

Canadian War Deaths in Afghanistan: Costly Policies and Support for Incumbents*

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Abstract

War comes with terrible costs both in terms of money and lives. Do voters punish incumbents for these costs? Much of the existing literature on the effects of war deaths on public opinion toward incumbents and their war efforts suggests that the answer is yes. We test this proposition on data from a non US case: Canada's war in Afghanistan. We estimate models of the effect of local war deaths on incumbent support using both individual level panel data from the 2006–2008 Canadian Election Study and aggregate district level data. In none of our models do we find support for the conclusion that war deaths decrease support for candidates of the governing party. Instead we find strong evidence at both the individual and district levels that support for Conservative Party candidates is higher in districts that experienced war deaths.

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1 Introduction

Modern democracy turns on the proposition that voters punish incumbents for costly policy choices. For example, voters might reward politicians for economic growth [1], for distributive favours [2], or for legislative action [3]. However, this relationship is rarely perfect. For example, voters have been shown to punish and reward incumbents for things obviously beyond their control [4, 5]. In large part, the extensive literature on the relationship between war casualties and support for incumbents acts as a test of this central tenant. The results we present in this paper call into question the proposition that voters necessarily punish incumbents for the negative results of their foreign policy decisions.

We use as our case study Canada’s war in Afghanistan. This is no small matter in the country in question. Canada’s engagement in Afghanistan is nearing a decade and has extracted a great cost in both dollars and lives, with 156 lost since the beginning of the conflict. Moreover, it is the country’s most significant military undertaking since Korea [6]. Despite this cost, we find no evidence that voters punish candidates of the incumbent government in Canada for losses in Afghanistan. To the contrary, we find evidence that voters in constituencies that experienced a casualty increased their support for the governing party. Indeed, we demonstrate that both individual- and aggregate-level results suggest that the governing party was the beneficiary of war casualties.

The results in the paper call into question two sets of findings from related literatures. First, in the context of Canadian voting behaviour the long held view in the field is that voters do not factor in foreign policy concerns in their decision making at the polls. Second, in the American case there is a well established negative relationship between war casualties and incumbent support [see for example 7–10]. In contrast, we find that there does appear to be a relationship between foreign policy and voting in Canada and it is in the opposite direction of that found in the literature on war casualties and incumbent support in the United States. Our analysis differs from most previous work on the relationship between political behaviour and foreign policy in Canada in that we take as our measure of foreign policy an objective outcome of that policy, namely war deaths. Other work tends to use survey measures that ask respondents about their views on various aspects of foreign policy.

War extracts a cost on its participants. Countries that engage in foreign conflicts not only spend vast sums but they also suffer casualties. It has been shown that citizens in democracies respond to these costs, both by decreasing their support for a war effort or by decreasing their support for an incumbent [7, 8, 11–14]. Indeed, so pervasive is this effect, that some have claimed that the domestic electoral costs of war—not least in the form of casualties—explains the empirical regularity of the democratic peace [9, 15, 16].

Previous work on casualty and government support leaves open three essential questions. First, there exists substantial debate over *how* war deaths decrease support for a candidate of the governing party. For example, Mueller [7] posited an effect where the cumulative logged casualties slowly decrease support for a war. Gartner and Segura [8] countered by suggesting that the effects of death on support were a function both of recent trends and the overall trajectory of casualties. While this debate is yet to be perfectly resolved, we have the sense that the debate is slowly being resolved in the direction of Gartner’s rational expectations account [14]. We should note, however, that Berinsky [17] provides an important and compelling counterpoint to this literature. Second, the literature has

left open the question of *which* deaths matter. Is it solely national trends, or does the geographic origin of those killed also matter? Our own reading is that while casualty rates most certainly matter for overall opinion on a war, local deaths also extract a measurable effect. For example, Karol and Miguel [9] suggest that the localized effects of deaths in Iraq cost George W. Bush about two percentage points in the 2004 election. Similarly, Grose and Oppenheimer [18] have shown that swings in Congressional votes for Republican candidates were significantly influenced by both deaths of hometown soldiers and the votes of representatives on the original war resolution. The final question, which in our view is much less resolved, is whether such effects travel beyond the United States.

American involvement in the world is exceptional, as is the relationship between American culture and war. There has been very limited analysis about the relationship between war deaths and incumbent support in other countries. Most certainly, it seems logical that the results from America would travel. In other words, we think that the literature suggests a strong prior, in which deaths extract a cost on governments. A priori, we have no reason to believe otherwise. However, empirically, we find very different results. First, using panel data from the 2006 and 2008 Canadian Election Studies (CES), we find that an individual's probability of voting for the Conservative party also increased significantly between 2006 and 2008 if they lived in a constituency in which war deaths occurred. Second, using official aggregate data from the 2006 and 2008 Canadian federal elections, we find that support for the governing Conservative party marginally increased in constituencies that experienced a war death. Accordingly, we have an interesting and puzzling finding. In Canada, in one election at least, support for the governing party increased despite a rapid increase in war deaths.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2 we first justify our two dependent variables. We then describe our data. We next present our models and main empirical findings, in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 present a series of robustness tests and auxiliary results. We then conclude by discussing our findings in light of recent work on political attitudes and political psychology.

2 Data

2.1 Dependent Variable

The measures used in previous work on support for war can be divided into two categories. In the first, researchers use approval of a war or of the current head of government [e.g. 8]. In this sense, such measures are capturing whether individuals support a particular effort and/or the political leader undertaking the effort. These measures could include casualty tolerance, support for long-term engagement, or support of a leader's decision to go to war. Most importantly, these measures represent opinions, and likely suffer from all of the well-known and attendant problems of survey measures [19]. Moreover, they often face thorny problems of sorting out causal factors from the dependent variable [20]. In the second case, authors have examined how war affects the vote shares of a governing party or governing representatives [e.g. 9]. This is the approach we take, for the following reason. Elections act as a definitive distillation of voters' judgments of their politicians and their actions. While all issues will not enter a voters' calculus evenly, and some may be forgotten by the

time of an election, an issue that does not systematically vary votes can probably not be expected to systematically constrain the behaviour of politicians for very long. In making this choice, we do not wish to suggest that previous work on approval and opinion has not taught us a great deal about the relationship between war efforts and approval. Quite the contrary, such studies have made substantial progress. Our wish instead is to extend this work to a case where we can actually evaluate the success of a government fully engaged in a war effort, a prospect that is more difficult than one might assume, given how many leaders exit during war time [9].

To measure the effects of war efforts on electoral support, we make use of two different dependent variables. In the first case, we observe individual level-vote choice, as measured in the 2006 and 2008 Canadian election studies. This forms the first part of our analysis. Second, we use official district (or constituency) level election returns in the 2008 Canadian federal election. As we show in our results section, we find that war deaths exert an effect on both of these measures, though not in the expected direction.

2.2 War Deaths

We collected data on the incidence of Canadian casualties in Afghanistan since the beginning of the conflict in 2002.¹ For each death, we identified the hometown of the dead soldier, as reported by the government and in media sources, and the constituency in which that individual lived. For the present study, we largely limit our analysis to deaths that occurred during the current government's first term in office, a period from January 2006 to October 2008. In total, deaths occurred in 69 constituencies. Fifty six constituencies experienced one death, 11 experienced 2, and one each experienced 3 and 4 casualties. This represents a total of 85 deaths. There were zero deaths in 237 of the constituencies we consider.

2.3 Individual Level Data

Our individual level data consists of 854 respondents in the 2008 Canadian Election Study who also participated in the 2006 CES. We limit our analysis to this subset, as we are interested in measuring the effects of war deaths between elections on vote choice, controlling for previous vote choice. We note that panel attrition is unrelated to deaths in the respondent's constituency ($\chi^2 = 1.07$, $p = .30$). We matched respondents to their constituency according to their postal code and could thus match war deaths to respondents. Finally, in addition to basic demographics, we also know the party identification of respondents and their vote choice in 2006. Accordingly, in Section 3.1 we present panel estimates of the probability of an individual voting for the current government if they are in a constituency that experienced a casualty, controlling for their partisan identification and their previous vote. As we are using panel data, we do not control explicitly for other demographic variables.

¹We break from some previous work in referencing only deaths when we employ the term "casualties".

2.4 Constituency Level Data

Our aggregate constituency level data include electoral returns from 306 of Canada’s 308 constituencies.² Constituency boundaries did not change between the 2006 and 2008 election, so we can calculate changes in Conservative vote share between the two elections, given the incidence of a casualty originating in the constituency. In addition to vote data, we also have a large amount of census data on the characteristics of these constituencies. We employ these data to refine our estimates below.

3 Results

3.1 Individual Level Conservative Party Support

We begin with individual level results. We present two sets of results in Table 1. In each case, we specify a logit model in which the dependent variable is a vote for the governing Conservative Party (1) or a vote for any other party (0). We estimate the model with robust standard errors, clustered on constituency. The first results in Table 1 suggest that the odds of voting for the Conservative candidate are 53% higher (95% CI: -6%; 149%) in a constituency that experiences a casualty. While this effect is obviously dwarfed by having already been a Conservative voter, it is still a substantively large effect, and certainly contrary to the conventional expectation of a measurably negative effect.

Table 1: War Deaths and Individual Level Support for Government Candidates in 2008^a

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	Odds ratio	95% CI		Odds ratio	95% CI	
War deaths	1.53	0.94	2.49	1.73	1.07	2.80
2006 Conservative vote	22.31	15.60	31.91	10.76	6.98	16.60
Conservative Party ID				4.68	2.62	8.36
Other Party ID				0.64	0.42	0.98
NFLD				0.02	0.01	0.04
<i>N</i>	854			854		
Log pseudolikelihood	-390.68			-356.87		
Wald χ^2	294.91			316.79		

^a The dependent variable is Conservative Party vote in the 2008 Federal election; cell entries are odds ratios and 95% CI from a logistic regression with clustering on the electoral district.

In the second set of results, we add a small number of additional controls. Namely, we introduce variables measuring whether the respondent presently identifies with the Conservative Party or with another party. Second, we include a dummy variable indicating if the individual resides in one of the seven constituencies in the province of Newfoundland and

²We exclude the constituency of Colchester Musquidobit Harbour, as this constituency was contested by both an Independent Conservative—an incumbent ejected from the Tory caucus—and another Conservative candidate. We also exclude a constituency in Quebec in which an independent incumbent ran uncontested by a Conservative candidate.

Labrador. While this may seem an arbitrary addition, we note that of the 10 largest absolute changes in Conservative vote share in 2008, Newfoundland ridings comprised seven. This was due to an organized effort on the part of the province’s (ironically, Conservative) Premier to punish the Prime Minister. This second set of results suggests that the odds of voting Conservative increase by 73% (95% CI: 7%; 180%) in constituencies that experienced a casualty.

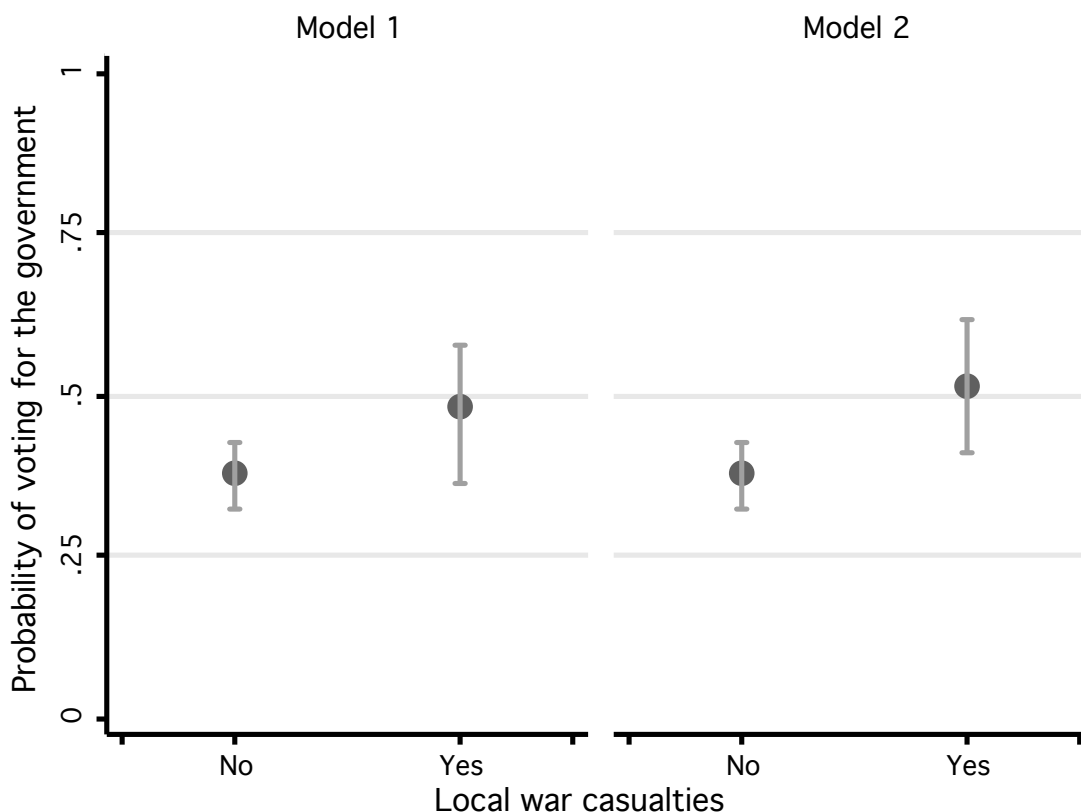


Figure 1: The effect of local casualties on the individual level probability of voting for the government candidate. *The plots show the predicted probabilities and 95%CI of voting for the candidate of the government party in districts with and without war deaths, holding other independent variables at their means. Model 1 contains a control for previous vote for the Conservative party in 2006; Model 2 controls for identification with the Conservative party, identification with another party, and a fixed effect for Newfoundland and Labrador. Predicted probabilities and 95%CI were generated using Clarify [21, 22].*

Figure 1 presents the findings from Table 1 in a different way. Here we report the difference in the probability of voting for the Conservative Party candidate in constituencies that experienced a war death compared to those that did not. We use the coefficients from the regressions in Table 1 to produce predicted probabilities, holding all other independent variables at their means. The Figure illustrates the result quite clearly: The probability of

supporting the Conservative Party candidate is higher in constituencies that have sustained a casualty in the war in Afghanistan.

3.2 Constituency Level Conservative Party Support

Aggregate level results largely confirm our individual level findings. We present three sets of results in Table 2. We begin with a simple bivariate regression between the occurrence of deaths since 2006 and change in Conservative support between the 2006 and 2008 elections. In Model 2, we add in a fixed effect for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, noting again the exception of this province. Third, we add in a series of census derived demographic covariates. As constituency level characteristics affect election outcomes [23], we include these measures to tighten the standard errors around our estimates of the effect of war deaths. While our first estimates suggest no effect and our second estimates suggest an effect with very wide confidence intervals, our third set of results suggest that the experience of casualties in a constituency increased support for the government’s candidate by 1.81 percentage points over their 2006 performance (95% CI: 0.30;3.33).

Table 2: War Deaths and Aggregate Level Change in Support for Government Candidates 2006–2008^a

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Coefficient	95% CI		Coefficient	95% CI		Coefficient	95% CI	
War deaths	-0.25	-2.17	1.67	1.06	-0.48	2.60	1.81	0.30	3.33
NFLD				-28.96	-33.26	-24.65	-29.57	-34.67	-24.47
% immigrant							0.13	0.07	0.19
Median inc							0.0001	0.00004	0.0002
% university							-0.11	-0.19	-0.03
Unemployment							0.08	-0.19	0.35
Population							-0.00006	-0.0001	-0.00001
Constant	1.79	0.88	2.70	2.16	1.43	2.88	2.65	-3.38	8.67
<i>N</i>	306			306			306		
<i>F</i>	0.07			87.64			32.86		

^a The dependent variable is the percentage point change in the Conservative Party vote at the district level between the 2006 and 2008 federal elections; cell entries are OLS coefficients and 95% CI.

Admittedly, these are not overly stable estimates and they rely, in part, on demographic correlates. However, two comments are warranted. First, they are almost certainly enough to reject the hypothesis that war deaths *decrease* support of the governing party. Second, they are largely consistent with the results we have uncovered at the individual-level. In one country and in one election, at least, it appears that war deaths over a sustained period of time increased support for the governing party.

We again graph our results from Table 2 in Figure 2. While the plot of the results from Model 1 in Table 2 do not show a significant difference in the change in government support between districts with and without war deaths, the second and third models clearly do. Model 2 and Model 3 show how Conservative Party support increased in 2008 over 2006 in both districts that had war casualties and those that did not. However, support increased more in those constituencies that were home to soldiers who died in the war. Our final model, Model 3, indicates that the Conservative Party vote share increase was roughly 2

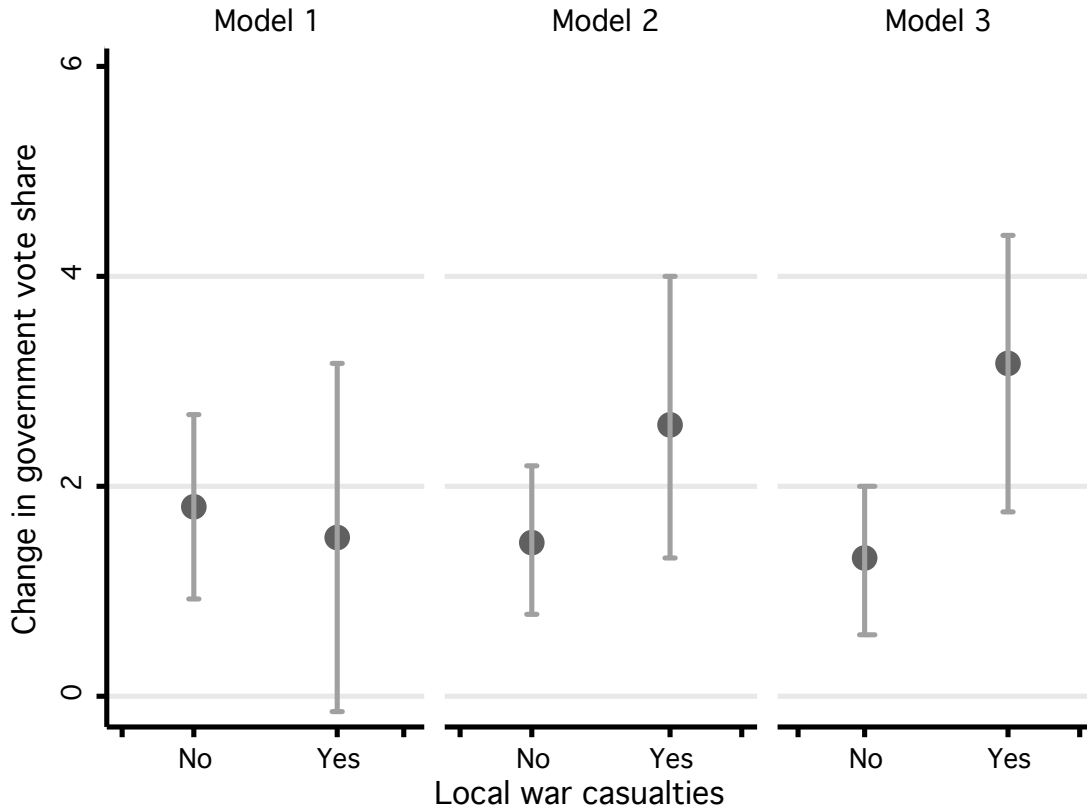


Figure 2: The effect of local casualties on the change in Government vote share 2006–2008. The plots show the change in Conservative party vote share between 2006 and 2008 in districts with and without war deaths along with 95%CI. All other independent variables were set at their means. Model 1 contains no controls; Model 2 includes a fixed effect for Newfoundland and Labrador; Model 3 includes basic district level demographic controls. The plots were generated using Clarify [21, 22].

percentage points higher in districts with war deaths. This effect is roughly of the same magnitude as that found by Karol and Miguel [9] except that it is in the opposite direction.

4 Robustness Checks

We have conducted a number of robustness checks on our findings. First, we address the possibility that by aggregating constituencies that experienced a death, regardless of when they experienced it, we may be missing two contradictory effects. Recent deaths may generate a rally-round-the-flag effect, driving up support for the governing party. At the same time, deaths farther in the past may decrease support.

To check against this, we have run our individual and aggregate tests substituting in two variables for our Deaths variable. The first is a dummy variable indicating a casualty in

Table 3: Individual-level robustness checks with deaths broken apart by period^a

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	Odds ratio	95% CI		Odds ratio	95% CI	
War deaths in 2006/7	1.18	0.71	2.00	1.24	0.67	2.28
War deaths in 2008	1.20	0.58	2.46	1.16	0.55	2.42
2006 Conservative vote	22.16	15.60	31.50	10.45	6.78	16.13
Conservative Party ID				4.64	2.61	8.27
Other Party ID				0.63	0.41	0.97
NFLD				0.02	0.01	0.06
<i>N</i>	856			856		
Log pseudolikelihood	-392.40			-359.52		
Wald χ^2	300.59			331.39		

^a The dependent variable is Conservative Party vote in the 2008 Federal election; cell entries are odds ratios and 95% CI from a logistic regression with clustering on the electoral district.

Table 4: Aggregate-level robustness checks with deaths broken apart by period^a

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Coefficient	95% CI		Coefficient	95% CI		Coefficient	95% CI	
War deaths in 2006/7	0.14	-2.10	2.38	0.83	-0.96	2.62	1.54	-0.21	3.28
War deaths in 2008	0.23	-2.81	3.27	0.84	-1.58	3.29	1.70	-0.66	4.06
NFLD				-28.75	-33.05	-24.46	-29.31	-34.43	-24.20
% immigrant							0.13	0.07	0.19
Median inc							0.0001	0.00004	0.0002
% university							-0.114	-0.193	-0.035
Unemployment							0.08	-0.19	0.35
Population							-0.00006	-0.0001	-0.00001
Constant	1.69	0.80	2.59	2.20	1.48	2.92	2.71	-3.35	8.77
<i>N</i>	306			306			306		
<i>F</i>	0.02			57.97			28.54		

^a The dependent variable is the percentage point change in the Conservative Party vote at the district level between the 2006 and 2008 federal elections; cell entries are OLS coefficients and 95% CI.

the year prior to the election. The second is a dummy variable indicating a casualty in the two and three years prior to the election. We then rerun all five of the models presented in Sections 3.1 and 3.2. We report these results in Tables 3 and 4. The point estimates are positive for each coefficient in every regression, though they only reach conventional levels of statistical significance in one. Nonetheless, there appears to be no evidence of a contradictory effect over time.

Second, we have tested against the possibility that our results are a function of some selection effect, wherein the same constituencies that are likely to send soldiers to war are those that are naturally more inclined to support the Conservative Party. To explore this possibility, we substituted our deaths variable with a measure of whether a death had occurred in the year *following* the election. As the results in Tables 5 and 6 indicate, the

point estimate for this variable is negative in all the aggregate models and never approaches conventional levels of significance. At the individual level, the point estimates are positive, but feature very large p-values (.82 in Model 1 and .52 in Model 2). Accordingly, the results reported in Sections 3.1 and 3.2 above do not appear to be due to selection.

Table 5: Individual-level robustness checks with deaths after the election^a

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	Odds ratio	95% CI		Odds ratio	95% CI	
War deaths in 2009	1.08	0.50	2.35	1.26	0.62	2.57
2006 Conservative vote	22.12	15.60	31.37	10.33	6.74	15.82
Conservative Party ID				4.67	2.63	8.30
Other Party ID				0.62	0.41	0.93
NFLD				0.02	0.01	0.06
<i>N</i>	856			856		
Log pseudolikelihood	-393.02			-360.06		
Wald χ^2	301.93			322.54		

^a The dependent variable is Conservative Party vote in the 2008 Federal election; cell entries are odds ratios and 95% CI from a logistic regression with clustering on the electoral district.

Table 6: Aggregate-level robustness checks with deaths after the election^a

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Coefficient	95% CI		Coefficient	95% CI		Coefficient	95% CI	
War deaths in 2009	-1.78	-5.00	1.43	-0.90	-3.47	1.67	-0.60	-3.11	1.89
NFLD				-28.50	-32.79	-24.22	-29.39	-34.53	-24.25
% immigrant							0.12	0.06	0.18
Median inc							0.0001	0.00004	0.0002
% university							-0.12	-0.20	-0.04
Unemployment							0.08	-0.19	0.35
Population							-0.00006	-0.0001	-0.00001
Constant	1.84	1.01	2.66	2.44	1.78	3.10	2.94	-3.13	9.01
<i>N</i>	306			306			306		
<i>F</i>	1.19			86.57			31.54		

^a The dependent variable is the percentage point change in the Conservative Party vote at the district level between the 2006 and 2008 federal elections; cell entries are OLS coefficients and 95% CI.

Finally, we have confirmed our individual level results in a matching framework. We used a nearest-neighbour matching algorithm that matched on vote in 2006, gender, year of birth and partisan ID. The results (Table 7) suggest a large increase in the linear probability of voting Conservative when in a constituency that has experienced war deaths. The average treatment effect of a war death of some 7.9 percentage points is consistent with the logit results presented above.

Table 7: Individual-level matching estimates^a

Variable	Average treatment effect		
	Coefficient	95% CI	
War Deaths	0.079	0.006	0.153
<i>N</i>	854		

^a There is only one match per observation.

5 Heterogeneous Effects

In this section we present estimates of heterogeneous effects of war deaths on support for incumbent government candidates. The aim is to test whether the likelihood of individuals or groups failing to punish the government is conditional upon the type of community in which they live. In particular, we want to test whether the effect of war deaths is conditioned by social cohesion. It might be the case that the effects of war deaths are greater when community bonds are tighter. We estimate heterogeneous effects at both the individual and district level.

At the individual level we use as a measure of social cohesion the length of residence of an individual in their neighbourhood. Residential mobility has long been viewed as connected to social cohesion—or social capital [24, 25]. The basic theory is that as people are more mobile, they invest less in local social capital, thereby decreasing the community’s stock and lowering social cohesion. We re-estimated our individual level model, including an interaction term between war deaths and length of residence in the individual’s neighbourhood. We report the results of the interaction in Figure 3. The graph shows the marginal effect of war deaths on Conservative vote, across the observed range of the length of residence variable. The solid sloping line represents changes in the marginal effect of a war death in the respondent’s district, as values of length of residence change, holding other variables constant.³ The dashed lines show the 95% confidence interval around the effect. The interaction effect is statistically significant at conventional levels whenever both the dashed lines are above or below the horizontal zero line. As the figure illustrates, there appears to be an increasingly positive effect of deaths on government vote share as years lived in a neighbourhood increase. While this only passes into significance for those who report having lived in their neighbourhood from 12 to 21 years, we note that this accounts for some 22% of respondents. Moreover, while the confidence intervals of the marginal effect widen substantially, the range of the estimate sits overwhelmingly on the positive side of zero.

We use a different measure of social cohesion at the district level. Here we employ the percentage of the district’s population that are visible minorities. Again, this is a measure used as a proxy for levels of community social cohesion. There is a large body of work making the connection between ethnic diversity and various aspects of social cohesion such as public goods provision [26–28], trust [29] and civic participation [30]. Figure 4 plots the

³Other variables are fixed as follows: Conservative vote 2006=0; Conservative party ID=0; Other party ID=0; Newfoundland=0.

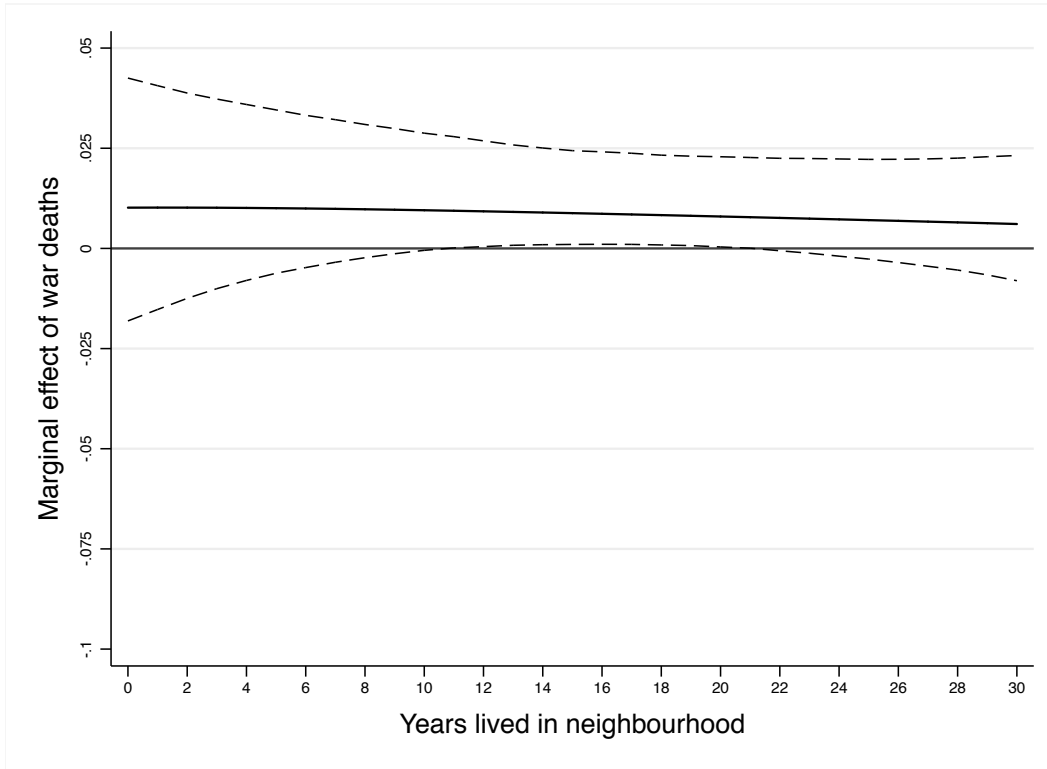


Figure 3: Marginal Effect of War Deaths on 2008 Conservative Vote, as Residential Tenure Changes.

Dependent Variable: Conservative vote in the 2008 Canadian election. The solid line shows the effect of war deaths on the probability of voting conservative across the full observed range of the residential tenure variable. The plots in the figure were created by first obtaining 10,000 simulated values of the model parameters and then using these to calculate predicted probabilities of voting when “deaths” is equal to 0 and 1, holding other variables constant and then calculating first differences.

interaction effect of percent visible minority in a district and war deaths in a district. Once again, we find a significant effect across a limited range of our predictor. For those who live in constituencies with a share of visible minorities under 10%, the effect of a war death is to increase support for the government. We note that two-thirds of constituencies fall below this threshold. In other words, the effects war deaths on Conservative Party support do appear to differ according to the levels of ethnic diversity in the community from which a death originated. We note, as well, that the same effect obtains if we condition deaths on the share of immigrants in a community.

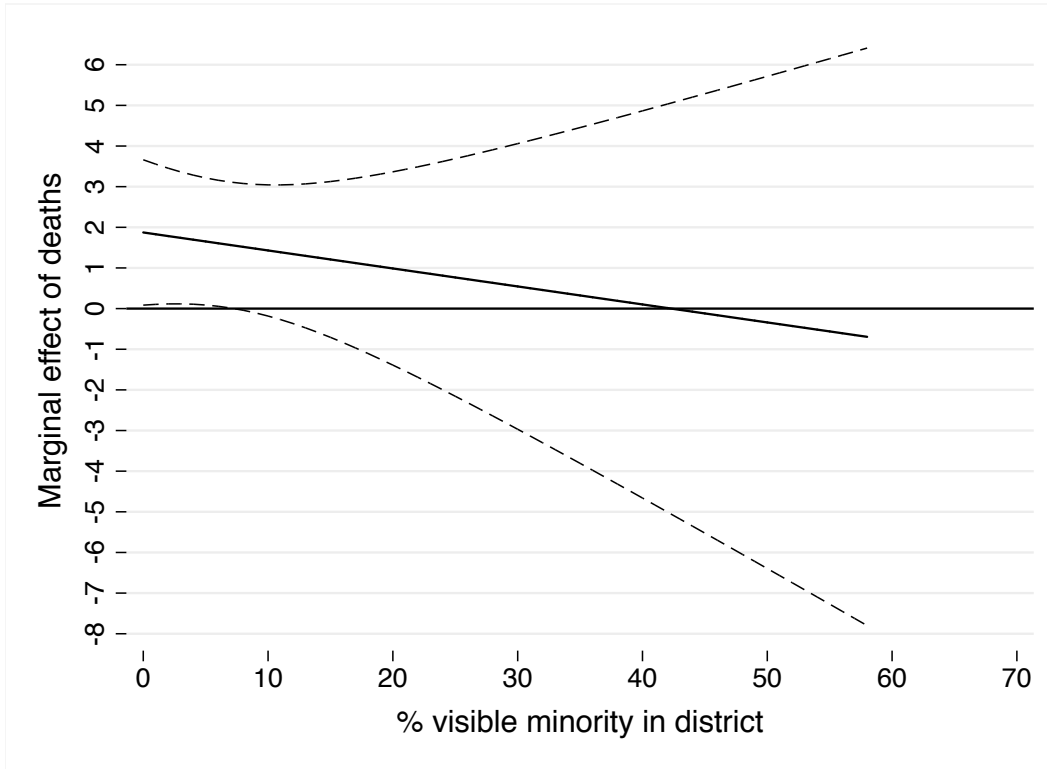


Figure 4: Marginal Effect of War Deaths on Change in Conservative Vote Share, 2006–08, as District Level Percentage of Visible Minority Changes.

Dependent Variable: Change in Conservative vote share 2006–2008 Canadian elections. The solid line shows the effect of war deaths on the change in Conservative vote share across the full observed range of the percent visible minority variable.

6 Discussion

Our findings that the experience of a war death in one’s electoral district has a positive effect on support for the incumbent Conservative Party runs counter to much of the work conducted in the United States on the relationship between war deaths and public opinion and voting. However, the results of the analysis in this paper do comport with other recent work in the field of political psychology.

The results presented above are concurrent with two experiments recently conducted on support for the Afghanistan mission in Canada. Following their work on declining overall support for the mission in Canada [31], Fletcher and Hove [32] have conducted two separate experiments on support for the mission. In each, individuals were exposed to three different images regarding the war in Afghanistan. In both experiments, a picture of a flag-draped coffin was presented to some subjects. Others were exposed to an image meant to evoke patriotism, while a third group was exposed to a picture of a soldier helping an Afghan child, in keeping with the more traditional Canadian conception of soldiers as peacekeepers and agents of development. In each experiment, support for the war was highest among the

group randomly assigned a picture of a war casualty.

Fletcher and Hove make the case that images of war deaths produce an emotional response, combining sadness and pride, and that this increases support in the mission. Our results hint at the possibility that this is also translating to support for the incumbent Conservative Party in districts that have experienced a war death. We note here that media attention to the war, unsurprisingly, is related to casualties. While media mentions of the war in Afghanistan are not solely a function of deaths, Figure 5 illustrates how increases in media mentions track with war deaths, indicating that media attention of the war focuses on deaths.

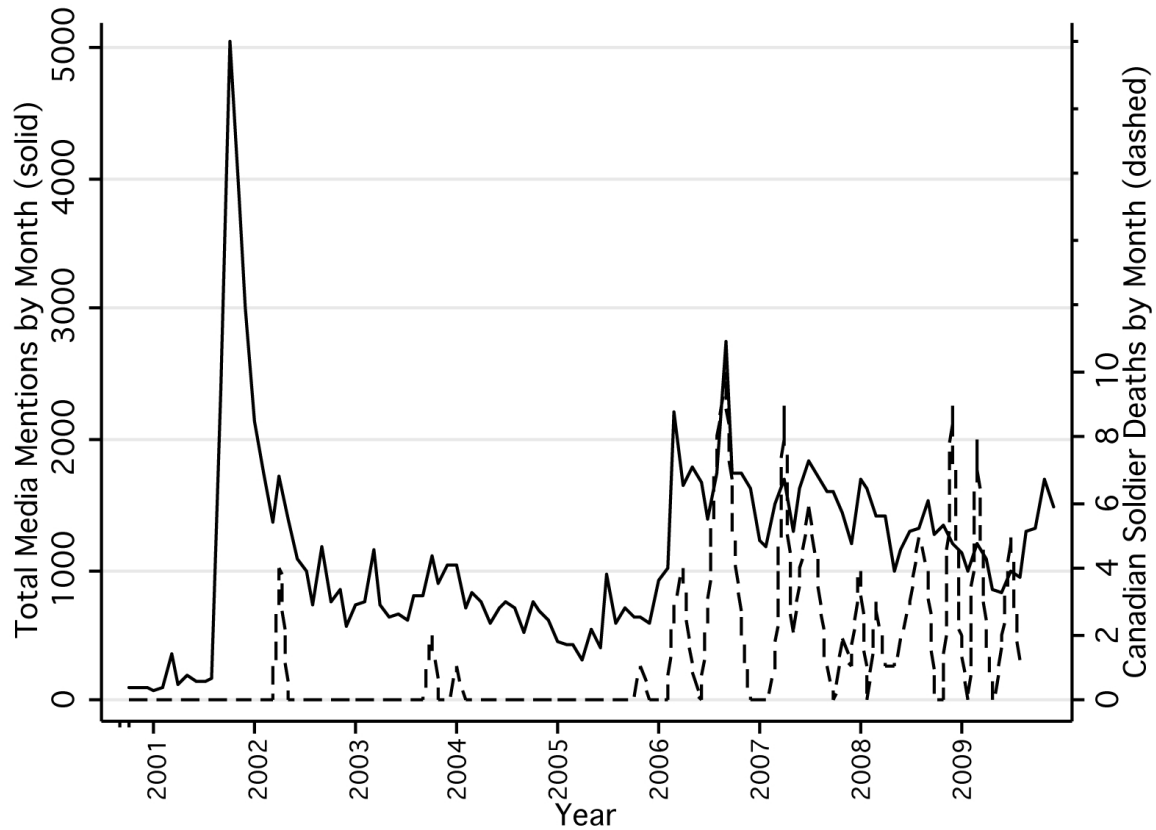


Figure 5: Media mentions of Afghanistan and soldier deaths by month, 2000–2009.

Healy et al. [5] illustrate how mood can affect vote choice and public opinion, even when the source of that mood (college sports victories) is seemingly irrelevant to politics. Healy et al. argue that the positive state of mind resulting from sports victories may cause voters to be more satisfied with the status quo and therefore to be more likely to support incumbents [5, 4]. The emotions connected to war deaths in Fletcher and Hove’s work are perhaps not positive, however, nor are they negative per se. The combination of sadness and pride “has effects that are markedly different from and more consequential than those of either of its constituent elements” [32, 16]. The feature linking the mood generated by war deaths to support for incumbents may be that individuals who have come in closer

contact with the casualties of war—in the sense of living in the same district—may feel they have a heightened stake in the outcome of the war. As Erikson and Stoker show, this may in turn lead to increased attention paid to the war and learning about the war [33, 223]. One of the outcomes of such learning and attention in the case of Canada’s war in Afghanistan may well be the conclusion that Canada needs a strong, combat ready army and that the Conservatives are the party most committed to that policy position. Indeed, Fletcher and Hove’s analysis indicates that the emotional reactions to war deaths are related to a positive view of a combat ready army and at the same time they serve to decrease approval of Canada’s traditional peacekeeping role, a role much associated with the opposition Liberal Party. Moreover, in our analyses, Conservative gains in support overwhelmingly come from the Liberal Party.

7 Conclusion

Conventional wisdom as well as much previous research holds that incumbents are affected negatively by war casualties. That is, as casualties increase, support for the war effort and support for government incumbents decrease. The specific case of voters punishing incumbents for war casualties can be thought of as an instance of the more general proposition that in democracies voters hold incumbents responsible for the negative outcomes of policy choices.

Three important questions are left open by the large extant literature on the effects of war casualties on incumbent support: 1) *How* do war deaths decrease support? 2) *Which* deaths matter? 3) Do these effects *travel* beyond the United States? In this paper we have focused on the latter two questions. In particular, we have estimated models of the effects of local Afghanistan war deaths on district level support for government party candidates in Canada using both individual level panel data and aggregate district level data. Our results from both sets of models indicate scant support for the proposition that war deaths *decrease* the probability of voting for the government candidate. Indeed, our analysis suggests that voters living in constituencies that experienced a war death were *more* likely to vote for the governing party.

The findings reported here from the Canadian case present an empirical puzzle in two senses. First, local support for government party candidates is increasing with local casualties while national support for the mission in Afghanistan is declining. Second, the Canadian results presented here are inconsistent with those found in similar studies in the United States. Both of these speak to the first question above—that of how war deaths affect opinion and voting behaviour. This question remains largely unanswered in our analysis. Moving forward, our focus will be on exploring the mechanism driving these results in order to address why local deaths seem to matter the way they do and what it is about Canada that separates it from the American case.

Our aim in this paper is not to demonstrate, *per se*, that war deaths increase government party support. Rather, the paper is a test of the contention, prevalent in the literature, that war deaths necessarily decrease support. As such, the null hypothesis under investigation in this literature is that war deaths have no impact and this is tested against the alternative that war deaths decrease support. The findings in our paper do not allow us to reject this null hypothesis. That is, while some may quibble with the strength of our results indicating

increased support for government party candidates, it is beyond doubt that the results presented here do not allow us to reject the null hypothesis implicit in the literature. At the very least our findings indicate, contrary to previous work, that voters do not always punish government candidates for war deaths.

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