

# Ideology and the Red Button: How Ideology Shapes Nuclear Weapons' Use Preferences in Europe

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Does partisan ideology influence whether Europeans are willing to use nuclear weapons, and if so, how? The US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe have been at the core of European security since the Cold War, but we have still yet to learn what would make Europeans be willing to support their use. In this paper, we present the results of a survey, in which we asked citizens in Germany and the Netherlands about their views on the use of the US nuclear weapons stationed on their territory in four distinct scenarios. Our results indicate that voters of right-wing parties are more likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons in both countries. There are, however, important differences between the two countries in terms of

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the degree to which the participants oppose the use of nuclear weapons. These results have implications for NATO's nuclear deterrence posture.

¿Influye la ideología partidista en el hecho de que los europeos estén dispuestos a utilizar armas nucleares, y si es así, de qué manera? Las armas nucleares de EE. UU. ubicadas en Europa han sido el núcleo de la seguridad europea desde la Guerra Fría, pero todavía tenemos que saber qué haría que los europeos estuvieran dispuestos a apoyar su uso. En este artículo presentamos los resultados de una encuesta en la que preguntamos a los ciudadanos de Alemania y los Países Bajos su opinión sobre el uso de las armas nucleares estadounidenses ubicadas en su territorio en cuatro escenarios distintos. Nuestros resultados indican que los votantes de partidos de derechas son más propensos a aprobar el uso de armas nucleares en ambos países. Sin embargo, existen importantes diferencias entre los dos países en cuanto al grado de oposición de los participantes al uso de armas nucleares. Estos resultados tienen implicaciones con respecto a la postura de disuasión nuclear de la OTAN.

L'idéologie partisane influence-t-elle la volonté des Européens d'utiliser l'arme nucléaire et, si oui, comment ? Les armes nucléaires américaines situées en Europe se situent au cœur de la sécurité européenne depuis la guerre froide, mais il nous reste encore à découvrir ce qui pousserait les Européens à soutenir leur utilisation. Dans le présent article, nous présentons les résultats d'une enquête, au cours de laquelle nous avons demandé à des citoyens allemands et néerlandais leur opinion concernant l'utilisation des armes nucléaires américaines situées sur leur territoire dans le cadre de quatre scénarios distincts. Selon nos résultats, les électeurs des partis de droite ont plus de chances d'approuver l'utilisation des armes nucléaires dans les deux pays. Néanmoins, il existe des différences importantes entre les deux pays en termes de degrés d'opposition des participants à l'utilisation des armes nucléaires. Ces résultats ont des implications pour la position de dissuasion nucléaire de l'OTAN.

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## Introduction

Does partisan ideology influence whether Europeans are willing to approve of the use of nuclear weapons? And if so, how? These questions bring together two different streams of academic scholarship: research on the link between partisanship and foreign policy, and the study of the public's willingness to support the military employment of nuclear weapons.

The link between partisanship and foreign policy has been studied extensively in recent years, with particular attention on the influence of partisanship on the willingness to use military force. This scholarship has demonstrated that, similar to the United States, foreign policy is contested along partisan lines in Europe as well (Rathbun 2004; Hofmann 2013; Mello 2014; Wagner et al. 2017; Wagner 2020). Scholars have in recent years looked at the link between partisanship and the support for the use of force mainly by using observational study of parliamentary votes to deploy troops abroad (Wagner et al. 2018; Haesebrouck and van Immerseel 2020; Wagner 2020), by looking at military budgets (Wenzelburger and Böller 2020), by exploring attitudes toward alliances (Gavras et al. 2020), or by scrutinizing public opinion (Everts and Isernia 2015). Altogether, these works have shown that partisanship provides a meaningful lens to explain public attitudes toward a range of foreign and security policy themes.

At the same time, the scholarship on public willingness to approve of the use of nuclear weapons (stimulated by the work of Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013 and Sagan and Valentino 2017) has flourished in recent years. It furthered the earlier

research on the “nuclear taboo” (Tannenwald 1999) and led to reevaluation of the degree to which the general public is opposed to the use of nuclear weapons (for an overview of the recent scholarship, see Smetana and Wunderlich 2021). While this new wave of the nuclear (non-)use research has provided some limited evidence about the relationship between political orientation of individuals and their support for nuclear strikes, it has, so far, focused predominantly on the United States.

We bring these two strands of scholarship together and look at how partisanship influences the willingness to use nuclear weapons *in Europe*. The timeliness of our study is underlined by the increasing salience of nuclear weapons in this region. Nuclear weapons have already received renewed attention after the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (see, e.g., Morgan and Péczeli 2021) and are now in the media spotlight primarily due to Kremlin’s nuclear sabre-rattling in the war in Ukraine and the possibility of an open armed conflict between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia. Notably, this rising attention the threat of nuclear war has not only increased the public salience of nuclear weapons, but also highlighted their continued relevance among policymakers.

Through the study of public opinion, we can better understand the political considerations that the policymakers would face. While the decision to use nuclear weapons would be taken by the highest-level decision-makers during a conflict, these decision-makers are influenced by public opinion (Lin-Greenberg 2021). As public opinion keeps elites accountable (Simmons 2009), it should normatively reflect a commitment to international norms.

To study the relationship between political ideology and support for the use of nuclear weapons, we used data from an original survey conducted in May 2020 in Germany and the Netherlands, two of the countries where US nuclear weapons are stationed in Europe (Kristensen and Korda 2020). In this survey, we asked individuals about their support for the use of nuclear weapons in four hypothetical scenarios. We look at how individual ideology as well as vote choice influence respondents’ willingness to approve of the use of nuclear weapons across these scenarios. Beyond investigating whether ideology or vote choice influence nuclear (non-)use preferences, our paper also advances existing scholarship by examining whether the effect of partisanship on foreign policy is consistent across different (even if culturally similar) countries.

Our results suggest that, in both Germany and the Netherlands, large majorities oppose the use of nuclear weapons. However, the ones willing to approve of the use of nuclear weapons in both countries tend to identify themselves ideologically as right-wing and vote for right-wing parties. We also find that the more general willingness to defend the countries on NATO eastern flank plays an important role—respondents who are willing to defend the Baltics in case of conflict are significantly more likely to support the use of nuclear weapons.

The remainder of the paper continues as follows. In the second section, we review the existing public opinion scholarship on the use of nuclear weapons as well as the scholarship on Europeans’ views of nuclear weapons. In the third section, we develop our theoretical argument linking partisanship and nuclear weapons’ use. In the fourth section, we present the data and the methods. The fifth section presents the results and a discussion.

### (European) Public and Nuclear Weapons

Our paper builds on the existing scholarship on European attitudes toward nuclear weapons and existing studies on the public willingness to use nuclear weapons.

#### *European Views of Nuclear Weapons*

Present debates about the usefulness of nuclear weapons in Europe are, in a way, a continuation of the long-standing debates dating back to the 1970s and 1980s.

In this period, the peace movements, often in cooperation with left-wing political parties, contested the stationing of nuclear weapons in Europe (Müller and Risse-Kappen 1987; Evangelista 2002; Wittner 2003, 2009; Nuti et al. 2015). Already during the 1970s and 1980s, major parts of the European population were opposed to the stationing of US nuclear weapons on European territory (Kelleher 1975; Everts 1985b; Müller and Risse-Kappen 1987). Yet, during this period, there was also remarkable elite political bipartisanship in how the center-right and center-left approached nuclear arms control (Bahr 2014), and such arms control became a very broadly shared concern (Müller and Risse-Kappen 1987).

Experts acknowledge that European countries are in a difficult position when it comes to nuclear weapons. On one hand, European governments—including in the countries hosting forward-deployed nuclear weapons—have been trying to position themselves as advocates of nuclear disarmament, mainly in a step-by-step fashion (Meier 2016; Glatz et al. 2020). At the same time, they are increasingly aware that in the current security environment, forward-deployed nuclear weapons fulfil a relevant task within NATO (Kühn 2017; Advisory Council on International Affairs 2019).

Recently, the salience of nuclear weapons in Europe has increased again (von Hlatky 2014; Morgan and Péczeli 2021; Smetana, Onderco, and Etienne 2021). Today, the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe is contested once more in four Western European countries where nuclear weapons are believed to be deployed: Belgium (Sauer 2014), Germany (Meier 2008; Davis and Jasper 2014; Fuhrhop, Kühn, and Meier 2020; Fuhrhop 2021; Onderco and Smetana 2021), Italy (Foradori 2012, 2014; Dian 2020), and the Netherlands (van der Zeijden 2014; van der Meer 2019; Onderco 2021; Onderco et al. 2021).

A major shortcoming of existing scholarship is that it does not seek to explain the variation within public opinion. Major exceptions to this pattern are over three decades old, and focus on single countries (Everts 1985b; Müller and Risse-Kappen 1987). Even more recent public opinion surveys use Europeans' views on nuclear weapons as an *explanans* rather than an *explanandum* (Pelopidas 2017; Fialho and Pelopidas 2019; Pelopidas and Fialho 2019b; Egeland and Pelopidas 2020). We therefore seek to remedy this shortcoming by explaining the variation in these public views, and add more granularity to our understanding of Europeans' attitudes to nuclear weapons and their use.

### *Public Opinion and Nuclear Weapons*

To explain the variation in European public opinion about the use of nuclear weapons, we build on the existing scholarship on public opinion on nuclear weapons, which has drawn mainly on work on the nuclear taboo. Whereas the “first wave” of nuclear nonuse scholarship drew on qualitative analyses of historical decision-making (Tannenwald 2007; Paul 2009), the more recent “second wave” literature has aimed at providing new insights into the nuclear nonuse puzzle using large-*N* experimental surveys of public attitudes (see Smetana and Wunderlich 2021). For example, Press, Sagan, and Valentino (2013, 189) found “relatively little evidence that the U.S. public strongly opposes the U.S. use of nuclear weapons,” and argued that the logic of consequences dominates individuals' views on hypothetical nuclear use, as opposed to “taboo-like” thinking driven by the logic of appropriateness. In a follow-up study that emulated the 1945 Hiroshima scenario in today's Iran, the authors found that “a clear majority of Americans would approve of using nuclear weapons first against the civilian population of a nonnuclear-armed adversary, killing 2 million civilians” (Sagan and Valentino 2017, 45).

These conclusions provoked a lively scholarly exchange. Some critics disagreed with such limited view of morality and demonstrated through follow-up experiments that preference for nuclear weapon use is also driven by individuals' moral

foundations (Rathbun and Stein 2019; Smetana and Vranka 2021; Smetana and Onderco 2022). Other scholars found that legal and ethical priming (Carpenter and Montgomery 2020) and vivid information on the negative effects of nuclear strikes (Koch and Wells 2021) can significantly decrease individuals' support for the use of nuclear weapons. Carpenter and Montgomery (2020) cautioned that some of the aforementioned surveys and the publication of their results carry their own risks as they could sway public opinion toward a more favorable view of the use of nuclear weapons.

The existing studies of nuclear nonuse attitudes are, with rare exceptions (Avey 2015; Sukin 2020), exclusively focused on attitudes in nuclear-armed states (Sagan and Valentino 2017; Haworth, Sagan, and Valentino 2019; Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022; Smetana and Onderco 2022). So far, there are no scholarly studies of nuclear nonuse attitudes conducted in states that participate in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement.

Arguably, studies of nonuse attitudes in such hosting states are highly relevant for both policy and theory—the hosting states are involved in decision-making that could potentially lead to the military use of nuclear weapons that are stationed on their territory, yet they do not possess operational control of these weapons and overall maintain their non-nuclear-weapon state identity. Moreover, recently reignited debates in European NATO states about the possibility of withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe are closely related to ideas about their purpose, including their hypothetical military use. As such, studies of nonuse attitudes in nuclear hosting states represent an important complement to existing scholarly research in (predominantly Western) nuclear-armed countries.

In this paper, we overcome the limitations of the existing research by developing a consistent theoretical framework to explain variation in public support for the use of the nuclear weapons stationed in Europe.

### Theory: Linking Ideology to Nuclear (Non-)Use

For a long time, whether voters hold meaningful foreign policy preferences was hotly debated among scholars (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Holsti 2004). However, over time, scholars understood that citizens hold certain basic attitudes toward foreign policy, and that these are systematically structured (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Peffley and Hurwitz 1992; Aldrich et al. 2006; Kertzer et al. 2014; Rathbun et al. 2016; Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017). Drawing clues from political psychology, European scholars have argued that personality traits (Schoen 2007; Gravelle, Reifler, and Scotto 2020), national identity (Mader and Pötzschke 2014), and the Holsti and Rosenau (1990) model of military and cooperative internationalism (Gravelle, Reifler, and Scotto 2017) influence citizens.

The recent rise of scholarship on party ideologies and foreign policy, however, is built around the idea that foreign policy is deeply rooted in partisan ideology, and that these ideologies also influence how voters choose the party they support (Thérien and Noel 2000; Palmer, London, and Regan 2004; Arena and Palmer 2009; Wagner et al. 2018; Wagner 2020). In bipartisan settings, linking party identification to party ideology is rather easy and straightforward. However, in multiparty systems, the left–right axis proved able to accommodate new conflicts (Laver and Hunt 1992) as well as keep its explanatory power (Aspinwall 2007).

It is therefore no surprise that the emerging accepted wisdom from the scholarship on party politics and foreign policy is that, at least in Western European democracies, the leading line of contestation runs across the left–right spectrum (Mello 2014; Ostermann et al. 2020; Wagner 2020), even if such a pattern does not apply all the time (Hofmann 2013). Such patterns, however, also hold in supranational bodies, such as the European Parliament (Raunio and Wagner 2020). This differentiation rests on the genuine differences between parties on how to approach

foreign policy (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). These splits are both material—what should scarce resources be spent on—and ideological—how to think about world politics (Rathbun 2004; Wagner 2020). As Rathbun (2004) argues, some parties believe in Jervis’s “deterrence model,” which in turn means that they are more likely to espouse views that highlight military preparedness and armaments, whereas others believe in the “spiral model,” which highlights security dilemma sensitivity and awareness of the effect of one’s own actions on the counterpart (see Jervis 1976 for a discussion of the deterrence and spiral models).

In line with recent calls for diversifying the scholarship on parties (Hofmann and Martill 2021), we believe that partisanship influences also what voters think when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons. The basis for the stationing of nuclear weapons in Europe is rooted in deterrence—the idea that by showing strength, one can dissuade the counterpart from even trying to attack (see Lieber and Press 2020 for explanation and application to Western Europe). Deterring the Soviet Union was the key reason for stationing these weapons in Europe in the first place and deterring Russia continues to be an important reason why US nuclear weapons continue to be stationed on European territory (Schulte 2012). The deterrent model of thinking is very closely linked to right-wing political ideology (Wagner 2020). There is also further evidence that conservatism is linked to a higher likelihood of the use of force. Henry Nau (2015) in his study of “conservative internationalism” talks of armed diplomacy—the use of military tools to support diplomacy. Scholars have also underlined the link between conservatism and a realist view of the world. Conservatives are more likely to embrace the “military internationalist” outlook, which highlights the importance of power in achieving foreign policy goals (Rathbun 2012, 2013). Piki Ish-Shalom (2006) traces the link between realism and conservatism in the work of Hans Morgenthau and conservative skepticism about human nature. This link even extends to the academic world, as international relations scholars who identify with realism are more likely to consider themselves conservative (Rathbun 2012). If left-wing parties supported military interventions in the post-Cold War period, it was usually to support humanitarian interventions in other countries (Rathbun 2004; Hildebrandt et al. 2013).

When it comes to nuclear weapons and partisanship, during the Cold War in Germany, the left-wing parties were often at the forefront of the opposition to nuclear weapons (Müller and Risse-Kappen 1987; Risse-Kappen 1983, 1997) while the conservatives were often more supportive of such deployments (Kelleher 1975). Similar patterns could be found in the Netherlands during the Cold War (Everts 1984, 1985a,b). While in recent years the left has continued to be more critical of nuclear sharing in Germany (Fuhrhop 2021), in the Netherlands almost all parties have flirted with unilateral nuclear disarmament (Onderco 2021).

A key part of the deterrent thinking is the willingness to use weapons, should need be. The extant scholarship based on surveys, conducted primarily in the United States, confirms that party ideology is at play when it comes to nuclear weapons. Identifying as Republican has been associated with a higher approval of nuclear strikes in several studies in the United States (Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013; Sagan and Valentino 2017; Koch and Wells 2021; Smetana and Vranka 2021); this relationship seems to be even stronger for Trump supporters specifically (Haworth, Sagan, and Valentino 2019). Political conservatism appears to be a strong predictor of support for nuclear strikes in other Western nuclear-armed countries (the United Kingdom, Israel, France) as well (Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022; Horschig 2022).

Given that the existing scholarship has shown that partisanship is an important driver of foreign policy preferences both in the United States and in Europe, and given that the existing scholarship has demonstrated that right-wing parties in Europe are more hawkish and right-wing voters in the United States are more likely to support the use of nuclear weapons, we hypothesize about the link between

supporting partisanship (especially identification with the right wing) and approving the use of nuclear weapons among Europeans.

**H1:** *The more that individuals self-identify with right-wing ideology, the more likely they are to support the use of nuclear weapons.*

Existing scholarship on partisanship and foreign policy in Europe, however, has mainly focused on the role of parties. We therefore do not know whether the link between foreign policy preferences and partisanship is mediated by vote choice or not. Existing work in comparative politics has demonstrated that individual partisanship influences vote choice (van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005; Caprara et al. 2017). While vote choice and partisanship are interrelated, they do remain distinct choices. For this reason, we also evaluate whether H1 in an analogous form applies to voters of right-wing parties.

**H2:** *Voters of right-wing parties are more likely to support the use of nuclear weapons than voters of left-wing parties.*

## Methods

### *Case Selection*

We have selected Germany and the Netherlands for this study because they provide a good case for understanding the political dynamics currently at play in the European countries hosting US nuclear weapons. Forward-deployed nuclear weapons are considered a key element of the NATO nuclear deterrent (Department of Defense 2018; NATO 2021). At present, the United States is believed to station nuclear weapons in five countries in Europe (Kristensen and Korda 2020). These weapons are under US custody while stationed in Europe, and their use is subject to approval by the US President. However, they would be delivered by dual-capable aircraft of the stationing countries, hence involving top political decision-making from both sides of the Atlantic.

Yet in recent years, parliaments in four Western European countries where US nuclear weapons are being stationed—Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands—debated whether to keep these weapons on their territory. These debates go beyond the narrow question of hosting nuclear weapons and address a broader issue of the value of nuclear deterrence and the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons as such.

These debates were most present in Germany and in the Netherlands, which is an additional reason to study these countries. Germany, from the spring of 2020 to late 2021, was enmeshed in a debate about the future of German participation in nuclear sharing, sparked by an interview that Rolf Mützenich, chair of the parliamentary caucus of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), had given to *Der Tagesspiegel* in May 2020 (Die Tagesschau 2020). This debate was settled (albeit tentatively) only in the recent government manifesto. In the Netherlands, the parliament has voted on over four dozen motions related to nuclear weapons in the last decade alone, more than in all other European host countries taken together. A major theme in these discussions was whether the country should continue providing dual-capable aircraft for NATO nuclear purposes (the Dutch government does not officially confirm the hosting of US nuclear weapons). The Netherlands was also the only NATO country to take part in the negotiations of the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) spurred by parliamentary action (Shirobokova 2018).

In both of these national settings, a key question that emerged was related to the military utility of the forward-deployed nuclear weapons on the national territory and their potential use in conflict (for the overview of the German debate, see Fuhrhop 2021; for the overview of the Dutch debate, see Onderco 2021). The debates in Germany and in the Netherlands therefore reflect deeper cleavages that exist when it comes to nuclear weapons in other European hosting countries.

*Survey*

The data for our research were collected by Kieskompas—Election Compass, a leading Dutch pollster and research institute. The online data collection<sup>1</sup> took place between September 17 and 19, 2020, in the Netherlands and between September 22 and 29, 2020, in Germany. In the Netherlands, random stratified sampling was employed, whereas in Germany simple random sampling was used to construct the panel of invited respondents. In both countries, panel members were predominantly drawn from a pool of voting advice application users who had voluntarily signed up and given consent online, and in the case of the Netherlands, the Central Bureau of Statistics (Statistics Netherlands) Golden Standard was used for constructing the demographic strata during sampling based on age, gender, education, and region.

The data collection yielded a sample size of 1,603 in the Netherlands, of which 1,020 were men and 583 women, with an average age of fifty-eight years (standard deviation [sd] = 15.4), and of which 941 had higher education. In Germany, the resulting dataset ( $n = 1,352$ ) consisted of 999 men and 353 women, had an average age of forty-eight years (sd = 15.8), and contained 830 respondents with higher education.

In order to account for the substantial demographic imbalances in the datasets owing to skewed sampling frameworks and differential participation rates (Etienne 2021), poststratification and iterative proportional fitting weighting methods were applied using benchmarks of age, sex, educational attainment, region (all drawn from Statistics Netherlands Golden Standard and Eurostat's CensusHub, for the Netherlands and Germany respectively), and voting behavior during the preceding parliamentary election (i.e., March 2017 in the Netherlands and September 2017 in Germany). These procedures resulted in nationally representative datasets with a maximum margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level (CL) of 5.1 percent in the Netherlands and 6.4 percent in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

*Dependent Variable*

To measure the willingness to use nuclear weapons, we asked respondents to imagine a military conflict between NATO and Russia in the Baltics. Given the range of US nuclear weapons stationed in Germany and the Netherlands, one can hardly imagine a realistic scenario of nuclear weapons' use other than their employment against Russia. Since the 2014 occupation of Crimea, Western experts have been particularly concerned about the possibility of a limited military conflict with Moscow on NATO's eastern flank (Suchy and Thayer 2014; Kroenig 2015; McCrisken and Downman 2019), concerns that have recently become further exacerbated.

In the next step, we presented the respondents with four scenarios involving the use of nuclear weapons within this hypothetical conflict. In the first scenario, we described "a demonstrative explosion over an unpopulated area to de-escalate in an attempt to stop an ongoing Russian invasion of the Baltic countries." The second scenario entailed the use of nuclear weapons "to target Russian military units and thereby gain a military advantage over Russia in the conflict." In the third scenario,

<sup>1</sup>An accumulating body of research has shown that carefully constructed online nonprobability panels in highly internet-penetrated populations produce results in the study of political behavior as accurately as other survey methods (see, e.g., Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014 for a fairly recent study) although slightly older research has also found that measuring accuracy is lower in online nonprobability samples than in probability samples. An example of such a study is Yeager et al.'s (2011).

<sup>2</sup>Margins of error were calculated taking into account the complex sample design, in accordance with the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)'s guidelines for reporting of precision in nonprobability samples (see Baker et al. 2013). Weights were trimmed at the 99.5th percentile in order to reduce the impact of the largest few weights. The same study by Yeager et al. (2011) found that poststratification in nonprobability samples improves measuring accuracy.



our respondents would read about “a demonstrative explosion over an unpopulated area to respond to a similar demonstrative nuclear explosion conducted by Russia.” Finally, in the fourth scenario, nuclear weapons would be employed “to target Kaliningrad as a response to a Russian nuclear strike against NATO troops, in an attempt to stop an ongoing Russian invasion of the Baltic countries.”

The first and the third of our scenarios address the possibility of the demonstrative use of nuclear weapons over an unpopulated area as a signal of resolve in an “escalate-to-deescalate” strategy. While scholars in our field mostly disagree to what extent concerns about such use of nuclear weapons are justified (Sokov 2014; Ven Bruusgaard 2016, 2020), many American and European decision-makers do tend to take them seriously, and they have even informed the development of new types of nuclear weapons in the latest US nuclear posture (Smetana 2018).

While the use of nuclear weapons in the first and the third scenarios is seen merely as demonstrative, that is, absent of direct casualties—the second scenario portrays the use of US nuclear weapons against military targets. Such military use would therefore maintain its coercive purpose but, in addition, it would seek to gain a distinct military advantage over the adversary. Finally, the fourth scenario presents a possibility of a highly escalated conflict and the “counter-value” nuclear strike against the enemy’s population in response to the Russians’ first use of nuclear weapons. Whereas the original “nuclear taboo” literature explicitly defines the norm as a prohibition of a first use of nuclear weapons, this retributive “second strike” scenario allows us to study the shift in attitudes once the “taboo” had already been broken in the conflict.

The respondents then indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed that it would be legitimate to use US nuclear weapons stationed in the respective European host countries in the given scenarios, responding on a six-point Likert scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). We then created an index based on the four scenarios, calculating the average response over the four categories (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). This index constitutes our dependent variable.

### *Independent Variables*

The main independent variable in our paper is left–right partisanship. We measure this in two ways.

The first way measures individual left–right ideology using a self-placement scale from 0 to 10. This measure, commonly used in the scholarship of political behavior in Western Europe, has been shown to have a large absorptive capacity in terms of both values and partisanship in advanced democracies (Knutsen 1997; Caprara et al. 2017).

Therefore, our second way uses a question that asked respondents about the party they would vote for if the election were held at the time of answering. We imputed their party choice with the Chapel Hill Election Survey (CHES)’s left–right indicator (*lygen*) (Bakker et al. 2015, 2020; Polk et al. 2017). The CHES is a standard source used in the study of party politics and party ideology.

Prior research has found that the effect of partisanship on foreign policy preferences is not linear (Ostermann et al. 2020; Wagner 2020). We therefore divide the eleven-point left–right scale into five bins of equal length (0–2, 2–4, 4–6, 6–8, 8–10) and use them as a categorical variable, with the center position (4–6) as the baseline. In table 1, the parties in both Germany<sup>3</sup> and the Netherlands are classified by the CHES left–right indicator.

<sup>3</sup>Although our questionnaire asked CDU/CSU as a combined answer option, we separated them based on respondents’ geographic location, where a location in Bavaria means a vote for the CSU rather than the CDU. Experts in German politics might be surprised that the CHES places the Free Democratic Party (FDP) to the right of the CDU. However, placement of the FDP in the German partisan system is somewhat contested. In the Bundestag, the German federal parliament, where parties are seated from left to right according to their ideology, the FDP has been seated on both sides of the CDU—both to the left of it and to the right of it. See Deutscher Bundestag (2021) and Jansen (2021).

**Table 1.** Parties and their CHES left–right ideology

	DE	NL
Scores 0–2	Die Linke	SP
Scores 2–4	SPD, Die Grünen	GL, PvdA, PvdD
Scores 4–6	CDU	D66, ChristenUnie, 50PLUS
Scores 6–8	FDP, CSU	VVD, CDA
Scores 8–10	AfD	PVV, SGP, FvD

### Control Variables

All of our variables are related to the defense that would be provided within the framework of NATO to the countries in the Baltics. However, it is well known that there is a large variation in Europeans' willingness to use force in the Baltics (Fagan and Poushter 2020). We therefore control for individuals' willingness to defend the Baltics. We measure willingness to defend the Baltics with a survey question, "Imagine there is a military conflict between NATO and Russia in the Baltic States. To what extent do you agree or disagree that [the country of survey] should actively defend allies there militarily?" This wording of the question highlighted the presence of the alliance between the survey country and the Baltic countries. The answers were collected on a six-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

We control for age and gender. We presumed that the Cold War experience of drills and fear of nuclear conflict may have decreased elder individuals' willingness to approve of the use of nuclear weapons. We also control for gender, as women were generally found, in the past, to be less willing to approve of the use of force (Eichenberg 2016a,b). Additionally, in Germany, we add a control for "East Germany," to control for potential long-term consequences of Germany's division during the Cold War.<sup>4</sup>

To analyze the data, we separately regress data for each country using ordinary least squares regression with poststratification weights.

## Results

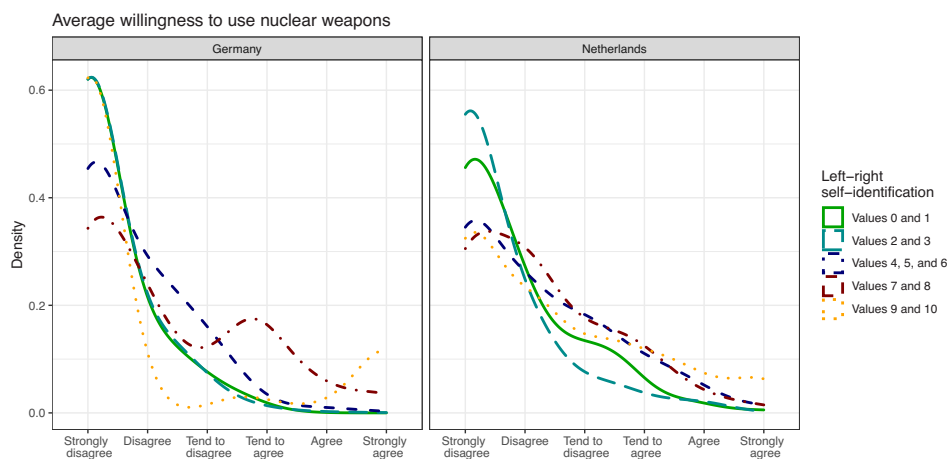
Before proceeding to the results from quantitative modeling, it is useful to see how the willingness to use nuclear weapons in individual scenarios varies by country.

Table 2 shows the willingness to use nuclear weapons across the four scenarios in the two countries under study. We can see that the relatively most accepted

**Table 2.** Descriptives for the four scenarios of nuclear weapons' use

	Disagreement		Agreement	
	DE	NL	DE	NL
Scenario 1: demonstrative scenario to de-escalate	91.3 percent	84.3 percent	8.7 percent	15.7 percent
Scenario 2: targeting Russian military units	97.1 percent	89.5 percent	2.9 percent	10.5 percent
Scenario 3: response to Russia's demonstration	82.0 percent	76.9 percent	18.0 percent	23.1 percent
Scenario 4: targeting Kaliningrad after Russian Nuclear Weapon use	85.3 percent	76.5 percent	14.7 percent	23.5 percent

<sup>4</sup>We thank reviewer 2 for this suggestion. The results remain substantively the same if the control is removed.



**Figure 1.** Willingness to use nuclear weapons by country and ideology.

*Note.* The dependent variable (presented here on the  $x$ -axis) represents the average response to the four scenarios. See the text above in the Methods section on the construction of the variable. Analogous figures for each scenario separately can be found in the online appendix.

scenario in Germany is scenario 3, a use of nuclear weapons in response to a Russian demonstrative strike. In the Netherlands, the most accepted scenario is scenario 4, targeting Kaliningrad after Russian use of nuclear weapons (although the difference with scenario 3 is very small). What these scenarios have in common is that the use of nuclear weapons is in both of them in response to first use by Russia. In all four scenarios, the approval in the Netherlands was higher than that in Germany.

Figure 1 adds more granularity and variation by ideology to table 2. It shows the average willingness to use nuclear weapons by country and ideology.<sup>5</sup> Starting from the left, we see that in Germany, strong disagreement is the most common response for all respondents but strongest among those who identify with the left wing or the far right. In contrast, the respondents who identify as centrist or right wing are less likely to reject any use. The respondents who identify as solid-right wing have in fact slight agreement as the second most common response. For the voters for the far right, strong agreement is the second most common response, on average.

The situation is slightly different in the Netherlands. Strong disagreement is still the most common response, but the opposition is smaller compared to Germany. Those who identify with the center, right wing, and far right are notably less likely to reject the use of nuclear weapons compared to their German counterparts. These respondents are consistently more likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons, although we should keep in mind that their willingness to approve of the use of force is still very low.

Let us now turn to the quantitative analysis, the results of which are presented in table 3. We present three models—model 1 presents the effect of vote choice, model 2 presents the effect of ideology (measured by self-placement on the left-right scale), and model 3 adds them both. Each model is run separately for the Netherlands and Germany, and they are subsequently replicated to add a control for the willingness to defend the Baltics.

In both countries, we find an effect of political ideology on the willingness to use force. The more right wing the respondents self-identify, the more likely they are to support the use of nuclear weapons. Figure 2 demonstrates this effect well. In

<sup>5</sup> Online appendix figures 1–4 show the same data, but broken down by individual scenarios

**Table 3.** Results of quantitative analysis

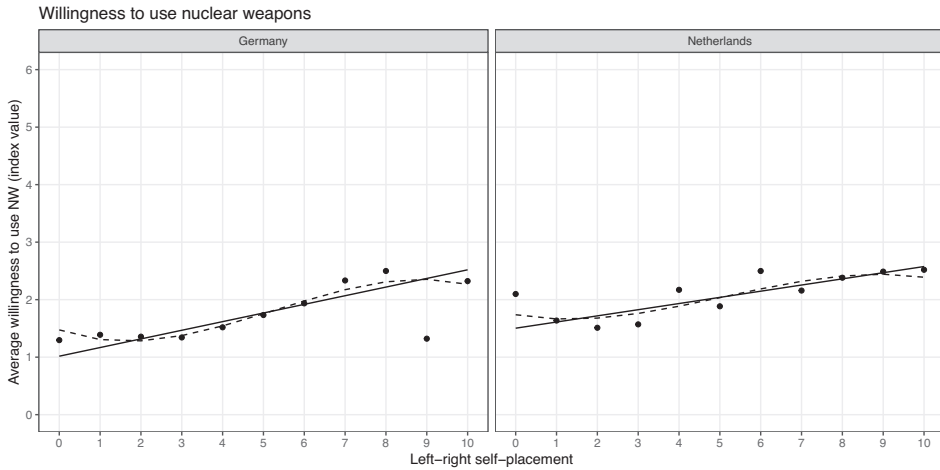
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	NL	DE	NL	DE	NL	DE
(Constant)	1.6 (0.13)***	2.06 (0.13)***	1.22 (0.12)***	1.16 (0.1)***	1.2 (0.16)***	1.31 (0.18)***
Age (continuous)	0.01 (0)***	0 (0)	0.01 (0)***	0 (0)	0.01 (0)***	0 (0)
Sex (M = 0; F = 1)	-0.13 (0.07)*	-0.18 (0.06)***	-0.21 (0.06)***	-0.15 (0.05)***	-0.13 (0.07)*	-0.15 (0.06)**
East Germany (West = 0)		-0.22 (0.09)**		-0.13 (0.08)		-0.2 (0.09)**
Vote intention (CHES LR 0–2)	-0.28 (0.15)*	-0.48 (0.11)***			-0.15 (0.15)	-0.04 (0.13)
Vote intention (CHES LR 2–4)	-0.1 (0.11)	-0.35 (0.08)***			0.05 (0.11)	-0.1 (0.09)
Vote intention (CHES LR 4–6) (baseline)						
Vote intention (CHES LR 6–8)	0.51 (0.11)***	0.1 (0.11)			0.41 (0.11)***	0.07 (0.11)
Vote intention (CHES LR 8–10)	0.44 (0.11)***	0.11 (0.11)			0.31 (0.12)***	-0.04 (0.11)
Left–right self-placement (0–10)			0.11 (0.01)***	0.15 (0.01)***	0.07 (0.02)***	0.14 (0.02)***
(Constant)	0.28 (0.17)	1 (0.15)***	0.12 (0.15)	0.36 (0.11)***	-0.3 (0.2)	0.49 (0.18)***
Age (continuous)	0.01 (0)***	0 (0)	0.01 (0)***	0 (0)	0.01 (0)***	0 (0)
Sex (M = 0; F = 1)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.1 (0.06)*	-0.09 (0.05)*	0.05 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.06)
East Germany (West = 0)		-0.12 (0.09)		-0.02 (0.08)	0 (0)***	-0.11 (0.09)
Vote intention (CHES LR 0–2)	0.04 (0.14)	-0.21 (0.11)**			0.25 (0.15)*	0.1 (0.13)
Vote intention (CHES LR 2–4)	0.04 (0.1)	-0.29 (0.07)***			0.24 (0.11)**	-0.11 (0.08)
Vote intention (CHES LR 4–6) (baseline)						
Vote intention (CHES LR 6–8)	0.54 (0.1)***	0.28 (0.1)***			0.42 (0.11)***	0.24 (0.1)**
Vote intention (CHES LR 8–10)	0.78 (0.11)***	0.41 (0.11)***			0.64 (0.11)***	0.28 (0.11)**
Left–right self-placement (0–10)			0.12 (0.01)***	0.14 (0.01)***	0.09 (0.02)***	0.1 (0.02)***
Willingness to defend the Baltics (1–6)	0.25 (0.02)***	0.21 (0.02)***	0.21 (0.02)***	0.2 (0.02)***	0.26 (0.02)***	0.2 (0.02)***
<i>N</i>	1,209	1,055	1,521	1,295	1,169	1,043
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.074	0.067	0.073	0.099	0.089	0.104
Delta <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.084	0.107	0.066	0.112	0.091	0.095

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Germany, we see a gradual increase from left to right, but in the Netherlands, we observe a dip in the willingness to use force among the center-left respondents and then relatively similar willingness to use force among center-right and right-wing respondents.

When looking at vote choice, we observe a similar dynamic: in the Netherlands, voters of right-of-center parties are more likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons, while in Germany, it is the voters of left-of-center parties who



**Figure 2.** Ideology and willingness to use force.

are less likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons. In both countries, it is the left-of-the-government voters who are strongest in their opposition to the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup>

The willingness to defend the Baltics is strongly and positively correlated with the willingness to use nuclear weapons. Respondents willing to defend the Baltics are significantly more likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons in such defense. Once we control for the willingness to support the Baltics, German far-right voters become significantly more likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons.

We also find a statistically strong positive effect of age, but only in the Netherlands. In both Germany and the Netherlands, females are less likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons, although this effect disappears when we control for the willingness to defend the Baltics.

## Discussion

The differences between the Netherlands and Germany might be linked to the centrist parties' views of nuclear weapons in both countries. Whereas in the Netherlands, the centrist parties include progressive (Christian) parties that have historically opposed nuclear weapons on religious grounds (Everts 1984, 1985b), in Germany, the center is comprised of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) that have historically adopted a more measured position in favor of nuclear deterrence (Elbe 2016). In the Netherlands, the center-right parties are also currently most "responsible" for the current nuclear policy (the center-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) holds both the ministries of defense and foreign affairs at the time of research and writing). The fact that the German center-left (which includes the social-democratic SPD that controlled the foreign ministry at the time of the study) rejects the use of nuclear weapons is also curious. While the foreign ministry is officially in favor of the existing nuclear deterrence arrangements, it has been under attack from the SPD's parliamentary caucus since 2020 (Die Tagesschau 2020; Meier 2020). Our results indicate that the SPD's parliamentary caucus, opposed to German participation in the NATO nuclear deterrent, may be in closer sync with party supporters. In contrast,

<sup>6</sup>For a robustness check, we imputed the vote choice with party families as coded by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). We find that voters voting for left-wing parties (ecological, socialist, and social democratic) are statistically significantly less likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons. The results can be found in online appendix 2.

the Dutch center-right that has held the defense and foreign affairs ministries and supports the existing arrangements (Onderco 2021) may lean on its supporters.

Our findings confirm the earlier work on partisanship and foreign policy preferences. We indeed find that there is less willingness to use force (nuclear weapons) on the left, compared to the right-wing parties and their voters. This finding corresponds with the scholarship on party politics of foreign policy, which finds consistently that right-wing parties are more willing to approve of the use of force (Rathbun 2004; Mello 2014; Wagner 2020). We find that individual partisanship and vote choice are broadly congruent in this respect. Our findings also correspond with the findings from surveys on individuals' willingness to use nuclear weapons conducted in the United States. In these surveys, conservative (more-right-wing) voters are consistently more likely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons (Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013; Sagan and Valentino 2017; Haworth, Sagan, and Valentino 2019; Koch and Wells 2021; Smetana and Vranka 2021). Our findings therefore indicate that the right-wing voters' willingness to use nuclear weapons travels across the Atlantic and is applicable also in different settings. While we find Europeans to be generally unwilling to use nuclear weapons, voters on the European right are more willing to do so.

Our results, however, differ from some of the findings in this stream that found a curvilinear effect of ideology on the propensity to use force (Wagner 2020). We find no such relationship. In contrast, our findings (figure 2) indicate that there is a fairly steady increase from left to right, and right-wing respondents remain consistently more willing to use force than left-wing ones.<sup>7</sup> We also differ from existing scholarship (Wagner et al. 2018), because we find that the far-right respondents are not less likely to approve of the use of force compared to other right-wing parties. This is contrary to the findings from earlier research, which often finds far right similar to the far left in its willingness to use force in general (Ostermann et al. 2020). We find such similarity when looking at the vote choice in Germany. We find there that the voters of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is known for having an affinity with Russia and skepticism about Germany's traditional alliances (Lemke 2020; Wood 2021), are as unlikely to support nuclear use as the voters of left-wing parties. However, they are also among the ones most likely to support the use of nuclear weapons, perhaps mirroring the affinity with militarism that was expressed by the far right in other countries (Ostermann and Stahl 2022).

One possible explanation for the absence of a curvilinear relationship might lie in the "nuclear taboo," which might be reasonably more espoused on the left. Another potential explanation is that the support for nuclear use is overall rather low, and so the curvilinear relationship, found by other scholars, simply cannot be seen because the top of the curve is "flattened." The absence of the curvilinear relationship can be also explained by the fact that nuclear weapon use in the scenarios that we used would happen geographically closer than other conflicts where Europeans usually deploy troops.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

In our paper, we studied the individual attitudes among Dutch and German citizens toward the use of nuclear weapons stationed on their country's territory in a hypothetical conflict with Russia in the Baltics. We designed four scenarios with the view to the most likely scenarios for the conflicts between NATO and Russia in which the use of nuclear weapons can be envisioned. In particular, we were interested in how political ideology influences individuals' willingness to approve of the use of

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, robustness checks reported in the online appendix demonstrate that there is a statistically significant positive linear relationship between vote choice and willingness to use nuclear weapons. See online appendix 3 for results.

<sup>8</sup> We thank one of the *Foreign Policy Analysis* reviewers for this suggestion.

nuclear weapons. This research therefore builds on two strands of research—the growing research on the influence of partisanship in foreign policy-making, and the booming field of study of public willingness to use nuclear weapons.

Our results indicate that right-wing voters, including those on the far right, are more willing to consider the use of nuclear weapons. While there are similarities between how German and Dutch voters see nuclear use, there appears to be a difference between them when it comes to centrist voters. Whereas German centrists lean toward the rest of the right in favor of nuclear use, Dutch centrists lean along with the left wing in opposing nuclear weapons. We also find that broader views on defending allies matter: we find that respondents who were willing to defend the Baltics were also more willing to use nuclear weapons.

Our results are in line with the existing findings that found Europeans reluctant to use nuclear weapons (Pelopidas 2019; Pelopidas and Fialho 2019a; Egeland and Pelopidas 2020). In none of the four scenarios did the willingness to use nuclear weapons exceed 24 percent of the population, and in two scenarios it reached only 10 percent. We find that overall, Germans are less willing to use nuclear weapons compared to the Dutch, perhaps in line with Germany’s “civilian identity” (Maull 1990). Yet, we extend the existing scholarship by asking about the origins of such attitudes, and offer one of the first studies in which Europeans were asked about their approval of nuclear weapons use in different circumstances.

Overall, our findings provide a distinct contribution to scholarly debates about the nature and the strength of the transnational nuclear nonuse norm, the “nuclear taboo” (Tannenwald 2007; Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013; Smetana and Wunderlich 2021). On one hand, our findings suggest that the majority of the public in Western, democratic countries continues to have a strong aversion to nuclear weapon use and mostly see it as an illegitimate tool of warfare. On the other hand, we show that the constraining effects of the norm are not uniformly distributed even in culturally homogeneous regions such as Western Europe and even within democratic societies themselves. As such, scholars in our field should design further studies of nuclear (non-)use attitudes that would engage in cross-national comparisons, while simultaneously looking at “within-country variations” based on ideology and other political and sociodemographic factors.

Finally, our findings are also important with respect to the growing discussion about the credibility of the NATO nuclear deterrent and the willingness of the Western European allies to defend the Eastern European allies. If NATO member states cannot imagine a conceivable military use of these weapons, then their military value is very limited and they fulfil mainly political value (Rudolf 2020). The outcomes of our study suggest that there is a limit to which the Western European public is willing to go. We find that the willingness to defend the Baltics is an important mediating factor in the public’s willingness to use nuclear weapons. Those willing to defend the Baltics are more willing to go to the extreme if needed. As concerns about Russia’s nuclear modernization efforts is rising, and concerns about Russia’s “escalate-to-deescalate” doctrine (Ven Bruusgaard 2016; Department of Defense 2018; Oliker and Baklitskiy 2018) are increasing, our findings have implications for the effectiveness of NATO’s extended deterrence. Given NATO’s emphasis on democracy as a key element of the alliance, the public opposition to a key element of the NATO defense posture creates questions about its long-term viability.

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### Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Foreign Policy Analysis* data archive.

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