

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fighting for their country: How proximate conflict shapes citizens' attitudes

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Abstract

Scholars have found that citizens' willingness to fight for their country has decreased globally since the 1980s. Some posit this as the underpinning of the 'long peace', contending that rising economic prosperity decreases the tolerance for sacrificing one's life. For governments trying to recruit military personnel, this trend is viewed as detrimental to one's country's defence capability. However, we show that this diminishing willingness to fight has not only decelerated in the past decade but has even reversed in some countries. Contrary to the notion of a continuous decline, we maintain that alongside previously identified factors, proximate conflicts affect citizens' willingness to fight. First, they challenge the view of international relations as cooperative, instead reinforcing a perception of global politics as inherently conflictual. Second, witnessing armed conflicts nearby heightens citizens' sense of threat, leading them to take the possibility of aggression more seriously and to feel increasingly vulnerable to future conflict. Consequently, they show an increased willingness to fight. In our empirical analysis, we find strong support for the notion that proximate conflict increases citizens' willingness to fight.

Keywords: conflict; long peace; military; willingness to fight; regional conflict

Introduction

The decline of mass armies¹ has made the mobilization of large segments of society for military purposes less relevant. Recruitment switched from appeals to patriotism to highlighting working conditions and benefits.² The abolition of conscription has been welcomed by pacifists and libertarians alike as a victory of individualism over 'legally sanctioned state violence'.³ The transformation of the military into smaller volunteer forces, which rely on advanced technology and which out-source tasks to third countries, and local nationals also rendered the question less urgent whether citizens in general were prepared to defend their country.⁴ Until recently, indications that fewer and fewer citizens were willing to fight for their country did not cause much alarmism outside military

¹Karl W. Haltiner, 'The definite end of the mass army in Western Europe?', *Armed Forces and Society*, 25:1 (1998), pp. 7–36.

²Cindy Williams and Curtis Gilroy, 'The transformation of personnel policies', *Defence Studies*, 6:1 (2006), pp. 97–121; Charles C. Moskos, 'From institution to occupation: Trends in military organization', *Armed Forces & Society*, 4:1 (1977), pp. 41–50.

³Deborah E. Cowen, 'Fighting for "freedom": The end of conscription in the United States and the neoliberal project of citizenship', *Citizenship Studies*, 10:2 (2006), pp. 167–183 (p. 179).

⁴Maya Eichler, 'Citizenship and the contracting out of military work: From national conscription to globalized recruitment', *Citizenship Studies* 18:6–7 (2014), pp. 600–614.

circles. To the contrary, historians,⁵ anthropologists,⁶ psychologists,⁷ and political scientists viewed the declining willingness to fight as part of a larger transformation towards less belligerent and less aggressive societies.

More recently, however, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and an increase in organized violence more broadly⁸ has raised questions about the reintroduction of conscription and reignited interest in citizens' willingness to fight for their country. In this article, we contribute to this discussion by examining citizens' attitudes on the willingness to fight, which have been surveyed by the World Values Survey and European Values Study (referred to as WVS/EVS from here on) in a growing number of countries since the early 1980s.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: We first discuss descriptive statistics, showing that the trend of declining willingness to fight has slowed over the past decade and even reversed in some countries. We then introduce our theoretical argument that conflict in a society's vicinity serves as a cue to remind citizens that the risk of war persists and increases citizens' willingness to fight. We find evidence for this argument in a series of multilevel regressions that control for a range of individual-level and country-level factors. In addition, we contextualize our findings with insights derived from our own focus group research. Our conclusion offers some thoughts about the broader ramifications of our findings.

A declining decline: new data on citizens' willingness to fight

Since the 1980s, the WVS/EVS include the following item: 'Of course, we all hope that there will not be another war, but if it were to come to that, would you be willing to fight for your country?'. To be sure, answering a survey is very different from joining the military and from actually risking one's life in battle.⁹ Although the WVS/EVS data may therefore not fully predict who will take up arms in the event of war, they are valuable because the same question has been posed, over a period of forty years, to hundreds of thousands of individuals in more than 100 countries. This allows us to compare countries and to map trends over time.

We take the study by Ronald Inglehart, Bi Puranen, and Christian Welzel as a reference point for our descriptive statistics, because to our knowledge it has been the first and thus far only study to propose a general global trend towards a declining willingness to fight, based on the WVS/EVS data.

In their research, Inglehart et al. drew from the WVS/EVS data, highlighting a broad decline in citizens' willingness to fight for their country since the 1980s.¹⁰ Figure 1 replicates the graph from the original article, illustrating the average change in the willingness to fight from each country's first to its most recent participation in the WVS/EVS.¹¹ The analysis omits countries with less than ten years in the dataset and standardizes values according to each nation's duration in the survey, following the methodology used in the original graph. However, the study, published in 2015, was constrained by the WVS/EVS data which were back then only available until 2009.

⁵James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?: The Transformation of Modern Europe* (Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

⁶Azar Gat and Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁷Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

⁸Shawn Davies, Garoun Engström, Therése Pettersson and Magnus Öberg, 'Organized violence 1989–2023, and the prevalence of organized crime groups', *Journal of Peace Research* 61:4 (2024), pp. 673–93.

⁹Sociologists have pointed to the dynamics within small groups to explain the actual willingness to fight; see: Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, 'Cohesion and disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12:2, pp. 280–315 (p. 280). In addition, whether the willingness to fight directly impacts peace and conflict depends, among other things, on one's trust in deterrence. A full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁰Ronald F Inglehart, Bi Puranen, and Christian Welzel, 'Declining willingness to fight for one's country: The individual-level basis of the long peace', *Journal of Peace Research* 52:4 (2015), pp. 418–34.

¹¹Minor discrepancies exist between our graph and the one presented in the original article. We understand that this is a result of continuing data cleaning and updating on the side of the WVS/EVS [personal communication with Bi Puranen and Christian Welzel, 4 October 2023].

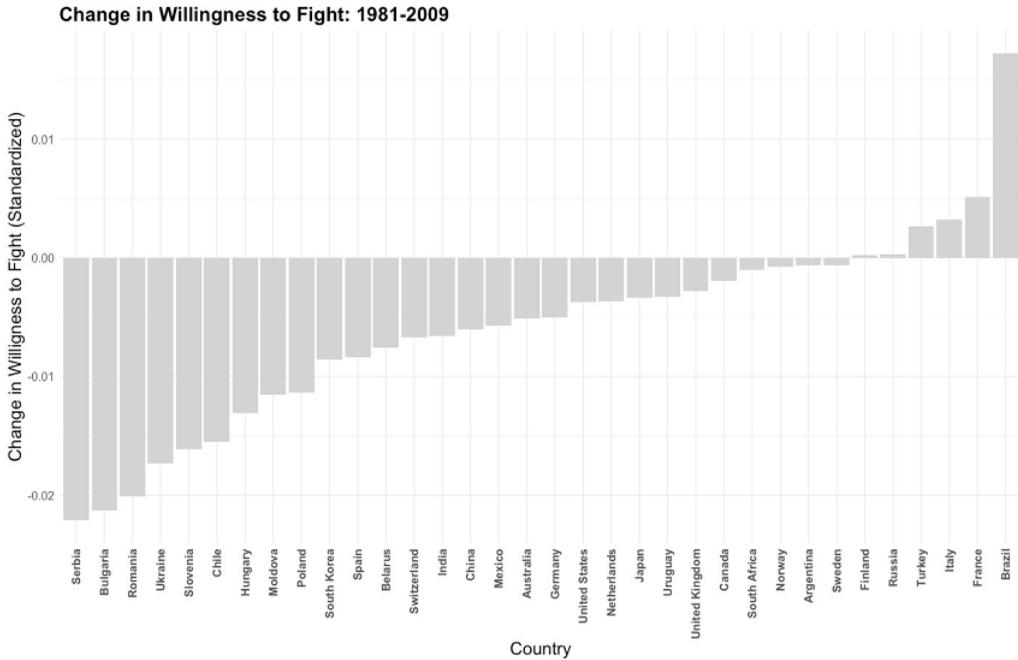


Figure 1. Change in average willingness to fight by countries with at least ten years of being included in the WVS/EVS. Reproduction of Inglehart et al. (2015, p. 430, Figure 5).

While there was a pronounced downturn in the average willingness to fight from the 1980s to mid-2000s, contemporary trends differ. Our extended analysis in Figure 2 incorporates the newest WVS/EVS data until 2022, which were not available to Inglehart et al. We distinguish countries previously represented in the original study (in grey) from those added based on post-2009 data (in light blue). Consistent with the original graph, we note that in the majority of countries, the average willingness to fight has decreased. Yet, while Inglehart et al. identified only five states with growing readiness to fight, our extended data highlights seven such states from their original dataset (grey). If we also take into consideration the newly added countries (light blue), roughly 25 percent of countries show a heightened average readiness to defend their nation since the 1980s. This contrasts with about 15 percent of countries in the Inglehart et al. sample.

A few individual examples illustrate this trend: In Slovenia, the average willingness to fight steadily declined from 95 percent in 1992 to 63 percent in 2011. However, by 2017, it had risen again to 80 percent. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, the average dropped from 87 percent in 2003 (the first recorded measurement) to 72 percent in 2011, before increasing to 94 percent in 2020. In Morocco, citizens' willingness to fight declined significantly from 95 percent in 2001 to 77 percent in both 2007 and 2011 but rebounded to 84 percent in 2021. Lastly, in Germany, willingness to fight has been measured at eight different points in time. While the average remained between 45 and 50 percent in the 1980s and 1990s, it steadily declined to a low of 34 percent in 2006. However, more recent measurements in 2017 and 2018 indicate an increase to just over 50 percent.

We take this as a starting point for our research. If the average willingness to fight is again rising, compared to the mid-2000s, then we ought to ask the question: why? However, these trends are primarily contextual; our argument and data remain significant even without them, as they contribute a valuable dimension to understanding citizens' willingness to fight. Ultimately, our aim is to identify the factors that lead citizens to answer 'yes' to this survey question. The next section reviews existing explanations and introduces our own model.

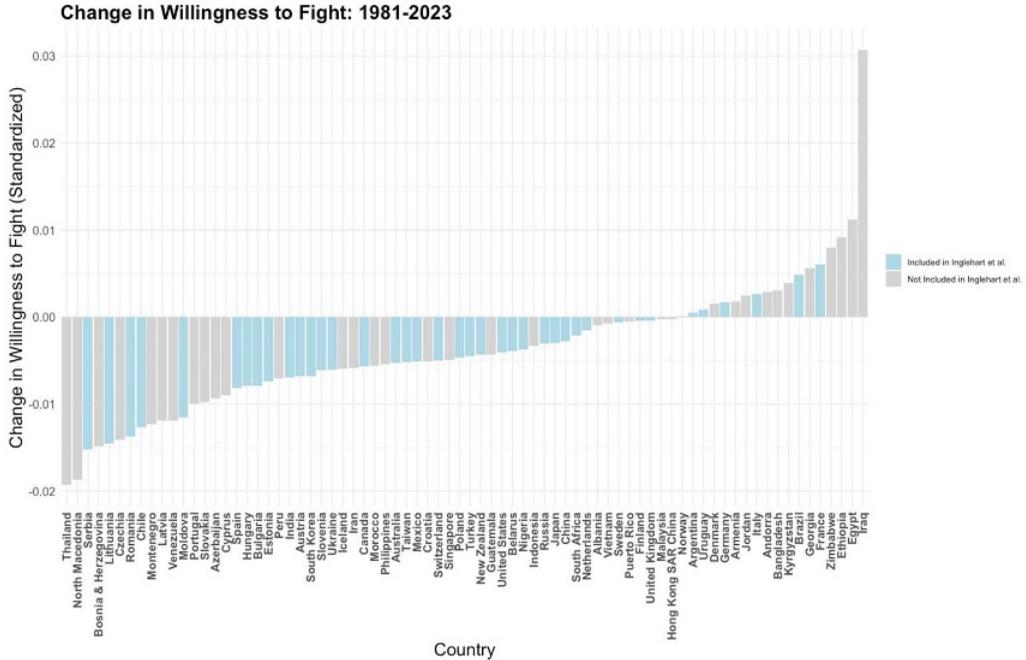


Figure 2. Change in average willingness to fight by countries with at least ten years of being included in the WVS/EVS. Including all available countries and waves. Standardized by years of survey participation.

Theory: conflict, beliefs, and the international system

Citizens' willingness to fight: wealth, values, and threats

In the past decade, a promising avenue of research on the causes of citizens' bellicosity has emerged, focusing on WVS/EVS data. Numerous studies have homed in on a specific item within this survey data: respondents' willingness to fight for their country. For instance, existing research has taken citizens' willingness to fight to reflect how much they value their own life. In line with their theory of value change, Inglehart et al. argue that the willingness to risk one's life in battle decreases as opportunities for self-realization increase in more affluent societies.¹² Because of the wealth–opportunity–value link, life becomes more valuable as opportunities for self-realization increase.¹³ While Inglehart et al. focus on between-country differences, other authors have shown that this might apply within societies as well. In countries with high inequality, wealthy individuals are less inclined to make personal sacrifices, i.e., fight for their country.¹⁴

The wealth–opportunity–value link covers one important dimension of the *willingness to fight* item of the WVS/EVS. However, the item is multidimensional, i.e., responses to the question indicate more than just the value attached to one's own life. For example, they are also an indication of patriotism, i.e., of the value attributed to one's country.¹⁵

¹²Inglehart, Puranen, and Welzel, 'Declining willingness to fight for one's country'.

¹³Bi Puranen, 'Allegiance eroding: People's dwindling willingness to fight in wars', in Christian Welzel and Russell J. Dalton (eds), *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 265.

¹⁴Christopher J. Anderson, Anna Getmansky, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, 'Burden sharing: Income, inequality and willingness to fight', *British Journal of Political Science* 50:1 (2020), pp. 363–79.

¹⁵A. Burcu Bayram, 'Nationalist cosmopolitanism: The psychology of cosmopolitanism, national identity, and going to war for the country', *Nations and Nationalism* 25:3 (2019), pp. 757–81; Pippa Norris and Kseniya Kizlova, 'What Mobilises the Ukrainian Resistance?', *LSE Blog*, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/03/03/what-mobilises-the-ukrainian-resistance/> accessed 11 February 2025.

Proximate conflict, threat perceptions, and beliefs about warfare

We argue that the interpretation of a declining willingness to fight as part of a broader development towards emancipative values, supported by growing levels of wealth, is incomplete. The willingness to fight is also influenced by armed conflict in a country's vicinity. The higher the number of armed conflicts and the higher their severity in a country's neighbourhood, the more likely citizens will indicate their willingness to fight for their country. Although testing the underlying causal mechanisms empirically is beyond the scope of this article, we posit that the proximity of armed conflict could impact on citizen attitudes in the following ways: First, the outbreak and/or escalation of armed conflict close to home serves as a reminder that the recourse to the use of force remains possible, notwithstanding the prohibition in the UN Charter. Occurrences of armed conflict closer to home make it more difficult to view international relations as a Kantian community of interdependent societies, bound together by international law and a dense web of institutions, with little necessity to fight for one's country, if not (yet) on a global scale then at least on a regional one. Instead, interpretations of international relations as a Hobbesian state of anarchy, where states whose citizens are unwilling to fight for their country run higher risks of being bullied, exploited, or even conquered by other states gain plausibility.

Second, and related, citizens are more likely to feel threatened themselves if they observe states (or armed non-state actors) in their neighbourhood resorting to force. Whether armed conflict close by is caused by conflict over resources, revisionist claims to contested territory, rising (hyper-) nationalism or authoritarianism, citizens will find it harder to dismiss neighbouring leaders' threatening rhetoric as cheap talk and to believe that their own country is effectively shielded from the spread of conflict in the future. Research has indeed shown that citizens in NATO countries and especially those protected by US troop deployments show a lower willingness to fight for their country,¹⁶ while residents of countries engaged in territorial disputes tend to express a higher willingness to fight.¹⁷

In both cases, answering the question whether one would be willing to fight for one's country affirmatively becomes more likely because it appears as a contribution to effective deterrence or defence, rather than a counterproductive signal of resolve that might lead to a spiral of threats and counter-threats and even to an unintended war.

It is important to clarify that our independent variable is not merely the overall level of conflict worldwide. Indeed, proximity of a conflict matters for at least two reasons: First, proximate conflicts receive a disproportionately higher level of media attention.¹⁸ Research has shown that media coverage of political violence evokes emotional reactions in viewers, which can influence their policy preferences.¹⁹ Yet, existing studies have thus far not explored the relationship between conflict reporting and citizens' willingness to fight. While we do not test this relationship directly ourselves, we argue that media reporting is one factor that links proximate conflict to respondents' willingness to fight.

A second avenue that connects proximate conflicts and citizens' willingness to fight is the influx of refugees, or previous migration which has established ethnic kinship with conflict parties in a nearby war. While some refugee flows outgrow regional boundaries, most often refugees seek

¹⁶Jo Jakobsen and Tor G. Jakobsen, 'Tripwires and free-riders: Do forward-deployed U.S. troops reduce the willingness of host-country citizens to fight for their country?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 40:2 (2019), pp. 135–64.

¹⁷Nam Kyu Kim, 'Territorial disputes and individual willingness to fight', *Journal of Peace Research*, 57:3 (2020), pp. 406–21.

¹⁸Michal Parizek, 'Worldwide media visibility of NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations in connection to the Russia-Ukraine war', *Czech Journal of International Relations*, 58:1 (2023), pp. 15–44; Elad Segev, 'Visible and invisible countries: News flow theory revised', *Journalism* 16:3 (2015), pp. 412–28; Ruud Koopmans and Rens Vliegenthart, 'Media attention as the outcome of a diffusion process—A theoretical framework and cross-national evidence on earthquake coverage', *European Sociological Review*, 27:5 (2011), pp. 636–53.

¹⁹For example, Virgil Hawkins, 'The other side of the CNN factor: The media and conflict', *Journalism Studies*, 3:2 (2002), pp. 225–40.

shelter in nearby countries.²⁰ Consequently, proximate conflicts lead to an increase in the number of refugees and involuntary migrations to neighbouring countries.²¹ Similarly, most regular migration occurs regionally as well. Thus, there exists a higher likelihood that countries close to a conflict share extensive ethnic connections to that conflict. In turn, regular and forced migration increases awareness of proximate conflicts and could thereby impact citizens' willingness to fight.

It is important to note that citizens' willingness to fight is not only influenced by spatial characteristics but also by temporal ones. In fact, societies with a history of armed conflict tend to harbour a heightened sense of threat and a stronger inclination for defence.²² Simultaneously, critical events can lose their potency over long time periods.²³ These temporal constraints inform our research: We do not only look at ongoing conflicts but also examine how the *recent* history of proximate conflicts influences citizens willingness to fight.

Lastly, there is a rich literature on the spill-over effects of conflicts. Research has highlighted several key aspects of this relationship. For example, Buhaug and Gleditsch (2008) argued that a country's risk of civil conflict is influenced by the civil conflicts of its immediate neighbours. However, the likelihood of conflict spillover is often mitigated by the capacity of the state.²⁴ While this body of research, and its proposed causal mechanisms, is informative, it diverges from our own research in two important ways: First, beyond a few exceptions,²⁵ the literature has focused on civil wars. However, we believe that both proximate civil and interstate wars shape citizens' willingness to fight. Second, many existing studies highlight or exclusively identify effects emanating from adjacent states.²⁶ In contrast, we argue that the decision to engage in conflict is also influenced by proximate conflicts beyond immediate neighbours, as these shape how bellicose citizens perceive their surroundings and thus, the level of threat they experience.

Taken together, these deliberations result in the following hypothesis:

H1: The willingness to fight is higher among citizens of countries that have encountered a greater number of proximate conflicts in the past decade compared to those in other countries.

Empirical analysis

To test our hypothesis, we run a set of multilevel logit regressions with country-level random intercepts and year-fixed effects.²⁷ After we conducted our quantitative analysis, we also employed focus group research with university students. We organized four groups, each consisting of approximately eight students, totaling 30 participants. The groups were gender-balanced and included both EU and non-EU citizens. While these focus groups are hardly representative in terms of age and level of education, they helped us to contextualize our findings. We will refer to the insights gained by our focus groups when appropriate.

²⁰For instance, even during the peak of the Syrian civil war, which forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to distant locations such as Germany, the majority sought safety in nearby nations; see: Zoe Todd, 'By the Numbers: Syrian Refugees Around the World', PBS, available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/numbers-syrian-refugees-around-world/> accessed 11 February 2024.

²¹Alexander Betts, *Forced Migration and Global Politics* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 5.

²²Mohammad Reza Farzanegan and Hassan F. Gholipour, 'Growing up in the Iran–Iraq war and preferences for strong defense', *Review of Development Economics*, 25:4 (2021), pp. 1945–68; Jacob S. Lewis and Sedef A. Topal, 'Proximate exposure to conflict and the spatiotemporal correlates of social trust', *Political Psychology*, 44:3 (2023), pp. 667–87.

²³Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, Revised Edition (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 86–90.

²⁴Alex Braithwaite, 'Resisting infection: How state capacity conditions conflict contagion', *Journal of Peace Research*, 47:3 (2010), pp. 311–19.

²⁵For example, Randolph M. Siverson and Harvey Starr, 'Opportunity, willingness, and the diffusion of war', *American Political Science Review*, 84:1 (1990), pp. 47–67.

²⁶For example, Halvard Buhaug and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, 'Contagion or confusion? Why conflicts cluster in space', *International Studies Quarterly*, 52:2 (2008), pp. 215–33; Miguel Carreras, 'Civil wars and criminality: The spillover of violence', *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory*, 5:1 (2012), pp. 837–52.

²⁷Replication data and Appendix can be found at: https://github.com/AlexanderSorg/fighting_for_country/.

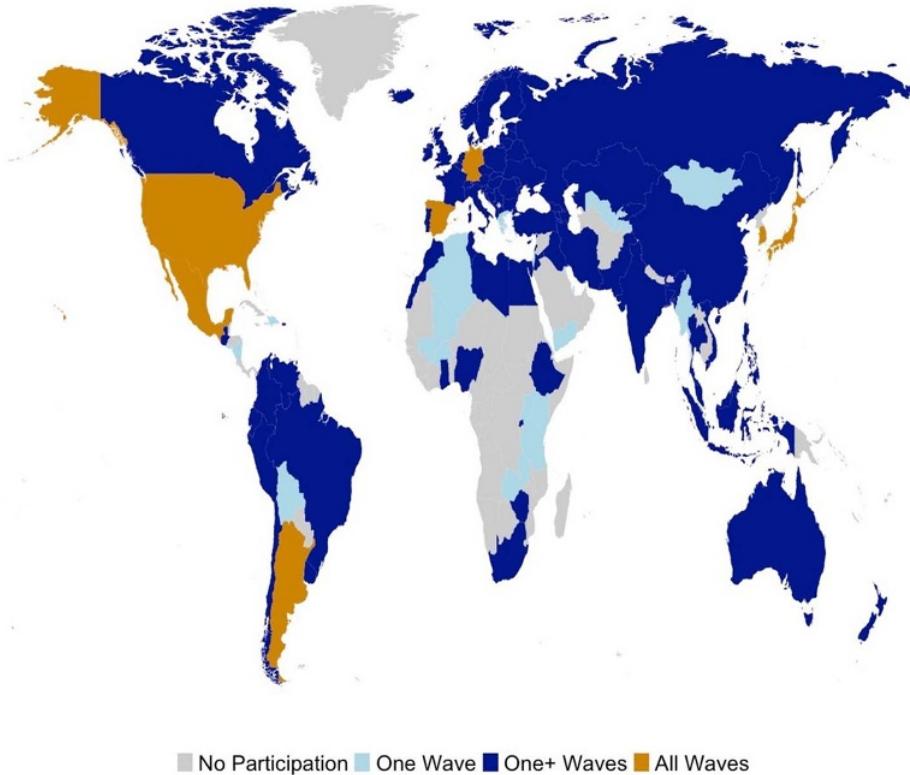


Figure 3. Number of countries and waves in which the ‘willingness to fight’ question has been asked.

Data

We evaluate how proximate conflicts affect citizens’ willingness to fight for their country. Our study draws on the WVS/EVS data, an individual-level national survey conducted across the globe. The World Value Survey has been conducted in seven waves from 1981 to 2022. The European Value Study, which by design is compatible with the data obtained in the WVS, has been conducted in five waves from 1981 to 2017. As [Figure 3](#) shows, the question we rely on as our dependent variable, named *E012* in the WVS/EVS coding scheme, has been included in almost all conducted surveys, resulting in data from 471,548 individuals in 112 countries.

The map and [Table 1](#) highlight the unequal regional representation in the surveys.²⁸ This leads to higher external validity for our findings in regions such as North America, Europe, and Asia, where numerous countries have participated in multiple surveys. In contrast, Latin America is less represented, and the lack of data is most pronounced in North and sub-Saharan Africa.

As a result, while our findings are relevant across various regions and contexts, caution is warranted when drawing conclusions about African countries. This is particularly important given the comparably low degree of statehood in sub-Saharan Africa and high importance of ethnic kinship within countries. Thus, responses in this region might differ from other regions.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable is based on the following WVS/EVS item: ‘Of course, we all hope that there will not be another war, but if it were to come to that, would you be willing to fight for your

²⁸For a more detailed table of countries, number of respondents and number of waves participated in, see Table IX in the Appendix.

Table 1. Number of respondents per region across all waves.

Region	No. of Respondents
Asia	135,252
Eastern Europe	97,081
Latin America	58,799
North Africa	16,713
North America	25,149
Oceania	10,522
Sub-Saharan Africa	38,336
Western Europe	96,927

country?'. The question has been asked in all waves of the survey, except the 2008 EVS. The response 'yes' is represented by 1, and 'no' is represented by 0. We exclude all instances of missing data, along with responses categorized as 'don't know'.²⁹

There is one frequently named issues with this variable, namely that the question is formulated in vague terms.³⁰ Indeed, researchers have pointed out that there might be a big difference between participation in a war of *choice* and a war of *necessity*.³¹ Our focus group research corroborates these concerns, with all participating students expressing reluctance to fight for their country outside the context of self-defence. However, for our research this is of lesser importance: We aim to determine whether proximate conflicts impact citizens' perceptions of the necessity of involvement in any form of conflict, regardless of their specific interpretations of the willingness to fight question. In fact, we do not make claims about the nature of conflicts we expect respondents to associate with the question.

As depicted in Figure 4, the overall average of people responding 'yes' when asked if they are willing to fight for their country is 70.6 percent. However, noteworthy regional variations exist, with the percentage of 'yes' answers ranging from 79 percent in North Africa to 62 percent in Western Europe.

Main independent variables

Our main independent variable is a moving count of proximate conflicts per country. We rely on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Armed Conflict Database to construct it.³² More specifically, we consider all types of conflicts coded in the UCDP dataset (extrasystemic, interstate, intrastate, internationalized intrastate) and all intensity levels (minor armed conflict and war). To assign each conflict to a country, we use the *location*³³ variable and then aggregate all conflicts occurring in a country per year. Next, conflict locations are matched with geographical data from the *cshapes* package in R to calculate the minimum distance between each state dyad

²⁹ Overall, 47795 respondents answered don't know in our dataset, corresponding to about 10 percent of the sample.

³⁰ Jakobsen and Jakobsen, 'Tripwires and free-riders', pp. 144–45.

³¹ Yao-Yuan Yeh and Charles K. S. Wu, 'When war hits home: Taiwanese public support for war of necessity', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 21:2 (2021), pp. 4–5.

³² Davies, Petterson, and Öberg, 'Organized violence 1989–2022'.

³³ As is noted in the UCDP codebook, location does not always represent the actual geographical location in which the fighting took place but can also include the territories of all states with a primary claim to the conflict. However, we found that in most conflicts, the location variable fits our purposes. In the few instances where this is not the case, we changed the coding. These include US–Grenada and US–Panama invasions in 1983 and 1989, where we excluded the United States from the territory of the conflict; the Afghanistan War in 2001, where we excluded the United Kingdom; the Iraq War in 2003, where we excluded the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia; and the Afghanistan War in 1978, where we excluded the Soviet Union. Lastly, we also excluded 'the war on terror' (Conflict ID: 418) in its entirety. As a result, in all these cases, neighbouring countries of the excluded states are not coded as being in proximity to the conflict for the event in question.

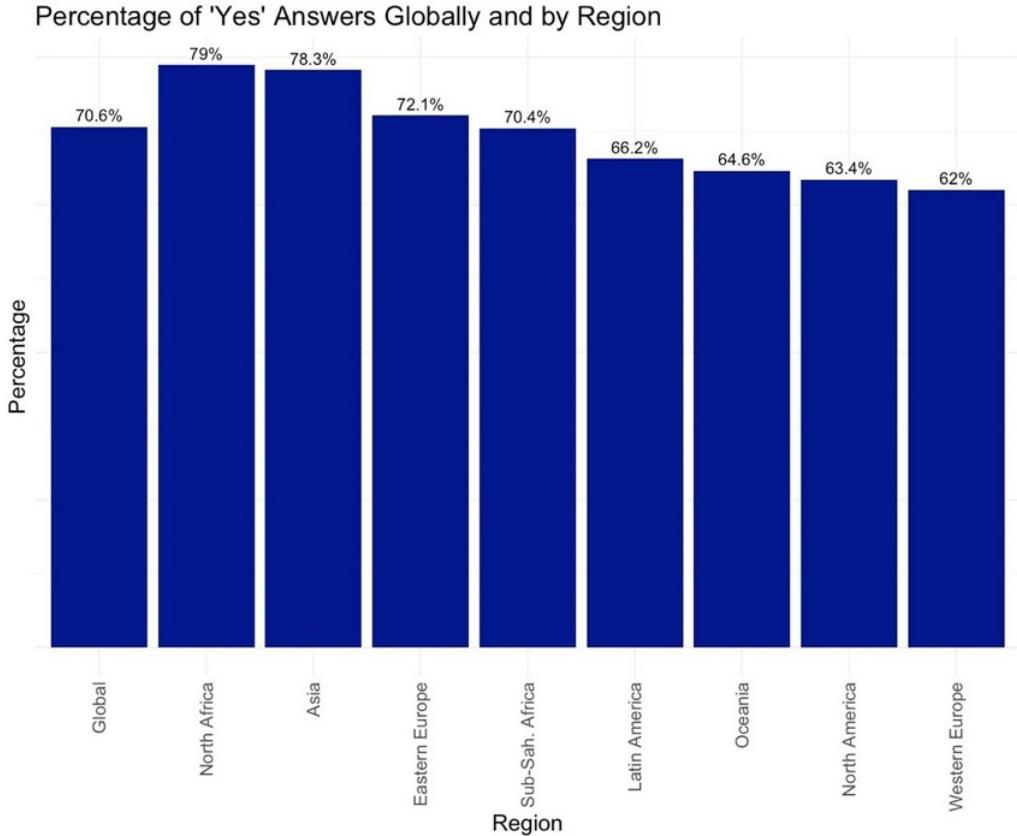


Figure 4. Average percentage of 'yes/no' responses in all WVS/EVS waves by region.

in the international system.³⁴ This results in a dyadic dataset in which all *states a* are paired with the number of conflicts occurring in *state b* per year, except from those conflicts in which *state a* is actively involved. We then calculate the moving sum of the number of conflicts occurring in a distance of 500 km of each *state a* for the past ten years, while weighting wars with a factor of 2.³⁵ This process collapses the dyadic structure into a monadic dataset.

In Figure 5, we visualize the independent variable on the example of France. The French were interviewed by the World and European Value Survey in 1981, 1990, 1999, 2006, and 2018. In 2006, we subscribe a proximate conflict score of 14 to France. In the decade until 2006, there were two conflicts in France's 500 km radius: A civil conflict in the United Kingdom in 1998; and a civil conflict in Algeria from 1997 to 2006. Notably, during the years 1997–1999, the Algerian civil conflict intensified, reaching the intensity of a war as defined by the UCDP criteria. This adds to one year of minor conflict in the United Kingdom, and seven years of minor conflict and three years of war in Algeria, resulting in a score of 14 (as noted before, wars are weighted with a factor of 2).

³⁴Nils Weidmann, Guy Schvitz, and Luc Girardin, 'Cshapes: The CShapes 2.0 Dataset and Utilities', available at <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=cshapes> accessed 11 February 2025.

³⁵We believe that changes in citizens' willingness to fight are informed by both the total number and the intensity of conflicts nearby. Thus, we weight wars with a factor of 2 compared to minor conflicts.

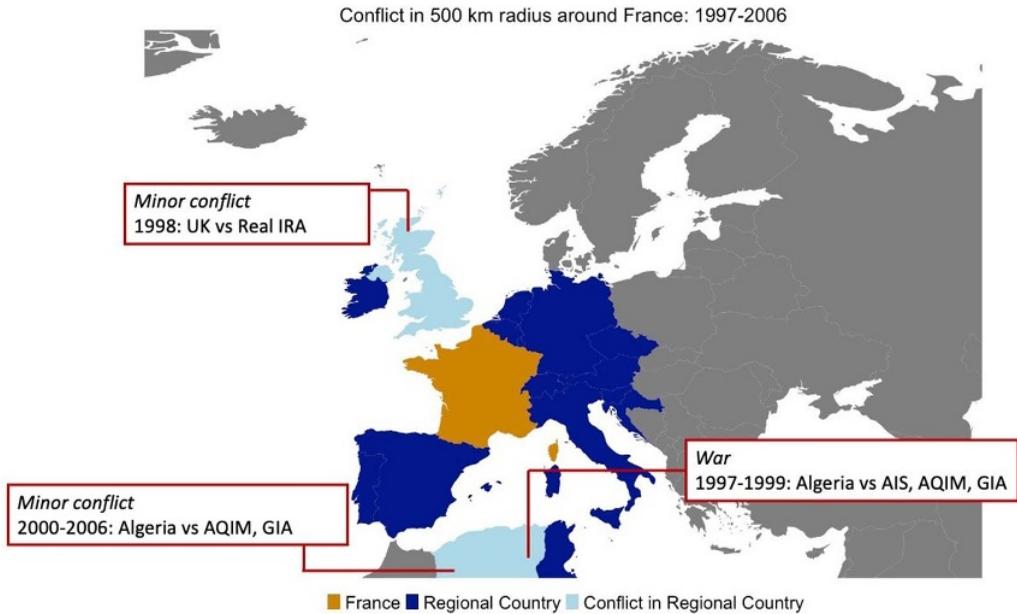


Figure 5. Example of independent variable – France in 2006.

In [Figure 6](#), we depict the distribution of the independent variable, grouped by region: Countries in Africa or Asia experience a considerably higher number of conflicts, especially wars, within 500 km of their borders than those in Western Europe, the Americas or Oceania.

Noticeable, the average percentage of ‘yes’ responses in the willingness to fight question in [Figure 4](#) corresponds loosely to the distributions shown in [Figure 6](#), i.e., where there is a larger distribution of proximate conflicts there also seems to be more people willing to fight for their country. This is further indicated in [Figure 7](#), where we plot the mean proportion of ‘yes’ responses per country-year against our proximate conflict score which we divide into three quantiles corresponding to the spread of the data: ‘low’, ‘medium’, and ‘high’. As becomes immediately evident, the mean proportion of respondents answering ‘yes’ moves up with the level of conflict both in the median and in the lower and upper quartile.

Lastly, we visualize the relationship between the willingness to fight and the sum of proximate conflict directly in a scatterplot in [Figure 8](#). We plot the mean willingness to fight per country-year against the sum of proximate conflict the country experienced in the year in question. Both the Loess fitted line, and a linear regression line indicate an overall positive relationship between these two variables, i.e., moving from low to high averages in the willingness to fight corresponds with a higher level of proximate conflict. In sum, our descriptive analysis suggests that there might indeed be a positive relation between citizens’ willingness to fight and proximate conflict.

In addition to our main independent variable, we employ a second, more complex, measure. Here we use a dynamic calculation of distance to construct the variable. We take the inverted distance divided by the sum of all distances to normalize the outcome, and multiply it with the intensity level of conflict, thereby automatically applying a factor of 2 to wars. In mathematical terms, it can be depicted as follows:

$$C_j \times w_{ij} \quad (1)$$

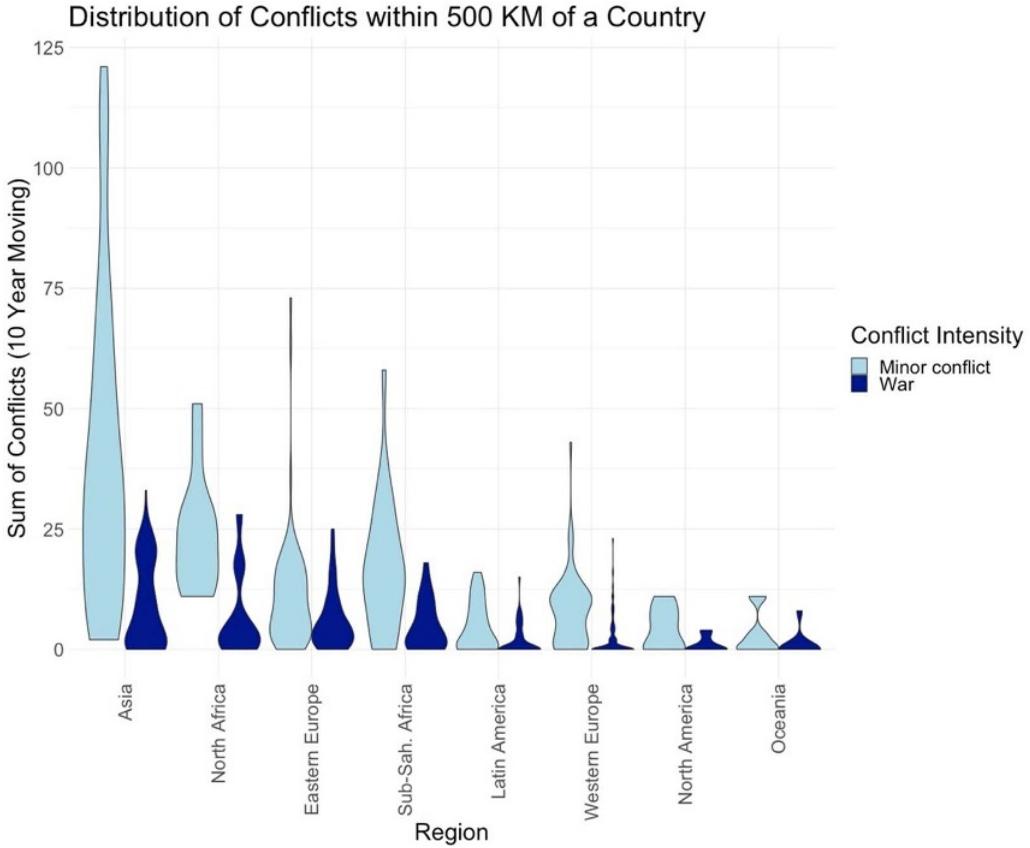


Figure 6. Distribution of the aggregate number of conflicts within a 500 km range of a given country over a timespan of ten years; sorted by region.

where $C_j \in \{0, 1, 2\}$ with 0 representing no conflict, 1 minor conflict and 2 war, is the conflict occurring in state j and w_{ij} is a distance weight calculated as

$$w_{ij} = \frac{1/d_{ij}}{\sum_{j=1}^n 1/d_{ij}} \quad (2)$$

This results in a second independent variable which dynamically penalizes conflicts that are further away. This approach is taken from Buhaug and Gleditsch.³⁶ We then again calculate a moving sum of the past decade (see Appendix for corresponding descriptive statistics).

Control variables

Next to our main independent variable, we add a range of control variables on the individual- and country-level. Existing research has pointed to three broad dimensions that influence citizens' willingness to fight: the value one places on their own life, the value attributed to the country and a country's defence policy environment. We account for a range of standard control variables, including Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and age, as well as factors related to these three dimensions.

³⁶Buhaug and Gleditsch, 'Contagion or confusion?'

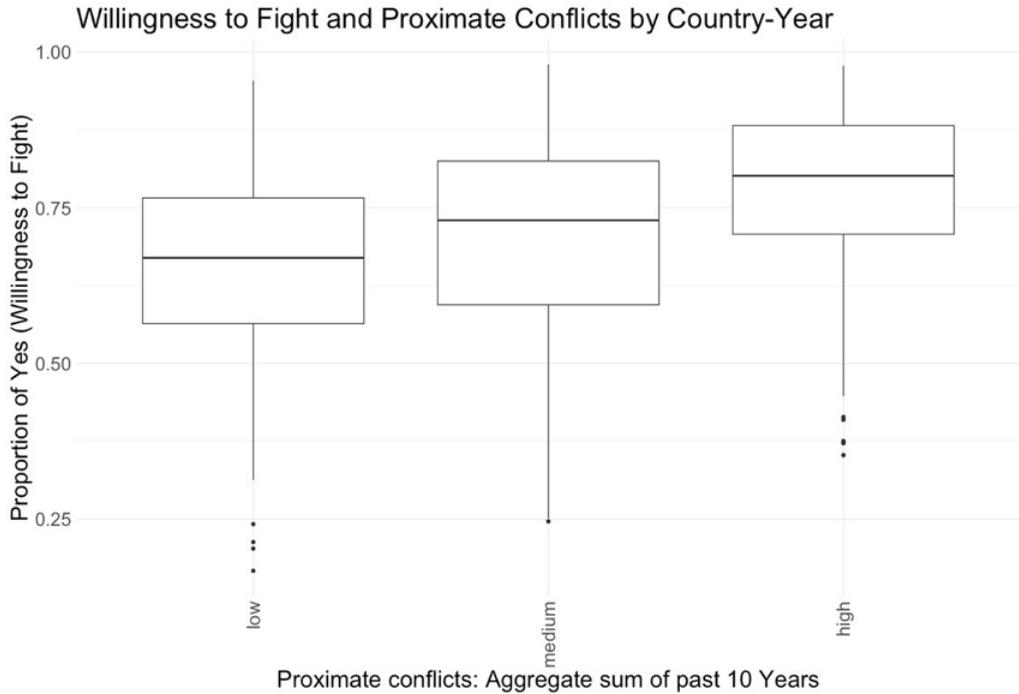


Figure 7. Visualizing the distribution of the average percentage of ‘yes’ to willingness to fight by country-year per proximate conflict level (500 km, ten-year moving sum).

Individual level. On the individual level, we rely on data provided by the WVS/EVS. As is common practice in survey data analysis, we include a variable for sex and age in our analyses. Indeed, women often exhibit a greater aversion to violence.³⁷ Moreover, as age increases, the willingness to fight is likely to decrease, not least due to the decreasing feasibility of participation in warfare. In addition, we include a measure of income that asks respondents to indicate their income from lowest to highest group (0–10). Earlier research has shown that income levels can influence respondents’ willingness to fight. Furthermore, military recruitment often targets low-income individuals, which might affect their willingness to fight.³⁸ Lastly, we add a measure of confidence in the national military. We believe it is important to account for this aspect as citizens might not be willing to fight, even in the face of threats, if they do not generally trust their own military. In fact, previous studies have found this variable to be positively associated with citizens’ willingness to fight.³⁹

We conduct a principal component analysis (PCA)⁴⁰ of the three pro-choice items⁴¹ used by Inglehart et al., as they have shown that higher pro-choice attitudes can lower citizens willingness to fight. The three pro-choice items reflect a wealth-opportunity-value link, which aligns with the dimension concerning the value one places on their own life. To control for the value respondents

³⁷ Joslyn N. Barnhart and Robert F. Trager, ‘Gender and aggression: Nature or nurture?’, in Robert F. Trager and Joslyn N. Barnhart (eds), *The Suffragist Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 40–65; e.g. Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³⁸ Anderson, Getmansky, and Hirsch-Hoefler, ‘Burden Sharing’; Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, *The Casualty Gap: The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁹ For example, Inglehart, Puranen, and Welzel, ‘Declining willingness to fight for one’s country’; Kim, ‘Territorial Disputes’.

⁴⁰ A PCA is used to summarize highly correlated variables onto a linear coordinate system, thereby reducing the dimensionality of the original data. We impute missing observations.

⁴¹ These are: The freedoms of abortion, divorce, and homosexuality, which are each rated on a scale from 1 (‘never justifiable’) to 10 (‘always justifiable’).

Relationship: Proximate Conflicts and Willingness to Fight



Figure 8. Scatter plot, visualizing the relationship between average willingness to fight and the sum of proximate conflict per country-year.

directly place on their own country, we also add a variable measuring national pride, which might positively affect citizens' willingness to fight.

Country level. As is common practice we add the natural logarithm of GDP per capita (constant 2010 US\$) taken from the World Bank through the *wbstats* package in R.⁴² A nation's wealth might correspond to the average value people place on their own life (wealth–value–opportunity link). We then add the Polyarchy democracy scale which we take from the Quality of Government dataset based on the VDem dataset.⁴³ This could positively correlate with the significance respondents place on their nation, potentially heightening their willingness to fight. However, this is not certain. In fact, some prior studies have shown that individuals in democratic nations tend to exhibit a lower willingness to fight.⁴⁴

Next, we control for a range of additional factors that touch upon the country's legacy of conflict and defence policy. We add a variable on each country's history of war using the UCDP Armed Conflict Database, which is coded from 0 to 1, where recent wars are weighted more heavily, and a value of 1 indicates current involvement. In addition, we include a dummy for military conscription.⁴⁵ All these variables are lagged by one year to provide us with data until 2022, corresponding to the last WVS/EVS survey year. Lastly, studies have shown that a nation's readiness to engage in

⁴²Jesse Piburn, 'Wbstats: Programmatic Access to the World Bank API', available at: <https://doi.org/10.11578/dc.20171025.1827> accessed 11 February 2025.

⁴³Jan Teorell, Aksel Sundström, Sören Holmberg, Bo Rothstein, Natalia Alvarado Pachon, Cem Mert Dalli and Yente Meijers, 'The Quality of Government Standard Dataset, January 2023', available at: <https://www.gu.se/en/quality-government/qog-data> accessed 11 February 2025.

⁴⁴Jakobsen and Jakobsen, 'Tripwires and free-riders'; Alexander Sorg and Julian Wucherpfennig, 'Do Foreign Military Deployments Provide Assurance? Unpacking the Micro-Mechanisms of Burden Sharing in Alliances', *International Studies Quarterly*, 68:3 (2024), sqae107.

⁴⁵Own coding; mostly based on the CIA World Factbook.

conflict may diminish when under the protective umbrella of an ally. Much of this research has specifically focused on the United States.⁴⁶ Accordingly, we have incorporated a binary variable to represent the status of being an US ally. However, we think that this dynamic could similarly influence nations that benefit from defence commitments from any country, not solely the United States. To account for such circumstances, we introduce an additional control variable. Both variables are constructed using the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions database, which we have updated to include data up through 2022.⁴⁷

Data analysis

Considering the nested structure of our data, which includes individual-level data alongside country-specific variables, we employ multilevel models. Due to the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, our chosen method is a logit estimator with country-specific random intercepts. Significantly, these random effects account for all constant confounding factors. In addition, we employ year fixed-effects to assure taking account of temporal confounders as well. As previously noted, some conflicts have a global impact, extending their influence well beyond their immediate region. However, if these conflicts truly have global effects, incorporating year-fixed effects in our analysis would help control for these influences.

We centered all non-dichotomous independent variables around a mean of zero. We run four models: Model 1 only controls for sex and age. In Model 2, we add additional individual- and country-level control variables. Models 3 and 4 are the same as Models 1 and 2 except that we replace our main independent variable (*Log Conflict 500 km*) with our dynamic independent variable (*Log Conflict Dynamic*).

Results

The results are reported in [Table 2](#). Notably, our main independent variables are positively correlated with citizens' willingness to fight throughout all models and highly statistically significant. This strongly supports our hypothesis. Thus, we are able to produce considerable evidence that proximate conflict increases citizens' willingness to fight.

Importantly, most control variables behave as expected, confirm previous results, and are further providing evidence that the WVS/EVS willingness to fight item is multidimensional. Both being female and increasing age decrease the likelihood of respondents answering with 'yes', a result observed in previous studies and intuitively logical.⁴⁸ However, our focus group research revealed some interesting nuance. Concurring with the quantitative findings, female participants in these groups were more hesitant to claim that they would be willing to fight for their country. Yet, this seemed to be largely driven by specific concerns related to their role as a woman, including the risk of sexual violence and the physical demands of combat roles, instead of a general aversion to violence. For instance, female participants frequently raised concerns about their ability to engage in heavy lifting and other demanding physical tasks. Nevertheless, many women expressed a readiness to contribute to national defence through alternative roles, such as intelligence or support services, which they often regarded as falling outside of the scope of the willingness to fight question.

With respect to measures related to affluence, GDP p.c. is negatively related to the willingness to fight. However, surprisingly, the pro-choice PCA is positively related. Another dimension of the willingness to fight item which previous studies had looked at and which we can confirm with our results is the value placed on one's own country. We find that individuals with patriotic feelings are

⁴⁶Jakobsen and Jakobsen, 'Tripwires and free-riders'.

⁴⁷Brett Leeds, Jeffrey Ritter, Sara Mitchell and Andrew Long, 'Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions, 1815–1944', *International Interactions*, 28:3 (2002), pp. 237–60.

⁴⁸We also run our main regression model on a subset of respondents aged 30 and younger (Appendix, Table VIII), to gain additional insights into the age group represented in our focus group interviews. Again, our main finding persists in this analysis.

Table 2. Regression results from a hierarchical model with random intercepts by country.

Hierarchical logit regressions with random intercepts				
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Willingness to fight			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Main Independent Variables</i>				
Log Conflict 500 km	0.099*** (0.010)	0.097*** (0.013)		
Log Conflict			0.120*** (0.011)	0.039*** (0.014)
<i>Individual-Level Controls</i>				
Sex	-0.640*** (0.007)	-0.676*** (0.008)	-0.640*** (0.007)	-0.676*** (0.008)
Age	-0.070*** (0.004)	-0.147*** (0.004)	-0.070*** (0.004)	-0.147*** (0.004)
Income Level		0.034*** (0.004)		0.035*** (0.004)
Pro-Choice		0.078*** (0.005)		0.079*** (0.005)
Confidence Military		0.315*** (0.004)		0.316*** (0.004)
National Pride		0.396*** (0.004)		0.395*** (0.004)
<i>Country-Level Controls</i>				
Log GDP p.c.		-0.633*** (0.038)		-0.590*** (0.037)
Democracy Index		0.169*** (0.015)		0.150*** (0.015)
Conscription (Y/N)		0.113*** (0.010)		0.117*** (0.010)
Defense Pact Non-US		-0.171*** (0.028)		-0.189*** (0.028)
Defense Pact US		-0.502*** (0.035)		-0.493*** (0.035)
War History		-0.036 (0.027)		-0.030 (0.027)
Number of countries	112	106	112	106
sd(Country)	0.797	0.848	0.794	0.805
Year-Fixed Effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	471,548	371,264	471,548	371,264

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

more willing to fight for their country. In addition, we find that citizens in democracies seem to have a higher likelihood of answering 'yes'. Related, our focus group research showed that students heavily prioritized fighting for a country that corresponded to their own liberal-democratic values.

This supports our findings, indicating that democracies may possess a greater capacity to motivate their citizens to engage in combat for their cause.

Lastly, we included additional controls in our analyses to account for the defence history and defence policy dimension of the dependent variable beyond our main proximate conflict regressor. Our results show that a country's history of war is negatively related to citizens' willingness to fight, but statistically insignificant. However, being on the receiving end of a defence commitment is negatively related to our dependent variable and statistically significant. Lastly, military conscription increases the willingness to fight. Intuitively, it seems reasonable that having a substantial share of citizens partake in military service would increase their willingness to fight. Moreover, because women are often spared from conscription service, this would further explain the observed gender gap. However, we do not want to imply causality. Indeed, the effect's direction could also be reversed: In countries with conscription, citizens may feel obliged to respond more affirmatively due to societal or legal repercussions.

One notable result that diverges from existing literature is the positive correlation between income levels and citizens' willingness to fight. This might be explained by the more nuanced approach taken by Anderson, Getmansky, and Hirsch-Hoefler. In their analysis, they divide income into five quintiles and interact each quintile with the country-level Gini index. They then conclude that in high-inequality countries, income negatively affects respondents' willingness to fight.⁴⁹ However, since income levels are not central to our study, we chose to control for them without replicating their method, as doing so would have unnecessarily complicated our model. When applied in this manner, our results align with previous findings, which show that when income is used as an unconditional control, it positively correlates with citizens' willingness to fight.⁵⁰

Regarding substantive effects, Figure 9 shows the predicted probability of change in the willingness to fight variable. The x-axis depicts our main independent variable, the proximate conflict score within a 500 km radius, combining minor conflicts and wars over the past decade. As pointed out before, wars are weighted with a factor of 2 in our independent variable. Consequently, certain countries register scores exceeding 50, with some even surpassing 100. All independent variables are held at their mean. The predicted probability visualizes Model 2 of the regression table. Even after controlling for a broad range of individual- and country-level factors, our independent variable still significantly impacts the proportion of willingness to fight, altering it by up to 0.08 proportion points.

Robustness tests

To assure the robustness of our findings, we conducted a wide range of additional analyses. All results are reported in the Appendix.⁵¹ First, we re-run our analyses with the inclusion of different time frames. Instead of summing up proximate conflicts in the past ten years, we now sum it up for the past five and fifteen years.⁵² In both analyses, the results remain unchanged. Lastly, we add a survey weight variable and rerun our main model.⁵³ This produces results that are consistent with our original analysis, providing additional assurance in the validity of our findings.

Besides these methodological tests, two more substantial objections to our findings might relate to the very nature of our data. First, given that the WVS/EVS encompass over a hundred countries, including numerous autocracies, there are inherent challenges that accompany the breadth

⁴⁹ Anderson, Getmansky, and Hirsch-Hoefler, 'Burden sharing'.

⁵⁰ Bayram, 'Nationalist Cosmopolitanism', p. 771; Jakobsen and Jakobsen, 'Tripwires and free-riders', p. 152.

⁵¹ In addition to the robustness checks presented in the Appendix, we conducted a series of additional tests controlling for refugee settlements and military deployments, as suggested by reviewer comments. However, these reduced our sample size considerably, leading us to exclude them from the Appendix.

⁵² See Tables III and IV in the Appendix.

⁵³ See Table VI in the Appendix. Because adding weights causes convergence issues, we set the Gauss–Hermite quadrature points to zero in this regression. We also re-ran the model with the computationally more effective glmmTMB package, leaving the Gauss–Hermite quadrature points at default value, and the results remain the same.

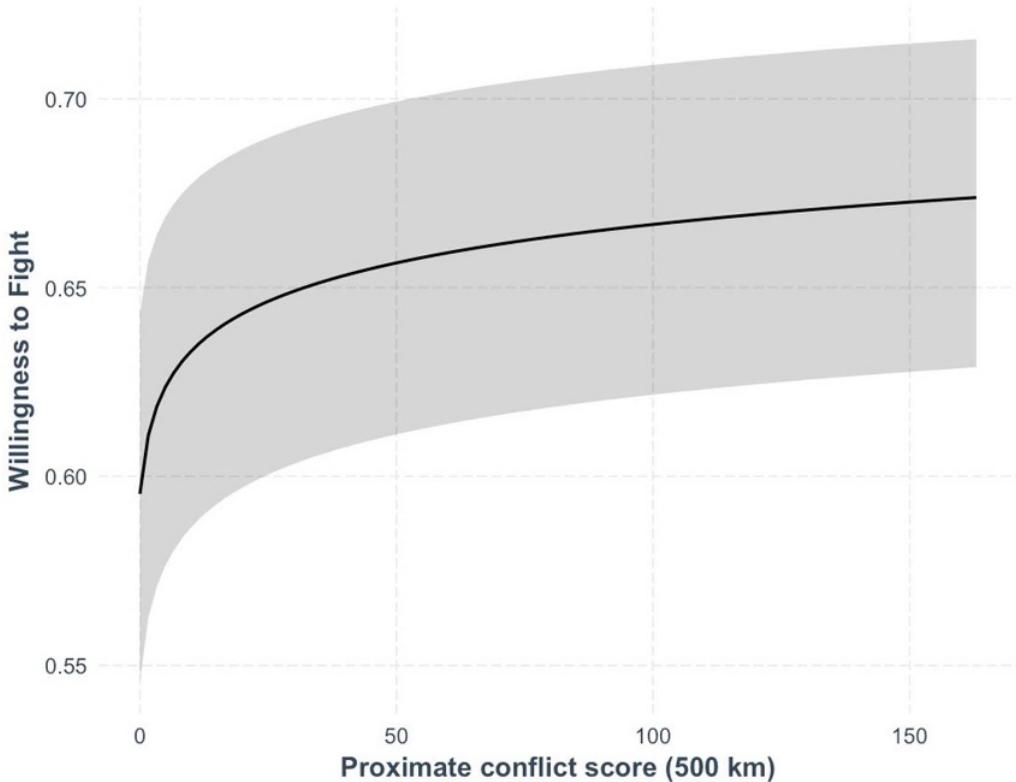


Figure 9. Predicted probability of change in the willingness to fight by score of proximate conflict.

of our sample. This diversity enhances the external validity of our conclusions but introduces conceptual complexities. Specifically, individuals in autocratic regimes may be disinclined to express their genuine views, a hesitancy that could be particularly pronounced when questions pertain to their willingness to defend their country –an issue potentially interpreted as a referendum on the allegiance to the ruling government. To mitigate this concern, we subset our dataset to include only those countries that score 0.7 or above on the V-Dem Polyarchy Index.⁵⁴ The results confirm our original findings.

Second, our data include all types of conflict from the UCDP dataset: extra-systemic, interstate, intrastate, and internationalized intrastate. However, one could argue that interstate conflicts affect citizens in nearby countries differently than civil conflicts. Accordingly, we rerun the model including only interstate conflicts. While the effect direction remains unchanged, this diminishes the statistical significance of the independent variable in one of our four models.⁵⁵

In summary, thorough testing across various configurations of our regression analysis consistently shows that the results retain their direction and statistical significance. We take this as evidence that citizens are indeed influenced by the conflicts in their surroundings, which shape their beliefs about war in the international system, resulting in an observable increased willingness to fight.

⁵⁴See Table VII in the Appendix.

⁵⁵See Table V in the Appendix.

Conclusion

A declining willingness to fight was introduced to peace and conflict studies as the individual-level basis for the long peace.⁵⁶ In this article, we plead for a more nuanced view on citizens' willingness to fight. First, a declining willingness to fight is not just another long-term trend towards post-materialism and emancipation. As the last wave of the WVS/EVS shows, the willingness to fight has, on average, gone up again even though we have not seen a decline in wealth. This, we argue, is because the willingness to fight does not only reflect the value attributed to one's own life but also the value attributed to one's own country, the defence policy environment, and threat perceptions. We have shown that armed conflict in a society's neighbourhood leads to an increase in citizens' willingness to fight, not because it depresses life opportunities or the appreciation of one's own country but because it acts as a reminder that war has not disappeared.

Second, we caution against the idea of a straightforward and strong connection between a rising willingness to fight and rising numbers of armed conflict because both variables in this equation are subject to multiple influences: As the example of Nordic countries illustrates, a high willingness to fight for one's country does not necessarily imply expansionist ambitions but can also signify a preparedness to defend liberal-democratic values.⁵⁷ Most importantly, the decline of violence and warfare in particular has been attributed to a battery of structural factors that operate independently of the willingness to fight.⁵⁸ If one accepts deterrence as an explanatory factor of the long peace, a high willingness to fight for one's country no longer appears alarming at all. In fact, like any unilateral measure of disarmament, a declining willingness to fight may also make countries vulnerable to less pacifist-minded ones.⁵⁹

Looking into the future, we believe that there could be an additional emphasis put on a more nuanced measurement of citizens' willingness to fight. The WVS/EVS has provided scholars with highly valuable data across many countries and over a period of forty years. To fully understand the drivers and consequences of the willingness to fight, however, additional research into citizens' interpretation of this question and into the link between such attitudes and actual conflict is required. For instance, researchers might want to focus on the precise circumstances under which citizens are willing to engage in armed conflict: Are they willing to defend their country, no matter the domestic political situation? Would they protect their families with arms? Their hometown, but not perhaps far away regions in their country? What about supporting war efforts by other means (intelligence gathering, production)? These and similar questions will be crucial to answer in future research on citizens' willingness to fight.

Our research carries also policy relevance. In recent years, policymakers across the world started to pay attention to the societal preparedness for war. In a recent report by RAND, it was argued that the 'will to fight is the single most important factor in war'.⁶⁰ Russia's invasion of Ukraine has underscored that even the wealthy Western societies now have to prepare for war. This has led to a renaissance of the 'whole-of-society' and integrated approaches to security. For instance, the new Dutch Security Strategy, released in 2023, speaks of the active role which citizens, civil society and private organizations have in the 'division of responsibility for national

⁵⁶ Inglehart, Puranen, and Welzel, 'Declining willingness to fight for one's country'.

⁵⁷ Bi Puranen, 'Allegiance eroding. People's dwindling willingness to fight in wars', in Russell J. Dalton & Christian Welzel (eds), *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 261–281.

⁵⁸ For example, Bruce M. Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001).

⁵⁹ A similar argument is made by Fazal and Poast, 'War Is Not Over—What the Optimists Get Wrong About Conflict', *Foreign Affairs*, available at: {<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/war-not-over>} accessed 11 February 2025.

⁶⁰ Ben Connable, Michael J. Mc Nerney, William Marcellino, Aaron B. Frank, Henry Hargrove, Marek N. Posard, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Natasha Lander, Jasen J. Castillo, and James Sladden, 'Will to Fight—Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War', *RAND Brief*, available at: {https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10040.html} accessed 11 February 2025.

security within the Kingdom.⁶¹ Understanding how the growing threats influence public opinion, and how the public views on national defence are formed, is of fundamental importance for policymakers.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.12>.

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⁶¹Kingdom of the Netherlands, 'The Security Strategy for the Kingdom of the Netherlands', available at: <https://www.government.nl/topics/security-strategy-for-the-kingdom-of-the-netherlands> accessed 11 February 2025.