Poznansky, 2018; Kaag and Kreps, 2014; Kreps, 2018; Lin-Greenberg, 2020; Zielinski, 2016). MR policies that reduce the price leaders pay for waging war make conflict more likely, while those that increase the cost reinforce peace.

Many scholars draw on this Kantian logic to argue that conscription is a major factor that shapes leaders' cost of war calculus (Choi and James, 2003; Pickering, 2011; Vasquez, 2009). Proponents of this argument expect that individuals who are at risk of being drafted against their will, along with their friends and family who would rather not see them drafted, are more likely to punish leaders for dragging them into an unpopular war. In contrast, when the military is composed of volunteers, the public is less likely to develop or voice strong opposition because it pays few if any direct costs of war, while the most extreme costs are concentrated among a smaller group and are partially offset by the factors that incentivized them to volunteer in the first place.

Public opinion surveys consistently find that people living in democracies are less likely to favor a war when they know it will be fought with conscripts (Bergan, 2009; Horowitz and Levendusky, 2011; Kriner and Shen, 2016). Surveys have also found that a draft reduces support for war or otherwise changes political preferences among the respondents who are most likely to pay the costs of war – people that are most likely to be drafted and their parents (Bae and Lee, 2024; Davenport, 2015; Erikson and Stoker, 2011; Horowitz and Levendusky, 2011; McGuirk et al., 2020). Small-N comparative studies also suggest that coercive forms of recruitment can empower the citizenry and incentivize the state to be more conscientious in its treatment of soldiers (Levy, 2013, 2014). These findings all support a key element of the causal logic linking conscription to foreign policy restraint – that conscription reduces support for war, ostensibly because it makes the costs of war higher for a larger portion of the population.

Yet, large-N analyses have not established a definitive correlation between conscription and CI. Some find that conscription actually increases the likelihood of a country's involvement in an international conflict or dispute, while others find a negative correlation or no correlation (Choi and James, 2003; Koch and Gartner, 2005; Pickering, 2011). Similarly, there is only mixed support that the broader costs of conscription incentivize casualty avoidance, with scholars finding support for positive, negative and null relationships (Horowitz et al., 2011; Koch and Gartner, 2005; Valentino et al., 2010; Vasquez, 2005). The diverse methods adopted in each of these studies – analyzing different units of analysis, time frames and conflict thresholds – complicates efforts to draw lessons from this literature.

For example, the only study that finds conscription decreases the real-world likelihood of CI demonstrates that war initiation is less likely between country-dyads that both used conscription compared to those in which only one country or neither country used conscription (Choi and James, 2008). However, a dyadic analysis is inconsistent with the theorized causal mechanism, that conscription constrains leaders by distributing higher costs of war over a broader and more powerful portion of a country's domestic population. If that were the case, conscripting countries should be more restrained against all potential adversaries, not just other countries that use conscription. A conscription-dyad finding supports a logic of external signaling rather than domestic costs: two states that both use conscription deter each other from fighting over minor disputes because they signal an ability and willingness to endure a lengthy, costly conflict (Horowitz et al., 2017; Moskos, 2001: 45). Monadic tests of conscription's effect on CI find a *positive* correlation (Koch and Gartner, 2005; Pickering, 2011). This is in fact consistent with the competing expectation that leaders actually may be more restrained in how they use capital-intensive, professional, volunteer militaries because of their greater aggregate financial and training costs (Horowitz et al., 2011).

Taken together, this evidence points to a disconnect between how conscription affects public opinion and how it affects CI. While there is some evidence that conscription constrains decisions for major conflict, the studies that test this hypothesis most directly show that conscription actually increases the probability that countries engage in riskier foreign policy behavior that produces lower levels of conflict – suggesting a possible stability–instability effect with respect to recruitment systems. However, none of these results consider that cost distribution is not only a question of *who* serves, but of *how many* serve, as well.

Military participation and representative drafts

I argue that for conscription to have a direct and independent ability to reduce leaders' incentives for waging war, as is often expected, it must reach a sufficiently large and powerful enough segment of the population that feels they will be personally negatively impacted. Yet there is wide variation in the size of conscript militaries and the extent to which conscripting countries implement conscription throughout their populations (Toronto and Cohn, 2020). As a result, conscription does not always affect enough of the population to constrain national leaders. Empirical examinations of the relationship between conscription and CI have not accounted for the variation in conscription's reach across populations. Instead, they generalize the fear of coerced participation in war of some soldiers in conscript armies across entire armies and their societies, regardless of how frequently coercion is actually applied.

Countries with small militaries, for example, could conscript a large proportion of their active-duty military while only conscripting a small percentage of the eligible civilian population. In Denmark, each new cohort of conscripts increases the size of the army by about 50% from its regular strength of around 8400 soldiers (Danish Defence, 2019). This is an enormous proportion of the active-duty strength of the army that is made up of conscripts. By comparison, of the more than 11 million draft-aged people who served in the American military from August 1964 through to March 1973, only 2,215,000 were draftees – less than 20% (Rostker, 2006: 45). However, only 6.5% of Danish men within a given age cohort are conscripted each year (Braw, 2019: 11). As a result, though in theory all men in these cases are subject to the possibility of conscription, it remains a low risk for the vast majority of them. In many countries, it is rare for someone to be conscripted if they are truly opposed to serving.

Even in countries with greater military needs, widespread opportunities for deferment or exemption can decrease the size of the eligible cohort that is actually at risk of being selected. It is common practice for countries to exempt individuals in vital industries such as agriculture or defense production, or to grant deferments to students (Flynn, 1993). Historically, married men or family breadwinners have also enjoyed exemptions (Geva, 2013). More than 57% of draft eligible men in the United States legally avoided military service during the Vietnam War (Rostker, 2006: 45). Rutenberg (2019) argues that decades of permissive draft exemption policies enabled American draft resistance during the

Vietnam War precisely because Americans had become used to having many ways to avoid dangerous forms of military service if they wanted to. In addition, systems of exemption and deferment often insulate more politically influential segments of the population from unwanted military service. During the Vietnam War, eligible African Americans were far less likely to receive deferments and more likely to be drafted, further reducing the riskiness of the draft to other – more politically connected – portions of the population (Rutenberg, 2019: 166). While political elites might be reluctant to use the military if they fear that large portions of the population would object, these objections may not be forthcoming if it is easy to avoid the draft due to low numbers of inductions or permissive exemption policies.

Thus, conscription on its own does not guarantee a strong impact on a significant enough portion of a country's population to reduce support for war and restrain its leadership. While conscription may reduce individual's support for war through the threat of coerced participation, this threat typically remains low for most of a country's population, and countries that use conscription are often still able to rely mostly on troops who are not coerced into service. Arguments that expect conscription on its own to lead to restraint either assume that a large portion of the population perceives some risk of coerced military service, or that the knowledge that some people are being coerced into service is enough to turn large portions of the population against the war. Given the variation in how conscription is practiced, the first new hypothesis I test is:

H1: Conscription is not associated with a lower probability of CI.

A binary measure of conscription only captures whether some soldiers have been coerced into bearing the costs of war against their will, rather than what portion of the population would be exposed to the costs of war. A more direct measure of the magnitude of MR's impact on the entire population is MPR (Andreski, 1971: 33; Van Doorn, 1975). By definition, as the share of the population that serves in the military at a given time increases, the number of people who remain insulated from the costs of war decreases – regardless of whether troops are recruited through coercion or not. Even if troops themselves have volunteered to serve and support a potential war, high MPR means that more friends, families and colleagues will directly know people who would be put in harm's way. In addition, maintaining a large proportion of the population in military service can be very disruptive to the civilian economy, making it more difficult to wage a long war of attrition (Gat, 2006). As a result, leaders can expect a greater proportion of their constituents to care about the war, oppose the war and punish them for the war – especially if it goes poorly – when MPR is high. Recognizing this, leaders of high MPR countries may be more selective about when to use force.

However, high MPR also ensures that more of the population is armed and able to fight, which could also correlate with a more threatening security environment or greater military readiness and capabilities. Public support for war often depends on the perceived likelihood of success (Eichenberg, 2005; Gelpi et al., 2005). Instead of making leaders more sensitive to domestic costs of waging war, high MPR could make leaders more confident they will win and so more likely to use military force. In sum, while high MPR spreads the costs of war across society in a way that may make leaders more restrained, it may also be a necessary component of a state's security maximization strategy. This leads me to test two additional competing hypotheses:

H2a: Higher MPR is associated with a lower probability of CI.

H2b: Higher MPR is associated with a higher probability of CI.

Lastly, and given the competing expectations of MPR's independent effect on CI, I argue that there may be an interactive relationship between conscription and MPR. As MPR increases, the proportion of personnel that are conscripted is also likely to increase, even if not at the same rate – especially since countries generally use conscription to increase their recruitment numbers more quickly than they could get personnel voluntarily. The combination of having a high proportion of the population under arms with a recruitment system that places many of them there against their will may make it especially likely that leaders will fear popular backlash for all but the most necessary wars. When high MPR occurs in a conscript system, there are few institutional or ideological barriers to insulate the population from the cost of war. High MPR ensures that more of the population pays the cost of war, while conscription incentivizes more criticism of the government because people are either coerced to pay the costs or are concerned about their loved ones whom they know are being coerced into paying the costs (Levy, 2019). High MPR in a volunteer system may not have the same

effect – or may even make it easier for leaders to use force – because popular opposition to the costs of war is mitigated by the perception that the people who pay those costs most directly (by serving in the military) have taken them on willingly. In a low MPR system, criticism can be contained to a small enough portion of the population so that leaders do not feel threatened by it. In this way, conscription would moderate the effects of high MPR. This results in the final, novel hypothesis:

> *H3:* If states use conscription, higher MPR will be associated with a lower probability of CI.

The principal obstacle to testing these hypotheses is the possibility that high MPR, conscription *and* CI are associated with the same causally prior variables. States that maintain high MPR, conscription, or both might do so because of their perceived benefits in a highly threatening environment; similarly, threats might lead states to initiate conflicts to preempt or deter attacks from other states. Alternatively, hyper-nationalistic states that emphasize the role of military service in citizenship might be more likely to have high MPR armies, to use conscription and to initiate conflicts. Fortunately, this endogeneity concern would bias results against finding the hypothesized relationship. Because of the countervailing influence of these plausibly prior variables, finding support for either H2a or H3 would be strong evidence that MR constrains states even in unlikely scenarios. While I use several control variables to account for the prior influence of threat, the role of confounding variables is only further justification for pursuing Hypotheses 1 and 2b, which are built upon the assumption that the relationship between MR and threat is stronger than the relationship between MR and public opinion.

Further examination using multivariate and bivariate probit regressions (see the Online Appendix) does indicate that the same prior variables affect a state's MR practices and its likelihood of initiating conflict. Many of the independent variables are statistically significant in models of CI and recruitment policies. Moreover, the directions of their effects are also consistent with this. For example, being in an alliance is associated with decreased MID initiation, increased MPR and a greater likelihood of using conscription. This points to the importance of further work to examine the complex relationship between these variables.

Research design and analysis

I test these hypotheses using Correlates of War (COW) data, covering 177 states from 1816 through to 2011. Unlike most prior studies, I use country-years as the unit of analysis, rather than dyad-years, to better capture the domestic restraint argument: as noted above, the increased cost of war arising from a country's own MR and mobilization policies should act as a constraint on domestic leaders independently of the recruitment policies adopted by its foreign adversary. I follow prior studies in using lagged independent variables to account for the possibility of endogeneity: that states might change their recruitment practices after initiating conflict. I include country and year fixed effects along with robust standard errors. I use ordinary least squares regression for all models to aid in interpretability, though the substantive results do not change with logistic or Poisson regression for the dichotomous and continuous forms of the dependent variable, respectively.

Dependent and independent variables

For the dependent variables, I focus on initiation of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) (Palmer et al., 2015). While we might expect states restrained by their MR policies to try harder to avoid even becoming the target of a war, ultimately this is outside their control. As a result, I only analyze MID initiation. There are several reasons to analyze MIDs over other types of international events. For one, interstate war is a relatively rare event, so including additional types of events allows for an examination of a broader set of likely uses of military force. This also allows for more direct comparison with prior studies of conscription and CI, which often use MIDs or other types of events that include events short of war. The MIDs dataset was originally created to 'understand how state interactions lead to interstate war,' and is populated by incidents involving the threat, display, or actual use of force over serious unresolved issues with the potential to escalate to war (Jones et al., 1996: 169). This inherent risk of escalation is important for my purposes because it ensures that a state's initial decision to engage in actions that start a dispute entail some risk of negative consequences or cost to the military or broader population. While future research may want to consider the effect of MR policies on the militarized incidents that comprise MIDs, focusing on dispute initiation avoids the problem of accounting for additional confounding variables that might affect the action-response escalation cycle through which disputes progress over time.

As discussed earlier, MR policies that increase the cost of war to society can create a stability–instability paradox: they may restrain leaders from highly provocative behavior without affecting their willingness to start

low-level disputes. Consequently, I analyze results for any type of MID initiation as well as for only those MIDs coded as a 4 or higher for their level of hostility, meaning those that escalate to the use of force. Examples of MIDs involving the use of force include instances of seizures, attacks and clashes, but not the lower level of border violations, shows of force, or mobilizations. Recruitment policies may constrain leaders from using force but not from lower-level MIDs because the former are more likely to escalate to a conflict that requires large-scale societal mobilization for war. My empirical expectations remain the same for both dependent variables. However, because low-level MIDs are much more common, it is important to analyze high-level MIDs on their own in case their relationship to MR policies is drowned out in the full sample.

I examine two competing independent variables, as well as their interaction. The first of these is a dichotomous variable measuring 1 if a state uses conscription and 0 if it relies on volunteer recruits.[1] The second uses the COW National Military Capabilities dataset's count of a country's active duty, regular military personnel to create a measure of MPR. This dataset only counts a country's military personnel if they are directly under the command of the government and for whom combat against foreign adversaries is a primary organizational purpose, so it generally excludes paramilitary forces such as gendarmeries and civil-defense units (Singer, 1987: 13–14).

Control variables

I control for additional factors that are likely to affect the probability of CI. Following the large literature that examines conscription in the context of the democratic peace, I control for regime type with a dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 if a country scores 7 or higher on the Polity2 measure of regime type, and 0 otherwise (Marshall and Gurr, 2020). Democracy remains a theoretically important variable for distinguishing just how responsive states are to the threat of punishment from their own populations (Hyde and Saunders, 2020). However, there is considerable debate about whether democracies are less likely to use force than non-democracies, and an immense literature that demonstrates the complexity of authoritarian regime types and the ways that authoritarian leaders can be restrained by their populations (Svolik, 2012; Weeks, 2012). There is even evidence that autocratic leaders pay greater costs after defeat – suggesting that they may be more sensitive to the risks of costly recruitment practices (Chiozza et al., 2004). While an effect of MR on CI depends on leaders being somewhat responsive to concerns that the public wants to avoid the costs of war, it is not clear that this relationship only obtains in democracies.

Geography can also affect the probability of CI. Because few countries have the capability to project force far beyond their own borders, countries with more land neighbors have more opportunities to get involved in MIDs. As a result, I include a control variable from the COW Direct Contiguity dataset that measures the number of a state's contiguous land neighbors (Stinnett et al., 2002). Similarly, states that have recently experienced a territorial loss may face strong incentives to initiate MIDs to regain their territory, so I also control for whether a state has lost any territory in the previous year using the COW Territorial Change dataset. For similar reasons, I include a dichotomous variable that indicates whether a country was involved in any war over the last five years, as well.

I include three control variables that might affect the likelihood of MID initiation through a state's evaluation of its own likelihood of victory, since states are unlikely to initiate conflicts that they do not believe they can win. Following Pickering (2011), I include a measure of troop quality created by dividing total military spending by the size of the armed forces, since countries that spend more money per soldier might be more confident in their military capabilities. For similar reasons, I use a logged COW Composite Index of National Capability score to measure the totality of a country's military capabilities in terms of material power. Lastly, I include a dichotomous variable that indicates whether a state is a party to a formal defensive alliance (Gibler, 2009; Small and Singer, 1969). These alliances might either constrain their members or embolden them.

Despite the possibility that the complex relationships between these variables could produce multicollinearity, the largest Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.36, for the relationship between democracy and logged troop quality. Most have a coefficient below 0.10. The regressions should have no problem distinguishing the effects of each variable.

Results

Table 1 shows results for all MIDs and only those MIDs that escalate to the use of force. The odd numbered models test the first three hypotheses, while the even numbered ones test Hypothesis 3. Conscription does not have an independent effect on CI after controlling for MPR in any of the odd numbered models. This is strong evidence in support of Hypothesis 1, that

Table 1. Military recruitment and conflict initiation.

Variables	*All militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) (binary)*		*All MIDs (total)*		*Forceful MIDs (binary)*		*Forceful MIDs (total)*	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Conscription	0.022	0.040*	0.054	0.087*	0.016	0.045**	0.012	0.043
	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.029)	(0.034)	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.019)	(0.023)
Military participation rate (MPR)	1.462*	4.742**	9.825***	15.946***	2.346***	7.761***	7.041***	12.840***
	(0.612)	(1.785)	(2.057)	(3.509)	(0.606)	(1.611)	(1.490)	(2.307)
Conscription × MPR		–3.430		–6.401		–5.662***		–6.063*
		(1.800)		(3.644)		(1.644)		(2.481)
Democracy	–0.013	–0.012	–0.080**	–0.078**	–0.032**	–0.030**	–0.051**	–0.049**
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Neighbors	0.030***	0.029***	0.105***	0.105***	0.026***	0.026***	0.048***	0.048***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Territorial change	0.004	0.003	–0.024	–0.026	0.004	0.002	–0.047	–0.049
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.027)	(0.027)
Recent war	0.032*	0.031*	0.158***	0.157***	0.050***	0.049***	0.155***	0.154***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.040)	(0.040)
Any alliance	–0.003	–0.003	–0.058	–0.059	–0.005	–0.006	–0.053*	–0.054*
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Troop quality	0.006	0.006	0.069***	0.070***	0.007	0.008	0.039***	0.040***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Composite Index of National Capability	0.047***	0.045***	0.123***	0.121***	0.024**	0.022*	0.067***	0.065***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Constant	0.397**	0.383**	0.478*	0.451*	0.099	0.075	0.005	–0.021
	(0.147)	(0.146)	(0.200)	(0.197)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.084)	(0.082)
Observations	10,781	10,781	10,781	10,781	10,781	10,781	10,781	10,781
R^2	0.263	0.264	0.299	0.300	0.212	0.213	0.204	0.204

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

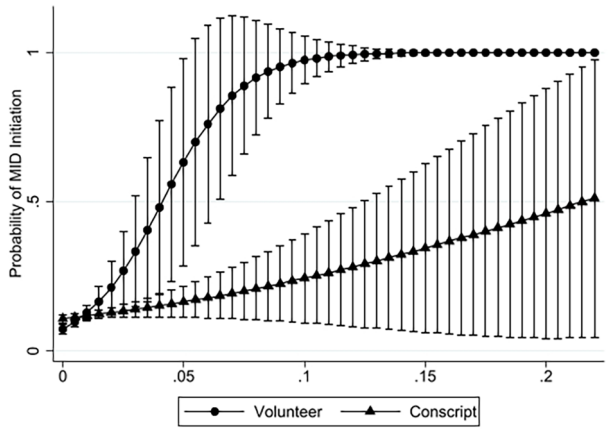

Figure 1. Military participation rate and forceful militarized interstate dispute initiation.

conscription is not associated with CI. Meanwhile, the odd numbered models all show a strongly statistically significant and positive relationship between MPR and CI, which is strong support for Hypothesis 2b and against Hypothesis 2a. This is consistent with the argument that recruitment practices are endogenous to threat environments or that bellicose countries are likely to maintain significant portions of their population under arms.

Models 6 and 8 show that conscription may moderate this strong relationship between MPR and CI, at least for MIDs involving the use of force, lending some support to Hypothesis 3. The interaction term between conscription and MPR in these models is statistically significant and shows a negative effect on the initiation of any forceful MIDs and the number of forceful MIDs. This indicates that conscription lowers the probability that a state will initiate forceful MIDs as MPR increases compared to volunteer armies with similar MPR. This relationship holds even in the presence of control variables that are strongly associated with war. Consistent with expectations in Hypotheses 2b and 3, increases in MPR when conscription is coded zero, or when a state uses volunteer recruitment, is associated with an increased likelihood of CI.

The substantive interpretation of the interaction effect requires more caution. The average marginal effect of MPR on the probability of initiating at least one MID involving the use of force is nearly six times larger when state recruitment is held constant as volunteer (6.67) compared to when it is set to conscription (1.12), though both are positive.[2] These average marginal effects are statistically significant at a 0.001 and 0.03 level, respectively. However, the marginal effect of MPR changes substantially over the wide range of MPR values. Figure 1 shows a large difference between conscript and volunteer militaries at higher levels of MPR. While the probability of initiating at least one MID involving the use of force is over 97% when volunteer armies put 10% of the country under arms, that same MPR is associated with less than 25% probability of CI using conscripts.

However, analyzing the full range of MPR is deceiving. The mean value for MPR across all countries and years in the dataset is less than 1% of the population, with a range that extends up to 21% and a standard deviation of around 0.01. In other words, countries rarely recruit more than 2–3% of their populations into the military. Figure 1 shows that the different effects of MPR on conscript and volunteer armies does not begin until relatively high levels of MPR – around 4% of the population, so MPR is rarely high enough for conscription to matter. In fact, only eight countries in the dataset ever register MPR above 10% of their population: Paraguay during the War of the Triple Alliance, from 1865–1867; the United Kingdom and France for parts of World War I and World War II; Switzerland from 1940–1945; Germany in 1918; Bulgaria in 1913, 1916 and 1918; Mongolia in 1944 and 1945; and Taiwan in 1949. None of these countries used volunteers during these periods. Although more than 97% of all country-years in the dataset have an MPR of less than or equal to 3% of their population, only 43 countries ever maintain MPR higher than this. Only seven countries maintained this MPR using a volunteer system and only one of those countries – the United Arab Emirates – did so for more than two years.

Figure 2 provides a more restricted view of the predictive margins from Figure 1 that zooms in on these most common MPR values. It shows that the confidence intervals for the marginal effect of MPR in conscript and volunteer systems overlap for all values between 0.003 and 0.03 – a range of MPR that includes roughly 65% of all observations. To put this into the context of the debate regarding the draft in the United States, whose MPR is currently around 0.005, Model 6 in Table 1 predicts that with the most recent complete values for all variables (2011), the United States currently has a 22% probability of initiating a MID involving the use of force (between 10% and 34%, given a 95% confidence interval). If all other values remain the same, that percentage increases slightly to 24.5% (roughly 12%–37% with a 95% confidence interval) were the United States to use conscription. That number further increases to 26.7% (13%–40% with a 95% confidence interval) for the post-1973 all-volunteer force maximum MPR of 1%, and is nearly identical for the same MPR under conscription (25.2%,

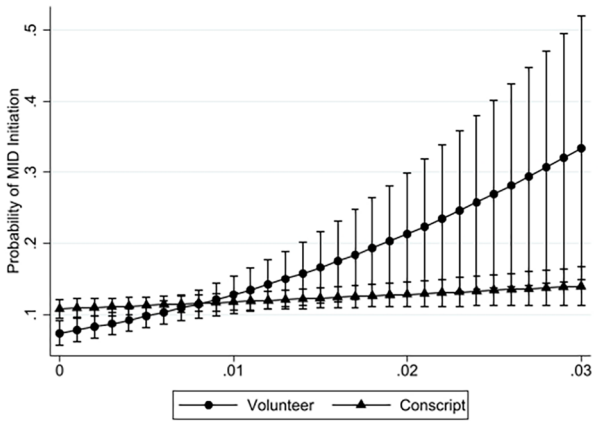

Figure 2. Subset of military participation rate and forceful militarized interstate dispute initiation.

12%–38% confidence intervals). In other words, there is no obvious difference between how conscription and volunteer recruitment are associated with CI, at least for historical values of American MPR.

Even more interesting, when MPR is less than or equal to 0.003, which constitutes 33.11% of all country-years and includes 73% of all countries, conscript armies exhibit slightly more bellicosity than volunteer ones. This is the range of the average MPR for many smaller, West African countries, such as Benin, Ghana, Senegal and Togo. While volunteer recruiting states with such small MPRs might be clearly less likely to initiate violent MIDs than their conscript peers, the ultimate probability remains low for both. This should not be that surprising, since such a consistently low MPR indicates that a country likely has trouble mobilizing for war. This offers further credibility to Hypothesis 3 and undermines Hypothesis 2b, that countries with higher MPR may initiate more conflict because they have more capable armies and so are more optimistic about their success. Table 2 also supports the argument that recruitment practices that increase the capacity for war-waging (high MPR and conscription) are also associated with more frequent CI. Despite making up less than 5% of country-years, high MPR countries that use conscription account for more than 11% of all forceful MID initiation during this period. High MPR conscript countries are a clear outlier in terms of their proportion of forceful MID initiation to country-years.

Given that the vast majority of cases fall within a small range of historical MPRs, and the discrepancy between the observed values for MPR and MID initiation versus the predicted ones, it is worth re-examining the models in Table 1 while excluding the outliers. While the maximum value of MPR in the dataset is 0.21, 95% of country-years have an MPR under one-tenth that size. Tables presenting results that exclude any country-years above that threshold, as well as additional models that exclude the world wars are available in the Online Appendix. Their results are broadly similar to those from the full models in Table 1, in that MPR for volunteer country-years is significant and positive, and the interaction term is also significant in most models. Again, plotting the marginal effects for the model examining any forceful MID shows that the confidence intervals for conscript and volunteer armies have substantial overlap, even when excluding outliers.

These results are a strong rebuke to the common argument that recruitment systems that mobilize large portions of populations can restrain states and make them less likely to initiate conflicts. While conscripting states might be less likely than volunteer ones to initiate MIDs as MPR increases, the difference is only evident above unusually high MPR. Such high MPR rates are rarely – if ever – sustainable through volunteer recruitment. Only 11 states have maintained such rates for any period since the end of the Cold War. Examples include North Korea, Israel, Syria, Iraq and Eritrea – not states commonly associated with peaceful restraint. For example, while the average number of MIDs per-country year is 0.326 and the average number of MIDs involving the use of force is 0.159, for North Korea and Israel, respectively, these numbers are 0.783 and 0.449 and 1.594 and 1.130. For more average and more historically normal MPR – including for the United States – there is little reason to believe that conscription is a restraining force in international relations.

Additional specifications

Sceptics might offer two explanations for why I did not find MR to be associated with constrained MID initiation. First, it may be the case that institutional mechanisms through which the population can express opposition to war are only strong enough in democracies, or that democratic leaders are more likely to fear popular punishment from costly wars. As Hyde and Saunders (2020: 4) argue, while audience costs can constrain both democrats and autocrats, they can do so more easily and frequently in democracies. Norms related to the use of force and casualty sensitivity may also be particularly acute in democracies, including in ways that are uniquely affected by conscription (Levy, 2019).

If this is the case, MR should only be associated with leaders' CI calculus in democracies; it would therefore

Table 2. Frequency of different types of conflict initiation by recruitment policies[+].

	Country-years n (% of total)		*Forceful militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) n (% of total)*		*Ratio of forceful MIDs to country-years*
High military participation rate (MPR) and conscription	616	(4.49%)	212	(11.31%)	0.344
High MPR and volunteer	89	(0.65%)	14	(0.75%)	0.157
Normal MPR and conscription	8,047	(58.66%)	1,078	(57.52%)	0.134
Normal MPR and volunteer	4,966	(36.20%)	570	(30.42%)	0.115
Total	13,718	100%	1,874	100%	–

[+]High MPR defined here as above 0.0212, or the top 5% of all cases.

be unsurprising that I did not find a relationship of restraint in a sample that includes many non-democracies. However, I did not find support for any of the hypotheses when the sample is restricted to democratic country-years. Due to space constraints, the full regression table is presented in the Online Appendix. If anything, these models indicate that MR is even less likely to affect democratic decision-makers' CI calculus. That conscription has a positive and statistically significant relationship with any type of MID initiation, even when controlling for MPR, suggests that, rather than acting as a restraint, MR practices are adopted to maximize readiness for war.

Second, time-varying structural conditions might mitigate the restraining effect of MR. Norms surrounding citizenship obligations and military organization shape recruitment practices, while technology and threat environment affect both the opportunity to use military force and whether successful military force requires labor-intensive or capital-intensive recruitment practices (Onorato et al., 2014; Posen, 1993). Figure 3 provides initial support for the idea that preferred recruitment practices differ over time in ways that may affect the use of force: the early–mid 19th century saw general convergence around higher MPR regardless of the type of recruitment, while the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw similar convergence around lower MPR. Meanwhile, the Cold War exhibits a spike in high MPR conscript armies, followed by a post-Cold War convergence around low MPR.[3]

As shown in the Online Appendix, subsetting regressions by time period provides little support for a restraining effect from MR for these time periods. Recruitment's strongest relationship to CI is also the period in which militaries seem to have been the smallest: during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During this time period, conscription and MPR are both positively associated with forceful MID initiation. While the interaction term in this model is also statistically significant, the difference between conscript and volunteer armies is only evident at MPR above 4% of the population – a range that still covers nearly 99% of all observations. Interestingly, conscription may have had a restraining effect on states prior to 1871, as its popularity was spreading among great powers. Limiting the sample to only democracies decreases the statistical significance for all hypotheses.

Conclusion

This article offers a new approach to the relationship between MR, public opinion and CI. While people commonly assume that conscription restrains the leaders' ability to use military force, I argue that it is MPR, rather than conscription, that is most likely to make costs of war high enough to induce restraint. I further argue that we may also expect MPR to correlate with a greater probability of CI, and that the most restraining recruitment policies should be those that combine high MPR with conscription, because conscription only increases the cost of conflict for a substantial portion of the population if a sizeable proportion of the population is under arms.

However, the evidence presented here shows that the relationship between conscription, MPR and CI is not as straightforward as popular arguments suggest. As I expected, there is almost no evidence that conscription prevents states from initiating conflicts on its own. The fact that if anything, conscription is positively associated with CI, should put to rest the argument that conscription creates uniform and sufficient costs on the population regardless of the form it takes. But there is little support for arguments that exposing more of a country's population to MR induces restraint under other conditions, either. While I found support for a hypothesized interaction between conscription and MPR reducing

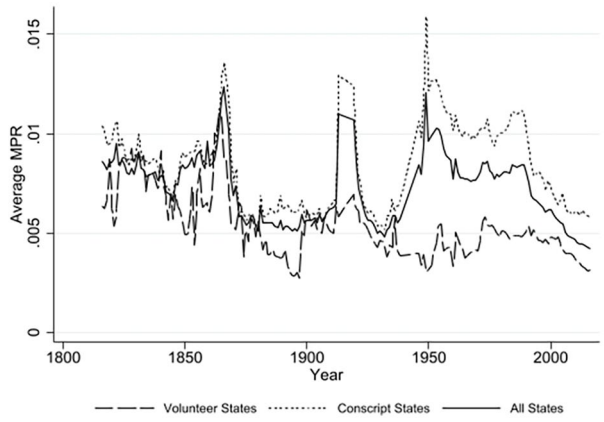

Figure 3. Recruitment and military participation rate over time.

the likelihood of CI, the statistical significance is very sensitive to different model specifications. For example, the fact that the relationship does not hold when tested on only democratic states – where public opinion should affect foreign policy the most – indicates that the cost of war to the public may not be the operative mechanism.

The range of MPR in which there is a substantive effect also undermines restraint arguments. The biggest difference in conflict behavior is evident at MPRs that are much higher than what most states usually sustain. A major challenge in evaluating this relationship is that there seems to be a ceiling for MPR when recruitment is limited to volunteers. Only 23 observations have MPR above 0.03% with a volunteer army, compared to over 300 at that MPR under conscription. This means that the predicted values for high MPR volunteer observations are disproportionately driven by a small number of observations. For example, the United Kingdom in 1915 is the only observation of a MID initiator with a volunteer army whose MPR is above 0.04%. It should not be surprising, then, that a simple reading of the regression tables gives false hope in the restraint argument. At typical MPR values, there is no difference between conscription and volunteer states when it comes to CI. If anything, the conditional effect of MPR on conscription might be more important at the other end of the spectrum, where there is some evidence that low MPR volunteer armies might be less likely to initiate MIDs using force than other types of states, though the substantive relationship is still small.

However, the descriptive statistics in Table 2 might be most instructive: high MPR conscript armies stand out, but as more bellicose than volunteer armies or low MPR conscript armies. This is consistent with the other most robust finding in this paper – that MPR is associated with increased, rather than decreased, probability of CI. Coupled with the findings that conscription is associated with an increased probability of CI, this points to a need to investigate how MR policies relate to a state's capacity to initiate conflict, as well as how they interact with the broader security environment. The evidence here indicates that far from promoting peace, efforts to prepare for war through readily-mobilizable militaries may be self-fulfilling – vindicating the predicted consequences of the development of garrison states (Lasswell, 1941; Stanley, 1996).

With little evidence that conscription is associated with a lower likelihood of initiating conflicts, either unconditionally or as MPR increases, it is important to reconsider common assumptions about MR, civil–military relations and foreign policy. Any relationship between MR policies and state CI in the international system may not be the result of how they distribute costs across society, as is commonly assumed. In fact, recent work questions whether personal cost is the decisive link between MR and public opinion. Blankshain et al. (2022) found that conscription reduces support for war, but argue that their results do not support that this is for reasons of personal or shared costs. In a sweeping review of public support for the draft and war, Fordham (2016) likewise concludes that there is only limited evidence that personal cost matters. Kriner and Shen (2016) find that a draft increases support for war among Democrats, as long as they think the draft will distribute costs evenly. This does not necessarily indicate that redistributing other types of costs will have no effect on conflict behavior or restraint – merely that policies relating to *who* participates in fighting do not have this effect. Public opinion may be important, but cost might not be the decisive factor on the public's preferences for war. People may tolerate higher costs if they approve of the mission or believe it is necessary for strategic success (Eichenberg, 2005; Gelpi et al., 2005; Stein, 2019).

Alternatively, my findings may also be consistent with scholars who discount the role public opinion plays in foreign policy at all. Questions remain about the extent to which people hold their leaders responsible for unpopular foreign policy decisions (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012; Snyder and Borghard, 2011; Tomz and Weeks, 2013; Trachtenberg, 2012). Even if leaders make foreign policy with the goal of avoiding electoral punishment, public opinion may matter less than elite preferences, or leaders might be able to shape public opinion about CI (Guisinger and Saunders, 2017; Horowitz and Fuhrmann, 2018; Saunders, 2015, 2018). Public support may be low, but that does not necessarily translate into less bellicose decision-making. As a reminder, by

late 1967, more Americans agreed than disagreed that it was a mistake to send troops to Vietnam (Newport and Carroll, 2005). This number only increased as the war went on – which it did, for five more years, of which two were its most bloody.

While this article should certainly raise questions about how we traditionally think public opinion affects foreign policy, it would be premature to discount public opinion completely. It is extremely difficult for countries to keep large portions of their populations under arms, especially when they must use coercion to achieve this. All but the most repressive regimes will prefer to rely on public support to sustain the legitimacy of their recruitment policies. Future research should examine the strategies that states use to make such costly MR policies tolerable to their populations – especially in light of the relationships between MR, identity formation and threat construction. It is also important to determine whether the relationship between MR and public opinion may matter more during conflicts rather than at their onset: it may be easy for leaders to initiate force, but public opinion may influence them more as war drags on and casualties mount. Anti-Vietnam War protests in the United States and the French army's mutinies during World War I lend some initial support to such expectations.

Decisions about who joins the military and how big the military should be are fundamental to a state's security. However, they also have important consequences, intended and unintended, for domestic society. As the United States and other countries continue to transition into increasingly capital-intensive force structures – particularly those that further insulate soldiers and civilians from the cost of war through the use of remotely piloted weapons and precision guided munitions – it is natural to be concerned that leaders might find it easier to use force abroad unnecessarily. While the impulse to find simple ways to limit foreign military adventurism is understandable, it is important to investigate policy options carefully and using available evidence. Reinstating a draft is unlikely to be the effective constraint on CI that many hope it would be, and similar efforts to expose more people to the high costs of wartime military service could have the opposite effect.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available at https://www.prior.org/jpr/datasets. All statistical analyses were conducted using STATA/IC 16.1.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for comments and feedback at various stages from Robert Cantelmo, Keith Carter, Lindsay Cohn, Michael Duda, Danielle Gilbert, AJ Glubzinski, Scott Limbocker, Danielle Lupton, Carl Wojtaszek and multiple anonymous reviewers. All errors remain my own.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interests

The views expressed here are the author's personal views and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense, the United States Army, the United States Military Academy, or any other department or agency of the United States Government.

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Notes

1. Derived from Toronto (2014) and Horowitz et al. (2011), updated by the author.
2. All marginal effects are examined using logit models, to aid in the translation of results into probabilities of initiating conflict.
3. Excludes the years 1914–1918 and 1939–1945 as outliers to aid in general pattern identification.

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