Pre-Analysis Plan for "Perceptions of Power: How Elites Evaluates Threats and Opportunities in International Politics"

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Abstract: International relations theories often hinge on the attitudes, perceptions, and responses of political elites. Yet elites are a difficult population to study. They are costly to access, especially for experimental interventions that require large numbers of subjects. They are also highly varied: because their views are shaped by institutional responsibility and professional identity, different elite "types" may carry systematically different conceptions of world politics. This project takes on this challenge by fielding a conjoint experiment on a large and heterogeneous sample of U.S. military, diplomatic, and business elites. Our experiment interrogates how elites of various types form perceptions about threat and opportunity in international politics. We draw on a novel recruitment method – LinkedIn targeted messaging – and demonstrate its advantages in targeting different groups of hard-to-reach elites. This method allows us to implement the same experiment across three different populations, and provide new insight into how US military officials, diplomats, and business elites think about international politics in the years ahead.

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1 Introduction

Our project seeks to assess how elites perceive and prioritize threats and opportunities in international politics. We plan to implement a survey with an embedded conjoint experiment in which elites evaluate pairs of hypothetical countries. We randomly vary key attributes of the countries, including their military capability, economic ties, history of standing firm in international conflicts, record of compliance with international law, and engagement with international organizations to test how these factors shape elite assessment of risk and opportunity.

We are particularly interested in differences among elite subgroups. To that end, we will use the platform LinkedIn to recruit a range of elite types, including U.S. diplomatic personnel, U.S. military officials, and business professionals. LinkedIn messages will be sent in October 2025 to these three sub-groups. Comparing patterns of response across these groups will reveal how professional background, institutional role, and sectoral interests condition foreign policy preferences.

2 Research Design

To investigate elite preferences, we will field a paired-profile, forced-choice conjoint experiment. The experiment will be embedded in an online survey, which will be distributed to a sample of U.S. political and business elites.

We recruit respondents using the social media platform LinkedIn. Specifically, we used LinkedIn's targeted advertising tools to send direct messages (DMs) to specific groups of LinkedIn users to invite them to participate in the survey.[1]

We target our messaging to the following groups based on the employer listed on their LinkedIn profile:

- **U.S. Military Elites**: LinkedIn users employed by the U.S. Department of Defense, including the armed service branches and civilian defense agencies.

- **U.S. Diplomatic Elites**: LinkedIn users employed by the U.S. Department of State and affiliated agencies, including foreign and civil service officers.

- **U.S. Business Elites**: LinkedIn users employed by the ten largest private U.S. financial services firms by revenue, as well as the ten largest U.S. internet and technology

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[1]A related experiment will test the effect of different messaging strategies on elites' willingness to participate in the survey. This experiment is pre-registered separately.

firms by revenue.[2]

Respondents who opt into the survey will first answer a pre-treatment questionnaire and then proceed to the conjoint experiment. To introduce the experiment, respondents are told to imagine that they are providing input to the United States government as it revises the U.S. National Security Strategy. As part of this strategy, the U.S. government will identify a set of countries that represent the most important threats to its security and economic well-being. It will also identify the countries that represent the greatest opportunity for strengthening U.S. economic, diplomatic, and security ties.

Respondents will complete 10 paired-comparison tasks as part of the experiment. In each task, respondents are presented with two hypothetical countries described by a randomized set of attributes. For 5 paired profiles, respondents will be asked to choose which of the two poses the greater threat to U.S. interests over the next ten years. In addition to this forced-choice outcome, respondents will rate the perceived threat level of each profile individually on a 0–100 scale. For the other 5 paired profiles, respondents will choose which country represents the best opportunity for strategic partnership over the next ten years. As before, respondents also rate the perceived level of opportunity for each individual country on a 0–100 scale.

We visualize the survey flow in Figure 1, and we list the randomized conjoint attributes in Table 1.
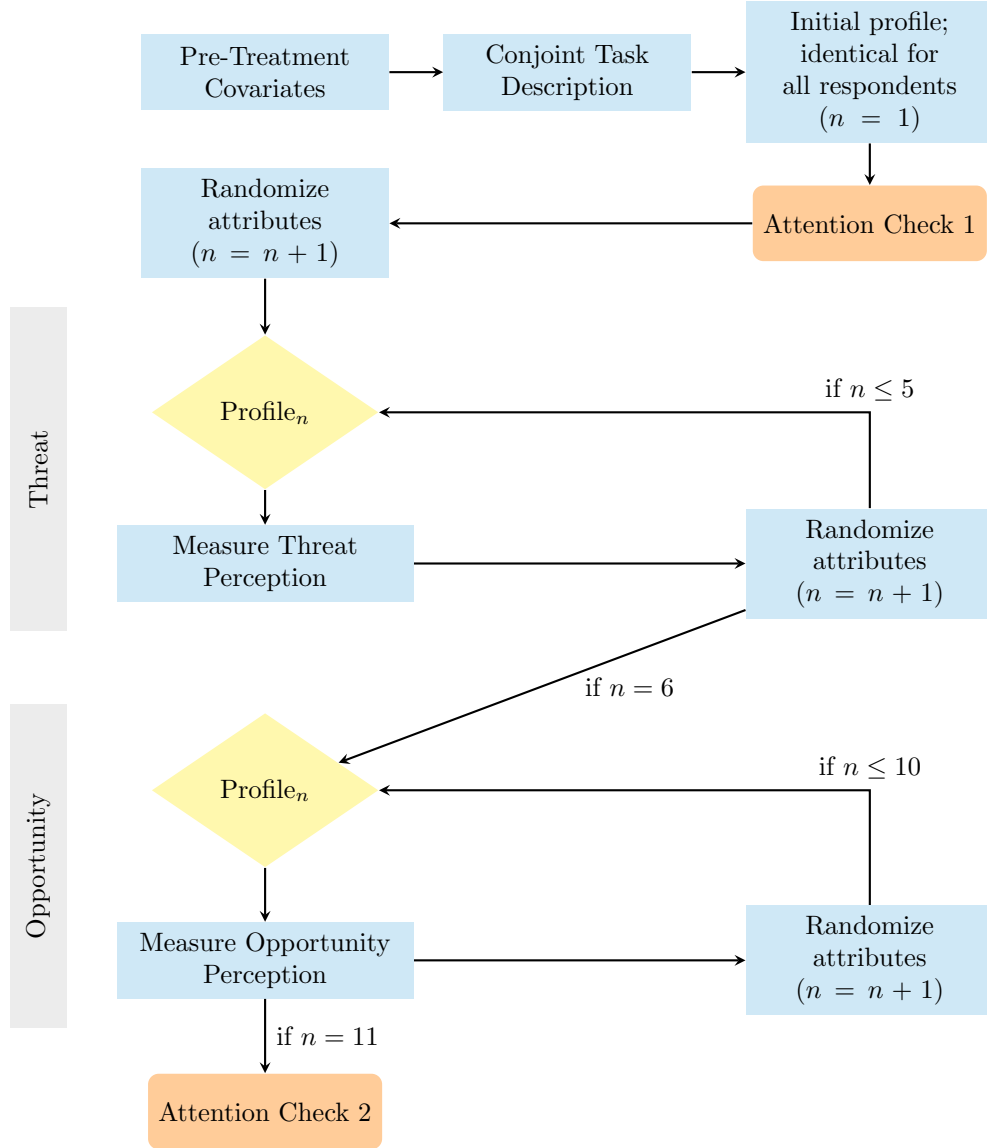
2.1 Attention

We measure attentiveness during and after the conjoint experiment.

1. To measure attention *during* the conjoint (pre-treatment), we employ the method suggested by Kane and Costa (2024): we ask three factual questions about the vignette after a first task that does *not* vary across respondents. The correct answers are thus the same across all respondents and can be combined into a continuous (additive) measure of attention that can be used to test the robustness of our findings without inducing post-treatment bias.

2. To explore whether attention deteriorates substantially over the course of the study, we use the method outlined in Powers (2024) and include a post-treatment attention check

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[2]We use revenue data from Fortune magazine to identify these companies. Financial services: Berkshire Hathaway, JP Morgan Chase, Bank of America, Citi, Goldman Sachs, Wells Fargo, Morgan Stanley, StoneX, American Express, and Capital One. Internet and Technology: Amazon, Apple, Alphabet, Microsoft, Meta, Nvidia, Dell Technologies, IBM, Cisco Systems, HP. For each firm, we restrict DM targeting to employees with a rank of "Senior" of above.

Figure 1: Consort Diagram for Conjoint Study

Note: Subjects begin by answering pre-treatment covariate questions and read a background page introducing the scenario they will consider. They then encounter a first attention check, which consists of three questions that do not vary across respondents. After the second attention check, subjects then see a randomly generated conjoint profile before answering our outcome questions. After viewing a profile and answering our threat-based outcome questions, subjects will see text that resets the scenario and presents a new conjoint profile. After five tasks, they switch to the opportunity-based outcome questions. After completing their tenth conjoint task, respondents encounter a second attention check based on their final task.

Table 1: Conjoint Attributes and Levels

	BACKGROUND FEATURES	
	Randomized attribute	**Levels**
Country Features	(B.1) Regime type	(1) Democracy
		(2) Autocracy
	(B.2) Population	(1) Large population
		(2) Small population
	(B.3) U.S. public support	(1) Mostly favorable
		(2) Mostly unfavorable
	(B.4) Economic power	(1) Small economy
		(2) Large economy
Leader Features	(B.5) Political orientation	(1) Reputed to be a pragmatic moderate
		(2) Reputed to be a nationalist hardliner
	(B.6) Communication style	(1) cautious and relies on factual information
		(2) impulsive and promotes conspiracy theories
	THEORY-RELEVANT FEATURES	
Military	(T.1) Military capabilities	(1) Small military with basic weapons systems
		(2) Large military with advanced weapons systems
	(T.2) Alliance with the U.S.	(1) Formal ally of U.S.
		(2) Not a formal ally of the U.S.
Past Behavior	(T.3) Compliance	(1) Generally abides by international rules
		(2) Frequently violates international rules
	(T.4) Engagement with IOs	(1) Actively supports the UN and other international organizations
		(2) Actively opposes the UN and other international organizations
	(T.5) Reputation for resolve	(1) Tends to back down in international disputes
		(2) Tends to stand firm in international disputes
	(T.6) Human rights record	(1) Strong record protecting human rights
		(2) Weak record protecting human rights
	(T.7) Disinformation record	(1) Has employed disinformation campaigns
		(2) Has not employed disinformation campaigns
Economic Stakes	(T.8) Supply chain integration	(1) Not economically integrated into U.S. supply chains
		(2) Highly integrated into U.S. supply chains
	(T.9) Economic competition	(1) Does not compete with U.S. companies for market share
		(2) Competes with U.S. companies for market share

Note: All attributes randomized independently across profiles. DV: respondent assesses which country poses a greater threat to the U.S. (and/or economic vs. security risk, 1–10 scale).

based on the *last* conjoint task that respondents complete. Respondents will not be removed based on this, and because it's post-treatment, it will not be included in main models of AMCEs.

3 Survey Instrument

3.1 Pre-treatment Questionnaire

Before the experiment, respondents answer a series of questions to measure demographics, employment, foreign policy knowledge, and political attitudes. These covariates may be included in some statistical models to boost the precision of our estimates or to explore heterogeneous treatment effects.

Demographics

- What is your age in years?

- What is your annual household income?

  - Less than $30,000

  - Between $30,000 and $59,999

  - Between $60,000 and $149,999

  - $150,000 or more

  - Prefer not to say

- What is your highest level of education?

  - Some high school or less

  - High school graduate

  - Some college

  - 2 year degree (e.g., Associates degree)

  - 4 year degree (e.g., BA, BS)

  - Post-grad (e.g., JD, MD, PhD, MA, etc)

- What is your gender?

  - Male

  - Female

  - Other

Employment

- What is your current or most recent employer? (text response)

- Which of the following best describes your current or most recent industry of employment?

  - Government: Defense/Military

  - Financial Services

  - Technology

- Government: Diplomacy/Foreign Policy
  - Other, please specify:

- What is your current or most recent job title? (text response)

- Which of the following best describes your role at your current or most recent employer?

  - Volunteer/intern
  - Entry-level employee
  - Rank and file employee with no supervisory responsibility
  - Supervisor/Team leader with oversight of a small number of employees
  - Manager/Director with oversight of a division or department
  - Executive leadership/Senior Official

- Were you previously employed in any of the industries below? Select all that apply.

  - Government: Defense/Military
  - Financial Services
  - Technology
  - Government: Diplomacy/Foreign Policy

Global Political Knowledge

- The current global treaty addressing climate change is known as the:

  - The Global Climate Agreement
  - The Kyoto Protocol
  - The Paris Agreement

- Which organization helps to facilitate trade around the world?

  - Global Tariff Treaty
  - World Trade Treaty
  - World Trade Organization

- Which part of the UN has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security?

- North Atlantic Treaty Organization

  - United Nations Ministry of War

  - United Nations Security Council

- In which region of the world are people most likely to live on less than $1,000 a year?

  - Sub-Sarahan Africa

  - South America

  - Latin America

- When states raise tariffs on imported goods, making domestic industries more attractive to domestic consumers, the state is engaging in:

  - globalization

  - extractivism

  - protectionism

- Which of the following is an example of a civil war?

  - The border dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan

  - Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between the mil- itary and rebel groups

  - War between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s

Foreign Policy Attitudes

- Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements (Completely Agree to Completely Disagree)

  - The U.S. needs to cooperate more with the United Nations

  - The best way to ensure world peace is through American military power

  - Generally speaking, the United States can trust other countries

  - The U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can

- Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements (Completely Agree to Completely Disagree)

- The use of military force only makes problems worse

- We should not think so much in international terms but instead focus on our own domestic problems

- Protecting the global environment is of utmost importance

- Please select Agree if you are still closely reading this survey

- Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements (Completely Agree to Completely Disagree)

  - Our allies are perfectly capable of defending themselves and so the U.S. should focus on internal rather than external threats

  - Going to war is unfortunate, but sometimes the only solution to international problems

  - It is essential for the U.S. to work with other countries to solve problems such as over-population, hunger, and pollution

3.2   Conjoint Experiment

After measuring foreign policy attitudes, we introduce the conjoint experiment by asking respondents to imagine the following hypothetical scenario:

> Imagine it is five years in the future and you have been asked to provide input to a new US Presidential Administration as it revises the U.S. National Security Strategy. This document lays out the government's goals, priorities, and guiding principles for advancing U.S. interests.
>
> As part of this process, the President is interested in identifying potential threats to US interests, as well as opportunities for strengthened partnerships around the world.

Respondents then complete five paired comparison tasks in which they evaluate the perceived threat of countries to U.S. interests, and five paired comparisons in which they evaluate opportunity for strengthened partnership. We randomize the order (threat vs. opportunity) in which respondents complete these tasks.

3.2.1   Threat Perception Tasks

For the threat perception portion of the experiment, we introduce respondents to the task:

In this portion of the survey, we will show you some information about a set of foreign countries and ask you to consider which of these countries are **a bigger threat to U.S. interests**.

Some of the details about these countries may seem important to you, while others may be less so. We will ask you to evaluate five separate pairs of hypothetical countries, labeled Country A and Country B. Please consider each comparison independently.

The first profile is fixed in order to facilitate the attention check described above. Respondents will then judge four additional paired comparisons with randomized attributes displayed in Table 1 above.

For each paired comparison, respondents see the following prompt:

Below, you see information about two hypothetical countries, Country A and Country B. In your opinion, which country constitutes the biggest threat to U.S. interests?

They will also see a narrative description of each country as well as a summary table. For example, respondents might see the following:

Country A is a democracy with a large population and a large economy. The country's leader, regarded as a nationalist hardliner, communicates cautiously and relies on factual information. The U.S. public has mostly favorable views toward the country. Country A has a small military with basic weapons systems, and it is not a formal ally of the United States.

The country generally abides by international rules and actively supports international organizations like the United Nations. It tends to stand firm in international disputes, has a weak record of protecting human rights, and has employed disinformation campaigns against other countries. It is not economically integrated into U.S. supply chains, and companies from Country A often compete for market share with U.S. companies.

Country B is an autocracy with a large population and a small economy. The country's leader, regarded as a nationalist hardliner, communicates impulsively and promotes conspiracy theories. The U.S. public has mostly unfavorable views toward the country. Country B has a large military with advanced weapons systems, and it is not a formal ally of the United States.

The country generally abides by international rules but actively opposes international organizations like the United Nations. It tends to back down in international disputes, has a weak record of protecting human rights, and has not employed disinformation campaigns against other countries. It is highly integrated into U.S. supply chains, and companies from Country B often compete for market share with U.S. companies.

The table below summarizes the features of these two countries:

	Country A	Country B
Political system	Democracy	Autocracy
Population	Large population	Large population
Economy	Large economy	Small economy
U.S. public views	Mostly favorable	Mostly unfavorable
Leader Type	Nationalist hardliner	Nationalist hardliner
Communication	Cautious and factual	Impulsive and conspiratorial
Military size	Small with basic weapons	Large with advanced weapons
U.S. Alliance	Not a formal US ally	Not a formal US ally
Compliance	Generally abides by int'l rules	Generally abides by int'l rules
International orgs	Actively supports intl orgs like the UN	Actively opposes intl orgs like the UN
Resolve	Stands firm in disputes	Backs down in disputes
Human rights	Weak record	Weak record
Disinformation	Employs disinformation	Does not employ disinformation
Integration	Not integrated in U.S. supply chains	Highly integrated in U.S. supply chains
Competition	Competes with U.S. companies	Competes with U.S. companies

After each comparison, respondents answer the following questions:

- **Threat DV 1: Choice (forced).** Which country poses the greater overall threat to the security and economic wellbeing of the United States?

  - ( ) Country A
  - ( ) Country B

- **Threat DV 2: rating (0–100, each profile).** For each profile, respondents rate perceived threat on a 0–100 scale, where 0 = no threat at all and 100 = extreme threat.

  - Country A: (0–100 slider)
  - Country B: (0–100 slider)

3.2.2 Opportunity Perception Tasks

The opportunity perception portion of the experiment is structured very similarly. We tell respondents:

> In this portion of the survey, we are interested in your views on which countries represent **a greater opportunity for strategic partnership** with the United States over the next ten years.
>
> On the next few pages, we will show you some information about a set of foreign countries and ask you to consider which of these countries presents a greater partnership opportunity for the United States.
>
> Some of the details about these countries may seem important to you, while others may be less so. We will ask you to evaluate five separate pairs of hypothetical countries, labeled Country A and Country B. Please consider each comparison independently.

The paired-comparison is presented to respondents identically to the threat perception task above. All features are included, and we present the information both as a narrative and in table form.

After each comparison, respondents answer the following questions:

- **Opportunity DV 1: Choice (forced).** Which country presents the greater overall opportunity as a potential strategic partner for the United States?

    - ( ) Country A
    - ( ) Country B

- **Opportunity DV 2: rating (0–100, each profile).** For each profile, respondents rate perceived opportunity on a 0–100 scale, where 0 = no opportunity at all and 100 = extreme opportunity.

    - Country A: (0–100 slider)
    - Country B: (0–100 slider)

3.3 Additional Questions

Finally, we include one additional (non-randomized) questions related to respondents' preferred policy tools.

- **Policy tools battery** As part the new U.S. National Security Strategy, the administration is reviewing U.S. foreign policy tools that are often used as leverage in negotiations with other states.

  In your opinion, how effective are the following foreign policy tools as a carrot or stick in negotiations with other countries?

  Respondents rate each policy on a 1–7 scale:

    – Limiting/granting access to U.S. trade and financial markets

    – Strengthening alliance ties

    – Providing security guarantees

    – Station U.S. troops abroad

    – Use military force if red lines are crossed

    – Modernize U.S. nuclear arsenal

4 Hypotheses

We will estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for each of the attributes in Table 1 as outlined in Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2014). Our primary hypotheses involve heterogeneous effects among elite types (Miltiary, Diplomatic, and Business) in the conjoint experiment. We summarize these by noting the cases in which we expect the AMCE for a particular elite group to be large in magnitude than other elite groups.

4.1 Military Elites

We expect the following attributes to have a larger effect on threat perception among military elites, compared to other elite groups:

- Not a formal ally of the United States

- Large military

- Reputation for resolve

4.2 Diplomatic Elites

We expect the following attributes to have a larger effect on threat perception among diplomatic elites, compared to other elite groups:

- Frequently violates international rules

- Actively opposes international orgs like the UN

- Weak record of protecting human rights

- Employed disinformation campaigns

We expect the following attributes to have a larger effect on opportunity perception among diplomatic elites, compared to other elite groups:

- Generally abides by international rules

- Strong record of protecting human rights

4.3 Business Elites

We expect the following attributes to have a larger effect on threat perception among business elites, compared to other elite groups:

- Competes with U.S. companies for market share

We expect the following attributes to have a larger effect on opportunity perception among business elites, compared to other elite groups:

- Highly integrated into U.S. supply chains

Exploratory Analysis

In addition to the hypotheses listed above, we will probe individual-level heterogeneity using attitudes measured in the pre-treatment questionnaire. In particular, we are interested in whether any observed heterogeneous effects across elite subgroups can be explained by differences in their foreign policy attitudes.

References

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