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"Twice the Citizen": How Military Attitudes of Superiority Undermine Civilian Control in the United States

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Abstract

Civilian control of the military is central to the making of security policy, ensuring that civilian officials and the elected leaders that appoint them oversee and decide military affairs. This paper exposes a challenge to civilian control in the United States that originates in the disparaging attitudes military personnel hold toward civilian society. We argue that when military personnel view military culture as superior, they are more likely to view civilian political leaders as illegitimate and in turn to favor actions that undermine civilian control. We develop a typology of civilian control in which military officers can *constrain*, *contest* and *limit* civilian authority. Our empirical analysis provides strong and consistent evidence of the corrosive effects of military superiority on civilian control across three surveys of U.S. military personnel: the 1998-99 TISS survey of 2901 military officers, a 2014 YouGov of 275 veterans, and an original 2020 survey of 770 West Point cadets.

Keywords

national security, civil–military relations, civilian control of the military, U.S. military

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Introduction

When Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick M. Shanahan lauded Naval Academy graduates in May 2019 as the "best and the brightest in America," he was echoing a theme that many had likely heard before—that their military service made them more honorable, selfless, and patriotic than other Americans. As Secretary Robert M. Gates (2011) had told West Point cadets 8 years prior, "Each of you – with your talents, your intelligence, your record of accomplishments – could have chosen something easier or safer and of course better-paid. But you took on the mantle of duty, honor and country." Or as the Army Reserve puts it, military service makes one "Twice the Citizen."[1]

Many in the audience likely agreed with these sentiments. In 1997, journalist Tom Ricks documented this sense of superiority, revealing that the Marines he interviewed exhibited a kind of contempt for American society in which civilian life is seen as dissolute and morally dubious, while military life is disciplined and honorable. Surveys have since shown that many military personnel view their culture as being superior to American culture (Feaver and Kohn 2001; Schake and Mattis 2016).

Scholars have long lamented these findings, but it has been less clear *why* these attitudes of superiority matter for civil–military relations. In this paper, we theorize that these attitudes of superiority encourage military officers to support actions that undermine the practice of civilian control of the military. Specifically, we argue that military personnel exhibiting this superiority are less likely to have confidence in civilian political leaders—that is, they question their capabilities, motives and whether they merit respect as leaders of the Department of Defense. In turn, they are likely to favor three actions that undermine civilian control. Specifically, they favor *constraining* civilian choices by appealing to the public or other elites; *contesting* civilian decision-making by insisting the military leadership's preferences be heeded in advisory processes; and *limiting* civilians' scope of authority by seeking reserve domains, or institutional authority to oversee in part or in whole specific policy or issue areas.

To evaluate these claims, we analyze data from three surveys: the 1998-99 Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS) survey of 2901 active-duty military officers and cadets (Feaver and Kohn 2001), a 2014 YouGov survey of 275 veterans (Schake and Mattis 2016), and an original 2020 survey of 770 West Point cadets. The TISS and YouGov surveys have been indispensable resources for analysis of U.S. civil–military relations. Yet, while their top-line findings that many officers regard civilian society contemptuously have caused consternation among scholars of civil–military relations, the empirical relationship between those attitudes and support for civilian control has not previously been explored. Meanwhile, the survey of West Point cadets is fully original, and provides an essential complement to the surveys of active duty officers and veterans. Temporal differences in when the three surveys were administered as well as variation across the sample population, comprising former, present and future officers, also helps ensure that the findings are not particular to one cohort in the military.

Across all three surveys, we show that there are large and robust correlations between military personnel viewing military culture as superior and viewing civilian

leaders as ignorant, partisan, and unworthy of respect. The negative correlation between military superiority and confidence in civilians is substantial and larger than other variables that might conceivably also shape attitudes, such as education and partisanship. Attitudes of military superiority in turn correlate with support for actions that undermine civilian control, particularly those that constrain, contest, and limit civilian authority. Importantly, these results hold across all three surveys, spanning the Clinton, Obama, and Trump presidencies; they also hold independent of whether respondents identify as Democrats or Republicans. Regardless of the party in power, or partisan affiliation, when military personnel exhibit attitudes of superiority, they are more likely to doubt the motives and credentials of civilian leaders and favor actions that undercut their authority.

This article makes three important contributions to scholarship on civil–military relations. First, we identify factors that can influence the quality of civilian control in democracies. Civilian control requires that elected leaders and the civilian officials they appoint to run the military are able to shape policy in accordance with their own preferences and the interests of the constituents to whom they answer (Avant 1994, 1996; Brooks 2020a; Desch 1999; Feaver 2003; Kohn 1994, 2002). As such, civilian control lies at the heart of democratic governance (Kuehn 2018). It is also central to a state's national security, given that civilian control can affect foreign policy and political leaders' decisions during armed conflict. Yet, both the mechanisms and factors that affect civilian control in the United States are understudied (Beliakova 2021: Croissant et al. 2010; Feaver 1999). We develop a typology that specifies three distinct mechanisms, short of a coup, through which the military can challenge civilian control. In so doing, we theoretically identify—and empirically validate—different pathways through which military beliefs and behaviors cluster and corrode civilian authority and control of the military.

Second, the article bridges the U.S. case with comparative research on civil–military relations. Scholars of non-democracies have long documented how militaries contemptuous of civilian authority develop a "guardianship" ethos that justifies intervening to protect the state from what they perceive to be venal politicians (Loveman 1994). Their research also details the challenges to establishing civilian control in democratizing countries, such as when militaries seek institutional prerogatives (Pion Berlin 1997; Stepan 1988). We thus show that even in a consolidated democracy like the United States, where an overt military take-over is unlikely, military attitudes of superiority are detrimental to civilian control.

Finally, we contribute to policy debate in identifying some deeply unhealthy dimensions of civil–military relations in the United States today. Prior research has revealed that there is considerable skepticism in the public about the importance of civilian control (Krebs and Ralston 2020), while large numbers believe military service should be a litmus test for key policymaking positions both in the Department of Defense and in the government more broadly (Jost & Kertzer 2020). Many U.S. military personnel also question whether civilian expertise is adequate to run or oversee the military, believing that military experience is a necessary prerequisite (Brooks,

Robinson, and Urben 2021; Urben 2010; 2020). In an era when civilian control is already weaker than it has been in decades ((Brooks, Golby, and Urben 2021), these findings suggest that there are deep currents in the military further pushing against it. Our findings both help illuminate the sources of these challenges to civilian control and raise alarm bells that the attitudes of some military personnel could facilitate its further decline.

Military Superiority, Confidence, and Civilian Control

Surveys of American military personnel reveal a disturbing trend in their attitudes toward civilian society (Feaver & Kohn 2001; Schake and Mattis 2016). As we show in our empirical analysis, those attitudes have two main dimensions. The first is a tendency to view military culture as superior to civilian culture. The TISS survey (Feaver and Kohn 2001), for example, shows that military personnel view military culture as more disciplined, honest, and morally upright than that of society. The second dimension is a belief that American society should emulate military values. This indicates that beliefs about military superiority are not just casually held, but reflect a worldview in which society should be modeled upon those values and that they should be actively promoted within American society.

The Sources of Superiority

Although we do not systematically investigate the origins of these attitudes of superiority, we surmise that several factors likely contribute to their prevalence. The first relates to the professional character of the contemporary American military, which lays the groundwork for a separation between society and the military. Since World War II, the United States has maintained a large standing military, which in 1973 transitioned to an all-volunteer force in which individuals self-select to join and maintain careers in the military.[2] A volunteer military produces distance between society and the military because those who self-select to join are not necessarily representative of society, and, unlike conscripts, often serve for long periods of time, severing their connection to their civilian identities (Feaver and Kohn 2001; Cebul and Grewal 2022).

In addition, a defining feature of professionalism is the emergence of a corporate ethos, imbuing officers with a “sense of organic unity and consciousness” in which they identify with the military as an organization (Huntington 1957, 10). In other words, professionalism creates a military that is, and sees itself, as an exclusive group distinct from society at large, rather than emerging from and embedded within it. These concerns about professionalism, in fact, are deeply rooted in the American tradition and were among the reasons why the Framers were concerned about a large standing army (Kohn 1975; Weigley 1993). Historical opponents of the creation of a professional military in the United States, such as John McCauley Palmer, also argued that maintenance of a citizen army was much more consistent with democratic traditions, while a professional army was antithetical to them (Wingate 2009). In a similar vein,

renowned military sociologist Morris Janowitz (1960) feared the professionalization of the military without adequate connection to society would degrade its commitment to democratic values (Burk 2002).

Professionalism thus sets the stage for the military's distance from society. In turn, U.S. military culture and particular conceptions of professionalism may explain why that separateness translates into a sense of superiority for some officers (Brooks 2020b; 2021). That culture of professionalism has been influenced by Samuel Huntington's (1957) concept of "objective civilian control," in which a clear division of responsibility is maintained between military and civilian leaders, and the military operates in isolation from societal concerns and politics. Huntington argued that those in the military are intrinsically different in mindset from their civilian counterparts in American society, going so far to posit the notion of a monolithic "military mind." Hence, not only does maintaining a professional army inevitably result in the creation of a military officer class apart from society, but Huntington sanctions that distinctiveness as normatively appropriate and necessary. Huntington also explicitly argued that military culture is superior to liberal societal culture and that society should emulate military values. In one notable passage, for example, he refers to the town of Highland Falls that abuts the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and argues that the local community could learn a great deal from the values held by the cadets in their midst. Military and civilian leaders have, in turn, reinforced these ideas, as this article's opening quotations suggest. Hence, structurally the military is organized in a manner that encourages its separation from society while it has culturally been shaped by conceptions of professionalism that enable and validate attitudes of superiority.

Attitudes of military superiority may in turn be reinforced by two other dynamics. First, the military has become less representative demographically of society, reinforcing a sense of distinctiveness among its personnel. Today, those who self-select to join disproportionately come from rural and less populated areas, often in the South and Midwest, rather than urban centers or areas in the Northeast or West Coast, and military personnel often hail from military families (Schafer 2017). There is also a partisan skew in the military, especially among officers, such that personnel do not mirror ideological cleavages in society (Feaver and Kohn 2001; Dempsey 2010; Urben 2010). As Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn's *Soldiers and Civilians* (Kohn 2001) details, these basing decisions, recruitment practices and partisan divides have yielded a significant "civil–military gap" between society and the military in the United States. Add to that, the military members' overall higher levels of fitness, education and technical ability relative to society may magnify the sense of superiority (Bryant et al. 2021, 17).

Finally, in combination with its isolation from society, the military's elevated position within it may reinforce this sense of superiority (King and Karabell 2002), by fueling a sense of miltiary exceptionalism (Bryant et al. 2021). Today, members of the military are provided cultural privileges that other service professions do not receive (Klay 2018). Indeed, scholars have found evidence of a social desirability bias that leads people to express reverence for the military, even if that value is not as deeply held (Golby and Feaver 2019; Kleykamp et al. 2017).[3] Hence, messages of exceptionalism

are regularly reinforced. At the same time, as members of American society, military personnel also observe (and may share) the American public's lack of esteem for other political institutions, even while the military remains among the most popular institutions in the country (Gallup 2020).

In short, the structural and unrepresentative character of the American military, its officers' particular culture of professionalism, and its vaunted role in American culture may explain why a sizable proportion of officers evince attitudes of superiority toward American culture. Retired Lieutenant General David Barno (2011) captures the interaction of these dynamics: "Today's Army–including its leadership–lives in a bubble separate from society. Not only does it reside in remote fortresses–the world's most exclusive gated communities–but in a world apart from the cultural, intellectual and even geographic spheres that define the kaleidoscopic United States. This splendid military isolation–set in the midst of a largely adoring nation–risks fostering a closed culture of superiority and aloofness."

While these attitudes of superiority have long been lamented, whether they actually matter for civil–military relations is up for debate. Our article shows that they do because they undermine confidence in civilian leaders and authority and in so doing, generate beliefs corrosive to civilian control. As Holsti (2004) puts it: "If such findings of wide partisan, ideological and cultural gaps had emerged from surveys in a Third World emerging democracy, they would surely suggest the very real possibility of military coup in the not-too-distant future. […But] the chances of such a coup in the United States are somewhere between infinitesimal and nil" (p. 559).

However, while a coup may be a remote possibility, there is a wide range of behaviors short of a coup that also undermine civilian control. Below, we provide a typology of three such behaviors, including constraining, contesting, and limiting civilian authority. We argue that the US military's attitudes of superiority encourage these very infractions on civilian control, and that they do so by fueling doubt about civilian leaders. Below, we outline our theory linking attitudes of military superiority to lower confidence in civilian leaders, and in turn, to support for actions undermining civilian control.

Confidence in Civilian Leaders

We argue that military officers' attitudes of superiority matter because they affect their confidence in civilian leaders of the military—that is, the president, Secretary of Defense and political appointees in policymaking or oversight roles who have held primary careers in non-military fields, such as law, business, politics, academia, and diplomacy. Because few politicians are veterans (Lupton 2017) and even fewer have held long careers in the services, instead maintaining long careers in the civilian sectors, political leaders as a general class are likely to be identified with the values held by society at large and not with those of the military.[4] Attitudes of superiority toward society therefore lay the groundwork for skepticism and disparagement of the civilian leaders who represent and reflect that society.

Specifically, military personnel who view military culture as superior are likely to harbor two sets of views insidious to respect for civilian leaders. First, because military officers see that society as less honest, and more materialistic, they are likely to be cynical about the motives driving civilian actors, seeing them as self-interested and fueled by safeguarding their careers or political parties rather than championing the welfare of the country. That civilian leaders are perceived to be self-seeking and partisan stands in stark contrast to the military's self-image as being motivated by service, sacrifice, and loyalty to the nation. Officers who view the military and society in this dichotomy are thus more likely to doubt the motives of civilian leaders.

Second, military personnel who view military culture as superior are more likely to doubt civilians' qualifications to run the military. It would be less remarkable if particular civilians were singled out as being unqualified, but important here is that we refer to a blanket belief and assessment about civilian leadership in the abstract. The attitudes of superiority fueled by the Huntingtonian notion of a "military mind" and the privileging of a separate, autonomous military sphere, we argue, in turn foster a belief that military leaders are better than civilian leaders at running military affairs. Following from the above, military personnel are likely to regard former military service as a litmus test for legitimate political leadership, for example, believing the president should have served to be respected as commander-in-chief (Brooks, Robinson and Urben 2021; Urben and Golby 2020). Observe that the operative word is "respect" in our empirical analysis—a much stronger term than asking if someone might be better qualified or prepared, let alone whether a specific job or experience in the military might assist a leader in performing a particular task. Military superiority fosters a belief that just by virtue of having served individuals are inherently more qualified to oversee the military.

In short, beliefs that military culture is superior are likely to lead military personnel to doubt the motives and credentials of civilian leaders, and accordingly whether they deserve respect. Of course, this may not always be the case: our theoretical expectations aside, individuals could in theory disparage civilian society while venerating political elites, or vice-versa. However, we hypothesize that on average:

Hypothesis 1: Military personnel who think military culture is superior to that of civilians will have lower confidence in civilian leaders.

Below we outline the next step in our argument, exploring how these attitudes of superiority and lower confidence in civilian leadership in turn affect officers' support for actions undermining civilian control of the military.

Civilian Control of the Military

Scholars have long sought to understand the origins of civilian control of the military, how it is achieved and in what manner it is challenged. They have observed incidents challenging civilian control from early in the republic, including the Newburgh

Conspiracy of 1782–83, when George Washington prevented a mutiny by the military against Congress (Kohn 1970), to more recent efforts by the military to wall-off nuclear command and control and war planning from civilians (Feaver, 1992). There have similarly been efforts to explain the causes of these challenges. In an important study, for example, Deborah Avant (1994) argued that institutional divisions between the legislature and executive enabled the military to leverage Congress and the president against one another, complicating civilian control in the United States. Desch (1999) argued that the level of external threat facing a country would be an important factor in assuring civilian control. This article outlines an alternative mechanism, rooted in the way that military officers perceive the civilian leadership. When officers view civilians as worthy leaders of the military—that is, when they believe them to be selflessly motivated, knowledgeable and respect their expertise—civilian control is more robust.

While scholars have explored the reasons why civilian control might vary, less clear is how to measure its presence or absence. One approach is to argue that civilian control is present when civilian preferences prevail over military policy and actions. Yet, as Desch (1999) argues, it can be difficult to ascertain when those conditions hold. Alternatively, some scholars define control in the negative, as simply the absence of coups. This approach falls prey, however, to what Croissant et al. (2010) call the "fallacy of coup-ism"—the idea that civilians control the military if the latter refrain from conspiring against the government. This truncates variation in military influence in government and reduces the military's power to its coercive potential, while neglecting its other means to shape outcomes and influence politics (Brooks 2019). In addition, it neglects challenges to civilian control in places where the chance of the military using its coercive power to intervene in politics is unlikely, as has been the case in the United States (Feaver 1999).

Other definitions focus on whether or not military leaders follow orders (Karlin 2020). Yet, civilian control entails more than formal compliance within an explicit governance structure; it entails acting in ways that conform with the spirit of that structure and ensure it operates robustly. Civilian control requires that military leaders submit to civilian oversight without seeking to subvert or indirectly contort civilian decisions. In this vein, Peter Feaver (2003) details how the military may "shirk" by delaying the implementation of policies or decisions or otherwise obstruct civilian initiatives. As he puts it (2003, 66), civilian control entails that "the military is behaving in a way that supports civilian supremacy in the long run." Similarly, Hooker and Richard (2003) contend that civilian control depends upon military leaders' implementing civilian initiatives when directed to do so. Other scholars have focused on the military's political activism (Brooks 2009; Kohn 1994, 2002), and its capacity to influence domestic politics, through public commentary, mobilizing civilian interests and legislators to lobby on behalf of these issues. While these actions are implicitly understood as challenges to civilian control, however, they have not been fully conceptualized in those terms. More recently, Beliakova (2021) has offered two general categories of challenges to civilian control, termed competition and insubordination.

We, however, outline three distinct analytical pathways through which civilian control can be challenged.

A Typology of Civilian Control

In this article we both build upon and contribute to this scholarship by identifying three different mechanisms through which military personnel can subvert civilian control. By looking at support for these actions we can discern the robustness of civilian control and the military's willingness to challenge it. First, the military can *constrain* civilian authority by shaping the domestic political context in which civilian leaders choose among policy options. We define such efforts as those that alter civilians' choice set, or decision-making calculus, by influencing public opinion or political elites in conformity with military actors' preferences. Through this political activism, military personnel increase a leader's domestic costs for pursuing a preferred policy or one that she has committed to pursuing.

Specifically, military personnel may ally with interest or pressure groups, or "shoulder-tap" members of Congress (Brooks 2009). Military leaders may make public comments about issues related to the use of force or military affairs that are contrary to a political leader's policy positions or platform. They may also resign in protest of a civilian decision. These actions, in particular, constitute elite cues that can potentially set the agenda of choices, alter the framing of an issue, or mobilize opposition, thereby circumscribing the options available to a political leader (Beliakova 2021; Golby, Feaver, and Dropp 2018; Jost and Kertzer 2020; Robinson 2018).

Military mobilization against Bill Clinton's efforts to abolish prohibitions on gay men and women serving openly in the military in the early 1990s illustrates this constraining dynamic. Military leaders purposefully courted Congressional allies to block the effort, while others spoke out and mobilized opposition within the ranks (Rayside 1996). There were also threats to resign in protest (Kohn 2002, 3). The result was a dysfunctional policy compromise, known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," in which the U.S. military allowed gay people to serve and not to ask them about their sexuality, as long as they did not share the latter publicly. In effect, military actors in coordination with the congressional allies they helped mobilize undermined Clinton's capacity to choose his preferred policy and instead forced a compromise (Shankar and Healy 2007).

The military's power to shape domestic political debate in this manner, and constrain civilian authority, is especially significant in the United States. As noted above, divisions between the executive and legislative branches provide opportunities for the military to play one off against the other and mean the military is more likely to develop its own goals distinct from the civilian leadership's (Avant 1994; Avant 1996). Survey research has shown that the American public is especially deferential to the military elite's opinions on a variety of issues, even those unrelated to national security matters (Jost and Kertzer 2020), while it is not especially wedded to norms of civilian control of the military (Krebs and Ralston 2020) and likes it when the military

acts like its co-partisan (Robinson 2018). Consequently, the threat to resign or make public statements is potent and carries with it significant ramifications for civilian control.

In turn, when military personnel feel the military is superior and doubt civilian leaders, they are more likely to support efforts to constrain civilian authority through political activism.

Hypothesis 2: Military personnel who think military culture is superior to that of civilians will be more likely to support *constraining* civilian authority.

Second, the military can *contest* civilian authority within the chain of command and thereby compromise civilian control. Contestation includes overt manifestations of insubordination, in which military leaders openly defy orders, but also encompasses threats to do so and other indirect means of defiance of civilian authority. For example, a military leader may threaten that he will oppose an initiative in internal decision-making processes unless the political leader modifies it to reflect his advice or concerns. The political leader will defer, fearing the military brass will be slow to implement the policy and shirk (Beliakova 2021; Feaver 2003), or will coalesce with other opponents in the government or chain of command to block the initiative.

Recchia (2015) has described how this kind of contestation occurred when U.S. military leaders pressured political leaders to seek allies and endorsement from international organizations for military interventions in humanitarian crises in the 1990s. Military leaders who were disinclined to support humanitarian interventions (Avant 1996) sought guarantees to protect their organizational interests. Specifically, they sought to encourage burden sharing and mitigate the risks and costs of unilaterally prosecuting these operations, even threatening to "veto" the interventions within policy processes in the White House if multilateral support was not obtained. Recchia shows how this pressure shaped civilian decisions, and conditioned U.S. policy choices.

We expect that when military personnel doubt civilian leaders, they are more likely to support contestation of civilian authority, especially by insisting that political leaders heed their advice on particular issues related to the use of force.

Hypothesis 3: Military personnel who think military culture is superior to that of civilians will be more likely to support *contesting* civilian authority.

Third, drawing from scholarship on comparative politics on reserve domains (Pion-Berlin 1997, Stepan 1988), military personnel can *limit* civilian authority by seeking to retain institutional authority and responsibility to oversee and decide specific policy domains or issue areas. The spectrum of authorities can vary widely, including the power to decide issues related to budgetary concerns or procurement decisions; control over the military justice system; to decisions about strategy in war, or foreign policy. Regardless, a military enjoys a reserve domain when decision-making in these areas occurs in institutional fora controlled, staffed or overseen by the military.

Specifically, if a military deems that it should be able to internalize within its own chain of command or institutional structures decisions about policy issues or the prosecution of military operations and to resist civilian incursions or oversight of those actions, it is seeking a reserve domain that limits civilian control. Likewise, support for appointing former military officers within the Department of Defense might be seen as a way of enhancing authority over policy decisions. Historically in Latin America, for example, military control of the defense ministry enabled lower levels of transparency and public accountability and hence advanced the military's influence over defense policy (Neto and Accorsi 2022).

Examples of this phenomenon occurred during the Trump presidency in which the military reduced the information it provides to the public (DeJonge Schulman and Friend 2018). The military was effectively claiming authority to monitor itself, internalizing within in its own institutions decisions about how it should operate, while making it more difficult for American citizens to assess its activities and therefore to signal opposition to Congressional representatives. Similarly, the military ended regular press conferences and prohibited its personnel from speaking to the media even on non-sensitive issues (Mehta 2020). In addition, some elements within the military sought to obscure information about the targeting of civilians in warzones and claimed the prerogative to do so when pushed by superiors to answer for their actions (Phillips and Schmitt 2021). Contrary to democratic control of the military, which requires transparency, in these examples the military is claiming the right to decide what the public knows.

Hypothesis 4: Military personnel who think military culture is superior to that of civilians will be more likely to support *limiting* civilian authority.

In short, attitudes of military superiority should reduce confidence in civilian leaders, and in turn increase support for actions that constrain, contest, and limit their authority. Figure 1 summarizes the theory, linking military superiority to lower confidence in civilian leaders and in turn to undermining civilian control.

Research Design

To test this theory, we draw upon three surveys of U.S. military personnel. These surveys complement each other, and allow us to evaluate our hypotheses across several populations of military personnel. We first examine the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS) survey of 2901 military officers and cadets, conducted in 1998–1999 (Feaver and Kohn 2001). The second is a 2014 YouGov survey of 275 veterans from Schake and Mattis (2016). Finally, we present results from an original survey of 770 West Point cadets conducted in 2020.

While the oldest, the TISS survey offers the largest sample size and the most comprehensive questions for each of our variables. In addition, the TISS surveys were done prior to the U.S.'s involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and therefore prior to controversies over the political leadership's conduct of these wars. The more

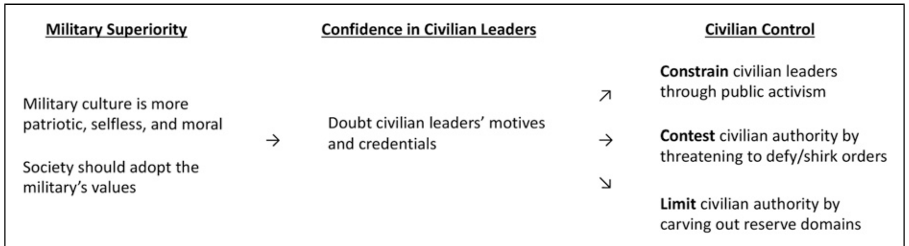

Figure 1. Theory linking military superiority to undermining civilian control.

recent YouGov survey focuses on former military personnel, allowing us to evaluate whether attitudes about military culture and civilian leaders are sensitive to an individual being in active service. If the relationships we posit are observed among veterans, it suggests that the cultural mindset of superiority and doubts about civilian leaders and control is deeply entrenched and present long after an individual leaves service. Finally, the survey of cadets allows us to examine the relationship of superiority and civilian control at this formative period in a future officer's career. If even among cadets, superiority breeds doubts about civilian leaders and support for measures that undermine civilian control, we see that the relationship between contempt for civilian society and disregard for civilian control is not a feature of actually having experienced civilian oversight, but stems from cultural beliefs about the military and society.

In addition, the TISS and YouGov surveys occurred under Democratic presidents, while the survey of West Point cadets occurred under a Republican president. Recent survey research of American citizens suggests that their views on civil–military relations issues are affected by who is president and whether they support the individual (Krebs and Ralston 2020). If the relationship holds across surveys in different presidential administrations and regardless of party affiliation, it suggests that it is the presence of supremacist attitudes about military culture that is consequential for support for measures that challenge civilian control.

The different samples and timing of each survey therefore help to demonstrate the breadth of our theory across different political contexts and at different stages of a servicemember's career. This helps us rule out the possibility that the responses are the product of a particular phase of socialization or a distinct generational cohort in the military. These differences, along with differences in question wording, nonetheless complicate making direct comparisons among the three surveys. For instance, readers should not conclude that attitudes of superiority have increased or decreased over time from a comparison of these surveys. While specific wording varies, however, all the questions asked are related thematically, inspiring confidence that they are all capturing comparable phenomena.

TISS Survey (1998–99)

We first present evidence from the TISS survey, which reached 2901 officers and cadets between Fall 1998 and Spring 1999 at the National Defense University, War Colleges, Command and General Staff College, and Army, Navy, and Air Force service academies.[5] The TISS survey is particularly useful as it included multiple questions to capture each component of our theory.

The TISS survey was one of the first revealing the US military's attitudes of cultural superiority. Officers were asked "to make some judgments about civilian and military culture in this country," and presented with a list of qualities (honest, hardworking, etc.). Figure 2 shows that the vast majority of the officers surveyed rated military culture as disciplined, loyal, honest, and hardworking, while rating civilian culture as materialistic, self-indulgent, and corrupt.

So pronounced were these attitudes of superiority that military personnel believed civilian society should adopt their values. About 68% agreed or strongly agreed that "civilian society would be better off if it adopted more of the military's values and customs." Similarly, 72% believed that "through leading by example, the military could help American society become more moral." In addition, 71% felt that "All Americans should be willing to give up their lives to defend the country," implying that military service is the highest and only legitimate form of service to the country. We use these three questions as our measure of military superiority. All three strongly correlate (see appendix), and so we average them into one composite variable, *superiority*.[6] Results

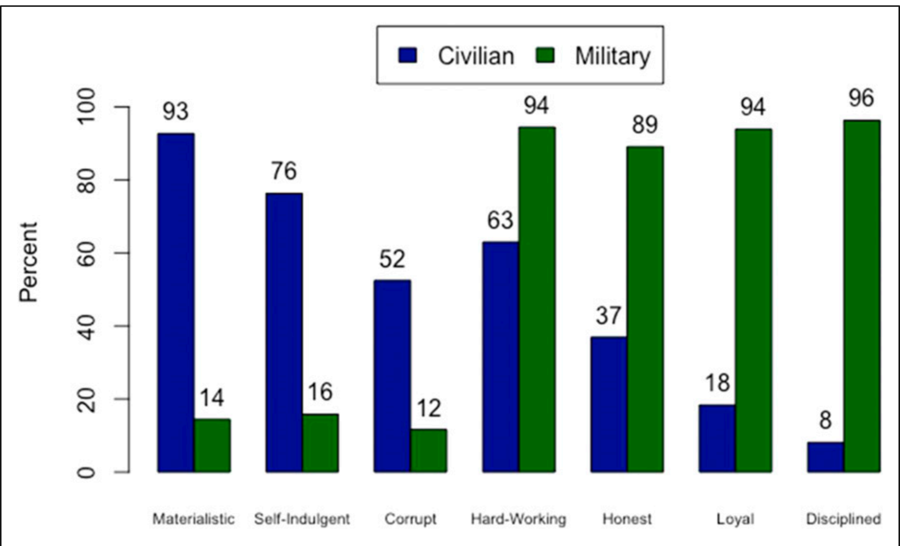

Figure 2. Military officers' judgments of civilian and military culture (TISS 1999).

also hold when examining each individually, which we present in the appendix (Supplementary Tables 8-10).

We hypothesize that these attitudes of superiority will correlate with lower confidence in civilian leaders, and in turn with support for actions that undermine civilian control. To measure confidence in civilian leaders, we draw upon three questions: (1) "To be respected as Commander-in-Chief, the President should have served in uniform" (55% agreed or strongly agreed); (2) "When civilians tell the military what to do, domestic partisan politics rather than national security requirements are often the primary motivation" (55% agreed or strongly agreed); and (3) "How knowledgeable do you think our political leaders are about the modern military?" (52% said somewhat or very ignorant). The first question captures whether a civilian would need military experience to be worthy of respect, while the latter focus specifically on civilian motives and knowledge, respectively. These three questions also strongly correlate, and so we average them into one composite variable, *confidence,* though we present each individually in the appendix. We reverse code each variable in constructing *confidence,* such that lower values indicate that civilians are ignorant, partisan, and unworthy of respect, and higher values indicate higher confidence.

We assess the correlation between *superiority* and *confidence* while controlling for a number of covariates. We control for demographic variables, including their gender, age, education, party affiliation (Republican), race (white), frequency of prayer, religion (Evangelical), and home region (South), as well as variables specific to the military, including their branch (army), rank, whether they have been deployed in the last 5 years, have a family member in the military, and how many of their three closest friends are in the military.

Figure 3 (left) presents the standardized coefficients from a multivariate regression model between *superiority* and *confidence* while controlling for each of these covariates (for regression table, see appendix, Supplementary Table 6, model 1). Attitudes of military superiority strongly ($p<0.001$) correlate with lower confidence in civilian leaders. Moreover, the effect size of military superiority is larger than any of the covariates, including education and partisanship. For ease of interpretation, Figure 3 (right) presents the predicted effect of superiority while holding all other covariates at their means. All else equal, officers who believe the military is superior express almost a full point lower confidence in civilian leaders, moving them from somewhat confident to somewhat not confident. In the appendix (Supplementary Table 7), we show that *superiority* also correlates with each aspect of *confidence* individually, including a belief that the president should be a veteran, that civilians are partisan, and that civilians are ignorant.

Civilian Control in the TISS Survey

We anticipate that attitudes of military superiority will in turn fuel support for actions that constrain, contest, and limit civilian authority. The TISS survey provides a number of questions that capture these transgressions.

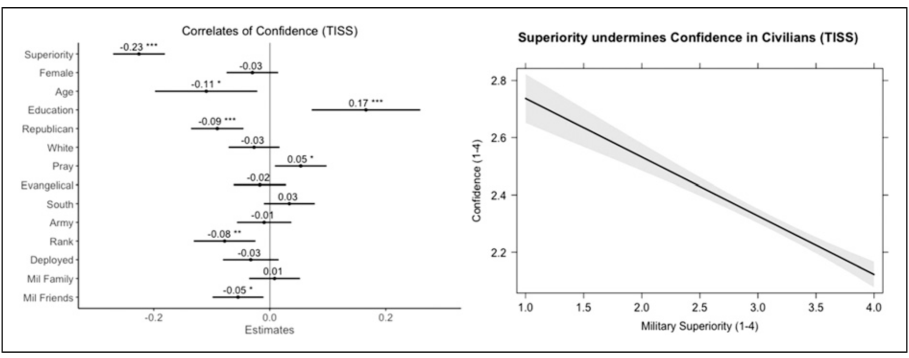

Figure 3. Military superiority and lack of confidence in civilian leaders (TISS 1999).

First, to measure military officers 'going public' to constrain civilian authority, we use four questions. The first two questions capture military officers publicly criticizing civilian leaders or publicly advocating for the military's preferences, thereby, consistent with our theory, affecting domestic costs and constraining leaders' options: (1) "Members of the military should not publicly criticize senior members of the civilian branch of the government," (reverse coded so strongly disagree=4), and (2) "It is proper for the military to advocate publicly the military policies it believes are in the best interests of the United States." The latter two begin with the prompt: "If a senior civilian DOD leader asks a military officer to do something that the military officer believes is *unwise*, would it be appropriate for the officer to…" and we record whether respondents believed it was appropriate to (3) "Retire or leave the service in protest" or (4) "Leak the matter to the press to alert others to this problem." Both leaking and retiring in protest signal to the public or other elites that there is military dissent, and thus constitute political activism. Support for these actions implies a servicemember hopes to affect the information available to citizens about military views. All four questions correlate (see appendix), so we combine them into one variable, *constrain*.

Second, to capture military officers contesting civilian authority, we use questions about the military pressuring civilians to follow the military's advice in four areas. The TISS survey asks whether military leaders should insist that their opinions be heeded on: (1) "Deciding whether to intervene" in a conflict; (2) "Ensuring that clear political and military goals exist"; (3) "Deciding what the goals or policy should be"; and (4) "Developing an exit strategy" for an intervention. For each, respondents were asked to specify the proper role of the military, from "be neutral," "advise," "advocate," or "insist." We record the number of times respondents said the military should "insist" across these four domains, creating a composite variable, *contest*.

Finally, to capture military officers limiting civilian authority, we draw on four questions about giving the military more influence than civilians over matters of war,

the use of force, and foreign policy: (1) "In wartime, civilian government leaders should let the military take over running the war," (2) "In general, high ranking civilian officials rather than high ranking military officers should have the final say on whether or not to use military force" (reverse coded so strongly disagree=4), (3) "In general, high ranking civilian officials rather than high ranking military officers should have the final say on what type of military force to use" (reverse coded so strongly disagree=4), and (4) "Military leaders do not have enough influence in deciding our policy with other countries." Each of these questions capture whether the military should retain decision-making prerogatives or reserve domains, including internalizing within their own institutions decisions about how to plan and employ forces in armed conflict, having the final say on deciding to commit forces to such a conflict, and even having a metaphorical "vote" in deciding foreign policy. All four questions correlate (see appendix), so we average them into one composite, *limit.*

Figure 4 shows that attitudes of military superiority correlate with all three types of infractions (see corresponding regression Supplementary Table 6 in Appendix). Officers who believe military culture is superior are significantly more likely to support constraining (top), contesting (middle), and limiting (top) civilian authority. Once again, military superiority is the most important predictor for all three of these infractions, more important than any of the controls.

Our theory suggests that the reason military superiority encourages these violations of civilian control is because it reduces confidence in civilian leaders. Put another way, confidence in civilians is an intervening variable, mediating the effect of military superiority onto civilian control. Although the TISS data is correlational, not causal, we have clear theoretical reasons for assuming the direction of the relationship, and thus we examine this mediation in two ways. First, following Baron and Kenny (1986), we show that the coefficient on superiority for all three infractions weakens when controlling for confidence, and that confidence correlates with all three infractions (Appendix, Supplementary Table 12). Second, more formally, we run a mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2011), which shows that for all three infractions, there is indeed a statistically significant mediated effect of superiority running through reduced confidence in civilians (Appendix, Supplementary Table 13).

In sum, the TISS survey provides strong empirical evidence of our theory, linking military superiority to reduced confidence in civilian leaders and in turn to support for violations of civilian control. However, one could argue that the TISS results do not reflect superiority per se, but simply the partisan context in which the survey was conducted, in particular, a Republican-leaning officer corps contemptuous of what some viewed as an immoral, draft-dodging Democratic president (Clinton). The models above already controlled for whether respondents were Republican, and still found an overall effect. In the appendix, we show that results hold even when sub-setting to the non-Republicans (Democrats and Independents) in the sample, suggesting that partisanship is not driving our results. However, from the TISS data alone, we cannot test conclusively whether Clinton may be the cause of the correlation. Below we thus

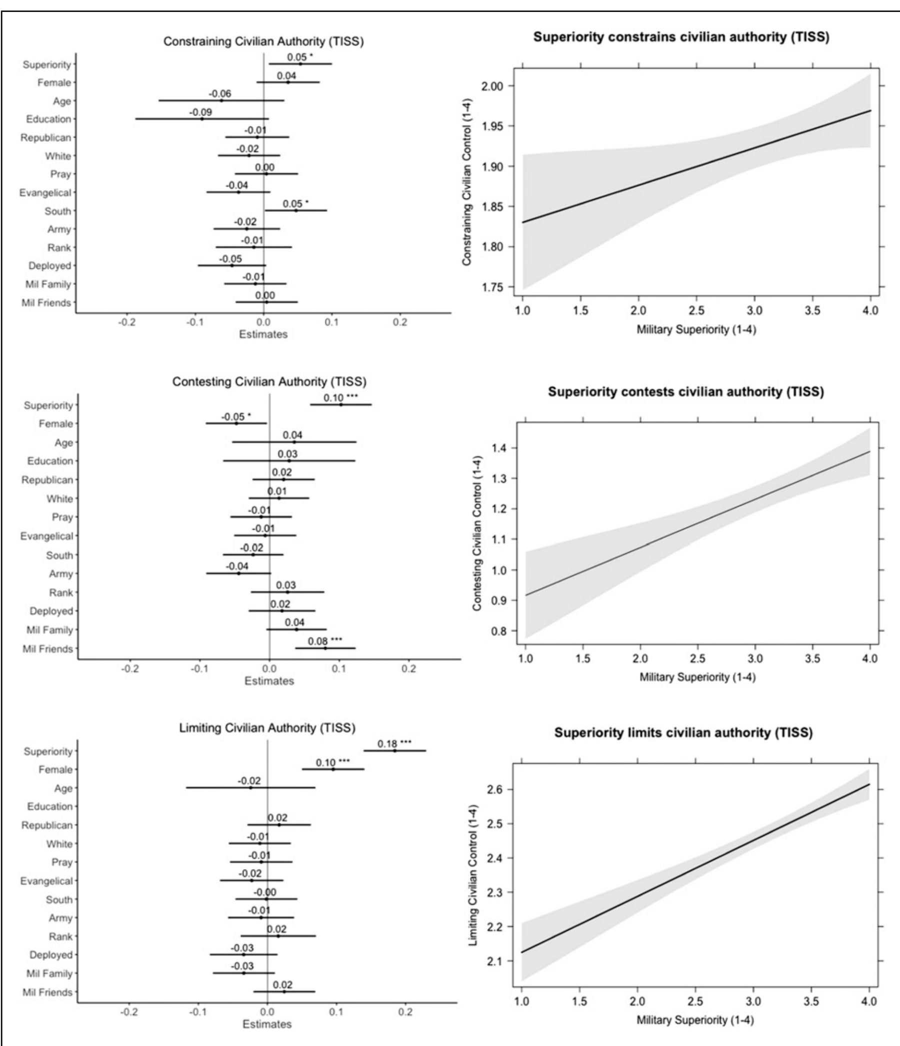

Figure 4. Military superiority and civilian control (TISS 1999).

validate the correlations with two other surveys, one conducted during the Obama presidency and the other during the Trump presidency.

YouGov survey (2014). In their book, *Warriors & Citizens*, Schake and Mattis (2016) use a survey of 1500 civilians and veterans conducted by YouGov in 2014. Of these respondents, we subset to the 275 veterans. While the sample is small and does not

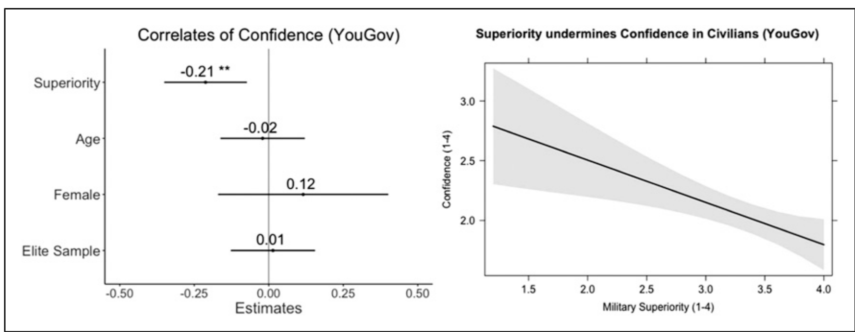

Figure 5. Military superiority and lack of confidence in civilian leaders (YouGov).

include active-duty personnel, the questionnaire includes several items relevant for our analysis and suggests that our results might hold during the Obama presidency, as well.

The survey included four questions measuring attitudes of military superiority: (1) "The military is more fair with how it handles promotion and awards than the rest of society" (65% agreed or strongly agreed), (2) "In general, the military is less fair than the rest of society" (72% disagreed or strongly disagreed), (3) "The military has more ethical problems or scandals than the rest of society" (74% disagreed or strongly disagreed), and (4) "Veterans are more reliable and hard-working than the rest of society" (77% agreed or strongly agreed). The four questions correlate, so we average them into one compositive variable, *superiority*, in addition to presenting each separately in the appendix (Supplementary Table 19).

The survey included just one question to capture confidence in civilian leaders: "How knowledgeable do you think our political leaders are about the modern military?" 61% said "not very" or "not at all" knowledgeable. Figure 5 shows that attitudes of superiority strongly correlate with beliefs that civilian leaders are less knowledgeable, controlling for age, gender, and survey sub-sample.[7] Like in the TISS survey, superiority correlates with about a full point lower confidence in civilians, moving veterans from labeling civilian leaders on average as "somewhat knowledge" to "not very knowledgeable."

Civilian Control in YouGov

The YouGov survey allows us to measure each type of violation of civilian control. To capture military officers constraining civilian leaders by mobilizing the public or other elites, we use two questions. The first is similar to TISS: "If a senior civilian Department of Defense leader asks a military officer to do something that the military officer believes is unwise but not illegal or immoral, would it be appropriate or inappropriate for the officer to… Retire or leave the service in protest" (48% said appropriate). The second question asks specifically about mobilizing Congress against the president: "If

the President decides to withdraw completely from the Afghan war in 2014, does the military have a responsibility to... Privately explain their concerns to Congress?" (60% said yes). We create a composite variable *constrain* that measures how many of these two actions respondents sanctioned.

The second violation is contesting civilian authority. While YouGov did not have a specific question about challenging civilian leaders, we infer it with the question: "When the President makes a policy decision on the wars [in Iraq and Afghanistan], does the military have a responsibility to support the policy?". While 76% said yes, the other 24% were willing to contest the president.

Finally, to measure the military limiting civilian authority, we combine two questions: (1) "When force is used, military rather than political goals should determine its application" (72% agreed or strongly agreed), and (2) "There are many different things that people say might keep the military from being effective during times of war. For each of the following, please indicate if it might greatly hurt military effectiveness, somewhat hurt military effectiveness, has no effect or is not happening at all: Non-military people getting too involved in purely military affairs" (69% said it would hurt military effectiveness). Both questions imply that the military should retain oversight and decision-making authority over crucial decisions related to war and the use of force. Figure 6 shows that in this YouGov survey as well, attitudes of military superiority correlate with all three types of violations of civilian authority (see corresponding regression supplementary Table 16 in Appendix). Substantively, superiority moves veterans about a full point more supportive of limiting civilian authority, from on average being weakly supportive to being strongly supportive.

In short, Schake and Mattis (2016)'s survey of 275 veterans is consistent with the TISS survey: attitudes of military superiority are widespread (60–70% agreement) and correlate both with reduced confidence in civilian leaders and with support for undermining civilian control. Mediation analyses (appendix, Supplementary Tables 17 and 18) likewise suggest that the correlation between superiority and undermining civilian control may operate in part through reduced confidence in civilians. Still, both the TISS and YouGov surveys occurred during Democratic administrations—Clinton and Obama. The desire to challenge civilian leaders could thus stem from an omitted aspect of partisanship, rather than from attitudes of superiority. To show that the results hold also with Republican presidents, we employ an original survey undertaken during the Trump administration.

West Point Survey (2020). The final survey was fielded between January 22–28, 2020 to 770 cadets at West Point enrolled in introductory American politics and International Relations classes. The survey's respondents constituted an opt-in panel, who received the survey online through the platform Qualtrics. In addition to a high response rate from the respondents, the sample benefited from the underlying cross-section of the West Point cohorts, which are intentionally drawn from all Congressional districts, providing a representative population for our sample. Of the 770 cadets who filled out the survey, the vast majority—85%—were in their second or third year. About 26%

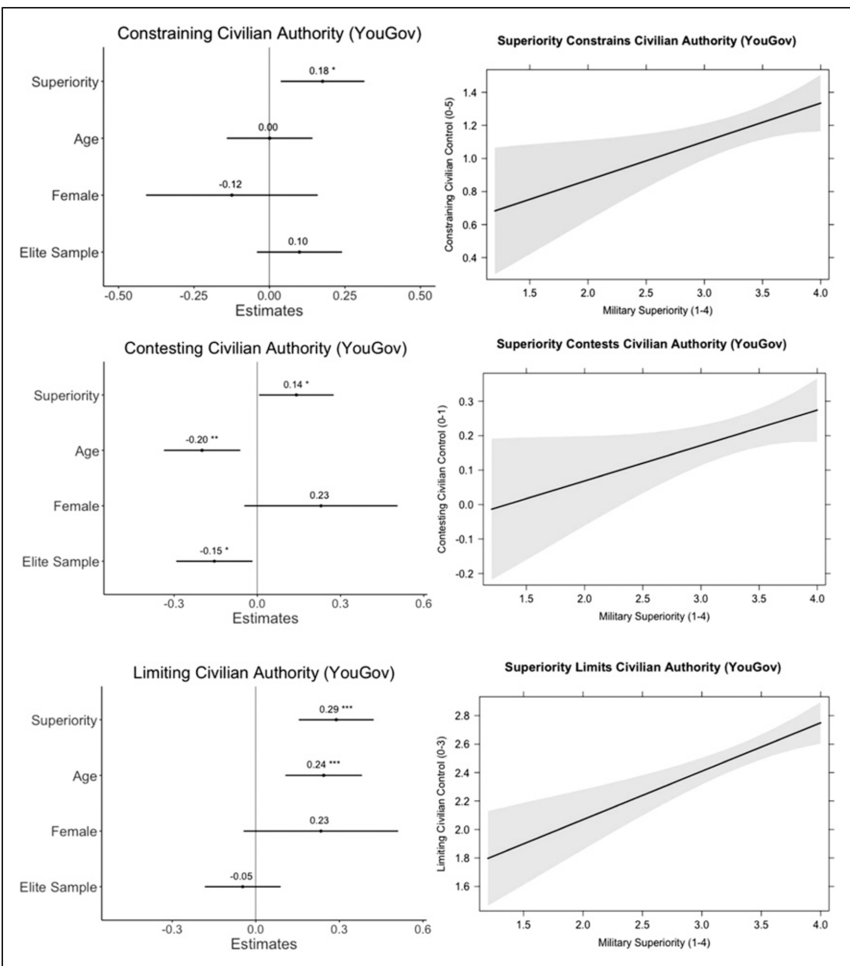

Figure 6. Military superiority and civilian control (YouGov).

were women, 68% were white, 58% were Republican, and 47% said they had a family member in the military (see more details in the Appendix).

To measure military superiority, the West Point survey asked cadets for their level of agreement with the statement: “Military culture is generally superior to the rest of society today.” Just 21% agreed or strongly agreed, while 54% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This low support for superiority among cadets suggests that perhaps the current cohort is less inclined to hold attitudes of superiority or that these attitudes may be socialized over time, rather than already established at the pre-commissioning phase in an officer’s career. But while low, these attitudes still correlate with corrosive

attitudes toward civilian authority. Those that held them exhibited derogatory views of civilian leadership and a receptiveness to actions subversive of civilian control similar to that observed in the TISS and YouGov surveys.

The West Point survey contained three questions capturing confidence in civilian leaders: (1)“To be respected as Commander-in-chief, the President should have served in uniform” (15% agreed or strongly agreed); (2) “To be respected in their position, the Secretary of Defense should have served in uniform” (57% agreed or strongly agreed); and (3) “More retired generals and admirals serving as cabinet secretaries or senior political appointees is good for the country” (50% agreed or strongly agreed). Each question gauges whether respondents have confidence in civilian leaders or would instead want them to have military experience. We reverse code each question and then average them into a composite variable, *confidence,* though we show that results hold with each individually in the appendix (Supplementary Table 23).

Figure 7 shows that in the West Point survey as well, attitudes of military superiority strongly correlate ($p < 0.001$) with reduced confidence in civilians. These correlations hold controlling for a variety of demographic variables, including gender, age, party (Republican), race (white), region (south), year at West Point, and coming from a military family. Moreover, of all these variables, military superiority is the *only* significant predictor of confidence in civilians. As in the other surveys, superiority correlates with about a full point lower confidence, moving cadets from being roughly neutral towards civilians to preferring them to have military experience.

The West Point survey only allows us to measure one of the three types of violations of civilian control: limiting civilian authority. We use three questions: (1) “In the ideal approach, there is a clear division between civilians and the military in decisions about the use of force. Civilians decide whether to commit forces and then military leaders take over and run the war. Each respects the other’s sphere and stays out of it” (42% agreed or strongly agreed); (2) “When the country is at war, the President should basically follow the advice of the generals” (37% agreed or strongly agreed); and (3) “It’s an inappropriate incursion into military autonomy for a civilian policymaker to establish a timeline on a military operation or campaign” (35% agreed or strongly agreed). These questions all capture the military retaining prerogatives in times of war or use of force. We average them into a composite variable, *limit,* though we show that results hold with each individually in the appendix.

Figure 8 shows that attitudes of military superiority significantly correlate ($p < 0.001$) with support for limiting civilian authority (see corresponding regression supplementary Table 24 in Appendix). Substantively, superiority is the most important predictor of limiting civilian authority. Attitudes of superiority move cadets from being roughly neutral on limiting civilian authority towards leaning supportive of it.

Finally, mediation analyses (Appendix, Supplementary Tables 26 and 27) suggests that the correlation between military superiority and limiting civilian authority operates through reduced confidence in civilians. Of the total effect of *superiority* on *limit*, about 47% occurs through reduced *confidence*. In the appendix, we also show that these results are not driven by the Democrats in the sample, who may view Trump as

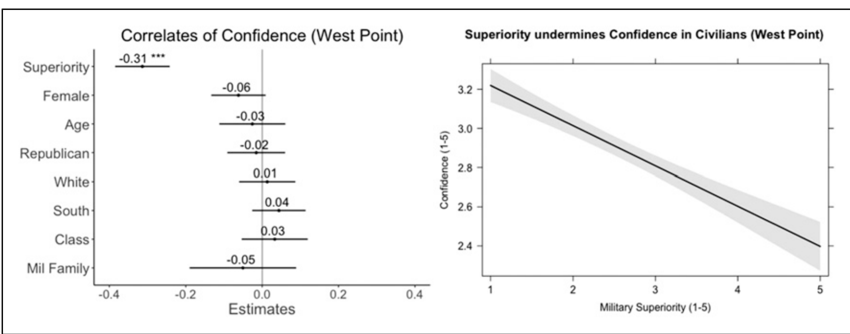

Figure 7. Military superiority and lack of confidence in civilian leaders (West Point).

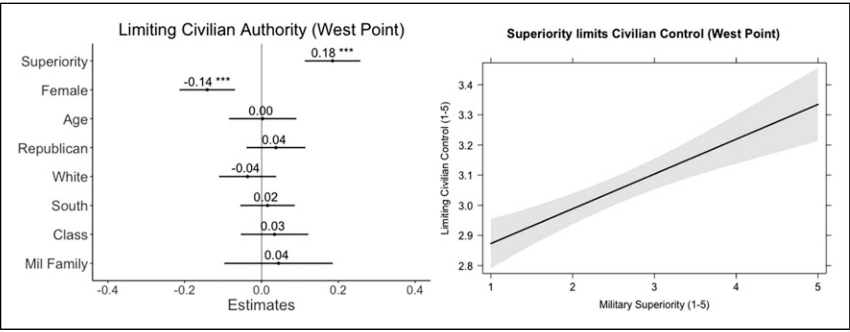

Figure 8. Military superiority and limiting civilian authority (West Point).

illegitimate and seek to limit his authority. Instead, all results, including the mediation, hold when sub-setting to either the non-Republicans or the Republicans.

Discussion of Survey Findings

In short, across all three surveys—TISS, YouGov, and West Point—we find strong and consistent evidence that attitudes of military superiority are worrisome, correlating with doubts about civilian leaders and a willingness to constrain, contest, and limit civilian authority. That these findings hold across two decades of surveys, spanning both Democratic and Republican administrations, and across officers (TISS), veterans (YouGov), and cadets (West Point), suggests that they may generalize to the U.S. military more broadly. Moreover, that results hold among both Democratic and Republican respondents suggests that disparagement of civilian leaders is not driven by partisanship but instead by a broader cultural superiority within the military.

While we find these results to be compelling evidence that military attitudes of superiority toward society are subversive of civilian control, we acknowledge two potential cautions about our findings. First, the data are correlational, not causal; the surveys themselves cannot conclusively determine the direction of the causal arrow. We have clear theoretical grounds, however, for believing that negative attitudes toward society might breed negative views of civilian officials. Theoretically, it is less clear why negative attitudes about civilian leaders would produce disparaging attitudes toward society writ large, rather than the other way around.

Second, while the surveys show that military personnel *support* actions that undermine civilian control, they do not tell us when and whether individual service members are prone to take such actions. Much like other experimental and survey research, we evaluate attitudes about actions. Still, we view these results as potentially instructive for explaining the gradual weakening of civilian control in the United States (Brooks, Golby and Urben 2021; Kohn 1994, 2002; Weigley 1993). Since the 1990s, there has been growing concern about increased political activism by military personnel, involving occasional incidents of active duty and more frequently retired officers engaging in public commentary and partisan endorsements. In addition, the examples discussed earlier in the paper indicate that there are instances in which military leaders have subverted civilian control. One motivating factor, we believe, may be cultural views within the military that disparage society and civilian authority and therefore foster a sense that the military should assert its influence more significantly in national security decisions and retain more institutional autonomy from civilian policymakers.

Conclusion

This article identifies an important and underappreciated source of challenges to civilian control—the attitudes of superiority toward American society evinced by many military personnel. It conceptualizes different means through which the military can undermine civilian control short of a coup. Survey results from three distinct military populations—officers, veterans, and cadets—from across different presidencies reveal that those who hold attitudes of superiority toward society are strongly and consistently willing to support actions contrary to civilian control independent of who occupies the White House. They support actions akin to public activism that generate domestic costs and constrain civilian choices; support contesting civilian decision-making authority within the chain of command; and support limiting the domains in which civilians make decisions about military affairs. In short, the article identifies a pathway via military officers' beliefs to the corrosion of a cornerstone of democratic governance—civilian control of the military.

Several implications for scholars and practitioners follow from these findings. First, scholars might devote more attention to civilian control of the military in the growing field of civil–military relations. As an outcome, civilian control has often been overlooked and outshadowed by more spectacular aspects of civil–military relations, especially those involving the use of the miltiary's coercive power or acts of overt

insubordination against political leaders. In addition, a next step that follows from our findings would involve operationalizing and empirically tracking the various infractions of civilian control we point to in this article. Our research underscores that the health and balance of civil–military relations often reside in these mundane and less overt forms of military dissent, which corrode civilian control. Documenting the actual state of civilian control is a first step to remedying any deficits within it.

Second, on a practical level, military leaders, civilian defense officials and political leaders might rethink how they address military audiences, so that they can avoid reinforcing a sense of military exceptionalism, while still acknowledging their personnels' service to the country. Institutions involved in professional military education (PME) might also consider how they can incorporate in their curricula lessons that inspire officers to reflect on their attitudes toward American culture, as a means of encouraging a sense of humility and regard for the society they serve. Finally, as part of a larger effort to remedy the civil–military gap, members of the public might strive to become more engaged in evaluating the U.S. military, aiming to replace blind admiration with thoughtful reflection and, when needed, constructive criticism.

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Notes

1. Shanahan quote appears in Garamone (2019). Reference to "Twice the Citizen" appears in: https://www.usar.army.mil/Portals/98/Documents/infographics/Final%20Career%20Infographic%2019%20FEB.pdf
2. While the dominant view (Huntington 1957) is that military professionalism promotes civilian control by distancing the military from politics, comparativists have shown that it can actually fuel intervention in politics by creating corporate interests that militaries are motivated to protect (Nordlinger 1977; Thompson 1973).

3. For a comparativist take, see Koehler, Grewal, and Albrecht (2022).
4. For example there are only 91 veterans serving in the 117th Congress. See: https://www.legion.org/legislative/251583/117th-congress-sees-lowest-number-veterans- wwii#:~:text=Of%20the%20military%20veterans%20serving, served%20in%20overseas%20co mbat%20deployments.
5. For details on its representativeness, see Feaver and Kohn (2001).
6. Results are nearly identical when conducting a principal components analysis, and so we err on the side of simplicity.
7. Schake and Mattis' survey data is a combination of a representative survey and an elite survey. The elite survey only asked about age and gender, limiting us to these two controls.

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