Elite-Public Gaps in Attitudes to Nuclear Weapons: New Evidence from a Survey of German Citizens and Parliamentarians

RESEARCH NOTE

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A recent surge in survey-based scholarship has shed new light on public attitudes toward nuclear weapons. Yet, we still know little about how these public attitudes differ from those of political elites. To address this gap, we conducted an original survey on a large representative sample of German citizens and on a unique elite sample of German parliamentarians. In the survey, we asked the respondents about their views on different aspects of NATO’s nuclear sharing practice. We found support for several hypotheses concerning nuclear use, extended deterrence, withdrawal of forward-deployed weapons, and the feasibility of global nuclear disarmament. As such, we provide systematic empirical evidence that there are, indeed, important gaps in public and elite attitudes toward nuclear weapons. Our findings underscore the argument that scholars should survey both political elites and the general public to obtain a comprehensive picture of attitudes toward pertinent questions in our field.

Una reciente ola de estudios basados en encuestas esclareció las actitudes del público hacia las armas nucleares. Sin embargo, todavía sabemos poco sobre cómo estas actitudes públicas difieren de las actitudes de las élites políticas. Para abordar esta grieta, realizamos una encuesta original sobre una amplia muestra representativa de ciudadanos alemanes y una muestra de élite única de parlamentarios alemanes. Por medio de la encuesta, recopilamos opiniones sobre diferentes aspectos de las prácticas de intercambio nuclear de la OTAN. Encontramos apoyo para varias hipótesis relativas al uso nuclear, la disuasión ampliada, la retirada de las armas desplegadas en el frente y la viabilidad del desarme nuclear mundial. De este modo, aportamos pruebas empíricas sistemáticas de que, efectivamente, existen importantes grietas en las actitudes del público y de las élites hacia las armas nucleares. Nuestras conclusiones subrayan el argumento de que los académicos deberían encuestar tanto a las élites políticas como al público en general para obtener una imagen completa de las actitudes hacia las cuestiones pertinentes en nuestro campo.

Une récente augmentation des recherches basées sur des enquêtes a apporté un nouveau éclairage sur les attitudes du public envers les armes nucléaires. Pourtant, nous ne savons encore que peu de choses sur la manière dont ces attitudes du public diffèrent de celles des élites politiques. Nous avons mené une enquête originale auprès d’un large échantillon représentatif de citoyens allemands et d’un échantillon unique de parlementaires allemands pour combler cette lacune. Dans le cadre de cette enquête, nous avons interrogé les participants sur leurs points de vue concernant différents aspects de la pratique de partage nucléaire de l’OTAN. Nous avons constaté un soutien pour plusieurs hypothèses concernant le recours au nucléaire, la dissuasion étendue, le retrait des armes faisant l’objet d’un déploiement avancé et la faisabilité d’un désarmement nucléaire mondial. Nous fournissions ainsi des preuves empiriques systématiques qu’il existe en effet des écarts importants entre les attitudes du public et des élites envers les armes nucléaires. Nos constatations mettent l’accent sur l’argument selon lequel les chercheurs devraient enquêter à la fois auprès des élites politiques et du grand public pour obtenir une vision exhaustive des attitudes envers les questions pertinentes dans notre domaine.

**Introduction**

The last few years have seen a surge in research on public attitudes toward nuclear weapons. Survey-based studies by Press, Sagan, and Valentino (2013) and Sagan and Valentino (2017) found that the American public is less averse to the use of nuclear weapons than suggested by earlier accounts (Tannenwald 2007). Following in their footsteps, Rathbun and Stein (2020) and Smetana and Vranca (2021) examined the relationship between moral values and public attitudes to nuclear use, while Montgomery and Carpenter (2020) studied the effects of legal and ethical priming on these attitudes. Herzog, Baron, and Gibbons (2022) delved

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into the impact of elite cues on public views on nuclear disarmament. Koch and Wells (2020) investigated the influence of vivid information about nuclear explosions on public opinion. Sukin (2020) and Haworth, Sagan, and Valentino (2019) tested nuclear (non-)use attitudes in the context of potential retaliation. Herzog and Baron (2017) examined public support for a nuclear testing ban, and the nexus of citizens’ attitudes toward nuclear weapons and energy (Baron and Herzog 2020).

This new wave of scholarship on public attitudes has undoubtedly contributed to important findings, not least given the new evidence showing that public opinion on foreign policy issues has a distinct influence on elite decision-makers (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Lin-Greenberg 2021). At the same time, there are sound theoretical reasons why the views of ordinary citizens on nuclear weapons might differ from those of political elites. For example, political elites could have internalized transnational norms governing different aspects of nuclear weapons more than the general public, and they have been more exposed to policy discourse about the consequences of nuclear proliferation and use. Even the pioneer of the “nuclear taboo” concept now suggests that “[t]oday the taboo may be increasingly an elite phenomenon” (Tannenwald 2021, 9). Another paper examining public attitudes toward the nuclear ban treaty in Japan found that not only are there discrepancies in the preferences of politicians and citizens, but the public is also strongly resistant to any elite cues toward treaty opposition (Baron, Gibbons, and Herzog 2020).

Overall, we still know little about the differences between the general public opinion and elite views on attitudes toward nuclear weapons. A common critique of the existing scholarship therefore calls for complementing studies on public attitudes with corresponding research into elite attitudes. To address this gap, we surveyed a sample of members of the German federal parliament, the Bundestag, and then fielded an identical survey to a representative sample of the general German population. Since Germany is one of the five European countries that host US nuclear weapons on their territory, the survey examined the public-elite attitudes toward various features of this nuclear sharing agreement. Specifically, we asked both public and elite respondents about their views on the use of these weapons under different escalation scenarios, on their purpose, prospective withdrawal, and the feasibility of nuclear disarmament.

Our study contributes novel findings on the similarities and differences in attitudes of political elites and the public. In particular, we found support for several hypotheses concerning the divergence in public and elite views on nuclear use, extended deterrence, the withdrawal of forward-deployed weapons, and the feasibility of global nuclear disarmament. As such, this research note is the first scholarly work to provide systematic empirical evidence that there are, indeed, important gaps in public and elite attitudes toward nuclear weapons.

We proceed as follows. First, we review the literature on gaps in elite and public attitudes to foreign policy issues. Second, we formulate our theoretical expectations and hypotheses. Third, we introduce our survey design and the data collection method. Fourth, we present the survey results. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of our findings.

Elite-Public Gaps in Foreign Policy Attitudes

In recent years, there has been a notable trend to using surveys and survey experiments to examine public views on foreign policy. In addition to the aforementioned nuclear weapons scholarship, scholars have also examined citizens’ approval of autonomous weapons (Young and Carpenter 2018), drones (Kreps 2014; Kreps and Wallace 2016; Macdonald and Schneider 2019), humanitarian interventions (Kreps and Maxey 2018), just war principles (Valentino and Sagan 2018), and militant internationalism in foreign policy (Kertzer et al. 2014).

While these studies have undoubtedly generated many valuable insights, there are voices that question their real-world relevance. Perhaps the most common line of critique concerns the assumption that the public exerts very limited influence over the foreign policies of states. In this view, foreign policy is an area reserved for elites—“the small number of decision makers who occupy the top positions in social and political structures” (Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor 2013, 369).

In fact, scholars have long doubted whether citizens even possess stable foreign policy preferences (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989). More recent studies suggest that while the public holds more consistent views of world politics than commonly assumed, its opinions on specific policies frequently stand in opposition to those of the elite decision-makers due to divergent interests, values, and social contexts where these attitudes are formed (Holsti 2004; Page and Boutron 2007; Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017). Others claim that elites think and act differently than the public because of the significant gap in context-specific knowledge (Kertzer 2020, 15) and experience (Riker 1995, 32; Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor 2013, 369). Various studies also contend that elites differ from the general public in personality traits (Caprara et al. 2003; Dynes, Hassell, and Miles 2019). For example, Copeland (2001, 217–218) argues that “most leaders […] do not resemble the ‘norm’ of the population; […] we would expect them to be much closer to the ideal-type Machiavellian rationalist than the average citizen.” Bø et al. (2017, 1877) even claims that “politicians are on average significantly smarter and better leaders than the population they represent.”

Finally, some studies show that in bargaining and decision-making exercises, elites tend to behave differently than the public or convenience samples. For example, in experiments that tested predictions of prospect theory, politicians behaved more rationally than non-elites (Linde and Vis 2017). On the other hand, in the “ultimatum game”, experienced elite players were more likely to reject low offers, contradicting assumptions about rational, self-interested conduct (LeVeck et al. 2014).

These purported differences led some scholars to conclude that “although observations of players who do not resemble actual decision-makers can produce statistically significant results, they are likely to be irrelevant to real-world policy decisions” (Berg et al. 2016). To capture the attitudes of relevant decision-makers, the argument goes, scholars should survey samples of elites (Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor 2013, 368; Hardt 2018, 466; Dietrich, Hardt, and Swedlund 2021). Of particular interest have been political elites—politicians situated in the relevant decision-making

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1Interestingly, another paper by these authors found that, unlike Japanese citizens, Americans can be influenced in their views on the ban treaty through elite cues (Herzog, Baron, and Gibbons 2022).

2See, for example, the debate in Smetsena and Wunderlich (2021). For a new study that examines the views of US national security officials on nuclear weapons—however, without a corresponding comparison with public attitudes—see Avey (2021).

3See Onderco and Smetsena (2021) for policy implications of some of our findings.
positions that exercise control over key political resources (Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor 2013, 369). To this end, scholars have studied the attitudes of political elites toward international cooperation (Hafner-Burton et al. 2014; Hafner-Burton, Leveck, and Victor 2017), international law (Bayram 2017b, c), foreign aid (Findley, Milner, and Nielson 2017), integration (Wonka and Rittberger 2014; Bayram 2017a), and political decision-making in general (Renshon 2015; Linde and Vis 2017).

It is also important to note that some of the recent scholarship suggests that the differences between elite and non-elite samples may be overstated. For example, Baekgaard et al. (2019) show that politicians tend to interpret new evidence in a similarly biased way as ordinary citizens. Similarly, Sheffer et al. (2018) find that political elites are similarly (or even more) prone to common decision-making anomalies as the public. A recent meta-analysis of elite-public studies has shown that despite differences in certain traits, the literature overestimates the divergence in elite-public decision-making (Kertzer 2020). Ultimately, the study of elite-public gaps in attitudes deserves further empirical investigation, and scholars should seek to include both public and elite samples in their surveys (Sheffer et al. 2018, 304; Kertzer 2020, 4).

**Theoretical Expectations**

Our investigation of elite-public gaps concerns the attitudes of the German citizens and parliamentarians to NATO’s policy of nuclear sharing. Under this arrangement, the United States has stationed a portion of its nuclear arsenal in allied states since the early Cold War years. As of 2021, the United States deploys B-61 nuclear gravity bombs at military bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. The weapons remain under US custody and the authorization for their use lies with the US president, but they are designed to be delivered by allied state pilots in allied fighter jets.

Nuclear sharing represents an intriguing area for the study of public-elite gaps. Even if hosting states are countries with democratic political systems, nuclear weapon policies are shrouded in secrecy with little public oversight. As noted by Cohen (2010, 147), “nuclear weapons necessitate a level of secrecy never known before to liberal democracies. Such secrecy obviates fundamental democratic values like transparency, oversight, public deliberations and the public’s right to know.” While the critique of the democratic deficit in “nuclear guardianship” (Dahl 1985; Pelopidas and Fialho 2019) also concerns non-elected policy elites with strong influence on the development of nuclear policies, our focus in this paper is on the elected political elites. As discussed in the previous section, political elites have access to background knowledge and relevant experience that influence their foreign policy attitudes, which is something that can be particularly relevant in the case of such secretive and techno-politically complex policies as those concerning nuclear weapons.

The first aspect of nuclear sharing that we sought to investigate was the hypothetical military use of nuclear weapons. While the earlier constructivist scholarship found that public pressure had played a key role in the emergence of the “nuclear taboo” (Tannenwald 2007), more recent accounts suggest that “the locus of the taboo today lies with elites for whom nuclear weapons remain a salient issue” (Tannenwald 2021, 9). Others proposed that the “tradition of non-use emerged because of a realisation among political elite in nuclear states of the horrendous effects of nuclear attack” (Paul 2010, 860). Studies of wargaming also found that “elites are less willing to use nuclear weapons in wargames than non-elites” (Paul 2018, 186).

We expect that political elites are more frequently exposed to the arguments that the use of nuclear weapons is, in principle, “unacceptable”. They are also more socialized with transnational non-use norms through diplomatic encounters, briefings, and NGO presentations (cf. Rublee 2021). On average, elites will also likely be more aware about the consequences of nuclear use, which is a factor that may drive nuclear aversion (Paul 2018; Koch and Wells 2020). Against the null hypothesis that public attitudes toward nuclear use do not significantly differ from those of elites (Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013, 200), we formulate the following hypothesis:

**H1: Political elites are more averse to the military use of nuclear weapons than the public.**

While nuclear weapons have not been directly used in a conflict since 1945, states have relied on their possession to deter others from attacking them or their allies. US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe have been deployed to the continent as an “extended deterrence” of nuclear and non-nuclear attacks against European NATO members (Von Hlatky 2014). American political elites across administrations mostly agree that the forward-deployed weapons provide the Alliance with a regional deterrence capability (U.S. Department of Defense 2018, 35–36; Flourny and Townsend 2020; Rough and Rose 2020), and such claims are a constant at NATO Summits. Political elites, including parliamentarians, are also regularly exposed to NATO’s political and military discourse, and possess, on average, a deeper knowledge of the strategic logic underpinning deterrence strategies (Flockhart 2004). As such, we expect that relative to the public, political elites will be more likely persuaded by the claims about the effectiveness of nuclear weapons for deterring both nuclear and non-nuclear threats:

**H2: Political elites are more convinced about the effectiveness of extended nuclear deterrence against nuclear attacks than the public.**

**H3: Political elites are more convinced about the effectiveness of extended nuclear deterrence against non-nuclear attacks than the public.**

Nuclear sharing, presumably, also gives the host nation a special status in NATO (Meier 2020). For example, national security advisers to Joe Biden during his presidential campaign argued that since Germany stations US nuclear weapons, it “has a seat at a very exclusive table in Brussels and plays a strong role in deciding what happens at that table” (Flourny and Townsend 2020). As such, we expect that political elites will be more convinced than the public about the relationship between the stationing of nuclear weapons and the country’s status in NATO, particularly due to their more intensive interaction with NATO officials and representatives, and a more general interest in, and insight into, issues concerning the positioning of the hosting country in the hierarchical structure of the Alliance:

**H4: Political elites are more convinced that nuclear sharing provides the hosting country with a special political influence within NATO than the public.**

European hosting countries also regularly debate the possibility of a withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from their territory. While the views on such a withdrawal differ across and even within individual political parties, recent polls suggest that a majority of German citizens favor the removal
of US nuclear weapons from Germany (YouGov 2020) and the end of reliance on nuclear weapons for German security (Bun de et al. 2020, 127). We, therefore, expect that the citizens in hosting countries will be more supportive of unconditional withdrawal than the political elites, who are more likely to see the issue as more politically complex, particularly concerning NATO politics and transatlantic security cooperation:

**H5:** Political elites are less supportive of an unconditional withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from the hosting state’s territory than the public.

However, the situation may be different if the withdrawal would take place as a part of broader security initiatives on the continent. Indeed, European states might use nuclear deployments on their territory to stimulate the process of nuclear arms control. Egeland (2020), for example, argued that in the 1980s, Europeans saw new US nuclear deployments as bargaining chips for future arms control negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union. The argument holds today as well: Russia periodically demands addressing tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, in US–Russian arms control discussions (Higgins 2020). Since arms control is a complex technical and political issue and corresponding debates in Europe take place outside of the spotlight of mainstream media, we expect that political elites will be more inclined than the public to accept the logic of US weapons as a bargaining chip:

**H6:** Political elites are more supportive of the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from the hosting state’s territory than the public if the withdrawal takes place as a part of arms control negotiations.

Finally, the deliberations over the future of US nuclear weapons in Europe come at a time when the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was adopted in 2017 and entered into force in 2021. The TPNW represents another high-level initiative in support of a world without nuclear weapons that has spurred debates in parliaments in nuclear-hosting countries, including the German Bundestag (Fuhrhop 2021). Yet, the treaty was less successful in making newspaper headlines and thereby reaching out to the wider public. While citizens in most countries generally support the idea of nuclear disarmament, there is very limited public engagement that would help to build the political momentum to turn this idea into reality (Harrington, Gheorghe, and Fink 2017). Some scholars suggest an explanation for this phenomenon: Most citizens support nuclear disarmament in principle, yet they are simultaneously skeptical that such a goal is realistically attainable (Rosendorf, Smetana, and Vranka 2021).

We have several reasons to believe that while both the ordinary citizens and political elites will mostly doubt the feasibility of nuclear disarmament (at least in the next decades), elites will still be more willing than the public to express optimism in this regard. Pelopidas (2020) argues that throughout the nuclear era, political elites have come up with expectations for imminent nuclear disarmament; even if such expectations are based on unrealistic grounds (see also Harrington de Santana 2011). Notwithstanding the limited progress toward “global zero”, many elites in both nuclear and non-nuclear states have regularly expressed their beliefs in prospective nuclear disarmament, particularly because they feel it to be aspirationally right. Political aspirations of this kind often affirm one’s identity and values and lead to a future-oriented expectation of effort—yet, importantly, they also contribute to creating political dynamics with few consequences for non-performance (Finnemore and Jurkovich 2020). As Craig (2020, 174) notes, nuclear disarmament “is a noble goal that is easy for idealists to support”.

Political elites have also been much more exposed than the public to the NGO and diplomatic discourse surrounding the TPNW that mostly portrays nuclear abolition as a feasible objective that can (and should) be achieved without further delays and obstructions (Gibbons 2018; Considine 2019). Moreover, while elites are likely to be more familiar with the numerous practical obstacles to disarmament, some of the recent developments may have contributed to at least some cautious optimism in this regard. For example, a recent survey of (mostly European) decision-makers found that they expected that emerging technologies would make disarmament verification, one of the major obstacles on the road to “zero”, easier (Onderco and Zutt 2021). For all these reasons, we expect that political elites will be relatively more willing to express their belief in disarmament feasibility than the public:

**H7:** Political elites are more convinced than the public that it is feasible to achieve global nuclear disarmament.

### Research Design

To test our hypotheses about differences in public and elite attitudes toward nuclear sharing, we fielded an original survey in Germany, one of the key host states. Given our aim to administer the survey to actual political elites, we had to limit both the number of questions and their length considerably. For each question, we used a six-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, with a possibility to select an “I don’t know” option. To prevent ordering effects, individual respondents received the questions in a randomized order (see Online Appendix A for the wording of all questions and the full results for both samples).

To test $H_7$, we asked our respondents to imagine a military conflict between NATO and Russia in the Baltics. Given the range of the aircraft carrying nuclear weapons deployed in Germany, credible scenarios (which we have used as a source of inspiration for this paper) mostly focus on their use against Russia on NATO’s eastern flank (Kroenig 2018; Kühl 2018). The survey asked the respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that it would be legitimate to use nuclear weapons in such a conflict in four distinct scenarios. Scenario 1.1 described a demonstrative nuclear explosion as a form of an “escalate-to-deescalate” strategy to stop a Russian invasion. Scenario 1.2 saw the use of nuclear weapons against Russian military targets. Scenario 1.3 depicted a reciprocal demonstrative explosion to a previous Russian nuclear explosion. Scenario 1.4 depicted a nuclear strike against Kaliningrad, the capital of a Russian enclave located

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4 As noted by one of the reviewers, political elites are more likely than the public to consider the signaling ramifications and policy impact of their survey responses. Those parliamentarians with a strong anti-nuclear stance could tend to strategically overestimate the likelihood of early nuclear disarmament, as skepticism about its feasibility potentially hinders initiatives aiming at this goal.

5 The length constraints prevented us from designing complex scenarios similar to Sagan and Valentino (2017) and others. Unlike these studies, we asked about the “legitimacy” of nuclear use rather than “approval”, as the former more directly focuses on normative appropriateness, while the latter requires a more complex discussion of both normative and strategic concerns. This implies that some respondents could have agreed with the legitimacy of nuclear use, yet they would not necessarily approve of it because of the expected consequences (cf. Sagan and Valenti no 2017, 60), e.g., the fear of radioactive fallout given the geographical proximity of explosions. For this reason, one should be cautious of directly comparing our findings on “atomic aversion” with those of Sagan et al., but they still hold for the main aim of our study, that is, public-elite gaps.
between Lithuania and Poland, as retaliation for previous Russian nuclear use against NATO troops. These four scenarios vary important aspects of possible nuclear use as they portray first-use absent of direct casualties, military use to gain a battlefield advantage, one-for-one second-strike retaliation, as well as “upping-the-ante” retaliation. While this certainly does not cover all of the possible instances of nuclear use, there is enough variation to examine public-elite gaps with qualitatively different nuclear-use contexts.

To address H$_2$ and H$_3$, we asked whether US nuclear weapons in Germany deter nuclear (2.1) and non-nuclear (2.2) attacks against NATO. We repeated this procedure for H$_4$, asking whether US nuclear weapons give Germany political weight within the Alliance (3.1). To address H$_5$ and H$_6$, we asked about support for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons without preconditions (4.1) and as a part of a US–Russian arms control agreement (4.2). Finally, we asked our respondents about the feasibility (H$_7$) of global nuclear disarmament in the next 50 years (5.1).

For the elite part of our research, we surveyed members of the German Bündestag. While in the German parliamentary system, it is the government that is mainly responsible for the execution of foreign policy, surveying the legislators provided us with several advantages over other political elites. First, a sample of parliamentarians can capture the political diversity of the country, including opposition parties. Second, the Bündestag plays an influential consulting role in foreign policy and oversees the federal budget. Third, the Bündestag ratifies international treaties negotiated by the government. Fourth, the Bündestag is where the debate about nuclear sharing has mainly taken place in recent years. Overall, the role of the Bündestag in German foreign policy has been on the rise in the past two decades (Harnisch 2009; Jäger et al. 2009).

Both surveys were fielded by YouGov. We ran the elite survey between June 16 and July 31, 2020, and received responses from 101 Bündestag members (14 percent response rate; see Online Appendix B for the comparison between the demographic composition of our sample and the Bündestag population). We then ran an identical survey on a representative sample of 2,020 respondents from the general German population between October 23 and October 26, 2020. For all analyses, we weighted the data using weights provided by YouGov.

**Results**

The distributions of all responses split by the two samples are available in Online Appendix E. For the following statistical analyses, we filtered out “I don’t know” responses. First, we examined the responses to four scenarios involving the military employment of US nuclear weapons stationed in Germany. Across the scenarios, the elite respondents consistently displayed a stronger aversion to nuclear use than the public (see figure 1). Using Welch’s t-test, we found that elites agreed with the legitimacy of nuclear use significantly less than the public in scenarios 1.1 ($p < 0.001$), 1.2 ($p < 0.01$), and 1.4 ($p < 0.001$). Only in the scenario where US nuclear weapons were exploded over an unpopulated area as a response to a previous Russian nuclear demonstration (1.3), the difference did not pass the threshold of statistical significance ($p = 0.053$), although the relationship remained in the same direction. As such, in three out of four scenarios, we gained empirical support for hypothesis H$_1$ that political elites are more averse to the military use of nuclear weapons than the public.

Second, we investigated whether political elites and citizens differ in their beliefs in the deterrent effects of nuclear sharing. As shown in figure 2, compared to the general public, the parliamentarians agreed more that the stationing of US nuclear weapons in Germany deters nuclear attacks against NATO countries. However, the elites were slightly less persuaded that the stationing of US nuclear weapons in Germany deters non-nuclear attacks. Welch’s t-test revealed that the difference was statistically significant for nuclear attacks ($p = 0.023$) but not for non-nuclear attacks ($p = 0.552$). As such, we gained empirical support for hypothesis H$_2$ but not for H$_3$.

Third, we examined whether elites and citizens differ in their beliefs in the political purpose of nuclear sharing. As shown in figure 3, the elite respondents agreed with the...
Fourth, we analyzed the data on elite and public support for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons. Figure 4 shows that the elite respondents agreed with unconditional withdrawal less than the public. Welch’s t-test confirmed that this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). As such, our data provide empirical support for hypothesis $H_3$.

In the scenario where nuclear weapons are withdrawn as a part of US–Russian arms control negotiations, the elite’s support for withdrawal considerably increased, yet the public respondents remained more supportive of the withdrawal. The difference between the two samples nevertheless ceased to be statistically significant ($p = 0.403$). As such, we have not gained empirical support for $H_4$.

Fifth, we examined elite and public views on the claim that global nuclear disarmament is unlikely to be achieved in the next 50 years. As we show in Figure 5, elite respondents are more convinced about the possibility of achieving this goal than the public. Welch’s t-test found that this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). As such, we gained empirical support for hypothesis $H_7$.

In Table 1, we summarize the statistics for each test and our findings concerning hypotheses formulated in the theoretical section. Our results hold even after applying a false discovery rate correction (see Online Appendix D).

**Conclusions**

To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first to systematically analyze the differences in public and elite attitudes toward nuclear weapons. While some earlier studies speculated that “elites may not differ dramatically from the general public in their views toward nuclear weapons” (Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013, 200), our findings show that there are, indeed, significant gaps in the views of the two groups. The results of our research underscore the argument that scholars should survey both political elites and the public to obtain a comprehensive picture of attitudes toward pertinent issues in our field. While elite surveys are expensive and difficult to conduct, they can contribute to important findings of both scholarly and policy interest.

Admittedly, there are some limits to the generalizability of our study beyond the specific German case. After the Second World War, Germany transformed into a nation with a deeply rooted pacifist stance and a general aversion toward the use of military force. While the West German government accepted the stationing of US nuclear weapons, West Germans were very concerned about the threat of nuclear war in Europe (Kelleher 1975; Risse-Kappen 1983). In the period of relative stagnation of arms control negotiations between the superpowers, Germans fiercely protested the further deployment of US nuclear weapons to the continent (Müller and Risse-Kappen 1987). The anti-nuclear protests of the 1980s, in particular, have strongly influenced German attitudes toward nuclear weapons (see Müller and Kotter 1991 for a historical overview).

Despite our focus on Germany, there are good reasons to believe that we would obtain similar results in other European hosting states (e.g., the Netherlands or Belgium) that are, like Germany, currently debating the wisdom of continued stationing of US nuclear weapons on their territory (Fuhrhop, Kühn, and Meier 2020; Smetana, Onderco, and Etienne 2021; see also the discussion in Morgan and Péczeli 2021). While the overall views on nuclear weapons will be somewhat different in these countries than in other European states with dramatically different historical experiences (e.g., Poland or the Baltic states), the actual gaps in public–elite attitudes that are the core subject of this study—e.g.,
the different levels of context-specific knowledge and the amount of exposure to normative arguments—are arguably based on differences that should hold cross-nationally, perhaps even beyond the European context. Scholars should conduct similar surveys to see whether this assumption would pass the empirical test.

We also believe that in addition to examining and explaining the relative differences between the two groups, future research on nuclear attitudes should also address the attitudinal interactions, that is, the constraining effects of public opinion on elite attitudes and the effects of elite cues on the views of the public (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Kertz and Zeitoff 2017). Moreover, while our research was particularly concerned with political elites, scholars should further disaggregate the “elite category” and shed new light on, for example, the attitudes of military or economic elites, whose views might be influenced by other concerns, norms, and experiences. Finally, future studies should explore to what extent public-elite gaps are based on basic socio-demographic differences between samples, such as the level of education or age (Kertzer 2020).

In addition to their scholarly contribution, our findings also carry a distinct policy relevance. The divergence in beliefs about the purpose of US nuclear weapons in Europe should be pertinent for a US administration that is currently debating the possibility of adopting a “sole purpose” nuclear policy (Panda and Narang 2021). In Germany, the prospective withdrawal of US nuclear weapons will likely become a subject of another round of political debate as the traditionally anti-nuclear Green Party will probably be a part of the new government. We show that while German citizens are much more inclined to support an unconditional withdrawal than parliamentarians, the support among the political elites increases considerably (and among the public slightly), once we provide an option to withdraw these weapons as a part of US–Russian negotiations. Our findings are, therefore, in line with the claim that many European elites see forward-deployed US nuclear weapons partially as a “bargaining chip” for arms control talks with the Kremlin. This “trade-off” logic, held by a significant proportion of the German parliamentarians, also helps us to explain why they

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To ensure confidentiality, we have not received individual-level socio-demographic information for the elite sample. However, data from the public survey suggest that age can play an important role in these attitudes. For example, only 9 percent of respondents in the oldest age category (55+) agree with nuclear use in our first scenario, whereas 15 percent in the youngest category (18–24) and 20 percent in the second youngest (25–34) agree (see Online Appendix A).
are much more reserved to an unconditional withdrawal of these weapons from Germany and simultaneously more averse to the public to any potential military use of these weapons. Ultimately, the findings of our study strongly suggest that should Washington and Moscow decide to address non-strategic nuclear weapons in their future arms control negotiations, they may find broad support among German politicians and the public alike.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the International Studies Quarterly data archive.

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