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# Does information increase opinion quality?

## The differential effects of information on the quality of opinions towards defence issues<sup>1</sup>

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*\*\* This paper presents a research plan. It's a work in progress. Please do not quote \*\**

**Abstract:** The capacity of citizens to voice an opinion on military issues is a much-debated topic. In the literature, those issues are often presented as remote from people's daily preoccupations, for which they lack both interest and information. However, as military issues have gained visibility since the end of the Cold War, prompted by multiple debates about overseas operations, nuclear (dis)armament, professionalisation of the armed forces, budget cuts, etc., public opinion matters increasingly. In this survey experiment, we aim to determine if providing information during the surveys could improve – in terms of stability and acceptance of consequences – people's opinions on strategic issues in France, Germany and the UK, three countries that vary in their military power and defence policies. We assume that the effect of providing information on opinions will depend on three main factors: (1) the level of knowledge of the respondents; (2) the salience of the issues on which they are questioned; (3) the national strategic culture of the country of the respondents. We test our hypotheses on three different issues that have been central to defence policies in Europe since the mid-nineties: European defence cooperation, military operations abroad, and nuclear deterrence. Assessing the extent to which the provision of information may influence survey responses is essential for the use of polls as a proper democratic tool for the collective decision-making process.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a larger project [OPIDEF](#) "Public opinion, democratic accountability and evaluation of defence: towards a new comparative research agenda", funded by Sciences Po – LIEPP.

## Definition of the problem and research questions

In representative democracies, political leaders are expected to respond to the preferences of citizens as they make decisions (Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Outside of elections, mass surveys are the most widely used tools to make such preferences publicly known, and therefore the tools by which we expect public opinion to be considered in the elaboration and evaluation of policies (Burstein 2010; Eisinger 2008; Glynn et al. 1999)<sup>2</sup>. Given how central and scrutinized surveys are in our modern societies, it is not surprising that public opinion polling remains a highly debated topic, both normatively and empirically.

The normative debate is concerned with the role public opinion should play in a democracy: how much influence the public should have over the policy-making process? To what extent political leaders should take into account citizens' preferences? This line of questioning leads to research on the *quality of public opinion*, starting with the assumption that an informed citizenry is required. If one agrees that public opinion should weigh on the political process in a democratic polity, the “good public opinion”, that can be trusted and politically mobilized, should result from a process of information, argumentation and discussion (see Neijens 2008 for an overview of this debate). However, empirical research has long suggested otherwise: most people do not care much and do not know much about politics (e.g., Converse 1964; Stimson 1999; Visser et al. 2008; Zaller 1992). As soon as we acknowledge that most citizens are uninterested and uninformed about most political issues, the normative debate opens up to an empirical one regarding the *validity of polls*: do they measure effectively public opinion? Are they adequate and trustworthy tools to reveal the true preferences of the public? (Glynn et al. 1999).

This project aims to address those issues empirically by implementing two original research designs to evaluate the effect of (the lack of) information on citizens' opinions on defence issues. Our interest in developing this research stems from the fact that defence is a domain characterised by a lack of democratic scrutiny, especially in Europe: policymaking in this field remains the preserve of the executive power<sup>3</sup>. In some countries, like France or the UK, the Parliament has

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<sup>2</sup> Knowing whether it is the case that polls facilitate policy responsiveness to public opinion is not the point of this research. For a thorough review of this debate, see Manza & Cook 2002.

<sup>3</sup> In France for example, defence is considered to be “le domaine réservé” of the President.

limited power over strategic decisions, such as the deployment of troops for multilateral military missions (Deschaux-Dutard 2017; Dieterich et al. 2010; Wagner 2006). In all of them, public opinion is generally overlooked, leading to data scarcity, that prevents scholars from assessing the alignment between defence policies and citizens' preferences. For this reason, defence is said to be an insulated policy that lacks transparency (Archeluta 2016). However, as Price and Neijens (1997) demonstrated, the quality of democratic decision-making is inextricably linked to the quality of public opinion. Defence policies are no exception.

### *The quality of public opinion*

In their paper, Price and Neijens list several criteria to evaluate the quality of public opinion. Some are “outcome-oriented” and others are “process-oriented”, applied both to an individual level and a collective level. At an individual level, the one we are interested in, they note that empirical research has focused mainly on “outcome-oriented” criteria, especially the relative stability of opinions over time (i.e., lack of volatility) and their consistency (with values and other opinions). Other criteria, all highly interconnected, matter as well: the conviction with which opinions are held, the amount of information that supports an opinion, the understanding and acceptance of consequences of policy alternatives, and the optimization of individual interests (Price and Neijens 1997: 345-346).

For the purpose of this research, we focus on two criteria: the stability of opinions and the acceptance of consequences. It is generally assumed that the quality of opinions (which, once aggregated, report public opinion) depends on background knowledge that citizens have prior to answering a survey (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). As Lupia and McCubbins contended, “knowledge is the ability to predict accurately the consequences of choices, and information is the data from which knowledge may be derived” (1998: 20). For both criteria, one may logically expect that higher levels of information improve the quality of opinions: it should lead to more stable opinions and better-assumed preferences in terms of consequences of one's choices. To determine the extent to which this is the case is one of the main objectives of this project. → **Q1: do higher levels of information improve the quality of opinions on defence in regards to their stability and acceptance of consequences?**

Levels of information can be considered as a function of respondents' socio-economic characteristics. Research has shown that education is a strong predictor of political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Gaxie 1978). One can also assume that personal experience and proximity to the issue, for professional reasons for example, could also provide knowledge,

and even compensate for lower levels of education → **Q2: do citizens with higher levels of education and/or personal experience in the defence/military sector hold opinions of better quality – more stable and more aware of the consequences of the alternatives – than citizens with lower levels of education and/or no personal experience of defence?**

### *The validity of public opinion surveys*

As stated previously, the questioning of the quality of opinions is closely linked to a reflection on the measurement tool that is polls. This debate about whether public opinion polling measures what public opinion is and wants is as old as the polls themselves (see Blumer 1948 for example). Nowadays, there is an overall agreement that polls do not collect pre-existing (informed) preferences, but rather record (private and on-the-spot) answers to (standardized) questions with pre-defined response options, determined by what considerations are at the top of respondents' heads (Zaller & Feldman 1992; Zaller 1992).<sup>4</sup> Combined to the fact that most people do not pay much attention to politics, Zaller's "Receive-Accept-Sample" model explains convincingly the instability of citizens' opinions. Therefore, the design of questionnaires matters, since the order of the questions and their wording could prime different considerations. Said otherwise "people are using the questionnaire to decide what their "attitudes" are" (Zaller & Feldman 1992: 582). Following this line of reasoning, **we wonder to what extent providing information in the question could improve the quality of responses; if the impact of providing such information varies according to respondents' levels of knowledge; and if providing information could bridge the gap between the preferences of the most informed and the least informed (if such a gap exists) (Q3)**. This is an important question that could help improve surveys design. Traditionally, surveys conveyors assume that respondents understand the questions and think of what the different options offered in the surveys imply. However, empirical research has shown that it is unlikely. Therefore, determining to what extent the design of the questions itself could provide information, and consequently improve the quality of responses, matters greatly.

Finally, levels of information depend also on the issue itself and its salience: "in its simplest sense, a salient issue is one that is politically important, one that people care about, and one on which they have meaningful opinions that structure party support and candidate evaluation." (Soroka & Wlezien 2010: 43). We may assume that citizens possess more information on issues

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<sup>4</sup> To what extent this should prevent survey results from being considered in the elaboration and evaluation of public policies remains an open – and normative – question, outside the scope of this paper.

that are more salient. Consequently, on those issues, providing information to respondents might matter less. Military issues are usually considered to be less salient than domestic issues. The former also differ in terms of salience: some are more visible than others (for example, military operations gain visibility when they are launched or when there are casualties. On the contrary, recruitment of military personnel is a less salient topic) → **Q4: does the impact of providing information on opinion quality varies according to the salience of the issues?**

## **State of the art**

### *A minimalist view of public opinion and its revision*

The quality of opinions collected by surveys – and therefore the trust we can place in them – has been discussed at length in the literature, including where foreign and defence policies are concerned. According to the dominant realist paradigm, policymaking in this sensitive field should remain the preserve of a narrow elite group. This realist approach goes hand in hand with a “minimalist” view of public opinion. Based on the “Almond-Lippmann consensus”, it states that citizens lack both interest in politics and knowledge about it. Consequently, their opinions are poorly structured, inconstant and irrational, leading to erratic mood swings. Therefore, decision-makers should not rely on public opinion for policymaking (Almond 1950; Drezner 2008; Holsti 1992, 2004; La Balme 2002; Sinnott 2000). This is even more true for opinions on issues removed from daily life, such as foreign and military matters: “foreign policy attitudes among most Americans lack intellectual structure and factual content. Such superficial psychic states are bound to be unstable since they are not anchored in a set of explicit values and means-ends calculations or traditional compulsions” (Almond 1950: 69).

A decade later, Philip Converse showed empirically that mass public opinion is indeed far more volatile and less coherent than opinions held by the elites, because of a belief system that is less ideologically constrained (Converse 1964). As a result, most people would rather respond *au hasard* to survey questions – as if they were flipping a coin – than acknowledge their ignorance. This explains the lack of stability and coherence in public opinion over time and from one issue to another. Moreover, the more abstract and further from daily considerations an issue is, the more likely people are to respond randomly. According to Converse, those random answers reflect “non-attitudes”. Likewise in France, Pierre Bourdieu claimed that public opinion “does not exist in the form which some people, whose existence depends on this illusion, would have us believed” (Bourdieu 2002

(1973): 235). Among other things, Bourdieu accused pollsters of imposing their questions to respondents, that is to ask questions for which interviewees show no real concern. Interestingly, he also claimed that for a single question, many others, which are beyond the respondents' grasp, would be worth asking, and that the responses to those would likely be inconsistent.

Since the nineties, the minimalist view has sustained criticism (Holsti 1992; Sinnott 2000; Sniderman 1998). It has been increasingly questioned regarding foreign affairs primarily in the United States, where the study of public opinion and strategic matters could be considered as a sub-discipline on its own. Indeed, several studies have shown that the American public is capable of rational opinions on foreign policy (e.g., Aldrich et al. 1989; Aldrich et al. 2006; Holsti, 1992, 2004; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Shapiro & Page 1992; Shapiro & Page 1988). The main challenging argument to the minimalist paradigm focuses on aggregate opinion. In a study considered to be a milestone, Shapiro and Page show that American "collective opinion is highly stable, well structured, and responsive to the best available information" (1988: 12). In our own research, we demonstrated that the French European Defence Mood (Stimson 1999) reveals a stable, and consistent with past international events, public opinion (Thiébaud 2018). The shortcomings identified by minimalism are overcome in the aggregation process.

### ***The problem of the lack of information***

The public's stable and coherent preferences at an aggregate level demonstrate its rationality as a whole. However, at an individual level, research is not as clear-cut. It has shown that citizens' opinions are more rational and stable than one would have expected (e.g., Aldrich et al. 2006; Eichenberg, 2016; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Rathbun et al. 2016; Reifler et al. 2011). However, it does not negate previous findings regarding citizens' lack of knowledge, which is quite well documented. Rather, it challenges the fact that the absence of factual knowledge would lead to random opinions, and consequently, it challenges the fact that low levels of political knowledge would prevent ordinary citizens from participating in the democratic process (Alvarez & Brehm 2002; Visser et al. 2008). Indeed, some authors have argued that high levels of knowledge are not necessary as people can overcome their lack of information by relying on cognitive shortcuts and heuristics (Popkin 1994; Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia & McCubbins 1998).

If a consensus exists among scholars on citizens employing shortcuts, that those adequately compensate for their lack of knowledge is open for debate. Indeed, other researchers have demonstrated that information matters in shaping people's preferences: if the public was better informed about politics, opinions would differ, which would, in turn, impact collective preferences

(e.g., Althaus 1998, 2003; Gilens 2001). In particular, Gilens' study concludes that: "the kind of information that matters is not only general political knowledge, interest, or cognitive capacity but also the specific facts germane to particular political issues. More specifically, three conclusions can be drawn. First, policy-specific facts can be an important influence on political judgments. Second, this influence is not adequately captured by measures of general political knowledge. Third, the consequences of policy-specific ignorance and the effects of policy-specific information are greatest for Americans with the highest levels of general political knowledge" (2001: 391). Both Althaus and Gilens reach their conclusions using statistical simulations to adjust citizens' political preferences to a situation where they would be better informed. Others have thought of alternative methods to conventional mass surveys to correct this problem of ill-informed citizens. The best-known instrument is deliberative polls (Fishkin 1991, 1995), which aim to show what citizens' preferences would be if they "were better informed on the issues and had the opportunity and motivation to examine those issues seriously" (Fishkin 1995: 162). However, this technique is burdensome, difficult to implement on a large scale, and the results of some actual deliberative polls have been mixed: exposure to information and an increase in knowledge do not necessarily lead to substantive shifts in political views (Visser et al. 2008).

## Surveys design and hypotheses

The questions of the lack of information of the public on defence policies, how it affects opinions, and how it could be compensated for in polls drive this research project. For our experiments on assessing whether providing information improves the quality of opinions on defence issues in terms of stability (experiment 1) and acceptance of consequences (experiment 2), we adopt a comparative approach between France, Germany and the UK. Indeed, these countries vary in their defence policies, military power, professionalisation of their armed forces, participation to multilateral operations, the approval of missions by their national democratic institutions, etc. Therefore, one of our variables of interest is what one might call a "**national strategic culture**". For example, in regards to our issues of interest, the support for European defence differs among those three countries, although their public opinion remains quite stable over the years: especially high in France and Germany, it is, unsurprisingly, far lower in the UK, where the public is divided [Cf. numbers Eurobarometer + references: anti-Atlantism in France – pro-EU/pro-NATO in Germany – anti-EU + pro-US/NATO in the UK]. One can also assume that having (France and the UK) or not having (Germany) nuclear weapons might have different effects



on the public's preferences regarding nuclear deterrence [idem]. The same logic applies to sending troops overseas: France and the UK have a long tradition of deploying troops abroad, including in the context of high intensity combat operations, whereas Germany is more cautious and hesitant to participate in military operations (moreover, the legal barrier was lifted in 1994 only) (Noetzel & Schreer 2008) [idem].

*[NB: France and Germany might be enough to conduct our experiments?]*

To conduct our experiments, we have selected three defence issues: European defence, nuclear deterrence and overseas operations<sup>5</sup>. Those issues were selected due to their importance in European countries military strategies since the end of the Cold War [to be developed – references and White Papers]. Each of them refers to a generic wider strategic issue: cooperation, armament and military interventions. In the first study of our OPIDEF project, we have documented the variability of defence issues on different **attribute dimensions**: obtrusiveness, emotional intensity, concreteness, and relevance (i.e., the perceived importance for the society). The results for those three selected issues show some variability in terms of obtrusiveness, concreteness and relevance, which can shed light on the **subjective salience** of the issue<sup>6</sup>, that is the salience the respondents assigned to issues [add first descriptive results]. We may assume that the more concrete, obtrusive and/or relevant an issue is for a respondent – i.e., the most salient – the less impact providing information would have on the quality of his or her opinions. For comparison, and to test the robustness of our assumptions, we also conduct the experiments on a more non-defence salient issue [education or environment?].

*[NB: question of measurement of objective salience → media content?]*

### ***Experiment 1: stability***

As previously stated, stability is one of main criteria research refers to when talking about the quality of opinion. An attitude is considered “stable” when respondents provide highly similar preferences at two different points in time. Our first experiment tests the stability of respondents' opinions over time on one of the three issues, depending on the provision of information.

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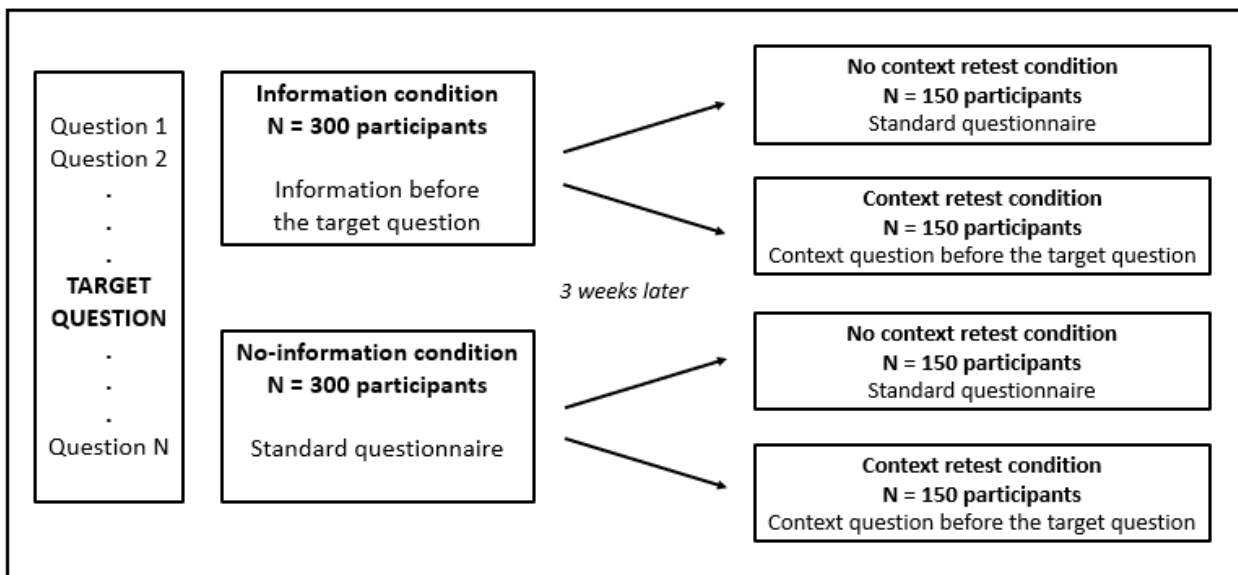
<sup>5</sup> Defence budget is not included, since a specific work package of our project OPIDEF is devoted to it.

<sup>6</sup> For obtrusiveness, we asked how much the respondent feels personally concerned about each topic (on a scale from 1 to 6); for concreteness, how concrete the respondent thinks each topic is, i.e., how easy it is for him or her to imagine or picture what the topic refers to; and for relevance, how important for society he or she thinks each topic is.

For each country and each issue, we gather a group of respondents (N=600), divided in two groups to which respondents are randomly assigned:

- France issue 1 group 1: N = 300; group 2: N = 300
- France issue 2 group 1: N = 300; group 2: N = 300
- France issue 3 group 1: N = 300; group 2: N = 300
- France issue 4 group 1: N = 300; group 2: N = 300
- Germany issue 1 group 1: N = 300; group 2: n = 300, etc.

The first group, the control group, answers a standard survey about either European defence, nuclear deterrence or overseas operations. The questions are asked without any informative introduction. On the contrary, the second group, receive some information before answering the target question. Three weeks later, the same participants take the same survey again. This time, none of them are provided with any information; however, a context question is introduced. Each group (provided / not provided with information) is divided into two subgroups depending on taking the survey with or without the context question before the target question.



*Example for nuclear deterrence*

**Target question**

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: there should be an international agreement for eliminating all nuclear weapons

## **Information**

Some experts argue that nuclear forces ensure stability in the world, due to their deterrent effect: because of their destructive power, the threat of their use efficiently prevent conflicts. Other experts argue that nuclear deterrence is too great a risk, necessarily leading to proliferation as countries would compete to acquire and modernize nuclear weapons to remain credible.

## **Context question (re-test)**

In the coming years, to ensure the security of Europe, do you think there should be: a European defence including nuclear forces vs a European defence including only conventional forces.

## *Variables*

Our **dependent variable** is the answer to the target question for each issue. This question measures the respondents' support for or opposition to a specific policy choice.

Our main **independent variables** deal with factors relative to levels of information:

- Being in the group who has received information
- Level of education
- Proximity to the defence sector (Defence Proximity Index – DPI): this index measures how close to the defence sector a respondent is, either due to his or her job, to a relative's or a close friend's job, etc.
- Political and defence-specific knowledge (Defence Knowledge Index – DKI)
- The subjective and objective salience of each issue (?)
- Nationality

We **control** for:

- Demographic variables: age, self-reported gender, profession, geographical localization.
- Political attitudes: economic conservatism, socio-cultural conservatism, authoritarianism, proudness to be a DE/FR/UK citizen, political ideology, interest in politics, media diet, political partisanship, trust in institutions.
- General foreign policy attitudes (Gravelle et al. 2017) and values (Alvarez & Brehm 2002; Rathbun et al. 2016)

## *Hypotheses*

1. The rate of “don’t know” should be higher in the group that does not receive information, compared to the group that is provided with information.
2. Providing information should increase the stability of opinions, as measured by higher re-test consistency and less sensitivity to priming effects. The answers of the respondents of the experimental group (i.e., the one that is presented with information) should remain the same over the experiment, independently of the introduction of a context question in the second wave.
3. Inside each group, those with higher level of education or who score higher at the DPI and DKI should hold more stable opinions on the issues of interest, compared to those with lower level of education or lower scores at the DPI and DKI. The latter should answer “don’t know” more frequently.
4. Answers of respondents with lower level of education or lower scores at the DPI and DKI who are provided with information should be as stable as the answers of respondents with higher level of education or who score higher at the DPI and DKI, including among those who are not provided with information. They should answer “don’t know” less often than respondents with lower level of education or lower scores at the DPI and DKI who are not provided with information.
5. The more subjectively / objectively salient an issue is, the less impact providing information should have on the stability of opinions of the respondents.

To summarize, we hypothesize that the effect of providing information should matter at three levels. Individually, the most educated, the most informed and the closest to the defence sector should be less sensitive to information effects. At the issue level, information about the most salient topics should have less effect on respondents’ answers than information on the least salient ones. Finally, at the country level, the visibility and relevance of various defence issues vary; therefore, information effects should also be less important among respondents of the country in which a given issue is the most debated and salient.

## *Experiment 2: acceptance of consequences*

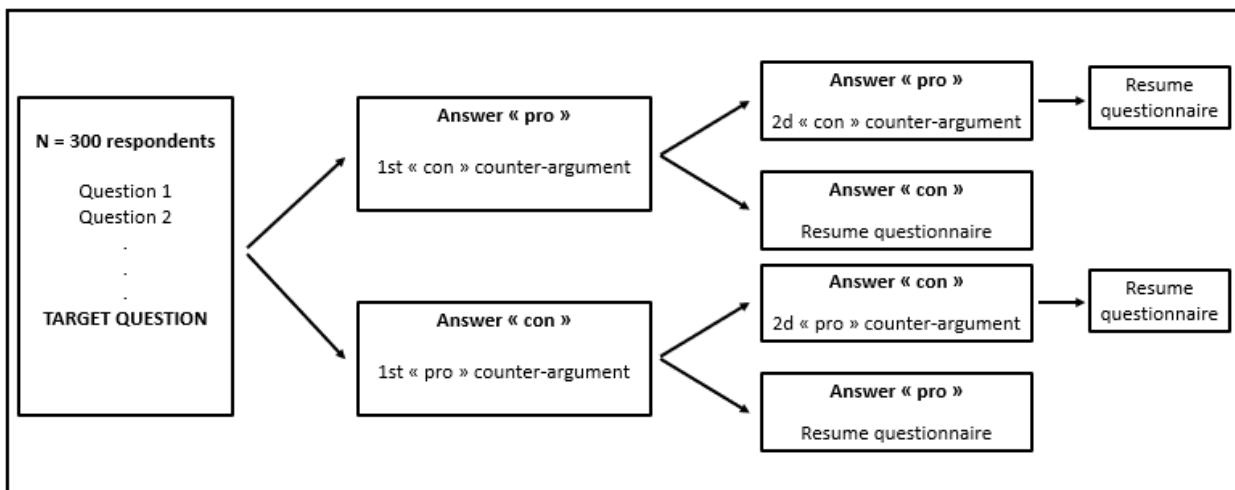
Another recurring reproach made to surveys is that people are asked their opinions about issues without having to face the consequences of their choices, as their answers reflect general “absolute” preferences. Said otherwise, they respond to surveys questions without caring or having to care for the implications of their choices, in a casual way, “making it up as they go along” (Zaller 1992). Unlike conversations, surveys move from one question to another without offering context, information, arguments and counter-arguments (Mayer 2002). There can be at least two reasons for respondents not caring about the consequences of their answers: either they do not take the time to think about the question and what their preferences would imply before answering; or they do not know or understand what their preferences would imply due to a lack of knowledge. This line of reasoning has led scholars to explore budget / economic / spending preferences of the public in terms of trade-offs<sup>7</sup> [references]. To what extent preferences regarding policy choices might be affected following a similar consequential logic is understudied. This second experiment explores the effect of providing information to respondents in the form of counter-arguments on their opinions. It tests if and how counter-arguments would lead citizens to change their previous answers to a target question about a specific issue.

For each country, we interview 1200 respondents (total N = 3600), randomly assigned to four groups, one per issue. Therefore, each group for each issue in each country is made of 300 respondents. This sample size allows the detection of small to medium differences between the three groups and is large enough to have stable correlations within each national sample. All respondents will first take the survey during which they would be asked about their preferences about either European defence, overseas military operations, nuclear deterrence, or [education or environment?]. Depending on their answers, respondent would be presented with a first counter-argument. If they do not change their mind, they are presented with a second counter-argument before resuming the questionnaire. If they change their mind after being presented the first counter-argument, then the questionnaire resumes afterwards.

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<sup>7</sup> This is the topic of our third experiment study (the aforementioned work package on defence budget) for OPIDEF.

Example: France – nuclear deterrence



### Target question

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: there should be an international agreement for eliminating all nuclear weapons → agreed

### Counter-argument 1

Some experts argue that nuclear forces ensure peace and stability in the world, due to their deterrent effect: because of their destructive power, the threat of their use efficiently prevent conflicts, and therefore nuclear powers should hold on their nuclear weapons.

### Counter-argument 2

[tbc – threats of new nuclear powers]

### Variables

Our **dependent variable** is the (non-)change in respondents' preferences despite being provided with counter-arguments.

Same **independent and control variables** as for the first experiment on stability.

## *Hypotheses*

1. We hypothesize that respondents with:

- a higher level of education
- higher scores to the DKI
- higher scores to the DPI

are less likely to change their opinions, even if presented with counter-arguments.

2. The sensitivity to counter-arguments should also depend on the subjective and objective salience of an issue: for more salient issues, one can assume that respondents bear in mind more easily the implications of their choices and won't need to be reminded of them.

3. The sensitivity to counter-arguments should be weaker in countries where there is a higher consensus on the issue.

## **Statistical Analyses**

*To be completed*

## **Conclusion**

Previous research has shown that surveys respondents' sensitivity to context, which includes the questionnaire itself, is dependent on how well an opinion is structured, how deeply rooted in values it is, and / or based on solid knowledge. Therefore, modifying the context, that is, in our case, the questionnaire, can be used as a tool to assess the quality of opinions. Our project aims, first, to determine whether citizens do lack knowledge on defence, as often assumed; and whether this lack of knowledge hinders the expression of stable and consistent opinions. Second, it aims to evaluate the impact of providing information during the survey itself on the quality of opinions. Those are important questions in our modern democracies, in which political leaders often appeal to public opinion to justify their decisions and legitimize their policies.

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