

# Muddying the Waters: How Perceived Foreign Interference Affects Public Opinion on Protest Movements

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**D**oes foreign interference help or harm protest movements? An extensive literature has debated this question but focuses on observational data, obscuring a crucial mechanism for protest success: its effect on public attitudes. We argue that public accusations of foreign meddling damage protest groups by reducing public support. In survey experiments conducted in the United States and Canada, we find that credible accusations of foreign interference erode support by discrediting protester groups among sympathizers and inflaming nationalist fears. Indeed, such accusations delegitimize protest movements even among those sympathetic to the cause. Conditional factors, such as the type of foreign assistance or the identity of the meddling state, have no impact. These findings reveal how referencing foreign backing is a potent discrediting tactic—it influences public opinion, a critical determinant for protest outcomes.

## INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, after mass protests erupted in Ecuador over the retraction of fuel subsidies, President Lenin Moreno claimed that the protests were instigated by Venezuelan agitators orchestrating a “coup” against him. Indeed, Ecuadorian police began investigating possible links to Venezuela involving \$740,000 in cash seized by police, which was supposedly used to fund the protests (Faiola and Garip 2019). Similarly, in Chile, a groundswell of public unrest led to mass protests due to increased subway fares in Santiago. Chilean President Sebastián Piñera claimed that his country was “at war against a powerful enemy” secretly promoting the protests—a veiled allusion to Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro (Faiola and Garip 2019). A few days before this announcement, Chilean police leaked an intelligence report to a local newspaper that allegedly tied some of the violent demonstrators to Venezuelan and Cuban agitators.<sup>1</sup>


These instances demonstrate a common government reaction to major protest movements: publicly alleging that foreign powers instigated or supported the protests

(Carothers and Youngs 2015). Because such events are frequent, how do perceptions of foreign interference influence the general public’s views of protest movements? What factors strengthen or weaken these effects?

Answering these questions is critical because the success of every nonviolent protest movement relies on public support, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of protesters achieving their desired policy goals (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Denardo 1985). Public accusations of foreign assistance can potentially impact a movement’s chances of success by shaping public perceptions. Many view such accusations as cynical attempts to discredit and undermine support for the movement. However, in a few rare and well-documented cases, such as Iran in 1953 or Chile in the early 1970s, foreign powers successfully instigated protest movements to topple a regime, forced policy changes on the target government, or destabilized it (Prados 2006). More recently, Russia unsuccessfully attempted to incite postelection protests in Moldova in 2005 by, for example, offering funding to local opposition leaders (Infotag 2005). Foreign powers have also occasionally provided material and technical assistance to already ongoing protest movements (Brancati 2016, 23).

Thus, this historical record potentially grants credibility to accusations of foreign interference to many members of the target publics, influencing their views of the protest movement. Accordingly, perceptions of such foreign influence could affect whether a protest movement can achieve its goals. Knowing the effects of such perceptions can also build insights into how actual foreign interventions impact the chances of the assisted protest movement.

To date, there has been limited research providing direct evidence on whether individuals, as opposed to governments, actually care about foreign interference in domestic protests. The few studies investigating

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<sup>1</sup> Claims of foreign interference in Ecuador and Chile were echoed by senior foreign officials, including the then head of the OAS and the then foreign minister of Argentina (Naim and Winter 2019).

foreign interventions for protest movements have differing conclusions on their significance. We address this by using survey experiments to identify the effects of such perceptions of foreign interference without the potential endogeneity arising from the nonrandomness (or inherent strategic nature) of the decisions of foreign powers to intervene on behalf of a certain protest movement or of leaders making public allegations of foreign interference. Our experimental approach distinguishes the effects of foreign interference on public views of the aided group from its effects on their views of the protest groups' underlying cause. Thus, studying this topic reveals valuable insights into questions of both scholarly and policy importance.

In this article, we examine a hypothetical scenario where covert foreign assistance is provided to protesters involved in environmental protests, such as opposing the construction of an oil pipeline, in the United States (US) and Canada. This type of nonviolent protest is common worldwide and is often considered a plausible context for foreign interference in both Western and non-Western political systems. This environmental setting enables a clear cross-national comparison and allows us to explore other potential factors moderating foreign meddling effects, such as interference in protests led by historically marginalized groups. Given the growing importance of environmental issues, it also has significant subject matter relevance.

We argue that foreign interference reduces public support for protesters by undermining protesters' credibility. Specifically, we find that revelations about foreign interference significantly increased American and Canadian public support for hardline government policies toward protesters receiving foreign assistance. Respondents believe such protesters are less committed to their publicly stated aims and are suspicious of protester involvement with a foreign conspiracy. We also discovered that public criticism of protest organizations receiving foreign aid was highest among the most environmentally conscientious respondents as well as those with extreme nationalistic attitudes. However, we find no evidence that any other conditional factors (such as whether protesters belonged to an out-group) mattered. Together, these results have important implications for a variety of questions regarding the role of external support in nonviolent campaigns, ranging from the factors driving support for protest movements to the consequences of leaders invoking an external threat on the politics of social contestation.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, we situate our research in the existing literature on public opinion on protests and environmental protests in general and on foreign interference in protest movements in particular. Second, drawing on the broader protest literature, we develop four hypotheses on the links between perceived foreign interference and public support to protest movement. Third, we explain our experimental design embedded in a survey conducted among American and Canadian adult citizens, and we discuss our findings. Finally, the concluding section summarizes the findings and describes their implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past 15 years, academic interest in nonviolent civil resistance campaigns has grown due to the combination of the Color Revolutions, the Arab Spring, and seminal contributions by Chenoweth and Stephan (2008; 2011). Recent research has analyzed domestic (Brancati 2016; Butcher and Svensson 2016; Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2017; Dahlum 2019; Groshek and Christensen 2017; Tucker 2007) and international (Braithwaite, Braithwaite, and Kucik 2015; Gleditsch and Rivera 2017; Karakaya 2018; Murdie and Bhasin 2011) factors driving major nonviolent protests (such as diffusion), as well as the determinants of their success in realizing their primary objectives (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Huet-Vaughn 2013; Klein and Regan 2018; Nepstad 2011; Ritter 2015a).

The limited experimental research on domestic public attitudes toward protests reveals two consistent patterns. First, protests described as nonviolent usually elicit more positive responses than their violent counterparts (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018). Second, despite their nonviolent nature, protests led by marginalized groups tend to be viewed more negatively (Davenport, McDermott, and Armstrong 2018; Edwards and Arnon 2019), although Manekin and Mitts (2022) find that this negative perception varies by protest goals. Notably, the sole experimental study to date on environmental protests finds that violent environmental protests are seen in a substantially more negative light than nonviolent ones (Thomas and Louis 2014).

## Public Opinion and Public Policy

The scholarly debate on public opinion influencing public policy remains highly contentious (for some recent entries, see Bartels and Achen 2016; Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2017; Enns 2015; Page and Gilens 2020), yet evidence suggests a significant impact. The concept of "anticipated representation" proposes that elected officials craft policies aligned with public desires, leading to policies responsive to public opinion without direct public participation (Arnold 1990; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995). Policymakers often monitor public opinion in democracies, even in some nondemocracies, using it to inform policy choices (Druckman and Jacobs 2006; Sherlock 2020).

Critics argue that the public's susceptibility to cues and other forms of elite "guidance" weakens its role in affecting policy. Although elites may sometimes successfully manipulate public opinion in the short term (Guisinger and Saunders 2017), they cannot do so indefinitely (Baum and Groeling 2010). Furthermore, elites' attempts to manipulate public opinion are not always successful (Edwards 2006). This suggests a degree of independence in public opinion from elite preferences.

Recent empirical studies support the direct effect of public opinion on foreign and domestic policy. Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo (2020) found Israeli politicians

were more willing to use force when the public favored it, and Sevenans (2021) showed that Belgian parliamentarians shifted their stances on domestic issues based on public opinion data.

Indeed, the role of public sentiment extends to non-violent protests, where it can indirectly shape policy. Favorable public perceptions of protests often translate into support in the form of monetary or in-kind donations and increased participation, which can sustain and amplify protest activities (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 36–8).<sup>2</sup> Policymakers, even those initially indifferent to a protest, must consider the potential for such movements to grow or persist as disruptive forces. Thus, they may seek strategies to dissuade the public from supporting such groups. One common method policymakers employ is to adapt public policies aligning more closely with public preferences on the issue(s) at stake, which will discourage further assistance to protest groups (see, e.g., Gurri 2018, 138–42).

## Public Opinion on the Environment

Research on public opinion on environmental causes in the US, Canada, and the wider West finds significant public support for such causes and movements, especially for environmental causes related in some manner to local health concerns (such as air and water pollution). However, this general support is greatly tempered by a limited willingness to bear significant economic costs for the promotion of environmental goals (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2014; Nemet and Johnson 2010). Nevertheless, some experimental research on this topic indicates that support for environmental causes can be affected by the framing of the environmental issue of concern (Albertson and Busby 2015; Friscia and Trager 2017).

## Protest Group Credibility

Research on group credibility indicates that highly trustworthy spokespeople are far more likely to persuade audiences to support their causes (Pornpitakpan 2004; Wilson and Sherrell 1993). For nonviolent protests, the organization's credibility is crucial in persuading the broader public beyond their core supporters to support their cause. This enhances their chances of success. Consequently, protest groups focus on enhancing their credibility through various protest and non-protest activities and methods of self-presentation that show their high commitment to their cause (Benford and Snow 2000, 620–1; Thorne 1975).

## Foreign Interference and Protests

Despite the surge of research on nonviolent protests, existing studies have done little to examine the causes or the effects of foreign interference (real or perceived) for

protest groups.<sup>3</sup> Existing research suggests three conditions under which nonviolent protest groups are more likely to draw external support. First, a foreign actor may view the protest movement as a means to remove or destabilize an adversary's government. Second, shared policy goals or outcomes, such as promoting democracy, may align the movement with a foreign actor (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 54). Third, the movement may secure international support from foreign non-state actors (e.g., International Non-Governmental Organizations [INGOs], foreign media, diaspora communities), who can then influence their respective governments to assist the foreign protesters (Bob 2005; White et al. 2015).

The protest literature has also not systematically examined how foreign interference, or public perceptions of foreign meddling, influences protest movements' success. Current qualitative and quantitative findings on this question are inconsistent. Some qualitative studies, focusing on financial support and sanctions in the Middle East (Zunes and Eddin 2009) and select cases from the 1980s and 1990s (Nepstad 2011), suggest that foreign interventions diminish protest success likelihood. A quantitative study analyzing protest campaigns from 1900 to 2006 found that foreign economic aid reduces protesters' success rate (Chenoweth and Stephan 2008, 23), echoed by a study that used an updated version of the same dataset (NAVCO 2.0) from 1946 to 2006 (Jackson 2015).

Conversely, studies using a revised NAVCO 2.0 dataset found that powerful states' open intervention can enhance protest success (Ritter 2015b), particularly when the target state is dependent on the intervening state. A recent study of foreign assistance incidents from 2000 to 2013 of maximalist goal protests found certain assistance types, such as training, to be somewhat beneficial (Chenoweth and Stephan 2021). Anecdotal evidence suggests protest movement leaders often solicit foreign and NGO support, believing it will aid their cause (Bob 2005). Some scholars and practitioners even advocate protest leaders cultivating external support, seeing it as one key to protest success, a way for movements to gain critical resources (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994, 32–3). Notably, foreign interference may have aided the nonviolent resistance to Nazi occupation in Denmark (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994, 243) and the South African anti-apartheid movement (Martin 2007).

However, some scholars have found foreign interventions to be inconsequential to protest success. Gene Sharp, the founder of modern nonviolent resistance scholarship and practice, considers such interventions of “limited use and effectiveness” (2005, 413). Similarly, a quantitative study from 1940 to 2006 found that such foreign interventions did not significantly impact assisted protest movements' success rates across

<sup>2</sup> Nonviolent protest groups sometimes shift public opinion in favor of themselves and their preferred policies due to their protest activities (Gillion and Soule 2018; Wasow 2020).

<sup>3</sup> This article does not discuss another, very different form of foreign interference in protests—interference by a foreign government in aid of a local government facing a major protest group (see Tolstrup, Seeberg, and Glavind 2019).



different measures (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 52–59). Related research on democracy protests found no meaningful effects on post-protest democratic reforms (Brancati 2016, 75).<sup>4</sup>

Given these conflicting viewpoints, exploring the factors influencing foreign intervention efficacy could advance the debate and deepen understanding of its impact on protest success. One possible reason for the discrepancies in large-N quantitative analyses may hinge on public and decision-maker perceptions of foreign intervention for protesters, rather than observed foreign actions, thus potentially leading to inadvertent “measurement error.”<sup>5</sup> A systemic micro-approach can address endogeneity issues arising from strategic selection by interfering countries (or leaders alleging interference) and distinguish whether foreign interference affects public protest support based on original cause support versus support for the specific protest group.

## THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION ON PUBLIC OPINION ON PROTEST MOVEMENTS

We argue that the perception of foreign intervention on behalf of protest movements reduces public support due to two primary reasons.<sup>6</sup> First, protest movements strive to signal high commitment and widespread support for their cause to third parties by showcasing their size or protest activities. When organizers succeed in bringing a significant number of people to their protests, they can plausibly claim widespread support among the non-protesting general population. Similarly, when peaceful protesters attend multiple demonstrations on the same topic and with the same set of demands, and/or repeatedly disrupt daily life, these activities indicate the willingness of protesters to dedicate significant resources to their declared cause (Denardo 1985; Klein and Regan 2018).

However, the presence of foreign assistance could cast doubt on the protesters’ commitment. To the broader uninvolved public, the motivation for repeated demonstrations and disruptions could be seen as driven by foreign monetary compensation rather than genuine conviction. Furthermore, resources from foreign powers may enable protest movements with low support to artificially inflate the ratio of protesters to latent popular support within the general population (through

better organization by main activists such as free busing services). This dynamics mirrors how well-organized unions can bring thousands or tens of thousands of their members for demonstrations even when their demands have limited or no support among the general public.

Second, the perception of foreign support might cause the protest movement to be perceived as a foreign conspiracy and a threat to national security. Both domestic elites and the public understand that foreign powers may back non-state groups to serve their interests, interests potentially conflicting with the protest organization’s objectives or targeting the public’s interests. As a result, the goals or policy solutions proposed by groups receiving foreign assistance may be seen as serving the foreign power more than the public. The foreign power’s assistance could also allow them some control over the protest group’s activities, reinforcing the perception that the group is a “tool” or even a “fifth column” of the foreign power. This divergence of preferences and possible foreign control amplifies the perceived security threat posed by protest groups receiving foreign aid.

Unsurprisingly, peaceful protest groups who receive foreign assistance are more likely to face repression. A study comparing violent and nonviolent uprisings found that protests receiving foreign support were more likely to be targets of mass killings (Perkoski and Chenoweth 2018). For this reason, during the October 2000 Bulldozer Revolution, Otpor, a nonviolent protest group known in Yugoslavia for receiving Western assistance, emphasized in its messaging to the Yugoslav security forces that it was not a Western “fifth column” to prevent a potentially violent crackdown (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006, 417–8). Therefore, our primary hypothesis is as follows:

**H1.** The perception of foreign interference for a protest movement will reduce public support for concessions to protesters’ demands and increase support for repression.

We also expect that perceived foreign assistance to protest movements would harm them more severely if a large share of their membership is composed of out-groups (e.g., ethnic, racial, and/or religious minorities). In-groups tend to see protests by out-groups, regardless of their actual nature, in a more negative light and as motivated by harmful intentions. This leads in-groups to be more supportive of the use of repression against out-group protesters (Arnon and Edwards 2019; Manekin and Mitts 2022).

Furthermore, in-groups frequently believe that members of the out-group are less patriotic than members of the in-group, regardless of the circumstances (Kornweibel 2002; Kunst, Thomsen, and Dovidio 2019). Thus, the involvement or potential involvement of a foreign power with a domestic movement largely composed of members of an out-group is seen as more threatening than such foreign involvement with a majority in-group domestic movement.

Not surprisingly, studies on the causes of severe mistreatment of ethnic/national minorities have found

<sup>4</sup> Beaulieu (2014) found that interference decreased the likelihood of the incumbent further escalating authoritarianism (110–3).

<sup>5</sup> Foreign interference effects on protests may be context-dependent, with contradictory findings stemming from variations in interference types or countries studied. While our approach and findings cannot definitively resolve these issues, to our knowledge, no study has yet attempted to reconcile these divergent results.

<sup>6</sup> Our argument primarily pertains to foreign meddling’s impact on protest movements. We do not apply this to other forms of foreign influence, which, as Hayes and Guardino (2011) suggest, may be more successful, underscoring the dependency of foreign interventions on method and context.

that minority groups are more likely to be mistreated when they receive, or are expected to receive, external assistance from a foreign power. Governments perceive actual or potential foreign assistance to outgroups as a greater national security risk due to fears that these minorities will be used by foreign powers as armed “fifth columns” (Downes 2006; Mylonas 2013). While foreign assistance to such nonviolent movements rarely includes armaments, mass demonstrations can pressure governments into making major policy concessions, sap the government’s strength, and, in a few cases, even bring down both democratic and authoritarian leaders (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Thus, preexisting negative perceptions of the out-group compounded with perceived foreign interference are expected to have a multiplier effect: The public will be far less willing to make concessions. This will also lead to greater support for repression against such foreign-backed protesters, leading to our second hypothesis.

**H2.** The perception of foreign interference for a protest movement composed of members of an out-group will further reduce support for concessions and increase support for the use of repression.

Perceived foreign backing of protests can play two non-mutually exclusive roles: instigating protests or “oil spilling” to escalate ongoing protests. The timing of foreign assistance may affect public perceptions. If foreign support comes after protests start, the public may dismiss interference as representing genuine protester interests rather than foreign agendas.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the public may prefer concessions, since foreign hijacking poses a greater risk. However, evidence of foreign backing before protests begin could undermine protester legitimacy. Thus, if foreign backing is perceived as instigating rather than hijacking protests, it will have stronger delegitimizing effects. Thus, our third hypothesis is as follows:

**H3.** The perception of foreign backing for a protest movement that began after the eruption of the protests compared to aid before the start of protests will blunt the negative effects that foreign interference has on public support for the protest movement.

We also argue that the type of foreign assistance to a protest movement may also matter. Perceptions of foreign assistance in the form of funding should elicit more negative reactions than other forms of assistance. There is a widespread belief that control over monetary resources by any actor provides them with control over society, as expressed in the famous American saying “whoever has the gold makes the rules.” Funding is assumed to give funders continuous leverage over recipients’ actions and priorities. This view is reinforced by the understanding that when recipients rely on

external funding to operate, a cutoff could force them to scale back or cease activities.

Therefore, even domestic NGOs and protest groups with entirely domestic financing sources are subject to constant media scrutiny, government investigations, public debates, and legal disclosure requirements. When these groups’ domestic funding sources are discovered to originate from supposed or actual “problematic” domestic sources, it sparks significant political controversy (e.g., see Mayer 2010; Soskis 2017).

When funding comes from perceived foreign sources, these dynamics may be magnified. Foreign funding of activist and protest groups is usually problematic by definition, as publics know foreign powers assist non-state actors in promoting divergent interests. Not surprisingly, there are widespread complaints in many countries in non-protest settings, supported by some academic research (Englund 2006; Stiles 2002), that foreign INGOs and foreign governments that fund domestic NGOs have undue influence over them. The discovery of a protest movement funded by a foreign power, along with implied leverage, leads to especially negative reactions.

Governments that seek to discredit protest groups focus their fire on the foreign funding that protest organizers allegedly received. For example, the Serbian protest movement Otpor received multiple forms of assistance from Western governments after its creation, including training in nonviolent protest methods and financial funding. Nevertheless, the Milošević regime, in its efforts to discredit the protesters as “Madeline [Albright] Youth,” emphasized in its messaging the financial assistance that Otpor received, even going to the extent of posting wall posters in which Otpor activists were shown with pockets stuffed with U.S. dollars (Sharp 2005, 320–4).

In contrast, other forms of foreign assistance to protesters are not seen as giving the foreign power similar leverage over the protest movement. For example, training in protest and mobilization tactics by a foreign power does not prevent the protest movement from continuing to operate as before with the skills that they acquired until that point in time. Accordingly, the public should be less wary of such foreign support. This leads to our final hypothesis.

**H4.** The perception of foreign interference for a protest movement that received financial assistance will reduce public support concessions and increase support for the use of repression compared to foreign aid in the form of technical aid/training.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two separate surveys using the online survey firm Lucid. We surveyed 2,563 U.S. adults in August 2020 and 2,664 Canadian adults (preregistered) in March–April 2021. We employed quota sampling to recruit participants, stratifying by age, gender, geographic location, and

<sup>7</sup> One reason the open (and cynical) backing from the Soviet Union did not undermine the popularity of the African American civil rights movement during the early Cold War may have been the timing—coming after the movement had already begun (Bob 2019, 193–8).

racial/ethnic representation of the U.S. and Canadian populations.<sup>8</sup> This approach ensures that opt-in Internet surveys are nearly as representative, or at least not worse, than probability sampling through random digit dialing (Kennedy et al. 2018; Macinnis et al. 2018). In fact, studies by Coppock and McClellan (2019) have found that Lucid samples perform as well as American National Election Studies.

However, recent studies have found data quality problems with Lucid in which inattentive respondents, or respondents who incorrectly answer attention check questions, could introduce attenuation bias (Ternovski and Orr 2022). In their comparison of pre-pandemic and pandemic era samples of Lucid, Peyton, Huber, and Coppock (2022) not only find that evidence of less attentive respondents leads to smaller estimated treatment effects but also find that these conditions did not change the signs or significance of findings. To remedy possible data quality problems that may affect the representativeness of our sample, we used attention checks and analyzed our results with both attentive and inattentive respondents and found that our treatment effects remain unaffected by these problems (see Supplementary Figure A5.1). We also used quota sampling to ensure that our American and Canadian samples broadly reflect demographics with recent U.S. and Canadian census data (see Supplementary Table A2.1). We did not weigh our sample as quota sampling for online convenience samples is found to be more representative (see Miratrix et al. 2018 and Supplementary Appendix A2 for more details). For the Canadian survey, we preregistered hypotheses and analysis plans in the Open Science Framework repository.

Before describing the survey, we explain our rationale for choosing an environmental protest scenario in the US and Canada. Our case selection criteria needed two key properties for context hypothetical survey experiments: experimental realism and country comparability. Realistic scenarios, based on public priors, help elicit opinions that mirror real-life political dynamics (McDonald 2020). Thus, in the survey experiments, we use real-world names whether they be the identity of the countries interfering or the identity of the marginalized groups participating in the protests. Fielding an environmental scenario in the US and Canada satisfied these properties. Both countries are major fossil fuel producers<sup>9</sup> and have recently experienced large protests over gas and oil pipelines, making our experimental setting plausible and salient to both publics. Additionally, unlike the US, Canada is not a major world power and has not had recent negative experiences with foreign meddling in its domestic affairs. Comparing these countries allows us to identify

possible differences in reactions due to these other factors, increasing the wider applicability of our results.

Environmental protests against oil and gas pipelines are common in the US, Canada, and other Western countries. Notable examples include the 2016–2017 Dakota Access Pipeline protests opposing construction through Native American lands, which could endanger water supplies (Estes 2019; Gilio-Whitaker 2019). In Canada, Indigenous peoples heavily participated in protests against the Trans-Mountain Pipeline expansion between Alberta and British Columbia (Campbell 2018). Environmental issues like the Greta Thunberg-led climate strikes are a common global protest cause, making them an ideal starting scenario for our hypothetical survey.

These protests often face public accusations from senior officials and media outlets in the US, Canada, and other countries that foreign powers have interfered in environmental protest movements to harm North American and European oil and gas production. For instance, in 2012, Canadian Environment Minister Peter Kent alleged that Canadian environmental NGOs and charities were “laundering” funds from unspecified foreign powers “for inappropriate use against Canadian interests.” Similarly, a 2018 U.S. House of Representatives science committee report claimed that Russia, in an attempt to damage the expansion of fracking in the US, funneled money to unwitting environmental groups opposed to fracking and pipeline expansion in the US, including supporting the Dakota Access Pipeline protest movement (Majority Staff Report 2018). Jason Kenney, head of Alberta’s Conservative Party, also claimed that anti-pipeline protests in Canada were bankrolled by Russia (McElroy 2018).

European leaders have also accused foreign actors of supporting domestic environmental protests to hinder European energy independence from Russia. Former North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen claimed Russia conducted disinformation campaigns supporting environmental groups and protests to maintain European dependence on Russian energy. Officials in Romania and Lithuania made similar accusations, linking local anti-fracking protests to Russian intervention (Higgins 2014). In 2019, a Belgian minister alleged intelligence services informed her that foreign powers directed Greta Thunberg’s climate protests (Boffey 2019). Such accusations are also common in U.S. local referendums on fracking and pipelines (Mooney 2018; Tempus and Horn 2014).

These claims of foreign meddling on behalf of environmental groups have been strongly denied, and to date, no conclusive evidence has emerged for any of them.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in the Belgian example noted here, the accusation was outright denied shortly afterward by Belgian intelligence agencies. However, for the purpose of our survey experiment, multiple allegations

<sup>8</sup> We proposed in our pre-analysis plan block randomization as a precaution. However, simple random sampling alone achieved our goals, eliminating this need. Our final design relies solely on simple randomization, deviating from the original plan. For further information on this change, see Supplementary Appendix A8.

<sup>9</sup> In 2019, the US was the largest oil producer, and Canada was the fourth largest oil producer (Williams 2019).

<sup>10</sup> For example, a careful analysis of this U.S. House of Representatives Report found it to be “thinly sourced” (Tobias 2018).



over the past decade by various government officials in the US, Canada, and elsewhere make our scenario plausible and salient to American and Canadian publics.

We made the deliberate choice to emphasize salience and plausibility in our research approach, employing real-world names to identify the actors within our scenarios. Studies, including McDonald (2020), have demonstrated that using familiar names lessens the cognitive load on respondents and enhances information recall, particularly when the actors are well-known. This can boost the likelihood of eliciting a respondent's authentic attitudes toward the given actor in hypothetical situations (Brutger et al. 2023). However, prominent actors may introduce some bias due to strong preexisting opinions (Druckman and Leeper 2012; Linos and Twist 2018). For example, Greenpeace may be viewed less favorably due to their perceived extreme methods, and the timing of our American survey, conducted 2 months after the George Floyd protests, might cause significant pretreatment effects in vignettes discussing Black rights protest movements.

We posit that any pretreatment effects related to the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests were likely minor in the context of our survey. As Linos and Twist (2018) note, such pretreatment effects depend on the extent to which the experimental vignette mirrors real-world issues. Given the disparity between our hypothetical 2025 environmental scenario and the real-life George Floyd protests against police brutality, we expect significant mitigation of these possible pretreatment effects.

Furthermore, the changes in public opinion related to one of our vignette groups, BLM, began to regress to their pre-protest levels within months of the initial protests. Our survey was conducted in late August 2020, approximately 3 months after the onset of the George Floyd protests (Pew Research Center 2020). This timing further supports our assertion of limited pretreatment effects.

Additionally, using real-world names for marginalized groups, such as Indigenous groups, raises ethical concerns. Although Indigenous peoples are not the object of our study and not subject to ethics review typically associated with biological data, historical artifact, or artistic work, the use of the "likeness" of Indigenous groups without their consent could potentially lead to "subject appropriation" if our hypothetical scenario gained public attention. This could inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes and stigmatize Indigenous communities (Young and Haley 2009), a concern given their historical exploitation and mistreatment by researchers and institutions (Hayward et al. 2021). We acknowledge that such actions could potentially harm Indigenous peoples' cultures and identities (Wolfe 2006).

These potential harms arise from publicizing certain tribal identities, which could have real-world consequences. Orr, Sharratt, and Iqbal (2019) expressed similar concerns in their survey experiment study of Native American tribes in Oklahoma, where the issue paralleled an ongoing, real-world court case. To

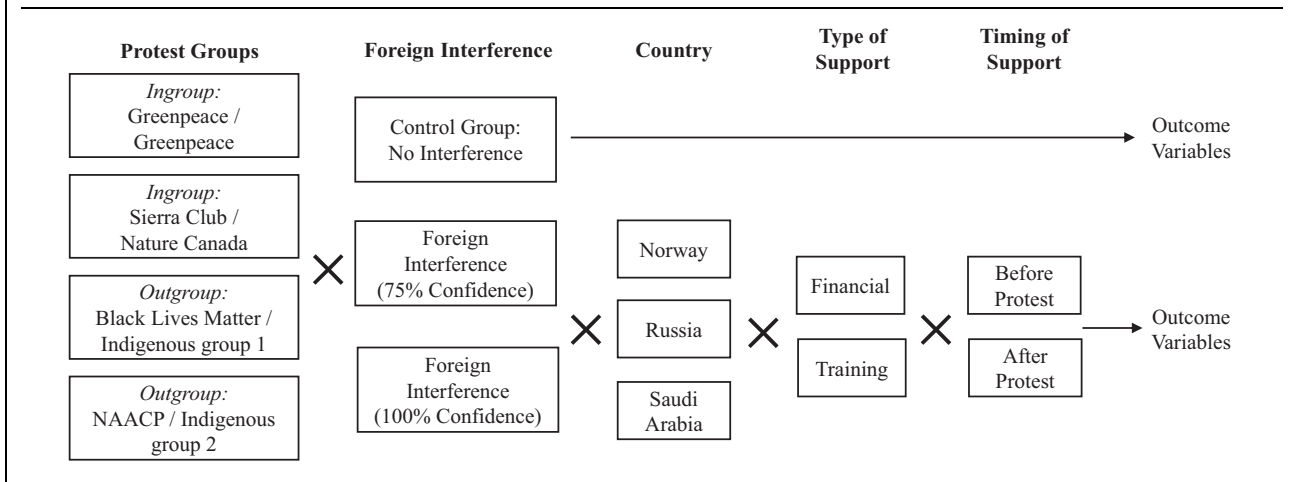
address these ethical implications, we have implemented two measures. First, our vignette is clearly delineated as a hypothetical future scenario set in 2025, reducing the likelihood of our respondents associating our protest groups with their real-world counterparts. Second, in a related approach to that of Orr, Sharratt, and Iqbal (2019), we use real Indigenous group names in the survey experiment but replace them with pseudonyms in the manuscript and the Supplementary Material. There is a delicate balance between generating useful research and respecting communities (Bird-Naytowhow et al. 2017; Lavallée 2009). We believe this approach strikes a balance, mitigating harm while preserving experimental realism.

Nonviolent protests serve as a vital tool for Indigenous communities in Canada and the US to protect their rights, especially on environmental issues. We believe our findings provide insights into potential government strategies of implicating these communities with claims of foreign meddling, insights that can be leveraged to defend Indigenous rights, anticipate governmental actions, and strategize suitable responses. To achieve this, our research design must maintain experimental control by ensuring treatment consistency in our scenarios (Brutger et al. 2023). The use of abstract descriptions for marginalized groups, like "Indigenous rights group," alongside real country names and other real entities, could compromise our experimental control and create inconsistencies for respondents. Using real-world names, in contrast, minimizes differences in treatment effects between real and hypothetical actors, which improves the external validity of our results (Croco, Hanmer, and McDonald 2021). For a more detailed discussion on the ethical implications of our research on Indigenous communities, see Supplementary Appendix A3.

## EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The survey began with a hypothetical environmental protest event set in 2025, where protesters attempted to halt a pipeline project extending from Texas (Alberta) to New Orleans (British Columbia).<sup>11</sup> After the introduction, respondents were informed that the protests were led by either an in-group or an out-group. The in-group was randomized to be a well-known environmental group in the US or Canada, while the out-group was randomized to be a Black civil rights group (BLM or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the US or an Indigenous rights group (names withheld) in Canada. As discussed earlier, we used pseudonyms for Indigenous groups and randomized multiple in-groups and out-groups to avoid treatment effects driven by group-specific public reputation. These groups were chosen based on pretest survey results (see Supplementary Appendix A1) relating correlations between groups and perceived racial

<sup>11</sup> The alternate locations in parentheses identify the Canadian description.

**FIGURE 1. Experimental Vignettes**

affiliation (e.g., Greenpeace protesters are predominantly viewed as white).

In each scenario, protesters opposed the pipeline project due to the potential environmental harm it posed to a nearby community. Specifically, respondents viewed the following vignette, with italics highlighting the randomized protest group and the associated community:

Led by the activist group, [*protest group*], an estimated 5,000 protesters gathered to oppose the construction of the pipeline because a key section of it is too close to the water supplies of a large, [*protest group community*]. They claimed that an oil spill from the pipeline could lead to the contamination of local water supplies and be extremely hazardous to the nearby community.<sup>12</sup>

Following this vignette, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups: *no interference*, *interference (75% intel confidence)*, and *interference (100% intel confidence)*. Participants in the *no interference* group received information indicating no interference had occurred. In the *interference* scenarios, participants were informed that U.S. or Canadian intelligence agencies had either 75% confidence or 100% confidence that a foreign country had interfered with the environmental protest. The 75% confidence treatment was included to mirror real-life statements from intelligence agencies that acknowledge some uncertainty in their assessments and to ensure that our observed effects are not solely due to portraying the foreign meddling as an unequivocally clear-cut case.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, respondents in the interference treatment groups

read the following details, with the text in bracketed italics representing the randomized components and parenthetical text provided for the Canadian audience:

A joint report by the main U.S. (Canadian) intelligence agencies reported that, based on secret intelligence they collected, they were [*Intel Confidence*] certain that the protesters received [*Type of Support*] assistance from [*Country*]. In fact, U.S. (Canadian) intelligence found that [*Timing of Support*], [*Country*] provided [*Type of Support*] to protest leaders. [*Country*] agents supported protesters hoping to sabotage American (Canadian) fossil fuel production and exports to benefit [*Country*] fossil fuel companies.<sup>14</sup>

*Type of support* was either “financial assistance” or “organizational training,” the two most common methods of foreign assistance to protests (Chenoweth and Stephan 2021, 15, 61). *Country* was drawn from Saudi Arabia, Norway, or Russia; *timing of interference* was either “six months before the protests started” or “several weeks after the protests started.” For participants who read this vignette, *intel confidence*, *type of support*, *country*, and *timing of support* were all randomized, resulting in  $2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 2 = 24$  variations, which were crossed with  $2 \times 1 = 2$  combinations of in-group or out-group protesters. In our analysis, we increased statistical power by analyzing some of the variations for our conditional effects (e.g., *country*) while averaging over others (e.g., *intel confidence*). Figure 1 summarizes the timings and survey instruments.

After assigning participants to interference or no interference group scenarios, we asked participants for their opinions on three sets of Likert-scale

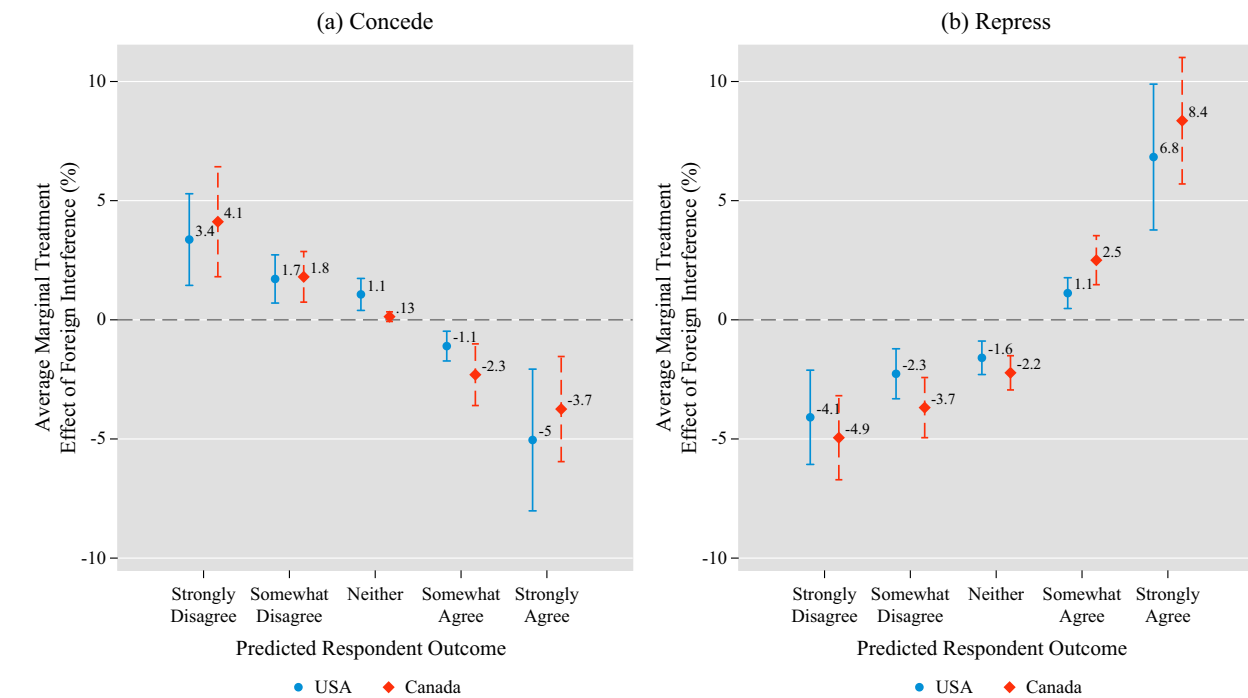
<sup>12</sup> In the out-group protest treatment, the protected community was portrayed as predominantly African American or Indigenous. For the in-group treatment, it was a neighboring suburb. The choice of 5,000 protesters was based on pretest responses indicating this would be a significant number for an average-sized community in the US and Canada (see Supplementary Appendix A1).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the Mueller report on the 2016 Russian intervention (Mueller 2019). 75% was also used by Tomz and Weeks

(2020) to convey uncertainty about a hypothetical Russian electoral intervention.

<sup>14</sup> The last two sentences are modeled after how intelligence agencies and domestic opponents of protest movements would usually present strong evidence of foreign interference. See Mueller Report part 1 (2019).



**FIGURE 2. Foreign Interference and Public Support for Protests**


**Note:** This figure shows the average marginal difference in treatment between foreign interference and no interference on respondent support for government concessions (A) and repressive actions (B) for the American (circle) and Canadian (diamond) samples. For point estimates and standard errors from this figure, see Supplementary Table A5.4. For model specifications with respondent demographic covariates, see Supplementary Table A5.3. Sample sizes were 1,702/1,755 for foreign interference and 856/889 for the no interference control for American/Canadian surveys, respectively.

agreement questions. The first set asked whether the government should concede to protesters and whether it should employ the police to arrest protesters.<sup>15</sup> The second set investigated how foreign interference influences respondent opinions on national energy security and perceived protester commitment.<sup>16</sup> We chose energy security to represent national security to parallel how foreign interference frequently frames issues as national security. For example, the Russian intervention in the 2016 U.S. elections led to discussions about “election security.” These questions parallel this logic.

We analyzed the models using ordinal logit, considering only treatment variables as independent variables. We also recorded demographics and political attitudes that could affect protest support, for example, environmental policy, attitudes toward protests, and attitudes toward the specific interfering country. Robustness checks, descriptions, analyses, and discussions can be found in Supplementary Appendix A5.

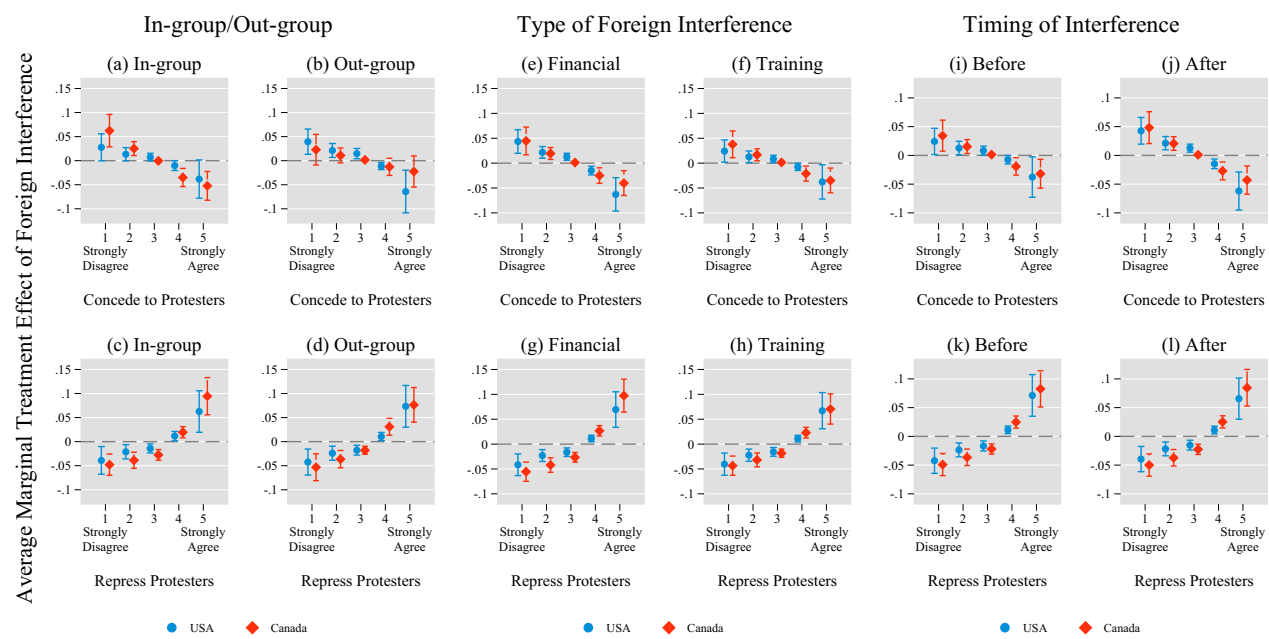
<sup>15</sup> Western governments have repressed nonviolent environmental protests like anti-pipeline demonstrations, even without foreign interference (e.g., police mass arrests at Dakota Access Pipeline protest; see Tabuchi, Furber, and Davenport 2021).

<sup>16</sup> See Supplementary Appendix A3 for specific wording of these close-ended questions and the survey instrument.

## RESULTS

First, we investigate whether foreign interference in a protest would lead to a loss of public support for protesters. Figure 2 displays the average marginal treatment effect of foreign interference<sup>17</sup> on public support for protesters, divided between respondent support for government concession to protesters’ demands (a) and support for more repressive tactics, such as arresting protesters (b). We find strong evidence of public antipathy toward protesters accused of receiving foreign aid. In Figure 2a, accusations of foreign interference led to an average increase of 3.4/4.1% in “strongly disagree” and a decrease of 5.1/3.7% in “strongly agree” responses for American/Canadian respondents regarding government concessions to protesters. We see similar, albeit smaller, increases in the intermediary “somewhat disagree” responses (1.7/1.8%) and decreases (1.1/2.3%) in the “somewhat agree” responses for American/Canadian respondents. Figure 2b follows a similar pattern of loss of public support: accusations of foreign interference led to a 4.1/4.9% decrease in “strongly disagree” and 6.8/8.4% increase in “strongly agree” responses for the government to arrest and severely restrain protesters,

<sup>17</sup> We present the pooled intelligence reports as the results are qualitatively similar for the 75% and 100% confidence reports.

**FIGURE 3. Foreign Interference and Public Support for Protests by In-group Status of Protest Group, Type, and Timing of Foreign Interference**

*Note:* This figure shows the average marginal treatment effect of foreign interference on respondent support for government concessions (top figure) and repression (bottom figure) conditional on in-group/out-group (left figures) type (center figures) and timing (right figures) of foreign interference for the American (circle) and Canadian (diamond) survey samples. For point estimates and standard errors from this figure, see Supplementary Tables A5.5 and A5.7 for the US and Canada, respectively. For model specifications with respondent demographic covariates, see Supplementary Tables A5.6 and A5.8. The sample sizes were 861/889 for no interference, 852/890 and 850/885 for financial and training aid, and 825/900 and 877/875 for before and after protests. The sample sizes for in-group control, in-group interference, out-group control, and out-group interference were 430/467, 822/868, 431/422, and 880/907, respectively.

with similar but smaller shifts (2.3/3.7%; 1.1/2.5%) in the intermediary disagree/agree responses.

However, these findings could depend on several other factors, as elaborated in hypotheses 2 through 4. We test these possibilities by accounting for the protest group's identity, the type of foreign support offered, and the timing of foreign intervention.<sup>18</sup> Figure 3 displays the average marginal treatment effect of foreign interference, conditioned by the identity of the protest group (a–d), the type of foreign interference (e–h), and the timing of foreign interference (i–l). For the impact of foreign intervention on in-group and out-group protest movements, we find no support for H2: the outsider status of protest groups receiving foreign interference does not affect public support for these protest groups.<sup>19</sup> On the left side of Figure 3a–d, accusations of foreign interference decrease respondent

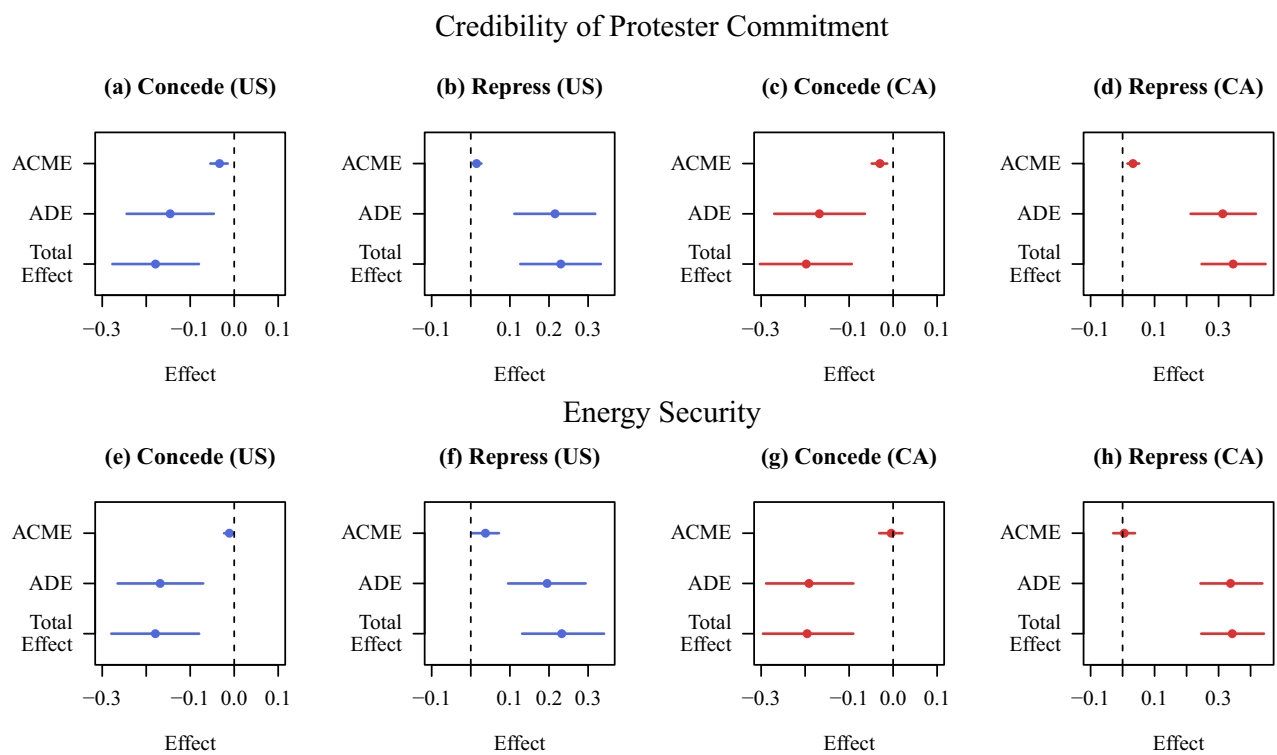
agreement toward concessions and increase respondent agreement toward repression, regardless of the group's status. For example, foreign interference increases support for strongly agreeing to repress in-group protesters by roughly 6.2/9.4% and out-group protesters by 7.2/7.6% among American/Canadian respondents, with no statistically significant differences when comparing in-groups and out-groups.

Our unexpected findings could be due to the protest goals in our study, which focus on environmental issues, diverging from those in previous studies examining in-group and out-group effects, such as the status of Confederate monuments in the US or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in Israel. The protests in our study do not revolve around issues of group inclusion or exclusion, making the status of a group less significant to respondents when foreign interference is involved in nonidentity-related matters. This result is consistent with recent studies finding that the effects of in-group and out-group status vary greatly based on the relevance of the protest goals to group inclusion or exclusion (Manekin and Mitts 2022).

more favorably than Greenpeace. See also Supplementary Figure A5.3.

<sup>18</sup> We also randomized the foreign country's identity as discussed in the experimental design section. The identity of foreign interferer did not affect the outcome—American and Canadian respondents consistently reduced support for protesters upon learning they received foreign aid, regardless of the intervener. See also Supplementary Figure A5.2.

<sup>19</sup> Here, we merged in-group and out-group statuses. However, in-groups status remained insignificant if we separated the analysis by the protest group. Some country differences emerged—although not statistically significant, Canadians viewed Indigenous groups

**FIGURE 4. Foreign Interference's Impact of Energy Security and Protester Commitment on Public Support for Protest**

Note: This figure plots the average causal mediation effect (ACME), average direct effect (ADE), and total effect. Each half of the figure is split between the American (A,B,E,F) and Canadian (C,D,G,H) results. For point estimates and confidence intervals from this figure, see Supplementary Table A6.1.

The middle and right sides of Figure 3e–l display the conditional effects based on the type and timing of foreign interference. Here, the results remain the same: the public disapproves of foreign interference irrespective of its type or timing.<sup>20</sup> In summary, we find little evidence of conditional effects, the general decrease in public support for protests caused by covert foreign interference.

## CAUSAL MECHANISMS AND ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

We expect foreign interference to erode public support for protest movements in two ways: by associating the group as a threat to national security and by creating the perception that these protesters are less committed to their cause. To investigate these mechanisms, we used causal mediation analysis and structural topic modeling on open responses. For the mediation analysis, two questions served as our mediators. The first

question asked respondents about their views on energy security, and the second question asked respondents to rate the commitment level of the protest group assigned in their vignette.

Figure 4 displays how these two mechanisms, perceived protester commitment and energy security, mediate how foreign interference affects public support for the government to concede to or repress protesters.<sup>21</sup> The top panels (a–d) confirm that foreign interference reduces public support for protests by directly undermining the credibility of the protest group in question. Specifically, the average causal mediation effect (ACME) through protester credibility is negative on concessions for Americans (ACME:  $-0.033$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and Canadians (ACME:  $-0.03$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ): that is, foreign interference reduces protester credibility, which decreases public support for concessions toward protesters. The commitment mediator accounts for roughly 18% (Americans) and 15% (Canadians) of the total loss in public support for

<sup>20</sup> The nonsignificant results for the conditional hypotheses are not from insufficient statistical power. Each of these hypotheses had at least 800 observations, meeting the minimum requirement for an 80% power level. See Supplementary Figure A2.2.

<sup>21</sup> All numbers from direct, indirect, and total effects from mediation analysis reflect the marginal changes on this five-point scale. A positive ACME of .04 should be interpreted as a .04 increase in mean agreement for repression caused by accusations of foreign interference.



concessions due to foreign interference. The ACME is positive with respect to repression for Americans (ACME: 0.015;  $p < 0.001$ ) with Canadians reacting more strongly (ACME: 0.032;  $p < 0.001$ ). Here, the commitment mediator accounts for 6% (Americans) and 9% (Canadians) of the total effect of foreign interference on public support repression. In general, as protesting groups lost credibility in the eyes of American and Canadian respondents, respondents became less willing to support government compromise (a–c) and more willing to tolerate repressive tactics by the government (b–d).

The second mechanism proposed, national security threat, investigates how foreign interference on environmental protests may trigger energy security concerns. Here, we observed divergent results between American and Canadian respondents. Americans are particularly concerned with energy security when exposed to the foreign interference instrument, but Canadians are not. On average, heightened concerns about foreign interference in domestic energy supplies decreased American support for concessions by 0.01 ( $p < 0.05$ ), accounting for 6% of the total effect of foreign interference. At the same time, these concerns increased American willingness to support repressive tactics by 0.037 ( $p < 0.05$ ), explaining 16% of the total effect of foreign interference. For Canadians, foreign interference did not change public opinion on energy security, which made it a poor mediator of foreign interference's effect on public support for protests.<sup>22</sup> This inconsistency across samples may be driven in part by respondent views on the importance of national energy security.

Together, these results provide strong evidence that foreign interference reduces public support for protest movements by casting doubt on the commitment of protesters. The threat mechanism finds weaker support since this relationship affects Americans who are concerned about energy security in the face of foreign interference. However, this mechanism does not affect Canadians because they do not appear as worried about national energy security as their American counterparts.

To further understand the process behind these micro-mechanisms, we also asked in our Canadian survey two open-ended response questions asking participants to explain their choice on whether the government should concede to protesters and on whether the government should arrest protesters.<sup>23</sup> We employed a structural topic model (STM) on these open-ended responses to generate topical content (words discussed in the selected topic) approach to compare how foreign interference affects respondents' justification for their choices. Unlike structured machine learning used to generate topics, STM works

more naturally for survey experiments where researchers can integrate the treatment covariate as a natural contributor to topic variance.<sup>24</sup>

We used STM on respondents' open responses that justify their separate choices for the government to concede to and repress protesters leveraging the model to identify which topics appear more frequently in responses exposed to foreign interference than those that are not exposed to interference.<sup>25</sup> Following Brutter and Kertzer's (2018) approach, we present the results by first comparing the difference in topical prevalence between interference and no interference in Figure 3. Then, we discuss a set of representative comments by respondents that were used to derive the corresponding substantive labels for topical prevalence (for more details, see Supplementary Appendix A7).

Figure 5a displays three distinct substantive topics on respondents' thought processes behind whether the government should concede between those exposed to the interference treatment and those not exposed to the interference treatment, and Supplementary Table A7.1 shows representative responses associated with these topics. When protest movements do not receive foreign support, respondents focus on the legal basis on which the government should concede to protester demands. "We are a country of law and order," one respondent claims, "If the government capitulates it will undermine the democratic approval process." Another respondent concurs, writing, "Unlawful actions should not be tolerated. This project was approved and has been underway." These comments, which stress the importance of procedurally handling the protests correctly, are significantly more likely to be associated with respondents who did not read about foreign interference.

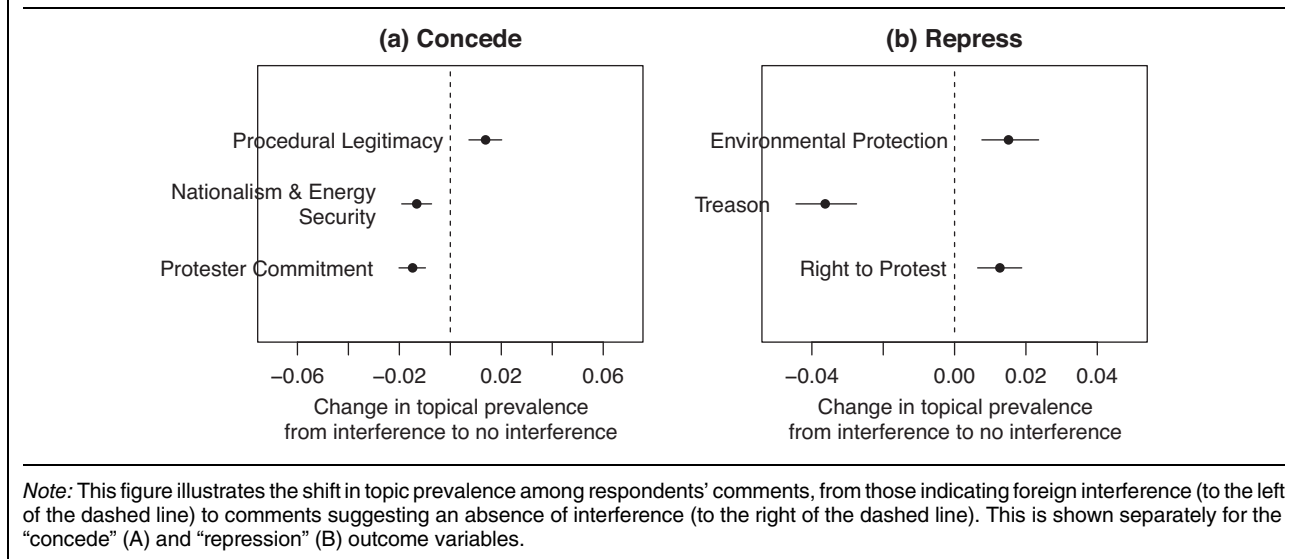
In contrast, for respondents who read about foreign interference, their comments focus on the need for Canadian energy security and question the motives of protesters. On the former, one respondent writes, "We need natural resources to be used. We shouldn't be using foreign sources," with another respondent elaborating, "We need to continue to harvest and develop our natural resources, to the best of our ability, to be competitive and support Canadian industry." For the latter, one respondent raises a concern about protester motives, "Because it's really suspicious, like it has a high chance of the Saudi Arabian government doing this to make no one dominate his spot." Another respondent goes further and writes, "If the protest was genuine then the concerns should be checked but since it is just a make work project financed by the Saudi government the protested should be sent home." Together, these comments are consistent with the causal mediation analysis on how foreign interference is mediated by respondent concerns regarding energy security and protester commitment.

<sup>22</sup> Sensitivity analyses of the mediators suggest that large deviations from  $\rho$  matter for the weaker mediating variable with respect to concession and repression, respectively (see Supplementary Appendix A6).

<sup>23</sup> Specifically, the open-ended responses were piped in based on respondents' earlier choice of either supporting, opposing, or remaining indifferent to concessions or repression.

<sup>24</sup> See Roberts et al. (2014). We only have the open-ended responses for the Canadian survey, which was suggested to us when we presented an earlier draft of this article with only the American survey.

<sup>25</sup> See Supplementary Appendix A7 for more details.

**FIGURE 5. Difference in Topical Prevalence Between Interference and No Interference**

For the repression open responses (Figure 5b and Supplementary Table A7.1b), two clear topics emerged for respondents who read about protests without foreign interference: environmental protection and the right to protest. When discussing whether the government should arrest protesters, one respondent writes, "I think that would be too severe of justice for a people trying to protect their home and environment." Another respondent speaking about the motivation of protesters writes, "They are trying to protect the environment which we all have a responsibility to do for future generations." Similarly, the prospect of mass arrests evoked the following comment from one respondent: "The government should not step in because protesters have the right to protest, peacefully." Another underscored the fundamental right of protest, writing, "Freedom and Rights of Canadians. It is an essential right to protest."

For respondents who read about foreign interference (Figure 5b and Supplementary Table A7.1), a single prevalent topic emerged: treason. In these comments, one respondent, displaying their own and unfortunately xenophobic personal view writes, "This is treason and the violators, even and including [Indigenous Group 1], should be jailed and treated as any one committing treason."<sup>26</sup> Another respondent believes that protesters "should be treated as a foreign force trying to undermine Canadian sovereignty." The national interest is invoked: "The protesters are being influenced by foreign powers to hinder the national interests of the country," worries another.

Structural topic modeling is an inductive approach, which contrasts from supervised methods that use our prior expectations on foreign interference's impact on public support for protests. Yet the patterns that we

have uncovered with STM are consistent with our theoretical priors about how foreign interference raises public fears of national security and undermines the credibility of protesters themselves. Moreover, these comments suggest that foreign interference reduces public focus on the environmental costs or even the legal nature of protests, leading instead to a singular focus on foreign threat and protester commitment.

## HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS

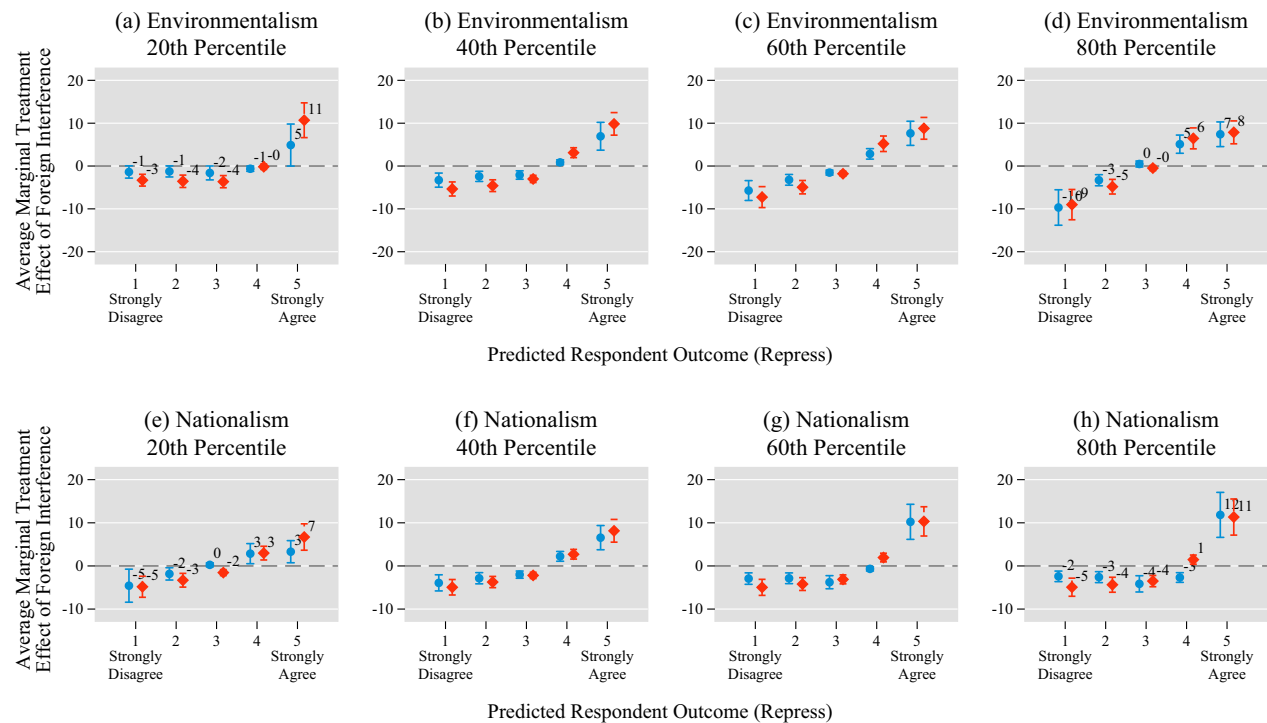
Our analysis has thus far focused on examining public reactions to a specific protest group. Foreign collusion may also undermine the causes championed by these groups. For example, Tomz and Weeks (2020) find that foreign meddling erodes public trust in democracy. As such, we also investigated whether foreign intervention changes public preferences for environmental policy regarding fracking and oil pipeline expansion and whether respondent preferences blunt or exacerbate the negative impact of foreign interference. Although we did not formally preregister hypotheses<sup>27</sup> related to this aspect, the significant substantive and policy relevance of potential conditional effects prompted us to report these exploratory findings.

Figure 6 displays the marginal treatment effect of foreign interference on government repression of protesters conditioned by respondents' environmental preferences (a–c) and level of patriotism (b–d).<sup>28</sup> In each subfigure, the vertical axis displays the conditional marginal treatment effect of foreign interference with the horizontal axis displaying the respondent response. It shows that foreign interference increases public support

<sup>26</sup> We displayed this comment because it was one of the top three comments that were representative of this generated topic.

<sup>27</sup> See <https://osf.io/cr5j4> for preregistration details.

<sup>28</sup> Similar analyses were also conducted with the concede outcome variable, which mirrored identical results as the repress outcome variable. See Supplementary Figure A4.1.

**FIGURE 6. Heterogeneous Marginal Treatment Effects (Repression)**

Note: These figures depict the marginal treatment effect of foreign interference conditional on respondent environmental preferences (A–D) and nationalism (E–G) for Americans (circle) and Canadians (diamond). For point estimates and confidence intervals from this figure, see Supplementary Table A4.1.

for the repression of protesters, and this effect increases with both more environmentally conscious and nationalistic American and Canadian respondents. For example, foreign interference *increases* support for repression for respondents in the 20th percentile compared to the 80th percentile of environmentalism by reducing respondents who strongly or somewhat disagree with repression from 2% (8) to 13% (14) and increasing those who strongly or somewhat agree with repression from 4% (11) to 12% (14). This indicates that environmentally conscious respondents feel betrayed by groups that do not genuinely advocate the cause. In fact, the negative effect of foreign interference is only insignificant among a small minority of respondents who are extremely indifferent to the environment (14% of Americans and 8% of Canadians) and who are accordingly less likely to feel betrayed in the first place. Similarly, an increase of nationalism from the 20th percentile to the 80th percentile enlarges support for repression by increasing the percentage of respondents who “strongly agree” with repressive actions from 3% (7) to 15% (11) for Americans (Canadians).

## CONCLUSION

Despite recurrent claims by public officials of foreign interference in protest movements (Carothers and Youngs 2015), little research has investigated public

reactions to such accusations. In this article, we use survey experiments, for the first time, in two countries to explore two related questions: how does the public react to perceived foreign interference in domestic protests, and what conditional factors influence this relationship? We find strong evidence that American and Canadian publics strongly disapprove of all forms of foreign interference in domestic protests.

We find that public responses to foreign interference in protests are driven by perceptions of protester commitment and national security concerns. Foreign interference reduces support by undermining the legitimacy of protester motivations and by increasing public tolerance for government repression due to heightened national security anxiety. However, these effects seem limited in scope, as the public may turn against a specific protest that receives foreign support but does not change their overall policy preferences.

Surprisingly, public reaction to foreign interference does not depend on various conditional factors such as the identity of the foreign country, protest group, timing of foreign interference, or type of foreign assistance. The mere existence of foreign interference is sufficient to reduce public support for protesters. Revelations about foreign assistance suppress all other considerations and related situational factors. As our study was fielded in democracies, we cannot rule out differing attitudes in some authoritarian contexts. Nevertheless, the similarity of results between a great power (US) and



a minor power (Canada) indicates that our findings are not dependent on the interfered country's geopolitical status or recent negative experiences with foreign meddling.

These results suggest government accusations of covert foreign assistance can significantly damage a protest movement.<sup>29</sup> The attitudinal damage is limited to the specific movement and does not “leak” by negatively impacting the underlying views of the issues advocated. However, weakening visible and important advocates could reduce the chances of achieving the desired policy change. This explains why linking protests to foreign interference is a common delegitimization tactic.

World powers sympathetic to foreign protest movements should think twice before aiding them. Any foreign assistance, if exposed or visible, may backfire and damage the aided movement. The best way to help foreign protest movements may involve “doing nothing” on their side. As for environmentalist activism in general, these results indicate that allegations of foreign support can be a potent anti-environmentalist tool, especially among the most environmentally conscious. Environmental NGOs and protest groups should be selective and vigilant with fundraising and aid offers, carefully vetting them to avoid perceived foreign ties.

Future research could extend our study in various ways. First, our results focus on aid provided to protest groups in a covert manner rather than public aid. More public methods of assisting a protest group (from public statements to sanctions) may differ in their effects. Second, the nature of the demand(s) made by the protest group may matter in some situations, and future research investigating the interactive effects of different types of demands and foreign interference would be of value. Third, elites may perceive foreign interference differently, caring more about some of the conditional factors studied here compared to the broader public. Given their key role in determining protest outcomes, soliciting elite views could be of great empirical value.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000327>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the

<sup>29</sup> Since leaders could exploit protests for self-serving accusations, questioning their public acceptance is reasonable. While disinformation concerns are beyond this study's scope, we address this by including third-party intelligence agency verification in treatments, without assuming public trust in leaders' honesty. We posit that persuading the public relies on both leader credibility and corroboration from government agencies.

American Political Science Review Dataserve: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZSEWM4>.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and the certificate number is provided in the Supplementary Material, and the authors affirm that this article adheres to the principles concerning research with human participants laid out in APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research (2020).

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