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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the effects of political information and anger on the public's cognitive processing and foreign policy preferences concerning third-party interventions in ethnic conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs an experimental design, wherein the authors manipulate policy-specific information by generating *ad hoc* political information related to ethnic conflict. The statistical methods of analysis are logistic regression and analysis of covariance.

Findings – The results demonstrate that both political information and anger have a significant impact on an individual's cognitive processing and policy preferences regarding ethnic conflict interventions. Specifically, political information increases one's proclivity to choose non-military policy options, whereas anger instigates support for aggressive policies. Both factors result in faster decision making with lower amounts of information accessed. However, the interaction of political information and anger is not significant. The study also finds that policy-specific information – rather than general political information – influences the public's policy preferences.

Originality/value – This study confronts and advances the debate over whether political information is significant in influencing the public's foreign policy preferences and, if so, whether such an effect is the product of general or domain-specific information. It also addresses an under-studied topic – the emotive repercussions of ethnic conflicts among potential third-party interveners. In addition, it tackles the argument over whether political information immunizes people against (or sensitizes them to) the effects of anger on their cognitive processing and foreign policy preferences. The study also introduces a novel approach for examining political information through an experimental manipulation of policy-specific information.

Keywords Politics, Information transfer, Public opinion, Ethnic conflict. Government policy, Decision making

Paper type Research paper

Ethnic conflicts entail intense negative emotions among rival groups, which often carry over to the global community and potential third-party interveners[1]. Although recent studies suggest that negative emotions influence decision making processes and outcomes (e.g. Marcus *et al.*, 2000), scholars have yet to examine the effects of emotions on the foreign policy preferences of a public from a potential intervening state in response to an ethnic conflict. Another factor in the formation of the public's foreign policy preferences that calls for greater attention is political information. In the literature on public opinion and foreign policy, the public is often depicted as an

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undifferentiated mass that reacts to the political environment in a uniform manner (see Berinsky, 2007). In reality, however, the public is divided across different levels of political information, which, in turn, leads to differences in perceptions of and attitudes about foreign policy events.

This study explores the effects of political information and anger on individuals' cognitive processing and foreign policy preferences concerning ethnic conflict interventions. Specifically, the context of the study encompasses US public reactions to interventions in ethnic conflict. We introduce a novel approach for examining political information through an experimental manipulation of policy-specific information. In doing so, we tackle the debate over the relative importance of policy-specific information versus general political information in shaping the public's foreign policy preferences. By bringing political information and anger together in an experimental design, we also observe the interaction of these two factors to explore whether political information immunizes people from (or sensitizes them to) the effects of anger in their decision making.

The study proceeds as follows. We first briefly address the impact of public opinion on foreign policy, specifically regarding military intervention decisions. In the following section, we review the literatures on political information and emotions. We then introduce the cognitive calculus model of foreign policy decision-making that serves as our theoretical framework. Next, we derive from the cognitive calculus model several hypotheses about the effects of political information and anger on the public's decision making processes and outcomes[2]. We follow with a description of the experiment that we conduct to test these hypotheses and present our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the study's design, the implications of our findings, and future avenues of research.

The impact of public opinion on foreign policy

For democratic leaders, following the will of the people is not just a normative ideal to fulfill; it is a prerequisite for political survival given that the public can vote out of office those politicians who defy their preferences. Accordingly, many scholars suggest that public opinion is an important factor in domestic and foreign policy making (e.g. Aldrich *et al.*, 2006; Cohen, 1973; Holsti, 1996; Ostrom and Job, 1986). In the foreign policy domain, the most provocative and salient issue to the public is the use of military force abroad (see Barnett, 1990; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987a; Mueller, 1973), which includes decisions on whether to intervene in ethnic conflicts.

Scholars posit several arguments on how public opinion influences foreign policy decision making. One theoretical perspective holds that public opinion serves as a constraint on foreign policy decision makers, particularly concerning military intervention policies, setting the limits within which policymakers may operate (e.g. Foyle, 1999; Sobel, 2001). This argument figures prominently in the audience costs proposition (Fearon, 1994) and in the structural explanation of the democratic peace phenomenon (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1992; Maoz and Russett, 1993). Another perspective argues that public support for the use of force constitutes "marching orders" that reduce the president's options to only force alternatives (e.g. Brule and Mintz, 2006). The role of public opinion in political leaders' decisions is also central to the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy decision making (Mintz, 2004; Mintz *et al.*, 1997; see also Redd, 2002). According to this theory, domestic politics is the

essence of foreign policy decisions since politicians are mainly concerned with challenges to their leadership and their level of public support. Being highly averse to losses in the domestic arena, politicians reject foreign policy alternatives lacking public approval, which would otherwise hurt them politically. Public opinion may thus inhibit leaders from using force by pressuring them to seek alternative policy options or otherwise oblige them to undertake aggressive policies. In either case, following the public's policy preferences grants legitimacy to a leader's foreign policy decisions.

Whether it serves as a "blank check" or "marching orders", the impact of public opinion on foreign policy decision making is well documented. One major instance is the Spanish-American War, wherein the public spurred a reluctant leader, President William McKinley, to use force (see Morgan and Campbell, 1991). Another example is Jimmy Carter's Iran hostage rescue decision in the presence of public pressure for more direct action against Iran (Brule, 2005). Public opinion also played a major role in Turkey's 1974 decision to intervene militarily in the ethnic conflict in Cyprus (see Adamson, 2001).

In short, scholars widely acknowledge that democratic political leaders need public support for their policy endeavors, particularly when conducting costly military interventions. Nevertheless, a more nuanced approach is necessary to better understand the formation of public policy preferences specific to ethnic conflict interventions, which, in turn, may provide greater insight into political leaders' decisions for engaging in and carrying out such military involvements. Accordingly, this study explores the dynamics of the public's foreign policy preferences concerning ethnic conflicts by focusing on two major factors, political information and anger.

Political information

In a broad sense, one's level of political information denotes one's range of factual knowledge and acquired information about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Goren, 2001; Popkin, 1991). More specifically, individuals' level of political information depends on the extent of their knowledge about the political system, what the government is doing, what other people want from the government, as well as what information they acquire about political matters from their daily life, education, the media, and political campaigns, which in turn translate into their political evaluations and choices (see Popkin, 1991).

The literature on political information differentiates between general political information and policy-specific information. Whereas some scholars depict individuals as "information generalists", others suggest that citizens are "information specialists" who are knowledgeable on only a few issues that are of particular concern to them (see, for example, Hutchings, 2003; Iyengar, 1990; Krosnick, 1990; Price and Zaller, 1993). Scholars who portray individuals as information generalists focus on the role that general political information (rather than policy-specific information) plays in molding public opinion (e.g. Zaller, 1992). In contrast, scholars who argue that the acquisition of policy information is domain-specific point out that policy-specific information has a more direct influence on political judgments, opinion change, and policy preferences than general political information does (e.g. Gilens, 2001). If the latter is the case, typical scales of general political information may not adequately capture such effects.

In addition to the debate over general versus policy-specific information, there are two notable theoretical gaps in the literature on political information. First, scholars

largely overlook the effects of political information on public decision making in the context of ethnic conflict. Secondly, the interactive relationship between political information and emotions requires more direct attention. Indeed, the number of studies that consider political information and emotions together is surprisingly sparse. To remedy this gap, this study offers a systematic investigation of the main and interactive effects of political information and anger on people's foreign policy preferences concerning third-party reactions to ethnic conflict in an experimental setting.

Regarding methodological approaches, there numerous political information measures, including factual test items, measures of consistency across political attitudes, and proxy indicators such as one's level of formal education (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Luskin, 1990; Zaller, 1992). However, such standard measures are susceptible to numerous threats concerning their internal and external validity, particularly since conventional information measures may reflect a host of intervening factors and individual differences that are often associated with political information such as intelligence, motivation, personal interest, and so forth. By comparison, applying an experimental manipulation of political information along with the random assignment of participants to experimental conditions would allow a researcher to control for such extraneous factors and individual differences.

To deal with these methodological concerns, we employ an experimental approach that manipulates political information by generating *ad hoc* specific political information. We manage this by exposing the experimental group to a presentation that contains basic information on ethnic conflict and conflict resolution before introducing the experimental scenario. To examine the difference between this *ad hoc* specific political information measure and more conventional indicators of general political information, our study includes a common measure of general political information – a factual information scale – as a covariate in our analyses. In using this measure, we also investigate which type of political information – general or policy-specific – has a greater influence on people's foreign policy preferences regarding interventions in ethnic conflict.

Emotions in ethnic conflicts and third-party reactions

As Herrmann *et al.* (1997) point out, “most cognitive models that predict foreign policy choice have only partially integrated emotion and affect” (p. 405). They further argue that emotions and affect have not received the attention they deserve despite a persistent scholarly interest shown in issues of war, ethnic conflict, and conflict resolution[3]. Although there are many studies on ethnic conflicts that investigate their political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions, scholars often disregard the role of feelings such as shame, humiliation, and pride, which are often experienced in such conflicts (Vogler, 2000).

Social psychology research on ethnicity (particularly studies that employ theories such as social learning and social constructivism) highlight the presence of emotional motivations as a leading factor for engendering ethnic violence. Crawford (2000) suggests that emotional appeals may be especially manipulative when there is a reservoir of preexisting negative beliefs and feelings towards an out-group (see also Petersen, 2002). In a separate study, Gordon and Arian (2001) argue that when conflict conditions are highly threatening, emotions (rather than rational considerations)

dominate the decision making processes of the public, resulting in public support for incendiary policies. Anger in particular acts as a powerful stimulant of violent behavior towards an ethnic group. In some cases, feelings of injustice and rage may arise due to nationalist provocations and thus motivate extremist political actions. Several studies also suggest that fear serves as one of the dominant emotions in ethnic conflict. Therein, studies applying the theory of ethnic security dilemma assert that one group's attempts to control the state for security reasons will reinforce another group's fear of extinction, thus leading to ethnic conflict (e.g. Posen, 1993; Snyder and Jervis, 1999).

Although most of the literature addresses emotions in relation to a set of ethnic rivals, it is highly plausible that cases of extreme violence within these conflicts trigger emotional reactions among other nations. In particular, humanitarian emergencies mostly associated with civil conflicts may generate a moral outrage on the part of a domestic audience, thus leading the public to pressure its government to take some form of remedial action to intervene in such conflicts (Regan, 1998; see also Blechman, 1995; Kohut and Toth, 1994). Thus far, however, studies that attend to the emotive repercussions of ethnic conflicts in the global community are extremely limited and only address the subject indirectly.

One area of research that indirectly deals with third-party emotive reactions to conflict is exemplified by what scholars refer to as the "CNN effect" (see, for example, Neuman, 1996; Seib, 2002). The basic proposition of the CNN effect thesis is that popular emotional impulses provoked by the commercial television industry largely affect US public preferences and foreign policy (Kennan, 1993; but see Gilboa, 2005; Jakobsen, 2000). One major implication is that television news stories may frame ethnic conflicts in a manner that induces emotional reactions and creates a sense of responsibility, thus moving the public to demand certain policy actions from its government. For instance, Seib (2002) argues that the broadcast of heart-wrenching images of suffering children to millions of Americans generated a strong emotional reaction resulting in public pressure on the Bush administration to intervene in Somalia (see also Kennan, 1993).

In sum, a limited number of studies suggest that the public may develop emotional reactions to a given ethnic conflict even if they are not directly involved. Building on these studies, we explore more directly how anger, as a major emotional factor, influences people's cognitive processing and foreign policy preferences concerning third-party responses to ethnic conflicts.

Theoretical framework: the CC model of foreign policy decision making

The cognitive calculus model (the CC model) is a decision making model designed to bridge the gap between process and outcome validity research orientations in the international relations literature. Its fundamental premise is that an individual is the engine that conducts the decision making process and the model should therefore reflect that individual's capabilities (see Geva *et al.*, 2000). Specifically, the CC model focuses on the integration mechanism by which a decision maker's interpretations of international events translate into policy choices. Therein, the CC model takes into account the decision maker's knowledge of foreign policy issues and international events, as well as the context of the information environment that pertains to those issues and events.

While the CC model is not exclusive in its treatment of the cognitive processes that underlie political decisions, it is the first model that incorporates the role of emotions in decision-making. Employing the CC model, several studies find that experiencing negative emotions limits one's cognitive processing capacity, increases the weight of emotionally congruent information, and leads to more belligerent policy choices (see, for example, Geva and Skorick, 2006). That said, previous studies that applied the CC model mostly referred to negative emotions as a combined psychological response rather than making an in-depth differentiation of distinct negative emotions such as anger, sadness, or fear. Recently, there has been an increasing scholarly interest in examining the diverse effects of discrete emotions on decision-making (e.g. Marcus *et al.*, 2000). In line with this new direction regarding research on emotions, this study focuses on the distinct effects of anger on the public's information processing and foreign policy preferences in the context of ethnic conflict interventions.

Given the focus of the CC model for mapping out cognitive processes and predicting decision making outcomes, we find it a useful conceptual framework for exploring the effects of political information and anger on the public's information processing and foreign policy preferences regarding third-party interventions in ethnic conflict. Building on the assumptions of the CC model, our arguments rest on the premise that political information and anger both have an impact on individuals' cognitive capacity and introduce a thematic bias to their information processing, thereby affecting their policy choice.

As a computational tracing approach, the CC model tackles three interrelated questions. The first question is: "When do we stop listening?". Given that international events are characterized by an inflow of information, the model seeks to specify the point at which a decision maker decides that there is enough information to make a choice. A second related question is: "Do we really listen before we stop?". This question addresses the possibility that part of one's information acquisition en route to a choice is rather ritualistic and does not necessarily imply allocation of much attention. A third inquiry is: "How does the process of information incorporation translate into the outcome?". This question explores the links between information processing and decision outcomes.

The CC model posits that individuals make foreign policy decisions in a manner described by the on-line information-processing model, which holds that individuals evaluate decision options upon exposure to incoming information by immediately integrating the valence of the raw material into a running evaluation tally (e.g. Lodge *et al.*, 1995). Building on this knowledge, the CC model contains an aspect that the on-line model does not address – i.e. a "threshold" (TH) representing the point at which the decision making process stops.

The model also postulates an on-line updating counter referred to as the "cumulative choice propensity" (CCP), which marks one's propensity to choose an option during the decision process as a function of the information accumulated.

According to the CC model, the decision task is composed of two mutually exclusive alternatives – the choice between doing (*A*) and not doing ($\sim A$). These two options may, for instance, constitute one's policy preference for using or not using force in an international conflict. The CC model holds that decision makers process information items sequentially and within the context of their "Political Information of International Relations" (PIIR), which represents their knowledge of international

events. The evaluation of information items continues until one's "cumulative choice propensity" (CCP) passes one's decision threshold or the decision maker runs out of information. Once the CCP exceeds a decision threshold, the process stops and the decision maker chooses the corresponding option (see Figure 1).

Hypotheses

This study tests several hypotheses about the main and interactive effects of political information and anger on the formation of the public's foreign policy preferences, specifically regarding interventions in ethnic conflict. Employing a cognitive-based approach to decision making via the use of the CC model, our propositions rest on the premise that political information and anger affect individuals' cognitive capacity and introduce a thematic bias to the processing of information, thereby, influencing their policy preferences.

One goal of this study is to address the main effect of political information on people's foreign policy preferences. Some scholars suggest that public support for aggressive policies is partly a function of information levels (e.g. Herzon *et al.*, 1978). Althaus (1998) shows that fully informed opinion on foreign policy issues tends to be relatively more dovish than less informed opinion. More specifically, Jaros *et al.* (1982) argue that the most critical aspect about a lack of political information "is not that it leads directly to a preference for aggressive policies, but rather that it leads to a desire for simple, readily understood solutions" (p. 152). In CC terms, we therefore anticipate a higher decision threshold for an aggressive policy among politically informed individuals compared to politically uninformed ones since political information leads to a more systematic decision making process and an increased awareness and consideration of multiple military and non-military policy options. We thus propose that the propensity for politically informed individuals to opt for military intervention in an ethnic conflict will be less than that of uninformed individuals. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

Figure 1.
Schematic representation
of decision thresholds
(TH) and changes in one's
cumulative choice
propensity (CCP) *en route*
to making a policy choice

- H1a.* Possessing political information decreases one's propensity to develop an aggressive foreign policy preference (i.e. military intervention) as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict.

In addition to political information, this study also examines the main effect of anger on individuals' foreign policy preferences within the context of ethnic conflict. Building on early cognitive appraisal theories of emotion (e.g. Arnold, 1960; Lazarus *et al.*, 1970), recent work on emotions suggests that different emotions have distinct effects on information processing, cognitive assessments, and policy choices (see, for example, Bodenhausen *et al.*, 1994; DeSteno *et al.*, 2000; Huddy *et al.*, 2007; Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Sadler *et al.*, 2005). To elaborate, several studies find that anger results in a heuristic-based, simplified decision-making strategy with a low amount of information accessed (e.g. Bodenhausen *et al.*, 1994; Lerner and Tiedens, 2006). Anger also introduces a bias in favor of emotionally congruent information that supports belligerent policy choices (e.g. Geva and Skorick, 2006). In contrast, individuals who experience anxiety exhibit a relatively unbiased and more systematic search for information. Moreover, studies indicate that while anger increases one's willingness to take risks, people experiencing fear and anxiety are more risk-averse (e.g. Huddy *et al.*, 2007; Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Lerner *et al.*, 2003). Concerning foreign policy preferences, scholars show that anger has a greater effect on the public's propensity to favor punitive and belligerent policy responses compared to that of fear and sadness (e.g. Geva and Skorick, 2006; Huddy *et al.*, 2007; Sadler *et al.*, 2005). For instance, examining US citizen reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Sadler *et al.* (2005) find that people who predominantly experienced anger endorsed an aggressive military response.

To reflect these findings in cognitive calculus (CC) terms, anger tends to lower the decision threshold for an aggressive policy by limiting the consideration of available information and other policy alternatives, generating optimistic risk assessments for the prospects of aggressive policies, and increasing the weight of information items in favor of aggressive policy options during the decision making process. We therefore expect that the induction of anger will increase an individual's propensity for supporting a military intervention in an ethnic conflict situation. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

- H1b.* Experiencing anger increases one's propensity to develop an aggressive foreign policy preference (i.e. military intervention) as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict.

Regarding the interaction between political information and anger, we should note that most studies exclude emotions when conceptualizing political information within a rational framework. Among the few studies on political information that do incorporate emotions, findings are contradictory. Some scholars suggest that politically informed people are more emotively engaged than less informed people (e.g. Lau and Erber, 1985; Taber and Lodge, 2006). In contrast, others assert that emotive states have a weaker influence on politically informed individuals compared to those who are less informed (e.g. Rahn, 2000; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991). Given the lack of consensus among scholars concerning the interaction between political information and anger, there exist two possible paths leading us to propose two alternative hypotheses in opposite directions, described hereafter. We are aware that by providing

bi-directional hypotheses regarding the interactive effects of political information and anger, we increase the chances for a type II error. Nevertheless, both lines of logic have *a priori* logic and are so far not associated with bodies of supportive evidence. Accordingly, we search for experimental evidence given the possibility that a relationship may exist in either direction.

The first line of logic rests on the premise that politically informed people are likely to be more emotively engaged than politically uninformed ones (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Herrmann *et al.*, 1997; Hsu and Price, 1993; Lau and Erber, 1985; Taber and Lodge, 2006). In their study on the relationship between affect and candidate evaluations, Lau and Erber (1985) find that “feelings toward candidate” variables predict candidate evaluations more strongly among politically informed individuals than uninformed ones (see also Brady and Sniderman, 1985). Applying the theory of motivated reasoning to varying levels of political information, Taber and Lodge (2006) find that biased information processing due to affectively charged “hot cognitions” is more likely among individuals who possess high amounts of political knowledge. Expressing this line of thought in CC terms, anger may lower a politically informed person’s decision threshold for supporting an aggressive policy option more than it would for a politically uninformed one. Accordingly, we propose the following interaction hypothesis:

- H1c.* Experiencing anger increases a politically informed individual’s propensity to develop an aggressive foreign policy preference (i.e. military intervention) as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict more than it does for a politically uninformed one. [Anger-information outcome interaction.]

An alternative logic, however, may be at work, which rests on the premise that politically informed people are less likely to be emotively engaged than politically uninformed ones. One example in line with this alternative logic is Rahn’s (2000) study, which claims that better informed individuals are less prone to the effects of “public mood” (i.e. variations in how people feel about their society) that may impair political reasoning and lead to low-information rationality compared to the less informed. This argument is consistent with the “sophistication-interaction hypothesis” (Sniderman *et al.*, 1991), which suggests that less informed individuals tend to lean more on their emotions and use them as a crutch to help determine their preferences on public policies (see also Zinni *et al.*, 1997). Expressing this line of thought in CC terms, anger may lower a politically informed person’s decision threshold for supporting an aggressive policy option less than it would for a politically uninformed one. Accordingly, we propose the following alternative interaction hypothesis:

- H1d.* Experiencing anger increases a politically informed individual’s propensity to develop an aggressive foreign policy preference (i.e. military intervention) as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict less than it does for a politically uninformed one. [Alternative anger-information outcome interaction.]

The next set of hypotheses address the main effect of political information on cognitive processing. As Fiske *et al.* (1983) argue, the more politically informed people are, the more cohesive and organized their cognitions become (see also Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1990). Additionally, high levels of political information result in one’s storage of more concepts and development of more conceptual linkages (Fiske and Taylor, 1991).

As such, politically informed individuals need less additional information for making their decisions compared to politically uninformed ones. In CC terms, we expect that tighter cognitive organization and more advanced cognitive capacity, along with already higher levels of information at the outset, result in faster information processing and reduce the necessity of additional information for decision making among politically informed individuals. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

- H2a.* Possessing political information decreases one's propensity to acquire more information in developing a foreign policy preference as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict.
- H2b.* Possessing political information decreases one's propensity to allocate more time in developing a foreign policy preference as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict.

Regarding the main effect of anger on cognitive processing, previous research has shown that anger instigates some degree of "cognitive shutdown" by leading to faster decision-making, lower levels of cognitive effort in terms of superficial, automatic, and heuristic information processing, as well as an inability or unwillingness to consider all available information and policy alternatives (e.g. Bodenhausen *et al.*, 1994; Huddy *et al.*, 2007; Lerner *et al.*, 1998, Lerner and Tiedens, 2006). For instance, Tiedens and Linton (2001) find that anger leads to less careful processing of new information and increased proclivity to be swayed by peripheral or stereotypical cues. To reflect the implications of these findings in CC terms, anger lowers one's decision threshold for selecting an aggressive policy option because it reduces the amount of information accessed and the processing time en route to making such policy choice. Accordingly, the following hypotheses express this logic:

- H2c.* Experiencing anger decreases one's propensity to acquire more information in developing a foreign policy preference as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict.
- H2d.* Experiencing anger decreases one's propensity to allocate more time in developing a foreign policy preference as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict.

Based on the same justifications given for the interactive effects of political information and anger on one's foreign policy preference (i.e. the outcome parameter), we generate two alternative interaction hypotheses regarding the parameters of one's cognitive processing:

- H2e.* Experiencing anger decreases a politically informed individual's propensity to acquire information and allocate time in developing a foreign policy preference as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict more than it does for a politically uninformed one. [Anger-information process interaction.]
- H2f.* Experiencing anger decreases a politically informed individual's propensity to acquire information and allocate time in developing a foreign policy preference as a third-party response to an ethnic conflict less than it does for a politically uninformed one. [Alternative anger-information process interaction.]

The experiment

We utilized for our experiment a computerized process tracing technique, the DecTracer, which presents written, audio, and visual information in a controlled setting while recording the decision behavior of the participants. For each participant, the DecTracer records one's decision (i.e. the policy preference), the number and type of information items one accessed, and the amount of time taken to make a decision.

To test our hypotheses, we designed our experiment around a hypothetical ethnic conflict on a fictitious island nation in the Mediterranean Sea. We conducted the experiment in two sessions, one day apart. The two sessions were presented as unrelated to each other. In the first session, we gave half of the participants a lecture on ethnic conflict (the *ad hoc* political information treatment), accompanied by a summary handout. The other half received a lecture unrelated to ethnic conflict. All participants answered a quiz to assess their knowledge of ethnic conflict. In the next session, all participants were exposed to a scenario that described the hypothetical ethnic conflict. Here, the scenario introduced two alternative policy options for the USA to employ in reaction to the conflict – a non-military option to act as a third-party negotiator versus the option to intervene militarily – and informed the participants that they would need to state their preference for one of these policy options at a later point in the experiment. Subsequently, half of the participants in the *ad hoc* political information and control conditions were exposed to a video clip, which served as our anger treatment, while the remaining participants were not exposed to the clip. Finally, participants were able to acquire as many items of information as they felt necessary to decide which policy they preferred.

Design

We used a 2×2 between-groups factorial design. The factors were political information (control versus the *ad hoc* political information treatment) and anger as the dominant emotive state of the participants (control versus the anger treatment). The dependent variable for the outcome parameter was the policy preference, whereas the dependent variables for the process parameters were the number of information items accessed and the processing time. We included general political information as a control, which we measured by a conventional information scale with 19 test items.

Participants

In total, 188 upper-level undergraduate students took part in this experiment. Among them, 62 students participated in the pre-test of the anger treatment and 126 students took part in the main experiment. We randomly assigned the participants to the experimental conditions. We debriefed the participants at the end of the experiment.

Measures of the dependent variables

Policy preference. The foreign policy preference chosen by participants (non-military negotiation (0) or military intervention (1)) (recorded by the DecTracer).

Number of information items accessed. The total number of information items (out of 20) viewed by participants at the point at which they chose a policy preference (recorded by the DecTracer).

Processing time. The amount of time that participants allocated in choosing their policy preference. The DecTracer's time counter started when a participant accessed

the first information item and stopped when the participant clicked on one of the two policy preference buttons on the screen.

Research material and treatments

Ad hoc political information treatment. We introduced the manipulation of *ad hoc* political information in the first experimental session by exposing half of the participants to a 45-minute lecture on ethnic conflict and conflict resolution. This lecture contained basic information about the definition of ethnic groups and ethnic conflict, the major causes and consequences of ethnic conflict, and alternative conflict resolution options. The tone of the lecture was kept as neutral as possible, promoting neither pro-intervention nor anti-intervention rhetoric. The other half of the participants received a lecture on an unrelated topic (concerning the use of quantitative methods in political science). Both lectures were presented to the participants as an activity unrelated to the second experimental session to prevent any priming effects on the participants' responses to the experimental material.

To test the effectiveness of the manipulation, we administered a knowledge quiz on ethnic conflict with a total of 14 test items. The quiz included basic factual knowledge questions on ethnic conflict and conflict resolution such as the definition of an ethnic group, the meaning of secessionist and irredentist conflicts, the difference between mediation and arbitration as diplomatic methods of conflict resolution, as well as an open-ended question asking participants to identify an ongoing ethnic conflict. The participants that received the *ad hoc* political information treatment answered more items correctly ($M = 12.78$) than the control group ($M = 7.96$), with a maximum score of 14, $F(1, 124) = 311.05, p < 0.001$. The results thus demonstrate the effectiveness of the *ad hoc* political information manipulation.

Anger treatment. Immediately after reading the ethnic conflict scenario, participants in the anger condition viewed a video clip in the form of a "newsbreak", which depicted the consequences of the ethnic conflict. The 70-second clip showed images of the killing and kidnapping of civilians at a roadblock, the dragging of a hostage's mutilated body, and the casualties following a bombing attack of the US embassy on a fictitious island. The video clip did not contain new information beyond what we presented in the written scenario. Rather, it provided a vivid portrayal of the violence suffered by the minority group and Americans, thus serving as the anger treatment. Individuals in the control condition did not receive the video clip. We chose not to expose the control group to any emotion-neutral video (such as a travelogue about the hypothetical island in question), because such an irrelevant stimulus would distract the participants' attention from the experimental task, and, in turn, would bias our results in favor of our hypotheses.

A total of 62 undergraduate students were involved in the pre-test of the anger treatment. In the control condition, participants were only exposed to the written scenario of the ethnic conflict whereas, in the anger condition, participants were exposed to both the written scenario and the video clip. All participants rated on a scale of 0 to 10 whether and to what extent they had experienced anger. The responses demonstrate that the experimental manipulation for generating anger is effective. The participants in the anger condition expressed significantly higher levels of anger ($M = 8.3$) compared with the participants in the control group ($M = 4.03$), $F(1, 60) = 78.64, p < 0.0001$.

As Izard *et al.* (2000) suggest, individuals can experience several emotions at a given moment and one emotion may trigger the other (see also Sadler *et al.*, 2005). Taking this possibility into consideration, in addition to anger, we asked the participants whether they experienced several other emotional reactions (fear, sadness, and calmness) in response to the video-clip. The participants rated these emotions on a scale of 0 to 10. To further observe which emotion was the dominant emotion, we also asked the participants to rank order their emotional states (from the most intensely experienced to the least intensely experienced emotion). The results show that anger has the highest rating and ranking compared to fear, sadness, and calmness ($p < 0.0001$), and is thereby the dominant emotional reaction.

Ethnic conflict scenario and the decision task. At the beginning of the second session, all of the participants read a brief scenario about a severe ethnic conflict on a fictional island. The Cyprus ethnic conflict case served as the guiding framework for this hypothetical ethnic conflict scenario, with certain modifications introduced to make the context more relevant to American participants. That said, we did not make any explicit references to that conflict to avoid any preexisting opinions about the conflict, which would confound our results.

The experimental scenario described the ethnic composition of the fictional island as a majority group affiliated with non-democratic countries in the region, and a minority strongly affiliated with the USA. The scenario depicted the evolvement of an ethnic struggle between these two groups and the subsequent violence against the minority group and Americans residing on the island. The story described the harassment and kidnapping of locals and Americans in roadblocks and bombings, as well as an increase in the number of fatalities. The scenario ended with a call by United Nations observers for some type of military or diplomatic action to be taken for resolving the conflict. As their decision task, we asked the participants to express their policy preference on whether the USA should act as a negotiator in the conflict or intervene militarily.

Information acquisition and policy preference. Following the exposure to the crisis scenario (and the video clip for those in the anger treatment condition), participants could view at their own pace up to 20 items of information before declaring their policy preference. The participants were not aware of the total number of items in the information set. Upon viewing an information item, participants could choose to access an additional item of information or could stop the process and choose the policy they preferred to be executed by the US government in reaction to the ethnic conflict.

General political information. We administered a questionnaire on general political information with a total of 19 test items at the end of the experiment. We modeled the questionnaire based on items from the National Election Surveys (NES), Prior's (2002) study, and Taber and Lodge's (2006) study. The questionnaire consisted of three segments:

- (1) domestic political knowledge;
- (2) recognition of important national and foreign political figures; and
- (3) foreign policy knowledge.

We then aggregated the separate scores of the three sections to obtain a total score of each participant's level of general political information.

We estimated Cronbach's α to check whether each constitutive section of the questionnaire is measuring the same underlying construct (here, general political information) and can thus be combined together to generate an additive measure. Cronbach's α reliability coefficient for this additive measure is 0.64. We also conducted a simple correlation test along with Fisher's r to z transformation. The results indicate significantly high levels of correlation among three sections of the questionnaire ($p < 0.0001$) and thus justify the formation of an index variable.

Results

Overall, the results from this experiment demonstrate that both political information and anger have a statistically significant influence on people's cognitive processing and foreign policy preferences in the context of third-party reactions to ethnic conflict. The interaction of political information and anger, on the other hand, did not yield significant results. Interestingly, the measure of general political information, which we introduced as a control in our analytical models, did not show a statistically significant influence on any of the dependent variables, indicating that policy-specific information is more effective in shaping individuals' cognitive processing and foreign policy choices in response to an ethnic conflict.

Policy preference

We first examined the main and interactive effects of political information and anger on people's foreign policy preferences. For this, we conducted a logistic regression analysis given the binary nature of our dependent variable "policy preference" (where we code policy preference for acting as a negotiator as "0" and military intervention as "1"). The results in Table I demonstrate statistically significant main effects for both the political information and anger manipulations ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, the *ad hoc* political information treatment led to a 23 percent decrease in the propensity of participants to choose military intervention as their preferred policy action to deal with the ethnic conflict situation compared to the control group. On the other hand, exposure to the anger treatment led to a 22 percent increase in the predicted probability for choosing the military intervention option. These results are consistent with *H1a* and *H1b*. However, the results do not indicate a statistically significant effect for general political information. Last, we did not find support for either of the interaction

Variables	Coefficients		Change in predicted probabilities (0 → 1)
<i>Ad hoc</i> political information	-0.96 *	(0.55)	-0.23
Anger	0.94 *	(0.52)	0.22
<i>Ad hoc</i> information * Anger	0.007	(0.99)	0.001
General political information	0.002	(0.005)	0.06
Constant	-0.28	(0.50)	
<i>n</i>	126		
Wald χ^2	12.02 *		
Pseudo R^2	0.07		
Log pseudo-likelihood	-80.13		

Note: * $p < 0.05$. Dependent variable is coded as 0 = negotiation, 1 = military intervention. Robust standard errors are in parentheses

Table I.
Examining the main and interactive effects of political information and anger on foreign policy preference (logistic regression)

hypotheses (*H1c* and *H1d*) concerning the interactive effects of political information and anger on people's foreign policy preferences.

Number of information items accessed

Tables II and III report the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) results for the main and interactive effects of political information and anger on the number of information items that the participants accessed en route to choosing their preferred policy option. Regarding the main effect of political information, participants in the *ad hoc* political information condition reviewed relatively fewer items ($M_{\text{information}} = 6.64$) than the control group ($M_{\text{control}} = 8.14$), $F(1, 122) = 2.25$, $p = 0.10$. While the results are in line with *H2a*, one should note that this difference is only marginally significant at the 0.10 level. Regarding the main effect of anger, the mean number of information items reviewed by the participants in the anger condition ($M_{\text{anger}} = 6.48$) is less than the mean for the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 8.29$), $F(1, 122) = 3.25$, $p < 0.05$. This result substantiates *H2c*. In comparison to *ad hoc* political information, the general political information variable did not display a significant effect. Similar to the results regarding policy preference, these results did not offer support for either of the interaction hypotheses (*H1e* and *H1f*) regarding the interactive effects of political information and anger on the amount of information accessed as a process parameter.

Processing time

We hypothesized that both political information and anger would lead to faster decision making (*H2b* and *H2d*, respectively). Since one would expect the decision making time and number of information items reviewed to be correlated, we included the "number of information items accessed" measure to the model as a control. The results of the ANCOVA presented in Tables IV and V indicate a statistically significant decrease in information processing time among participants in the *ad hoc* political information condition ($M_{\text{information}} = 75.36$ seconds) compared to the control group

Variables	SS	df	MS	F-value	p-value
<i>Ad hoc</i> political information	54.732	1	54.732	1.603	0.10
Anger	102.169	1	102.16	2.992	0.04
<i>Ad hoc</i> information*Anger	55.567	1	55.567	1.627	0.20
General political information	40.885	1	40.885	1.197	0.27
Residual	4,132.027	121	34.149		

Table II.
Examining the main and interactive effects of political information and anger on the number of information items accessed (analysis of covariance)

	Anger		No anger		Total (across anger conditions)	
<i>Ad hoc</i> information	6.39	(5.84)	6.88	(5.56)	6.64	(5.66)
No <i>ad hoc</i> information	6.56	(5.38)	9.83	(6.59)	8.15	(6.17)
Total (across information conditions)	6.48	(5.57)	8.29	(6.20)		

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses; $n = 126$

Table III.
Mean number of information items accessed across experimental conditions

($M_{\text{control}} = 103.55$ seconds), $F(1, 121) = 4.62$, $p = 0.01$. This result corroborates *H2b*. On the other hand, we did not find a statistically distinguishable difference regarding processing time between the anger and control conditions, even though the means are in the expected direction ($M_{\text{anger}} = 79.48$ seconds and $M_{\text{control}} = 98.98$ seconds), $F(1, 121) = 0.01$, $p = 0.45$. Unsurprisingly, as the number of information items accessed increases, the amount of time allocated to choosing a policy option also increases ($p < 0.0001$). As for the previous analyses, the effect of general political information is not statistically significant. Finally, the results did not offer support for either of the interaction hypotheses (*H1e* and *H1f*) regarding the interactive effects of political information and anger on processing time.

Discussion and conclusion

This study focused on the effects of two central factors – political information and emotions – that are associated with the formation of the public’s foreign policy preferences in the context of ethnic conflict. Specifically, we explored the emotive repercussions (particularly, anger) of ethnic clashes for the domestic audience of a third party. We also investigated the role that political information plays in people’s decision making processes and in the formation of their foreign policy preferences in response to ethnic conflict situations. As such, our study confronts and advances the debate over whether political information matters for influencing individuals’ foreign policy preferences and, if so, whether such effect is the product of general or domain-specific information (Gilens, 2001; Goren, 2004; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987b; Zaller, 1992). As a novel methodological approach, we introduced political information as an experimental treatment rather than relying on conventional measures that focus on existing variations in political information among the general public. By looking at the interaction between political information and anger in addition to their main effects, our study also tackled the argument over whether political information sensitizes people to (e.g. Lau and Erber, 1985; Taber and Lodge, 2006) or immunizes them from

Table IV.
Examining the main and interactive effects of political information and anger on processing time (analysis of covariance)

Variables	SS	df	MS	F-value	p-value
<i>Ad hoc</i> political information	3,787.977	1	3,787.977	4.540	0.01
Anger	9.212	1	9.212	0.011	0.45
<i>Ad hoc</i> information*Anger	353.348	1	353.348	0.424	0.51
Number of information items accessed	530,713.93	1	530,713.9	636.109	0.00
General political information	14.149	1	14.149	0.017	0.89
Residual	10,0117.57	120	834.313		

Table V.
Mean processing time across experimental conditions

	Anger		No anger		Total (across anger conditions)	
<i>Ad hoc</i> information	74.52	(71.75)	76.15	(57.47)	75.36	(64.27)
No <i>ad hoc</i> information	84.28	(80.59)	124.1	(77.46)	103.55	(80.96)
Total (across information conditions)	79.48	(75.91)	98.98	(71.37)		

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses; $n = 126$

(e.g. Rahn, 2000; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991) the effects of negative emotions on their information processing capacity and proclivity towards supporting aggressive policy options.

Given the cognitive calculus model's focus on mapping out and linking cognitive processes and decision outcomes, we employed it as our conceptual framework for constructing our hypotheses and our experimental design to examine the effects of political information and anger on people's information processing and foreign policy preferences regarding interventions in ethnic conflict. Specifically, based on the premises of the CC model, we proposed that both political information and anger affect individuals' cognitive capacity and present a thematic bias to their information processing, which in turn influences their policy choice.

Overall, the results of our experiment confirm that anger leads participants to express a preference for more aggressive policies, whereas participants in the ad hoc political information condition are more likely to show support for non-military options. Moreover, both factors lead to faster decision making with less additional information accessed. As previously mentioned, apart from our main analyses, we also included a conventional measure of political information – one's general information of domestic politics and international facts – as a covariate in our models. Interestingly, we did not obtain statistical significance for this factor in any of the analyses. We therefore conclude that policy-specific information – rather than general political information – is more consequential for shaping individuals' cognitive processing and foreign policy preferences.

Although our experimental results indicate significant main effects for both political information and anger, we did not find support for either of our interaction hypotheses. Therefore, we cannot provide a conclusive answer on whether political information immunizes people from (or sensitizes them to) the effects of anger concerning their cognitive processing capacity and proclivity towards supporting aggressive policies. In their study on the role of discrete emotions in political intolerance, Halpertin *et al.* (2009) reach a similar conclusion. Using nationwide surveys in Israel, they find that angry people show high levels of political intolerance *regardless* of their level of political information. However, they also find that political information acts as a form of immunization from the effects of hatred and fear on political intolerance. It may thus be worthwhile to investigate the interactive links between political information and other negative emotions (besides anger) with regards to the public's foreign policy preferences concerning third-party reactions to ethnic conflict.

A few comments are warranted regarding our use of the experimental method. Whereas political scientists in general (e.g. Kinder and Palfrey, 1993) and international relations scholars in particular (e.g. McDermott, 2002) acknowledge the high internal validity of experimentation as means of testing hypotheses, debate continues over the external validity of this method. Therein, most criticism is directed at the use of college students (Sears, 1986) and the artificiality of laboratory settings (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Luskin, 1990) regarding the representativeness of the experimental samples, as well as the generalizability of results.

In response to such criticism, we echo the sentiments expressed by Mook (1983) that, "what makes research findings of interest is that they help us understand everyday life. That understanding, however, comes from theory or the analysis of mechanism; it is not a matter of 'generalizing' the findings themselves" (p. 386). In other

words, our research objective and the conclusions we draw from our experiment relate solely to the logic of our theory and hypotheses. As such, our purpose is neither to estimate the characteristics of a given population from sample characteristics nor to draw inductive conclusions about that population. Last, we also emphasize that our experiment is designed to study the policy preferences and decision-making processes of the general public rather than that of elite decision makers. Otherwise, using students in an experiment that aims to study elite behavior would be problematic. For our purposes, experimentation is an appropriate method when the real-world equivalent of a student sample is the public rather than the political elite (see Mintz *et al.*, 2006).

There are several important implications of our findings, particularly given the well-documented impact that public preferences have on policy makers. To begin with, the tendency among people experiencing anger to prefer more aggressive third-party responses to ethnic conflict echoes and substantiates some key concerns about the role that emotions play in foreign policy decision making. In particular, leaders can:

- be pressured to act hastily in the presence of angry masses demanding an immediate and aggressive foreign policy action, which may lead to costly and ineffective policy outcomes;
- take advantage of existing public anger to seek out their policy objectives; or
- instil emotions into a crisis situation as a means to manipulate the public into supporting belligerent policies.

To elaborate, public anger can steer leaders towards taking swift and aggressive policy actions in responding to ethnic conflict or other international crisis situations. Given “marching orders” (Brule and Mintz, 2006), leaders may set aside more prudent measures of action in order to avoid appearing weak or indecisive to the public, a move that may result in numerous policy failures and dangerous escalations of violence. President Jimmy Carter’s Iran hostage rescue attempt, Operation Eagle Claw, which left eight servicemen dead and forced Carter to abort the mission, is just one example of how public anger can place pressure on leaders to engage in hasty and unwise policy decisions. For leaders who are interventionist at the outset, public anger may provide a platform to rally the masses behind an aggressive policy action, one that the public would otherwise oppose under normal circumstances. In cases where the public is not already angry, leaders can otherwise attempt to instigate anger as a means to manipulate the public into supporting aggressive policies in order to obtain a “blank check” for their personal political agendas.

The other key factor we consider – political information – also plays a major role in mediating the public’s policy choices, and, in turn, leaders’ responses to international crises such as ethnic conflicts. Based on our finding that political information has a significant effect on people’s foreign policy preferences, it stands to reason that those who control the flow information (be it political leaders or the media) can have a veritable impact on public support for certain policy actions. Given the media’s tendency towards the negative and controversial, its ability to set a tone of anger among the public concerning a foreign policy event may drive public preferences towards more aggressive policy actions in reacting to an international crisis. Political leaders may also seek to frame information in accordance with their policy objectives and partisan goals, and use such information to either calm down an angry mob

atmosphere to curb demands for military action, or stoke negative emotions in order to pursue a more interventionist agenda. However, research shows that politically informed individuals are less prone to be affected by such manipulative discourses (see Taber *et al.*, 2009; see also Baum, 2002; Luskin, 1990). As such, if people already possess a high level of information to begin with, they can resist a biased information environment and thus develop more reasoned and informed foreign policy preferences.

While the focus of this study has been to explore the effects of political information and anger on public preferences regarding whether or not to intervene in an ethnic conflict *before* any policy action is taken, one may also look at what role emotions and information play on such preferences *after* an intervention is initiated. The dynamics of public policy preferences based on political information and anger may change throughout the course of a military intervention. To elaborate, while anger may instigate a proclivity towards a military response to an ethnic conflict situation, it may also lead to increased public demands to prematurely terminate an intervention mission in progress, particularly if casualties are incurred. Concerning the ethnic conflict in Somalia in 1992, the US public initially displayed support for an interventionist policy. However, public support dropped dramatically when 18 American marines were killed on October 3, 1993, leading President Clinton to withdraw US troops. Later, the fate of the Somalian intervention played a key role in shaping the public's foreign policy preferences regarding interventions in other ethnic conflicts, which, in turn, influenced US foreign policy decision making, including the Clinton administration's decision to not respond to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (see Jentleson and Britton, 1998; Harris, 2006). Regarding political information, while the results of this study show that political information leads to a preference for less aggressive policy options before a military intervention is initiated, politically informed people may in fact support sustaining an ongoing operation since they are likely to be more cognizant of long-term foreign policy objectives, credibility issues, sunk costs, and major political and military concerns.

Other future avenues of research may involve further experimental investigations with variations in the information sets and scenarios, as well as with manipulations of other emotional states such as sadness, fear, and hatred. Such experiments may be conducted in the USA using nationally representative samples, as well as in different cultural contexts outside the USA. One might also replicate the analyses with real-world public opinion data on ethnic conflict interventions, such as with the interventions in Somalia (1992) and Bosnia (1995). Another research route might include the collection of cross-sectional time-series data, which would allow for a more comprehensive empirical investigation of the effects of political information and negative emotions on public opinion regarding interventions in ethnic conflict. By investigating how and to what extent political information and emotions can drive people's foreign policy preferences, scholars can provide a means to better understand and predict such public reactions and to further analyze their reflections on political leaders' decision making. We expect that future efforts may increase the robustness of our findings and contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in this line of research.

Notes

1. A third-party intervention can be defined as a convention-breaking interference (i.e. an extraordinary measure) – be it political, economic, and/or military – in a civil or

international conflict, undertaken by a governmental or intergovernmental actor external to the conflict with the principal purpose of affecting the direction, duration, or outcome of such conflict (see Regan, 1998; Rioux and Boucher, 2003; Rosenau, 1969; Young, 1967). In this study, we focus on militarized interventions in ethnic conflict conducted by third-party actors external to the warring parties.

2. The term "public decision making" may have numerous applications, including, but not limited to, public policy preferences, public approval of political figures (e.g. presidential approval), voting decisions in elections and referendums, as well as decisions to engage in collective action movements and events such as demonstrations and protests. In the context of our study, we refer to the term as people deciding on their preferred foreign policy action concerning whether or not to intervene militarily in an ethnic conflict.
3. Although some studies refer to emotions and affect interchangeably, one should note that affect and emotions are different constructs. Affect may encompass several different feelings, moods, and emotions (see Conover and Feldman, 1986; Fiske and Taylor, 1991). For our part, we are interested in the impact of negative emotions (in particular, anger), rather than affect in a generic sense, on the public's policy preferences regarding interventions in ethnic conflict.

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