

Domestic Distributional Roots of National Interest

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What international issues become national interests worth fighting for, and why? Contrary to conventional wisdom, I argue that issues without clear economic value, such as barren lands, are more likely to be perceived as national interests because they do not benefit any single domestic group. Since who benefits is unclear, politicians have an easier time framing such issues as benefiting the whole nation. I test this argument using survey experiments on the American public. The results show that first, issues providing diffuse benefits to citizens are more likely to be considered national interests than issues providing concentrated benefits to certain domestic groups. Second, issues with clearer economic value are harder to frame as having diffuse benefits because they are more easily associated with specific beneficiaries. This study proposes a new theory of national interest and offers a potential explanation for why people frequently support conflict over issues without obvious benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Many international conflicts today involve disputes over objects whose economic or strategic value is not immediately clear. Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a war in 1998 that cost more than a hundred thousand lives over the sparsely populated town of Badme. Greece and Turkey faced multiple skirmishes in the Aegean Sea over the two uninhabited islands of Imia/Kardak. These examples are not isolated incidents; a vast majority of territorial conflicts post-1945 have been over uninhabitable areas devoid of natural resources or strategic value (Altman 2020; Goemans and Schultz 2017). Even more puzzling, these disputes are often regarded as central to the nation's integrity and receive widespread support for conflict from the public.


Previous studies have explained the widespread public support behind these disputes by assuming that some issue areas, such as those concerning a nation's territory or security, speak more fundamentally to ideas of the nation than others. Because such issues are perceived as important national matters, individuals and leaders alike are willing to escalate conflict over them and undergo immense sacrifices for their cause (e.g., Manekin, Grossman, and Mitts 2019; Penrose 2002). However, these studies leave unanswered a larger question: why are some issues more likely to be understood as important to the nation than others?

In this article, I seek to explain which international issues are more likely to be perceived as national interests—defined as issues that can generate widespread, enduring support for conflict—and why such

perceptions of national interest often fail to reflect an issue's objective material value. I focus on a previously understudied dimension, the domestic distributional consequences of an international issue, to answer this question. While domestic distributional consequences have been widely used to infer policy preferences in the political economy or the public policy literature (Lake 2009; Potter 1980), there has been comparatively little attention to how they affect perceptions of national interest or support for conflict escalation.

I advance two arguments in this article. First, I argue that issues thought to provide widespread, diffuse benefits to all citizens within a country are more likely to be understood as being in the national interest than issues thought to provide concentrated benefits to certain domestic groups. Second, I argue that issues with clear, specific economic benefits are less likely to be perceived as offering diffuse benefits to the nation than those without. This is because having clearer economic stakes makes it easier for the political opposition to frame the issue as benefiting relevant domestic groups instead of the entire nation. For example, gaining new oil fields can benefit everyone in the nation by lowering gas prices and establishing energy security. However, the specific economic reward at stake—oil fields—also allows domestic opponents to plausibly discredit the issue as serving the interest of oil companies even when it may not be true. In contrast, when there is no economically valuable object at stake, it is easier for politicians to attach an abstract value to the issue and claim that the consequences are diffuse, since such benefits are harder to imagine as being concentrated.

I test my theory using three survey experiments fielded on nationally representative samples of the American public. Survey experiments can provide a direct test of the theory by manipulating an issue's domestic distributional consequences while holding constant other factors that may influence perceptions of issue importance. The experiments demonstrate three main findings. First, respondents are more likely to think

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Received: May 05, 2022; revised: January 29, 2023; accepted: October 30, 2023.

that issues providing diffuse benefits to all citizens are more important and worth fighting for than issues providing concentrated benefits to certain domestic groups. Second, economic benefits are harder to persuasively frame as having diffuse consequences for the nation than non-economic benefits such as security benefits. Third, distributional concerns can be powerful to the extent that individuals are *less* likely to support conflict over issues with economic benefits than without if they suspect the benefits would be concentrated.

This article makes several contributions. First, it proposes a new theory of which international issues become more worth fighting for and why. While scholars have extensively examined the conditions that lead to war and how states act given a certain ordering of preferences (e.g., Fearon 1995), we know relatively little about how and why the preferences are ordered the way they are. By approaching the question from a domestic distributional dimension, this article provides a novel explanation for what becomes perceived as national interest and why they often lack clear economic value.

Second, this study complicates our understanding of distributive politics and foreign policy. Previous theories have focused on how distributional consequences promote subnational actors to pursue their interests in foreign policy (e.g., Lake 2009; Rogowski 1987). I flip this argument, arguing that the very fact of having distributional consequences and subnational actors who may stand to especially benefit makes it harder for politicians to frame the issue as broadly beneficial to the nation.

This new theory also contributes to a long-standing debate on whether and to what extent national interest is constructed. Some scholars view national interest as an objective reality that can be assessed and discovered (Morgenthau 1948), while others view national interest as subjective social constructions (Finnemore 1996; Weldes 1996). By showing how issues with higher objective value can fail—and are in some ways more susceptible to failing—to become national interest, this article demonstrates that what becomes perceived as national interest is essentially subjective, but that there also exist objective constraints to how successfully issues can be framed as matters of national interest.

Finally, this study has important implications for many existing theories on domestic politics and international relations. Whether or not an international issue is publicly understood to be in the national interest plays a decisive role in many theories, influencing whether leaders are rewarded for escalating conflict or punished for backing down (Fearon 1994; Kertzer and Brutger 2016); whether foreign policy elites support the use of military force (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020); which states prevail at the bargaining table (Putnam 1988; Weiss 2013); how successfully states can extract resources from the public to fight foreign adversaries (Christensen 1996; Goddard and Krebs 2015); and when nationalist sentiments are triggered and lead to aggression (Vasquez 1993). Consequently, understanding what becomes perceived as a national interest would be fundamental to better comprehending how existing theories apply to various situations.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE ON ISSUE VALUE AND NATIONAL INTEREST

The question of what states fight over has long been considered integral to understanding international conflict (Holsti 1991; O'Leary 1976; Rosenau 1966). However, there is less agreement on what exactly is understood as a national interest worth fighting for and why (Diehl 1992). Some scholars believe that certain issues are inherently more important than others, while others believe that an issue's value is more or less decided by elites' domestic political concerns and their ability to successfully frame the issue as important. I show that although both views advance our understanding of what states fight for, both leave unanswered many questions.

Inherent View of National Interest

High–Low Politics

The realist tradition has long argued that military-security issues related to power and survival are fundamentally more important than issues related to welfare because power and survival are often preconditions to any other objects states may want (Evangelista 1989, 150). The public is also assumed to be aware of this hierarchy: in his influential book on national interest, Krasner (1978, 70) remarks that “it could be assumed that all groups in society would support the preservation of territorial and political integrity.”

However, while it is reasonable to assume that states and the public would place foremost importance on self-protection and survival, what exactly counts as issues related to survival is ambiguous (Wolfers 1952). Many studies have noted how welfare issues also contribute to a state's survival and military capability in the long run (Barnett 1990; Narizny 2003b), and even if we knew which issues were security related, there is no reason why such issues should necessarily be considered more important than other issue areas. Except in extreme circumstances, many “low-politics” issues have a more direct impact on an individual's or even on a nation's well-being than security issues. For instance, trade agreements and firm expropriation cases often involve hundreds of millions of dollars on average and directly affect the livelihood of those living within the country (Hajzler 2012), while disputes over barren, uninhabited lands are hardly related to a state's survival or an individual's well-being (Altman 2020).

Value by Issue Category and Benefit Type

Similarly, some scholars have argued that an issue's value is decided by the type of goods involved, and that issues involving certain goods are inherently more valuable than others. For example, many believe that conflict over territory is fundamentally more important to the nation for biological or symbolic reasons (Johnson and Toft 2013; Penrose 2002; Vasquez 1993). Yet assuming that some goods are inherently

more important than others cannot explain the variation in the importance and conflict proneness of issues even within the same substantive category (Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Potter 1980): for example, not all territories are equally conflict-prone, and some territories are much more likely to be considered fundamental to the nation and worth fighting for than others (Hassner 2003; Huth 1996; Shelef 2015).

To address this shortcoming, other scholars have taken a more fine-grained approach of examining what types of benefits are involved in each issue. Notably, the Issue Correlates of War Project (ICOW) provides a new typology of issues that allows issues even within the same category to have different values depending on their tangible or intangible qualities (Hensel and Mitchell 2017).¹ This approach has enabled scholars to compare the importance of benefit types and find that issues with intangible value tend to escalate more frequently into militarized conflicts than those with only tangible, material benefits (Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Toft 2006; Vasquez 1993).

While this approach highlights the importance of studying intangibility in international relations, it also raises several questions. First, it is unclear why and to what extent intangible benefits are more valued than tangible ones. For example, Zellman (2018) finds in his study of the Serbian public that intangible framings do not always engender stronger feelings for reclaiming lost territory than do economic framings. Second, intangibility is often hard to objectively measure because even the same object can hold multiple meanings for different people depending on their ideology, pocketbook considerations, and framing of the dispute (Shelef 2015; Tanaka 2016; Zellman 2015).

More importantly, the existing literature leaves largely unanswered why some issues tend to hold more intangible value than others. For instance, ICOW classifies trade and industry disputes as having lower intangible value compared to other issue areas such as territorial disputes, but little has been theorized about why exactly they are less likely to hold intangible values in the first place. To be clear, I am not arguing that intangible benefits are unreal or unimportant. Rather, the aim of this section is to point out that we need more investigation into why some issues are more likely to acquire intangible meanings and develop into important national matters than others.

Domestic Politics as National Interest

Contrary to an inherent view of national interest, others have claimed that an issue's value is malleable and heavily driven by domestic elites. For example, scholars have explored which specific policies are implemented when certain coalitions are in power (Brooks 2013; Narizny 2003a; 2007; Trubowitz 1998). These policies, however, are often domestically

contentious or polarizing because they tend to reflect the interests of a specific group. This is contrary to the concept of national interest that this article is trying to explore, which are issues that can receive widespread consensus about their importance across coalitions.

Another group of scholars has examined how sectoral interests manage to co-opt the national interest and rationalize it to the public (Hobson 1902; Snyder 1993). These studies are closer to the article's focus, but as Snyder himself acknowledges, justifying select policies to the public is harder when there are diverse interests in the society. This article expands on this existing literature to explore how some issues have an easier time remaining justified as national interests when faced with multiple discourses about what is important to the nation.

Finally, scholars have also argued that leaders may have incentives to ramp up the value of an issue in order to gain domestic support or gain leverage in international bargaining (Mueller 1973; Weiss 2013). However, while leader cues would certainly influence public opinion, a leader-driven approach cannot tell the full story. Leaders are often criticized for backing down in conflicts or for escalating unnecessarily (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Tomz 2007), and their attempts to frame an issue as important or unimportant are not always successful (Druckman 2001; Krebs 2015; Zellman 2015). In fact, leaders do not enjoy a completely free hand in portraying issues as national interests even in many authoritarian regimes (Li and Chen 2021; Weeks 2012). Therefore, the question of which issues have an easier time being widely framed as the national interest and why still remains. In the next section, I investigate this question by turning to a domestic distributional approach, examining what kinds of issues are more likely to resonate with the public as having important consequences for the entire nation.

THEORY OF DOMESTIC DISTRIBUTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Domestic distributional consequences have been widely used as a theoretical basis to infer public policy preferences in other areas of political science. A vast literature in political economy has explored how an issue's distributional consequences influence domestic groups' preferences on trade (Grossman and Helpman 1999; Rogowski 1987; Scheve and Slaughter 2001), foreign aid (Milner and Tingley 2010; Pandya 2010), and monetary and financial policies (Broz 2005; Gowa 1988). Studies have also shown how a good's distributional impact interacts with the public and interest group preferences to influence presidential control over foreign policy (Krasner 1978; Milner and Tingley 2015) or domestic policy processes (Evangelista 1989; Lowi 1964; Zimmerman 1973).² I build on these studies,

¹ ICOW defines tangible salience as values of security, survival, and wealth; and intangible salience as values of culture, identity, equality, justice, independence, status, prestige, and influence.

² The public policy literature provides a typology of issues based on the issues' equality of distributional impacts, which is similar to the theory I propose in this article. However, as pointed out by Potter

arguing that how an issue's benefits are distributed within the domestic polity is also influential in determining which issues are considered important to the nation and worth fighting for. Yet I differ in one key aspect: I argue that having clear domestic distributional consequences is precisely what makes it harder for the issue to be widely understood as important to the nation and generate durable support for conflict.

Benefit Diffuseness and Perception as National Interest

I start by hypothesizing that issues perceived as providing widespread benefits to nation members are more likely to be regarded as being in the national interest than those providing concentrated benefits to specific domestic groups. This can be for both reasons of self-interest and normative concerns. First, the public may favor issues providing widespread benefits because they believe they have a higher chance of directly gaining from the issues than from issues with concentrated benefits. By contrast, issues with concentrated benefits would only appeal to a small fraction of the society. Although those who gain directly from the concentrated benefits may still consider the issue as important and worth fighting for, if a vast majority of the public who do not directly gain do not think of the issue as important, there would be lower public support for the issue on average. Support for the issue would also be more nationally divisive, since some would perceive the issue to be important while others would not.

Second, people may have a normative understanding of how national interest should benefit the general citizenry rather than a select group of individuals, especially when the issue entails highly visible and diffuse costs such as military action. Scholars have noted how the public are wary of the national interest being hijacked by corrupt elites and wish to keep in office "good, public-regarding executives" (Downs and Rocke 1994, 364; Lowi 1964), and how people are generally averse to situations where only a select few benefit: individuals are less likely to accept unequal divisions of goods because they believe such situations to be immoral and unfair (Fehr and Schmidt 1999; Gottfried and Trager 2016), and more likely to prefer foreign policies which minimize inequality or benefit the poor over the rich (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Diascro 2001; Lü, Scheve, and Slaughter 2012). Therefore, based on both self-interest and normative reasons, I predict:

H₁: *Compared to issues providing concentrated benefits to certain domestic groups, issues providing diffuse benefits to citizens will be more likely to*

(1980, 421), the policy literature's "issue area paradigm is designed to specify the nature of policy process [the identity of major actors, intensity of domestic conflict] rather than to generate insights pertaining to the nature of the policy outcome."

H_{1a}: *be perceived as important to the nation (Perception as National Interest)*

H_{1b}: *generate public support for military escalation (Support for Conflict Escalation)*

H_{1c}: *increase willingness to take personally costly action for the issue (Personal Engagement).*

Economic Benefits and Plausibility of Benefit Diffuseness

In practice, however, it is difficult for individuals to assess the exact diffuseness of an international issue's benefits. After all, how the benefits are distributed is not an inherent quality of the issue but depends heavily on the political institution, domestic politics, and the specific situation of the issue (Cowen 1985; Gowa 1988).³ In fact, even within the same issue area of territory, which is usually regarded as benefiting the entire nation (Wright and Diehl 2016, 34), there exist cases where some are seen as providing concentrated benefits to certain domestic ethnic or political groups. For example, in 1812, the U.S. South vigorously opposed the incorporation of Quebec into U.S. territory because they feared that the addition of Canadian territory would only empower the North at their expense (Maass 2020). Similarly, Somalia did not attempt to claim lands inhabited by their co-ethnics on the Ethiopian side of the border when the Majertain family held power because the Majertains feared that the incorporation of Ethiopian-Somalis would only provide more representation to their competitors, the Ogadeni clan, and weaken their political influence (Saideman 1998).

Further complicating the measurement of issue diffuseness is that even the same issue can be viewed as having either diffuse or concentrated benefits depending on which aspect of the issue is emphasized. Those who support fighting for a given good would stress how the good can provide diffuse benefits to all nation members, while the opposition would emphasize how the issue may end up serving only the interest of select domestic groups. This leads to a second question: what kind of issues are more likely to be perceived as providing diffuse benefits to all nation members when faced with conflicting information about who benefits?

I argue that issues with specific economic benefits are less likely to be perceived as providing diffuse benefits to the nation. To be clear, economic benefits do not

³ While it is debated whether excludability or rivalry is an inherent quality of a good, many agree that pure public goods are very rare and that all goods can be made excludable or rivalrous depending on how high of a cost the supplier is willing to pay (Cowen 1985). Assuming that some issue areas are more excludable than others is also tricky because it obscures variation within the same issue category. Thus, while I agree some goods naturally have a more public good quality than others, I do not assume excludability or rivalry inheres in an issue and instead focus on how an issue is more likely to be persuasively framed as excludable.

have to be concentrated; they can certainly provide diffuse benefits to the nation. However, their easier divisibility makes them more easily imagined as excludable.⁴ Additionally, because economic benefits are often more specific and tangible, it is easier to associate the benefits with a relevant domestic group who may especially gain. This in turn lends more plausibility to the accusation that the issue exclusively benefits concentrated interests, even when it is not necessarily true. For example, the U.S. President Donald Trump continuously took advantage of the fact that some export industries gain more from lower tariffs to accuse free trade agreements of serving parochial interests. In a well-received presidential rally in Pennsylvania, he declared that “the inner cities will remain poor. The factories will remain closed. The borders will remain open. The special interests will remain firmly in control” (*Time*, June 28, 2016).⁵

Moreover, the ease of identifying domestic groups who can especially benefit from the issue makes it easier for the opposition to introduce concerns of parochial interest involvement. Hobson (1902, 47), for example, points to the existence of “special commercial and social interests which stand to gain” as evidence for his argument that Great Britain’s national interests had been hijacked by parochial groups. Other scholars also note that the more obvious the private interest at stake, the more leaders would have to try to legitimize their case for pursuing a specific policy (Goddard and Krebs 2015).

A good example of how economic benefits are hard to frame as diffuse is the case of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. During the war, the U.S. Secretary of State James Baker claimed that the U.S. intervention in the Gulf was a “vital national interest” because “American jobs” and “the pocketbook and standard of living of every American” were at stake (*PBS*, November 9, 1990).⁶ Although Baker attempted to frame the Gulf War as bringing diffuse economic benefits to the American public, his statements did more to invite suspicion that there were ulterior motives to the war. Hackett and Zhao (1994) find that accusing the war of serving the interest of oil companies was one of the most frequent arguments used by anti-war groups, taking up 33% of reported anti-war newspaper headlines during the war. On the other hand, more abstract values such as benefits of national security or prestige are less subject to accusations of concentration since it is harder to imagine how such issues could only benefit a specific group of people. In addition, because what is exactly at stake is ambiguous, it is also harder for critics to disprove the

claim that abstract benefits would be widely distributed. Therefore,

H₂: Suggestions of benefit concentration will be more effective for specific economic benefits than for non-economic benefits.

Economic Benefits and Plausibility of Diffuse Non-Economic Benefits

Yet H_2 is still insufficient to conclude that issues with specific economic value would be considered less important to the nation than issues without any economic value. After all, if abstract non-economic benefits were more resilient to claims of concentration, proponents would try to frame all issues, including issues that have economic value, as matters of diffuse non-economic benefits. In fact, politicians have often tried to frame the aforementioned trade issues, wars, and imperialist foreign policies as matters of national security and status rather than matters of economic gains.

This leads to the final part of my argument, where I argue that having economic benefits can make an issue harder to be considered national interest by making it possible for the opposition to raise criticisms of concentrated economic benefits. Even when proponents try to describe the issue as a matter of national security, claims of concentrated economic benefits can provide a plausible alternative way of understanding the issue, undermining the credibility of other abstract benefits involved.

For example, when Bolivia went to war against Paraguay over the Chaco region, a land with rich oil and gas potential, the Bolivian president Daniel Salamanca never mentioned the potential economic benefits from oil as a reason for why Bolivia should go to war (Meierding 2020, 88).⁷ Instead, he claimed that gaining the Chaco would benefit all Bolivians by providing a passage to the Atlantic and that the problem of the Chaco was a matter of national honor (Arze Quiroga 1951). However, Chaco’s rich oil potential provided Salamanca’s political opponents with an opportunity to accuse Salamanca of going to war for concentrated economic interests. The political opposition argued that the real cause of the war was to benefit oil companies and corrupt Bolivian elites who were trying to benefit at the cost of ordinary Bolivians (Marof 1935). Despite Salamanca never mentioning oil benefits as a reason for war, and despite ample evidence that oil interests were never actually involved, the Bolivian public “almost immediately accepted as truth that the Chaco War was the result of a basic conflict of oil lands” (Klein 1964, 175).

Similarly, just before the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted

⁴ Divisibility also does not have to make something excludable, but it is often regarded as a prerequisite for private goods. See, for example, Milner and Tingley (2015) and Samuelson (1954).

⁵ Transcript: <https://time.com/4386335/donald-trump-trade-speech-transcript>. It remains to be seen how generalizable this rhetoric is, but populist leaders in Europe and Asia have also opposed free trade on similar grounds.

⁶ PBS Oral History Transcript: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/baker/1.html>.

⁷ Meierding (2020) notes that in the rare cases that Salamanca mentioned oil, the context was always to emphasize how gaining access to the Paraguay River could facilitate the transportation of oil rather than to advertise the possible economic benefits of gaining the oil fields.

multiple times that “The conflict with Iraq is about weapons of mass destruction (...) It has nothing to do with oil, literally nothing to do with oil.”⁸ Records from classified internal documents also revealed that many government officials, including the U.S. president George W. Bush, were very cautious on the matter of oil and agreed multiple times on the principle that “Iraqi petroleum belonged to the people of Iraq” (Meierding 2020, 161). However, despite the precautions taken and strong denials by the Bush government, the war was met with much public scrutiny about parochial interest involvement. Again, during the Chile–Bolivia war over the nitrate-rich land of Antofagasta in 1879, the role of mining companies was continuously suspected for over a century, even when the Chilean president Anibal Pinto explicitly insisted that “Chile did not go to war to save the Compania de Salitres but to enforce its [sovereignty] treaty rights [with Bolivia]” (Sater 1986, 13).

By contrast, accusations of concentrated economic benefits cannot be made when there is no economic value for anyone to benefit from. Consequently, when issues without economic value are framed as matters of national security and honor, they are more likely to remain framed as matters of abstract benefits because alternative framings of economic interests cannot be offered.⁹ Even when the issues’ non-economic benefits are unclear, it is relatively easy to maintain that the issues have national value because the existence of abstract benefits is difficult to disprove. For instance, the Siachen Glaciers are not valuable for economic or security reasons to the eyes of outside observers (Chari, Cheema, and Cohen 2003, 53), but because accusations of concentrated economic benefits cannot be offered while the claim that the glaciers could provide some strategic advantage in the future is hard to disprove, the glaciers remain perceived as matters of vital national security for citizens in both India and Pakistan. To summarize, having economic value makes possible accusations of concentrated interests, which are effective in undermining even the sincerity of proponents’ claims that there are other, diffuse abstract benefits to the issue. Consequently,

H₃: *Issues suggested of having concentrated economic benefits will be less likely to be considered national interests compared to issues with no economic benefits at all.*

⁸ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rumsfeld-it-would-be-a-short-war>. CBS News, November 15, 2002 (accessed December 2, 2022).

⁹ One could ask whether the opposition could also make arguments about concentrated security or identity benefits. While such arguments may be theoretically possible, as I will soon show in the empirical section, arguments of concentration are indeed less persuasive for abstract benefits than for economic benefits. Furthermore, arguments that an issue would only help defend some parts of the country or increase the “national” honor of only some people are very rarely made in the real world. Previous studies have alluded to possible reasons for why—for example, Schultz (2001) and Gilbert (1988) note that making opposition statements about national security can be costly, since such arguments can backfire and invite accusations of being treasonous and endangering the nation’s defense.

Moderators and Scope Conditions

Finally, I wish to clarify two key scope conditions of the theory. First, the theory assumes the existence of a visible domestic opposition that is strong enough to offer suggestions of concentration. It is, therefore, possible that the theory is less applicable in authoritarian regimes where such opposition does not exist. To what extent it is less applicable remains an empirical question: after all, effective domestic political opposition can also exist in many non-democracies, where criticisms can be voiced by different factions within a governing party or unofficial civilian opposition outlets. In fact, the cases of Bolivia and Chile referenced above were both semi-authoritarian at the time. Studies also suggest that authoritarian leaders, especially non-personalist ones, are not completely insulated from public opinion and have incentives to care about maintaining public support and legitimacy (Li and Chen 2021; Weeks 2012; Weiss 2013).

Second, the applicability of the theory will depend on how excludable the economic benefit is seen to be. Accusations of concentration will be more successful when there is more suspicion about the benefit’s potential to provide concentrated benefits: for example, when the benefit at stake is more easily captured by oligopolistic groups—such as a capital-intensive resource like oil—or when there is higher pre-existing distrust among the public against the redistribution system, the ruling elites, or potential beneficiaries. The empirical section below focuses on testing the three main hypotheses. In the interest of space, I discuss these ideas further in the conclusion and present several related findings in Appendix A.6 of the Supplementary Material.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

I test the hypotheses through three survey experiments, each survey testing one hypothesis (Figure 1). In all three surveys, participants read about a hypothetical territorial dispute scenario between the United States and Russia. Using a hypothetical scenario has several advantages. First, it allows the manipulation of independent variables—such as the degree of benefit diffuseness—while holding constant other factors like the character of the opposing country, increasing the internal validity of the results. Second, introducing an unfamiliar territory allows us to bypass people’s pre-existing feelings about known territories and assess how easily the concept of national interest attaches to new issues. While hypothetical, the scenario was also designed to mimic many real-world territorial conflicts today by featuring a remote island disputed between well-known rivals (Altman 2020; Frederick, Hensel, and Macaulay 2017; Schultz 2017), increasing the plausibility and representativeness of the scenario.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Appendix D.8 of the Supplementary Material for more discussion on the representativeness of the scenario.

FIGURE 1. Flowchart of Theory and Empirical Tests

Study 1: Benefit Diffuseness and Perception as National Interest (H_1)

Study 1 examines H_1 , investigating the effect of benefit diffuseness on how likely the issue is perceived as a national interest worth fighting for. Using the survey platform Lucid, I conducted a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 1,196 U.S. adults in October 2020. Lucid ensured that the participants resembled the gender, age, geographic, and racial distribution of the U.S. adult population, and the full survey data can be found in the APSR Dataverse.¹¹ All survey participants started by reading:

The U.S. and Russia are involved in a territorial dispute over Seal Island, a small uninhabitable island off the coast of Alaska. The island provides access to offshore oil fields. The U.S. and Russia both claim Seal Island to be rightfully theirs, but neither has yet taken serious action to take control of the island. The U.S. could use its military to take control of Seal Island without any casualties. But Russia would retaliate with economic sanctions, which would lead to a nationwide economic downturn of approximately \$80 billion, and a loss of around 10,000 jobs across various industries in the U.S.

Participants were then introduced to the benefits of taking Seal Island. The survey randomized two variables: the breadth of the population receiving the benefit (*Benefit Diffuseness*), and the issue area of the benefit (*Benefit Type*). Benefit Diffuseness varied on three levels, ranging from the most diffuse condition of “All Americans,” to the moderately diffuse condition of “Alaskan Residents,” and to the most concentrated condition of “Employees of Occidental Oil.” Occidental Oil was described as an “American oil company operating in the region.” As for benefit type, respondents read about either a specific economic benefit or a vague security benefit. Respondents assigned to the economic condition were told that taking the island would lead to \$150 billion worth of benefits for either all Americans, Alaskan residents, or employees of Occidental Oil. Those in the security condition were told that taking control of Seal Island would lead to increased protection for one of the three beneficiaries. This resulted in a 3×2 variation, where for each benefit type the prompt read:

Economic: Securing the island would lead to an economic benefit for [all Americans/Alaskan residents/employees of Occidental Oil, an American oil company operating in the region], [who would be able to save \$150 billion annually through reduced gas prices/by providing the company with an additional annual profit of \$150 billion].

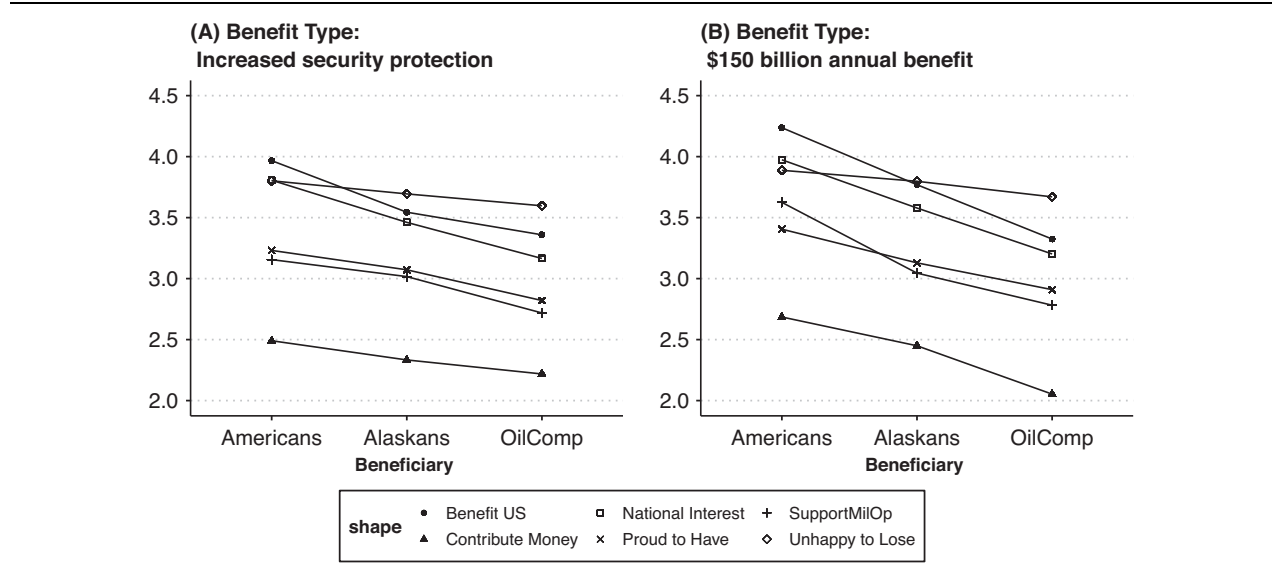
Security: Securing the island would lead to increased security protection for [all Americans/Alaskan residents/employees of Occidental Oil, an American oil company operating in the region], by allowing [the United States government/the Alaskan state government/Occidental Oil] to have greater control over the Pacific Ocean.

Those who did not receive “All Americans” as their beneficiary condition were explicitly told at the end of the prompt that “Other Americans, apart from [Alaskan residents/employees of Occidental Oil] are not expected to benefit from taking Seal Island.” Respondents were then asked a series of questions assessing their opinions of Seal Island: how much they approved or disapproved of using the U.S. military to take control of Seal Island (*Support for Military Operation*);¹² how much they agreed or disagreed with statements related to national interest, such as “Taking control of Seal Island is in the U.S. national interest” (*National Interest*), and “Taking control of Seal Island benefits the U.S.” (*Benefit U.S.*); and statements related to respondents’ level of personal engagement with Seal Island, such as “Taking Seal Island would make me proud” (*Proud to Have*), “I would be unhappy if Russia took control of Seal Island” (*Unhappy to Lose*), and how willing participants were to contribute \$20 to fund a military operation for Seal Island should the U.S. government request it (*Contribute Money*).¹³ The full prompt and questionnaire are provided in Appendix D of the Supplementary Material.

¹² Those who neither approved nor disapproved of the military operation were prompted to answer if they leaned toward approving, leaned toward disapproving, or leaned neither way, ultimately yielding seven levels of approval. I present the original five-point scale in the main results so that it is easier to compare the changes in coefficients and variances with other dependent variables, which also use a five-point scale. However, the results are the same—in fact, stronger—when I use the seven-point scale instead of the five-point scale to measure support for military operation.

¹³ Respondents were also asked how much they agreed with the statements “Taking control of Seal Island benefits me personally,” “Taking control of Seal Island benefits the American people,” and how willing they were to enlist if additional military forces were needed in the war over Seal Island. The results are also identical for these variables, with support being the highest for the most diffuse condition and lowest for the most concentrated condition.

¹¹ I use the survey platform Lucid for all three surveys and report results using all respondents. Results using only respondents who passed attention checks are stronger and are reported in Appendices A.1.3, B.2.2, and C.2.3 of the Supplementary Material. See Lee (2023a) for the replication data.

FIGURE 2. Effect of Benefit Diffuseness on National Interest

Note: All dependent variables were measured on a five-point scale except for Contribute Money which was measured on a four-point scale. Each point indicates the mean value of each dependent variable according to the beneficiary condition received. The differences in mean values by beneficiary condition are significant at $p < 0.05$. It is also worth noting that economic benefits are not always considered less important than security benefits when controlling for their level of diffuseness. For the related regression, see Appendix A.1.1 of the Supplementary Material.

Each point in Figure 2 represents the mean value of each outcome variable depending on the level of benefit diffuseness. Figure 2a displays results for when the benefit at stake was security, and Figure 2b shows results for when the benefit was economic. In both figures, perception as national interest, level of support for military action, and level of personal engagement were the highest when all Americans benefited, followed by when only Alaskans benefited, and the lowest when only employees of Occidental Oil benefited. The differences in the mean values for the three diffuseness conditions were significant at $p < 0.05$ for all six dependent variables (Appendix A.1.4 of the Supplementary Material).¹⁴ This pattern is consistent across both benefit types, indicating that both security and economic benefits are less favored when they are concentrated. The results support H_{1a} through H_{1c} , which predicted that the more diffuse the issue's benefits, the more likely the issue would be thought of as a national interest and worth fighting for.

Substantively, changing beneficiaries from all Americans to Alaskan residents or employees of Occidental Oil each resulted in about a 12% and 20% decline in the level of support for all dependent variables.¹⁵ I also find that the decline is due to both self-interest and

normative reasons as suggested earlier in the article: the more concentrated the benefits, the less likely respondents believed that they would personally benefit from the issue or that Americans as a whole would benefit from it. These beliefs in turn significantly lowered respondents' support for the issue as a national interest worth fighting for—detailed results using causal mediation and examples of open-ended responses are available in Appendix A.2 of the Supplementary Material.¹⁶ Preference for diffuse benefits was also robust to controlling for participants' demographic and attitudinal qualities such as party identification, income, education, gender, militancy, nationalism, and friendliness toward Russia (Appendix A.1.2 of the Supplementary Material), and the treatment effects were remarkably homogeneous across respondents' party identification and political ideology (Appendix A.3 of the Supplementary Material).

In addition to examining changes in mean values, I also analyze whether there is more convergence in opinions when benefits are diffuse (Table 1). After all, a highly divisive issue cannot be seen as a national interest since such issues would have a harder time eliciting broad public support for conflict escalation. Table 1 presents the variance of each dependent variable depending on the level of benefit diffuseness. A

¹⁴ In the variable "Unhappy to Lose," the difference between all Americans and Alaskan residents is statistically insignificant. The weaker effect may be due to a general aversion to losses, but despite the weaker effect, even when the island is framed as a loss, fewer people express unhappiness about "losing" the island when the island is expected to provide concentrated benefits.

¹⁵ Consistent with the general theory, there is some preliminary evidence to suggest that the negative effect of concentration is greater

for economic benefits than for security benefits (Appendix A.5 of the Supplementary Material).

¹⁶ These results provide some suggestive evidence that while self-interest and normative mechanisms both act as significant mediators, normative understandings of national interest (e.g., intention to benefit the public, averseness to inequality, and dislike for potential corruption) play a bigger role than concerns for pure self-interest.

TABLE 1. Convergence in National Interest Perceptions by Benefit Diffuseness

		All Americans	Alaskans	Oil Company	Levene's test
H_{1a}	Benefit U.S. (1–5)	1.00	1.44	1.81	$p = 0.00$
	National Interest (1–5)	1.20	1.48	1.82	$p = 0.00$
H_{1b}	Support Military Use (1–5)	1.37	1.59	1.69	$p = 0.08$
	Proud to Have (1–5)	1.37	1.54	1.71	$p = 0.06$
H_{1c}	Unhappy to Lose (1–5)	1.23	1.35	1.43	$p = 0.13$
	Contribute Money (1–4)	1.35	1.34	1.31	$p = 0.72$

Note: Values indicate the variance in the responses for each DV per Beneficiary condition. Lower numbers indicate more convergence in answers. The final column indicates whether the variances per Beneficiary condition are significantly different from each other: the p -values indicate how confidently we can reject the null hypothesis that the three variances are equal.

smaller variance in responses implies that opinions are more converged, while a larger variance indicates that opinions are more dispersed (Kertzer, Rathbun, and Rathbun 2020). We observe that variances in the answers are the lowest when all Americans benefit and the highest when only Occidental Oil employees benefit for most of the dependent variables.¹⁷ The differences in variances are also significantly different from each other for the most part, as shown in the final column. These results indicate that issues with concentrated benefits not only receive lower support on average, but also induce more divergence in beliefs about the issue's national importance.

Study 2: Economic Benefits and Vulnerability to Suggestions of Concentration (H_2)

Study 1 showed that how an issue's benefits are distributed domestically matters in deciding whether people perceive the issue to be important to the nation and worth fighting for. Study 2 builds on these findings to examine whether economic benefits are more vulnerable to the accusation of providing concentrated benefits compared to abstract, non-economic benefits. The second experiment was carried out on a nationally representative sample of 825 U.S. adults in March 2021. As in Study 1, participants read about a hypothetical dispute over Seal Island and the anticipated costs of taking the island. Depending on which benefit type condition participants were assigned to, participants then either read about an economic benefit or an abstract security benefit for all Americans.

They say the U.S. would gain access to [offshore oil fields, reducing gas prices for all Americans/important strategic locations, better protecting all Americans from security threats].

The innovation in Study 2 is that it introduces uncertainty about who benefits. Instead of stating as a fact that taking the island would benefit a certain group of

beneficiaries, all participants were suggestively told that "Some policymakers argue taking Seal Island would benefit all Americans." Half of the participants then received an additional message that other policymakers believed taking the island would only benefit certain interest groups:

However, other policymakers question the true motive behind trying to take Seal Island. They say taking Seal Island to gain [new oil fields/important strategic locations] would only benefit a small number of interest groups, at the expense of most Americans. They argue the real motive for taking Seal Island is to help certain interest groups, not to [reduce gas prices for/ increase the security of] all Americans.

This design yields a 2×2 variation, where the conditions were randomized across whether participants read about the economic or security benefit of taking the island (*Benefit Type*), and whether participants read about a possible concentration of benefits (*Concentration Suggested*). This design allows us to compare how effective the opposition's accusation of benefit concentration is depending on the issue's Benefit Type. The main dependent variable in this survey is how much the issue is seen as providing diffuse benefits to all Americans, measured as the level of agreement with the statement "Taking control of Seal Island benefits the American people" (*Benefit Americans*) on a five-point scale. If H_2 holds, reading about the opposition's accusation would lower the average level of agreement with *Benefit Americans* more for the economic benefit condition than for the security benefit condition.

Table 2 displays the four possible treatment conditions and the average level of agreement with *Benefit Americans*. I also present results for how nationally important people perceived the issue to be, measured as the level of agreement with the statements "Taking control of Seal Island benefits the U.S." (*Benefit U.S.*) and "Taking control of Seal Island is in the U.S. national interest" (*U.S. National Interest*). The results are also consistent across other outcome variables measuring levels of personal engagement (*Proud to Have*, *Unhappy to Lose*, and *Contribute Money*) and level of support for military operation (*Support Military Use*), presented in Appendix B.3 of the Supplementary Material. All the dependent variables were

¹⁷ For the outcome variable *Contribute Money*, the variance is the smallest when only employees of the oil company benefit, but only because responses converged around *against* paying the extra \$20.

TABLE 2. Persuasiveness of Concentrated Benefits Suggestion by Benefit Type

Benefit:	New oil fields			Important strategic locations			
	Benefit Americans	Benefit U.S.	National Interest	Benefit Americans	Benefit U.S.	National Interest	
<i>No concentration suggested:</i> (A) <i>n</i> = 228	4.00	4.09	3.76	(B) <i>n</i> = 195	3.86	4.06	3.84
<i>Concentration suggested:</i> (C) <i>n</i> = 200	3.22	3.50	3.35	(D) <i>n</i> = 202	3.43	3.77	3.56
Suggestion Effect	0.78	0.59	0.41		0.43	0.29	0.28
95% C.I.	(0.55, 1.01)	(0.38, 0.80)	(0.20, 0.64)		(0.21, 0.65)	(0.10, 0.49)	(0.07, 0.49)
Suggestion effect size (relative to new oil fields)					55%**	49%**	68%

Note: The table shows the average level of each dependent variable for each treatment condition (A-D). People assigned to conditions A and B only read about the possible diffuse benefits of taking Seal Island, while those assigned to C and D also read about how the benefits could be concentrated on certain groups. "Suggestion Effect" calculates the difference-in-means of the DVs between A&C and B&D with 95% confidence intervals. The last row displays the relative effect size of the concentration suggestion in the strategic locations condition compared to the oil fields condition. Asterisks indicate whether the difference in the effect size is statistically significant. **p* < 0.1, ***p* < 0.05.

measured on a five-point scale,¹⁸ and the effect of receiving the opposition rhetoric is summarized in the second to last row with its 95% confidence intervals.

Table 2 demonstrates that suggestions of benefit concentration reduced the level of agreement with *Benefit Americans* by 0.78 points in the oil fields condition, compared to only 0.43 points in the strategic locations condition. As can be seen from the last row of the table, the opposition was also almost twice as effective in undermining people's beliefs that the issue would benefit the United States (*Benefit U.S.*) or be in the national interest (*National Interest*) when the benefit was economic compared to when it was more abstract. The heterogeneous effect of suggesting benefit concentration by benefit type is visualized in Figure 3.

Furthermore, I find that suggestions of benefit concentration are also more effective at dispersing beliefs about who benefits in the economic condition than in the security condition. Figure 4 shows the density distribution of responses for *Benefit Americans* when the benefit is strategic locations (left) and when the benefit is oil fields (right). Responses from participants who did not receive the opposition's argument are depicted in light gray, while responses from participants who read about a possible concentration are shown in darker gray. In the case of security benefits, although respondents were generally less likely to agree that taking Seal Island would benefit Americans when introduced to the possibility of concentrated benefits, the shape of the distribution did not change dramatically. In fact, the proportion of participants who either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement declined by only 18 percentage points, from 69% to 51% (Figure 4a). In contrast, when oil fields were at

stake, reading about the possible concentration of benefits reduced the proportion of those who strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement by 30 percentage points, from 73% to 43% (Figure 4b). Those who strongly or somewhat disagreed that taking Seal Island would benefit the American people also increased by almost three times in the oil fields condition, from 12% to 32%.

Finally, akin to Study 1, economic benefits were not necessarily less preferred to security benefits when the opposition did not cast doubt on how the benefits would be distributed. In other words, while economic benefits were more vulnerable to accusations of concentrated benefits as hypothesized by *H*₂, people did not automatically associate economic benefits with concentrated interests in the absence of such accusations. This finding has two important implications. One, economic benefits are not inherently less preferred than security benefits when their distributional consequences are perceived as diffuse. Two, it highlights the theory's scope conditions: the theory may be less applicable to situations or polities where the political opposition does not or cannot raise accusations of benefit concentration.

Study 3: Potentially Concentrated Economic Benefits versus No Benefits (*H*₃)

Studies 1 and 2 have each shown that the public prefers diffuse benefits over concentrated benefits and that economic benefits are more easily discredited as concentrated than non-economic benefits. The third survey tests the final hypothesis (*H*₃), which predicted that issues suggested of having concentrated economic benefits would be less likely to be considered national interest than issues without any economic benefits. Study 3 was fielded on February 12–14, 2022, on 677 U.S. adults.

¹⁸ The only exception was *Contribute Money*, which was measured on a four-point scale following Study 1.

FIGURE 3. Persuasiveness of Concentrated Benefits Suggestion by Benefit Type (Visualized)

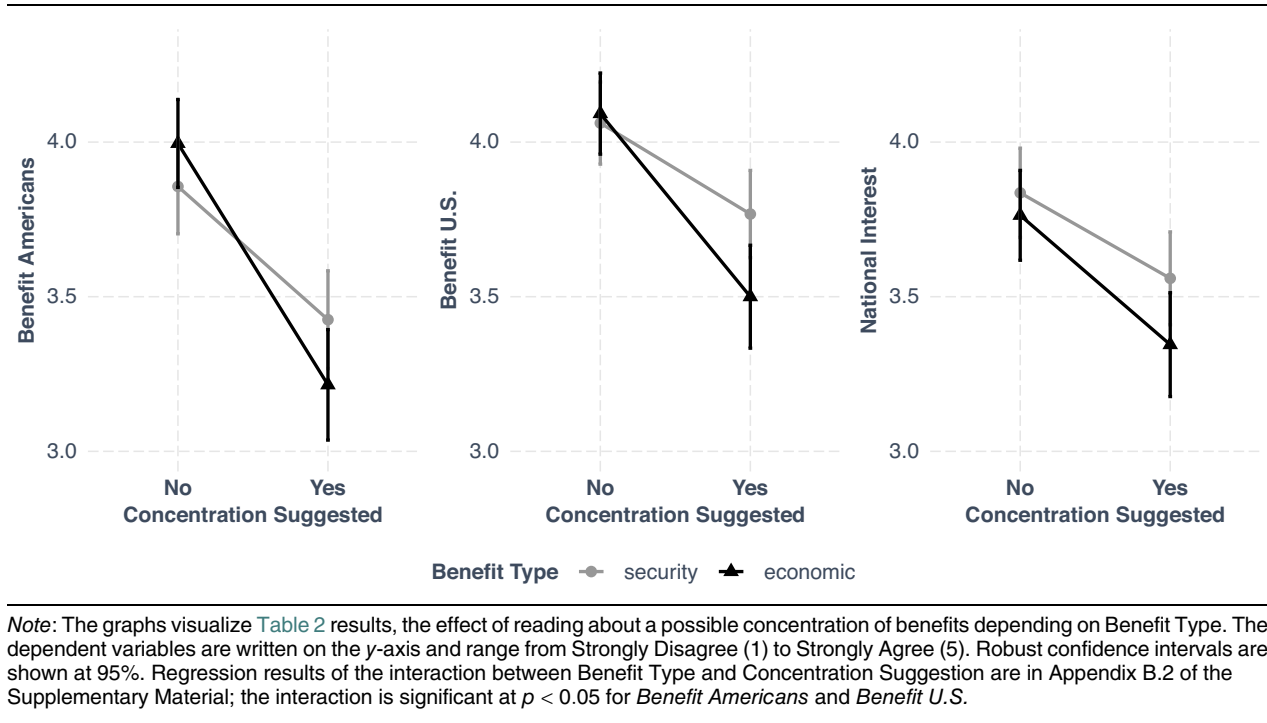
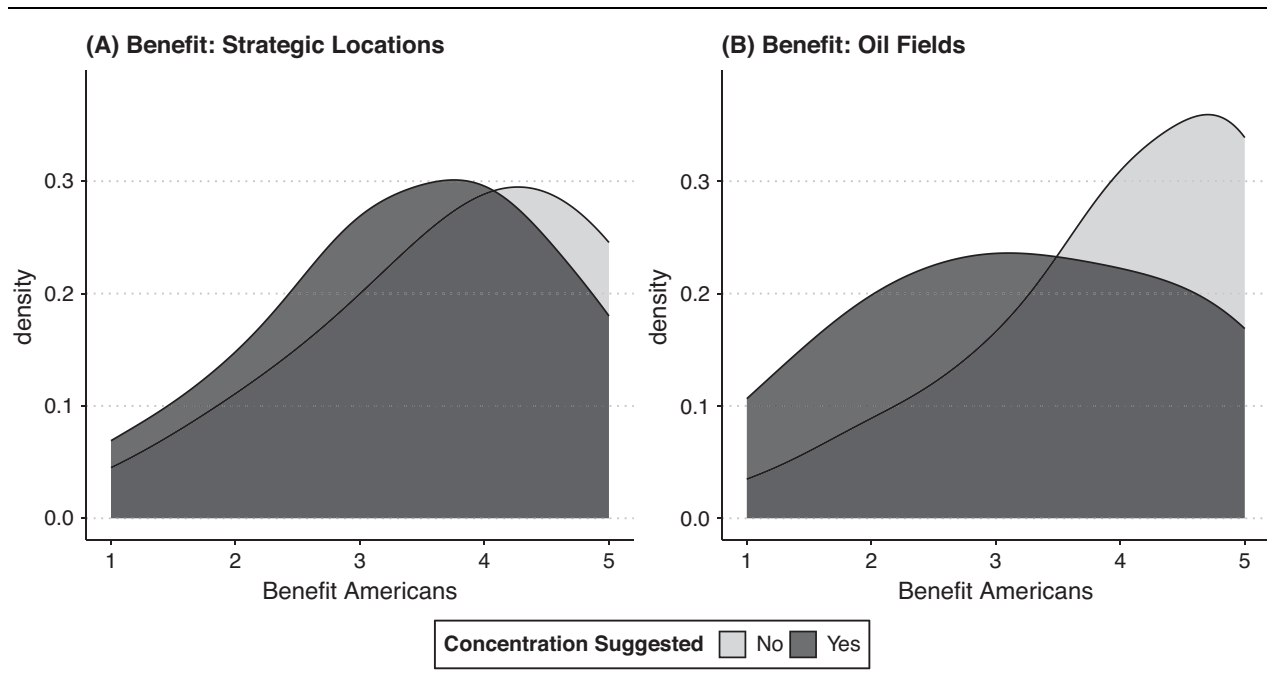


FIGURE 4. Persuasiveness of Concentrated Benefits Suggestion by Benefit Type (Belief Dispersion)



Note: Smoothed density plot showing the distribution of responses for “Taking Seal Island benefits the American people” (*Benefit Americans*). The responses range from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) and are plotted on the x-axis. The difference in variance is only significant for panel (b), the economic condition (Appendix B.1 of the Supplementary Material).

TABLE 3. Effect of Having Economic Value with Uncertain Distributional Consequences

	<i>Dependent variables:</i>				
	Support Military Use (1)	Benefit Americans (2)	Benefit U.S. (3)	National Interest (4)	Contribute Money (5)
Economic value (Concentration suggested)	-0.147* (0.088)	-0.637*** (0.099)	-0.260*** (0.094)	-0.249** (0.096)	-0.316*** (0.105)
Constant	2.890*** (0.062)	3.275*** (0.070)	3.421*** (0.067)	3.427*** (0.068)	2.424*** (0.075)
Observations	677	677	677	677	677
R ²	0.004	0.058	0.011	0.010	0.013

Note: Coefficients show how the DVs change relative to when the island does not have any economic value. Coefficients are estimated using ordinary least squares and robust SEs are presented in parentheses. All responses were measured on a five-point scale; support for military use is significant at $p < 0.05$ when using the seven-point scale. Full regression results with covariates are available in Appendix C.2.2 of the Supplementary Material. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Study 3 employed a simple design, varying only whether or not the issue at stake had objective economic value that could be accused of concentrated economic benefits. When introducing a hypothetical territorial dispute over Seal Island between the U.S. and Russia, half of the respondents were told that “the island does not have any natural resources” (*No Value*), while the other half were told “the island provides access to offshore oil fields” (*Economic Value*). After being told of the anticipated costs of taking over the island, all respondents in both the *No Value* and the *Economic Value* scenarios read about the proponents’ attempt to frame Seal Island as a matter of diffuse security benefits:

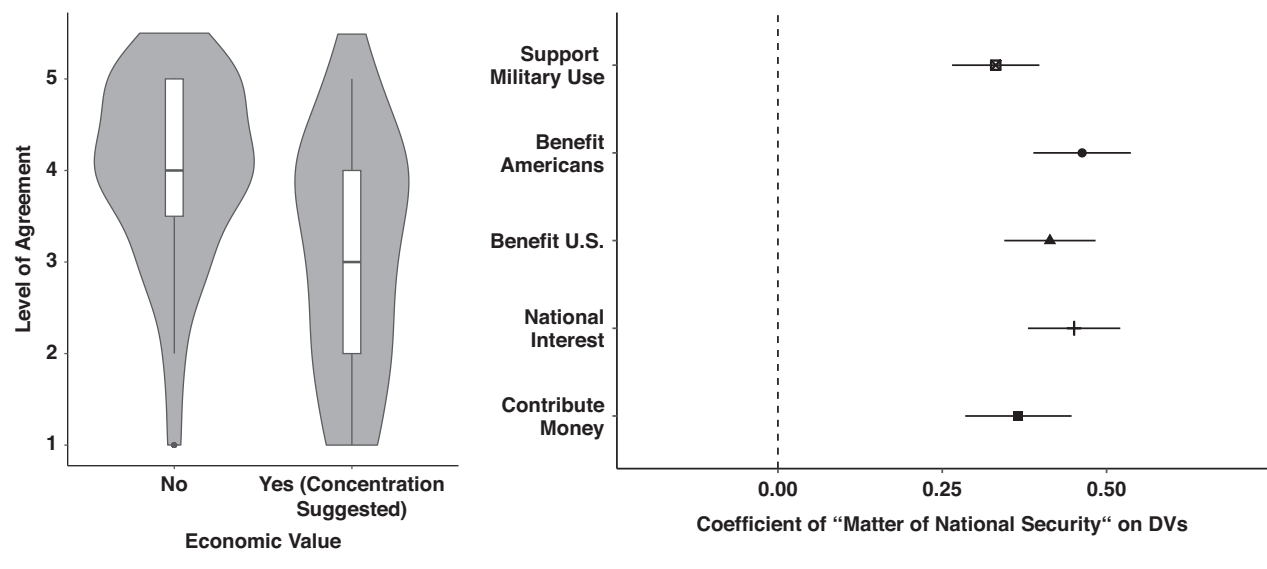
Despite the costs, some policymakers argue that taking control of Seal Island would be in the U.S. national interest. They say taking Seal Island would provide access to important strategic locations. The strategic locations could be used to better protect all Americans from foreign security threats.

Next, all respondents were introduced to opposing arguments. In the case where the island had no value, the opposition cast doubt on the size of Seal Island’s security benefits by saying, “They claim the security benefits provided by Seal Island would not be as large as what some policymakers argue.” In the case where oil was present, the opposition was able to make an additional accusation about how the oil benefits would be concentrated on certain domestic groups, which read, “In fact, they say the real reason for trying to take Seal Island is to benefit certain oil companies, not to protect all Americans. Only some oil companies would benefit from taking the island, at the cost of other Americans.” This design allows us to test how effective an accusation of concentrated economic benefits is in decreasing support for an issue that is objectively more valuable relative to when the issue does not have any economic value and is not subject to such accusation.

After reading the prompt, respondents were asked how much they approved or disapproved of a military operation to take Seal Island (*Support Military Use*), followed by questions on whether taking Seal Island would be beneficial for most Americans (*Benefit Americans*), for the U.S. (*Benefit U.S.*), or be in the national interest (*National Interest*), presented in random order. Participants were also asked how willing they were to contribute \$20 to support a military operation for the island should the U.S. government request it (*Contribute Money*).

The results in Table 3 show respondents consistently believed that gaining an island with potentially concentrated economic benefits would result in fewer benefits for Americans and the nation compared to when the island did not have any economic value. For example, the belief that taking Seal Island would benefit Americans was lower by 19.5% when the island had economic value with uncertain distributional consequences compared to when the island did not have any clear value to begin with (model 2). Respondents were also less likely to support military use over Seal Island or to contribute personally to the dispute in the economic value condition.

Finally, I investigate Table 3 results in more detail by examining the theoretical mechanism suggested by H_3 . H_3 predicted that having economic value can become a liability in framing an issue as a national interest because it opens up the issue to suggestions of concentrated economic benefits, which in turn can cast doubt on the sincerity of the issue’s other non-economic benefits. To test this mechanism, I first examine whether respondents were indeed less likely to believe that the island had diffuse security benefits when the island had economic value. Figure 5a displays respondents’ level of agreement with the statement, “The policymakers who support taking Seal Island are trying to take the island for national security reasons” (*Matter of National Security*), both for when the island had no economic value (left) and for when the island had

FIGURE 5. Testing H_3 Mechanisms

Note: Panel (a) shows the distribution of responses for *Matter of National Security* measured from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Box plots display median and quartile values. The mean values for the two conditions are 3.98 (No Value) and 3.10 (Economic Value), and the difference is significant at $p < 0.01$. Panel (b) displays the regression coefficients of *Matter of National Security* for each dependent variable presented in Table 3. Confidence intervals are at 95% and full mediation results are available in Appendix C.1 of the Supplementary Material.

economic value suggested of concentration (right).¹⁹ The figure shows that when the island had potentially concentrated economic value, less than half of the respondents (45%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the proponents' claims that taking Seal Island was a matter of national security. By contrast, when the island had no economic value, 75% of participants believed policymakers were pursuing the issue for national security reasons even when they had read about the island's doubtful security benefits.

I then examine the second step of the mechanism—whether belief in the issue as a matter of national security affected respondents' view of the issue as a national interest worth fighting for. To do so, I estimate the effect of *Matter of National Security* on each of the dependent variables presented in Table 3. Because respondents' perception of the issue as a matter of national security is not randomized, in this estimation stage I control for other covariates that can affect its relationship with the dependent variables, such as party, education, gender, and income. The results are displayed in Figure 5b and demonstrate a strong positive relationship between respondents' belief of Seal Island as a matter of national security and their level of support for the five dependent variables.

Overall, Study 3 demonstrates that issues with economic benefits, when faced with the suggestion that the benefits may be concentrated, are less likely to be seen as being in the national interest than issues without any

economic value because the economic benefits also undermine the sincerity of non-economic benefits. By showing how the presence of economic benefits can backfire, this result challenges the conventional wisdom that economic benefits make an issue more valuable all else equal. It also provides a potential explanation for some puzzling empirical findings in the territorial conflicts literature, where studies have found that contested lands with resources are *less* likely to be claimed or evolve into militarized conflict (Altman 2020; Hensel and Mitchell 2005; Huth 1996; Lee 2023b).

CONCLUSION

An issue's value plays a decisive role in many international relations theories. It determines when states choose to escalate conflict, which states prevail at the bargaining table, and whether leaders are punished for backing down. This study takes one of the first steps in trying to unpack how issue values are decided, and offers a new theory of when and why international issues are perceived as important to the nation and worth fighting for. Findings from survey experiments show that first, issues providing diffuse benefits to nation members are considered more important and worth fighting for than issues providing concentrated benefits to certain domestic groups. Second, economic benefits are less likely to be seen as providing diffuse benefits when faced with uncertainty about how the benefits would be distributed. Lastly, accusations of concentrated economic benefits can also undermine the sincerity of an issue's non-economic benefits,

¹⁹ This question was asked after questions on the dependent variables to prevent it from influencing responses to the DVs.

ultimately making the issue less preferred to one without any clear value.

This study contributes to the literature on national interest by first, complicating our understanding of distributive politics in foreign policy. According to the classical collective action theory, issues benefiting specific groups are more likely to be represented in foreign policies because the concentrated benefits motivate the beneficiaries to take action while the diffuse costs discourage the general public from opposing strongly. While this may be true for issues whose costs are small or hidden, this article shows that when it comes to issues with high and visible diffuse costs such as those involving military conflict, issues with concentrated benefits actually have a harder time becoming national interests.

Second, the article provides a nuanced understanding of the traditional high–low politics argument, which assumes that security issues are inherently more important than welfare issues. Survey respondents were equally—sometimes more—likely to support escalation over economic benefits compared to security benefits when they were told for certain that all Americans would benefit. This finding suggests that we may see less enthusiasm for escalation over economic issues not because economic issues are perceived as less important than security issues per se, but because economic issues have a harder time being thought of as benefiting the entire nation.

That said, a limitation of the current study is that it holds constant many important dimensions such as rivalry, regime type, and type of economic resources. These dimensions are important to consider in future research, since they can significantly affect the applicability of the theory. For example, rivalries may diminish the importance of distributional consequences because any benefit for any domestic group could be preferred over the opposing country gaining if there is enough animosity toward the opponent. If this were the case, the U.S.–Russia scenario provided in this article would be a harder test of the theory. In contrast, it is also possible that some sort of existing rivalry is necessary for an issue to be considered using military force over.

Additionally, many of the examples provided in the article as well as the survey experiments themselves focus on oil resources. The oligopolistic nature of the oil industry makes oil a convenient proxy for clear and specific economic interests because it is easier to imagine cases where oil companies are powerful enough to influence foreign policy. But as aforementioned, the persuasiveness of the opposition would vary depending on how economically concentrated, politically influential, or corrupt the industry is seen to be. Therefore, it would be worth examining how the relevant industry's market concentration or its public reputation affects the persuasiveness of benefit concentration accusations on a gradual scale.

Finally, this article assumes that domestic political opposition exists and has incentives to make a contradictory case about an international issue. However, challenging foreign policy is not a costless move

(Gilbert 1988; Schultz 2001), and as a result, the domestic opposition may be more willing to voice their opposition in some cases than in others. For example, if economic resources are found on land that is already considered valuable to the nation, the domestic opposition may shy away from voicing any kind of criticism because of the risks involved in doing so. The incentives of the opposition would also vary by regime type. Given that the theory relies heavily on the role of the opposition, it would be important to further theorize about the expected benefits and costs of the opposition's strategy. Specifically, examining in which issue areas domestic opposition is more likely to arise and how the theory applies to various political institutions or to issues with already established national values would be interesting avenues for further research.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001284>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BFRJDU>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Mike Tomz, Ken Schultz, and Jim Fearon for their comments and support on this project. I also thank Feyaad Allie, Dan Altman, Joshua Byun, Stacie Goddard, Hein Goemans, Michael Goldfien, Zuhad Hai, Lindsay Hundley, Josh Kertzer, Andrew Kydd, Ashley Leeds, Jack Levy, Rachel Lienesch, Yingdan Lu, Emily Meierding, Rachel Myrick, Cesar Vargas Nunez, Jeongmin Park, Avshalom Schwartz, Nadav Shelef, Lauren Sukin, Katy Robinson, Sarah Thompson, Ariel Zellman, Andi Zhou, participants at APSA 2021, Peace Science 2021, ISA 2022, and IRTC 2022, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. All errors remain my own.

FUNDING STATEMENT

Funding was generously provided by the Stanford Institute for Research in the Social Sciences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author declares the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Stanford University and certificate numbers are provided in the Supplementary Material. The author affirms that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

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