

The Wars of Others: The Effect of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Spanish Nationalism*

Laia Balcells, Juan Fernando Tellez, Francisco Villamil

Published at *The Journal of Politics* 86(1): 352–357

doi.org/10.1086/726939

Abstract

Wars can produce drastic changes in the attitudes and behavior of the citizens of the countries involved in the fighting. Yet such conflicts also have important security and economic implications for uninvolved, ‘third-party’ states. How do the wars of others shape domestic public attitudes? We explore this question by analyzing the effect of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on Spanish nationalism. Exploiting a natural experiment in Spain, we show that the Russian invasion caused a general increase in the salience of Spanish national identification, but not at the expense of regional or substate national identities. We also find an activation effect on electoral participation and increased support for taxation. Our study illuminates pathways through which international conflicts can impact domestic politics in third-party states.

*Balcells (lb1127@georgetown.edu), Tellez (jftellez@ucdavis.edu), and Villamil (francisco.villamil@uc3m.es). This study is part of the Georgetown University project “Inequality and Governance in Unstable Democracies—The mediating Role of Trust,” implemented by a consortium led by Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC grant ES/S009965/1) is gratefully acknowledged. Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst. Supplementary material is available in the appendix in the online edition. The study is approved under Georgetown University institutional review board protocol STUDY00004223.

How do wars affect public opinion in countries that are not directly involved in the fighting? Political scientists and sociologists have long documented that wars and major security crises can produce changes in public attitudes and behavior, including increases in patriotism (Mueller, 1970), ethnic identification (Hiers, Soehl & Wimmer, 2017), xenophobia (Sides & Gross, 2013), and support for aggressive antiterror policies (Huddy et al., 2005). It is generally thought that these changes are driven by the direct involvement of one's country and that foreign wars should not impact citizens in uninvolved, 'third-party' states.¹ Yet, the 'wars of others' can have indirect, downstream consequences for citizens of third-party countries, who might in turn react to those repercussions. With some exceptions (Gehring, 2022), however, the record of evidence on these effects is sparse.

In this article, we explore the possibility that the wars of others can generate changes in third-party states by looking at public sentiment in Spain in the weeks surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24th, 2022. The Russian invasion represents a historic return of large-scale, land-based conflict on the continent that has been perceived as a threat throughout Europe.² The sense of threat is palpable and reflected in European politicians advocating for increases in their countries' defense budgets.³

To estimate the effects of the invasion we leverage the fact that we were in the middle of fielding an online survey of Spanish citizens when the Russian invasion took place. In our analysis, we compare the attitudes of respondents in the pilot phase of the study, which took place between 8 to 2 days before the invasion, with those in the main study, which began 7 days after the invasion. Combined with the suddenness of the invasion, the short time window allows us to produce plausible causal estimates of Russian's invasion on citizen attitudes. We complement these

¹ As Mueller (1970, 21) argues (speaking about the US), "major conflicts between other powers are likely to engender split loyalties and are less likely to seem relevant to the average American."

² European citizens and elites have mostly sided with Ukraine and rejected Putin's actions, see e.g. Eurobarometer's report on 'Public opinion on the war in Ukraine' (<https://bit.ly/3JarHzG>, accessed November 3, 2022). See Figure A10 in Appendix for data from our survey on attitudes towards the crisis among Spaniards.

³ For example, a few weeks into the war, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez claimed that his government would increase defense spending by about 2 percent. Source: *ElDiario.es*, March 14, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3qSTZbF>, accessed November 3, 2022.

analyses with data from a second survey fielded between February 22nd and February 28th (thus, also “interrupted” by the invasion), which allows us to examine some additional implications of our argument.

The evidence suggests that the invasion of Ukraine produced a boost in national identification among Spaniards—even in Catalonia and the Basque Country, where substate national or regional identity often supersedes national identity—but that this increase was not at the expense of such substate identities. We further find greater levels of civic engagement—in particular with regard to voting intention—but no improvement in attitudes towards Spain’s political leadership. We interpret these changes as supporting an account of security threats (even imagined or hypothetical ones) boosting national cohesion (Smith, 1981; Stein, 1976), but not a ‘rally around the flag’ effect which typically produces increased support for leadership (Feinstein, 2022).⁴ We speculate that Spain’s relative political and cultural distance from Ukraine means that our results represent a *lower bound* on what citizens across Europe might be experiencing.

Why the wars of others might affect domestic attitudes

Prior scholarship has shown that while national identity is largely stable, its salience can vary in response to a variety of events, including presidential victories (Koter, 2019), sporting events (Depetris-Chauvin, Durante & Campante, 2020), interstate wars (Gehring, 2022), and state repression (Nair & Sambanis, 2019). Research that focuses on the impact of conflict on national identification, in particular, has usually explored either domestic events or the direct involvement of countries in international conflicts. Yet there is reason to expect that wars can reverberate to countries not directly involved in the fighting because of the *indirect* consequences wars have on other states. These consequences can take different forms, including the prospect that the war could expand into other countries or that third-party states could experience severe economic damage as a result of interdependencies in world markets.⁵

⁴ The results are in agreement with findings on the effects of Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014 on EU citizens (Gehring, 2022).

⁵ Federle et al. (2022) documents a negative economic impact of the 2022 Ukraine invasion on EU firm valuations in the stock market.

We expect that the prospect that a foreign war will generate hardship at home can contribute to a sense of general insecurity and threat among citizens in third-party states. With respect to political outcomes, one possibility can be a broad, “external conflict increases internal cohesion” (Stein, 1976) effect that strengthens national identification and, potentially, engagement with the state. A different possibility is increased identification and dependence on state leaders, as in the well-known ‘rally around the flag’ effect (Feinstein, 2022). In the empirics, we explore which of the two mechanisms is likely to be at play.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as seen from Spain

The unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 by Russian troops provides a unique opportunity to examine how foreign wars affect domestic public sentiment. The conflict is highly salient for citizens of uninvolved, ‘third-party’ countries, such as Spain.⁶ The invasion has been extensively covered by Western media, and it is quickly having serious second-order consequences for citizens of many countries. Only a few weeks into the conflict the price of gas and food soared around the world, and imports from Ukraine were increasingly scarce in Europe and the Middle East. In addition, Putin’s threat of using nuclear weapons and the fighting around nuclear facilities in Ukraine made citizens in Europe anxious about a potential nuclear disaster. In other words, this conflict is having an impact on the feeling of security of citizens in many countries, in the former Soviet space and beyond.

Empirically, we focus on Spain, a particularly interesting testing ground because public patriotism can be stigmatized (particularly among the left) due to the legacies of the Spanish civil war (1936–1939) and the Francoist regime (1939–1975). Even though recent events such as the 2017 secessionist bid in Catalonia have started to soften the stigma (Dinas, Martínez & Valentim, 2022), surveys and public opinion polls show general stability in Spaniards’ national identity. Also, levels of patriotism are notoriously low in territories such as the Basque Country and Catalonia, where substate nationalism is salient. In addition, Spain is relatively far from Ukraine—both cul-

⁶ We discuss at length the unexpectedness of the Russian invasion in Spain and its impact on public discourse in Appendix A.

turally and in terms of geography. Jointly, these characteristics make Spain a ‘hard test’ for the topic of study.⁷

Empirics

Our identification strategy relies on data from an original survey we were in the process of fielding online in Spain around the time of Russian’s invasion. We fielded a pilot of the survey between February 16th and February 22nd. Russia officially invaded Ukraine just two days after the conclusion of our pilot, on February 24th. Our survey then launched in earnest on March 3rd and continued until March 28th.⁸

The main results in this study use responses collected in the smallest possible time-window, comparing attitudes in the pilot phase to attitudes during the first large collection of the survey launch (March 3rd–March 7th), for a total of 1,744 respondents. However, we also present results of the same analyses expanding the post-invasion window beyond March 7th (for a total of 7,100 respondents) in Appendix G. The identifying assumption in our study is that the respondents surveyed before and after the invasion are as-if randomly distributed. This design approximates an experiment in which a group of individuals is exposed to the Russia-Ukraine war treatment—those interviewed *after* the invasion—while another group—those interviewed *before* the invasion—serves as a control group. Of course, as with other similar studies, the invasion represents a ‘bundled treatment’ that includes not just the effect of the invasion but also downstream reactions such as elite responses (Balcells & Torrats-Espinosa, 2018; Enos, Kaufman & Sands, 2018).

A key issue in identifying the effect of sudden events is treatment compliance. In our case, the main concern is whether respondents in the post-invasion period were truly exposed to the invasion, in other words, if they were aware of it. We discuss this at length in Appendix A, where we present evidence of treatment compliance based on changes in Spanish press coverage (Figures A1 and A2) and Google search trends (Figure A4), both of which reflect a sudden and sharp

⁷We discuss the Spanish case at greater length in Appendix M.

⁸ We include more details on the survey and the daily number of respondents in Appendix B.

increase in awareness of the Russian invasion of Ukraine within Spain.⁹ The same evidence helps alleviate another concern that respondents in the pre-invasion period could have been somewhat affected by the crisis in Ukraine. Anecdotally, it seems the invasion surprised almost everyone—even regional experts thought that Putin was bluffing (Treisman, 2022).

An important caveat is that while the *survey* used quotas for certain respondent demographic characteristics, the *pilot* did not. Thus, the pilot sample is a bit different from the survey sample: respondents in the former are older, more conservative, and slightly wealthier (Table A1). Fortunately, we know exactly what these differences are and adjust for them by using *optimal full matching* (Hansen & Klopfer, 2006). Since the pilot sample is substantially smaller, we look for matches for each pilot (i.e., control) observation among the survey (i.e., treatment) observations. Our estimand is thus the average treatment effect on the controls (ATC). As Figure A9 shows, we obtain good balance on the pre-treatment covariates: sex, age, education, income, social class, and ideology.¹⁰

Our two primary outcomes of interest measure national identification, and regional (or sub-state national) identification, on a 0-10 scale.¹¹ We take two estimation approaches. For the main results, we use OLS on the matched sample to regress our outcome of interest against a binary indicator of whether the respondent is in the pre- or post-invasion sample, weighted by the computed matching weights, using cluster-robust standard errors (Austin & Stuart, 2017). In Appendix C, we also present results without matching: OLS with controls and region (Autonomous Communities, CCAA) fixed effects.

⁹ In Figure A7, we show that our results are stronger for respondents who are more likely to follow the news.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that, in the main analysis, the vast majority of responses were collected on February 17th, February 21st (pre-invasion) and March 7th (post-invasion). We have more responses post-invasion — and report results extending the post-invasion window out further into the future (Appendix G) — but there are trade-offs in doing this, since responses further out from the invasion were likely affected by other developments during this time period and are less comparable to pre-invasion responses.

¹¹ We use the following questions: 1) “On a scale from 0 (low) to 10 (high), how SPANISH do you feel?”; 2) “On a scale from 0 (low) to 10 (high), how [respondent’s REGION demonym] do you feel?”

Additionally, we also present results from a short survey fielded by the same survey firm (40dB) for *El País* newspaper between February 22nd and February 28th with 2,000 responses (which we refer to as our *complementary survey*).¹² This survey allows us to precisely identify effects of the Russian invasion on two relevant outcomes: intention to vote in an election, and intention to vote for each of the main four Spanish political parties (see Appendix J for the questions' wording). We present here the results using OLS on a matched dataset, and again report in Appendix K full results using both the matching approach and a model without matching –including control variables and region fixed effects.

Results

Figure 1 shows the coefficient estimate of the invasion for both our main outcomes. Overall, we observe a statistically significant increase in national identification of about .64 on a 0-10 scale, or about .23 standard deviations.¹³ By contrast, the invasion seems to have no effect on regional identification. Thus, the invasion increases the salience of Spanish national identity but not at the expense of substate identities. These results are robust to a variety of tests, including a placebo test in Appendix I). Figure A19 (Appendix G) shows no clear patterns of effect decay or growth over time.

These estimates represent changes in the overall sample, though we also explore these effects separately for left and right-leaning respondents. Figure A11 shows that the invasion of Ukraine has similar effects regardless of the ideological leanings of the respondent. Also, despite the strength of substate nationalism (and the relative weakness of Spanish nationalism) in Catalonia and the Basque Country, we find very similar results when we exclude these territories from the analyses or when we look only at them (see Appendix E). Yet, the increased salience of Spanish nationalism in these regions is driven by individuals who do not vote for Catalan or Basque nationalist parties.

¹² The timeline of this survey's fieldwork is included in Appendix J.

¹³ As a point of reference for these effects, we discuss baseline levels of national identification in Spain in Appendix M and compare them to other countries in Europe. We also discuss external validity issues in Appendix O.

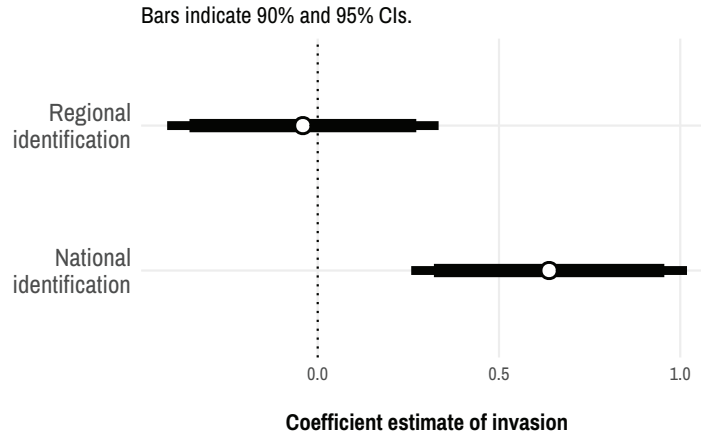


Figure 1: Effect of invasion on national and regional identification

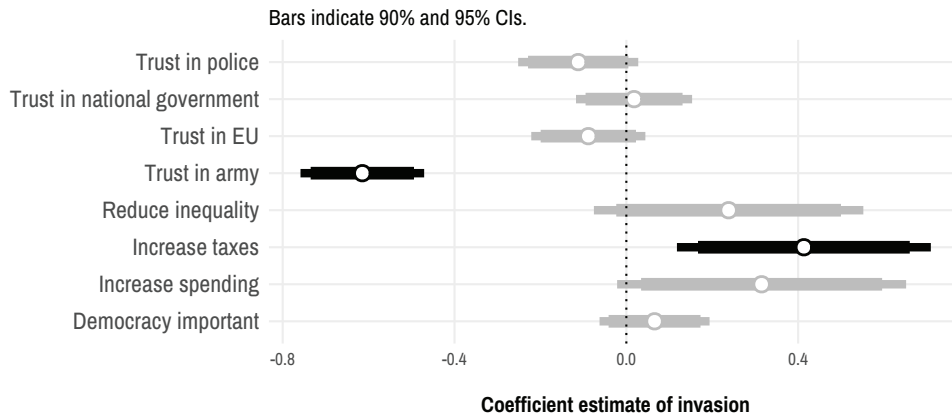


Figure 2: Effect of invasion on other outcomes

Figure 2 shows the effect of the invasion on other outcomes, such as trust in different institutions, attitudes toward democracy, and preferences for specific economic policies (i.e. taxation, redistribution, spending).¹⁴ We find that the invasion has a negative effect on trust in the armed forces and a positive effect on preferences for increasing taxation. While the latter effect is not robust across all subsamples, the negative effect on trust in the army is robust across ideological, age, and gender subgroups (Appendix H). This result may reflect pessimism among Spaniards about the state of their armed forces— a pessimism that becomes more salient in light of a new

¹⁴ We detail the wording of these variable, along with heterogenous effects, in Appendix H.

external threat. Consistent with this mechanism, Appendix N shows that the invasion triggered Google searches in Spain related to topics of international security.¹⁵

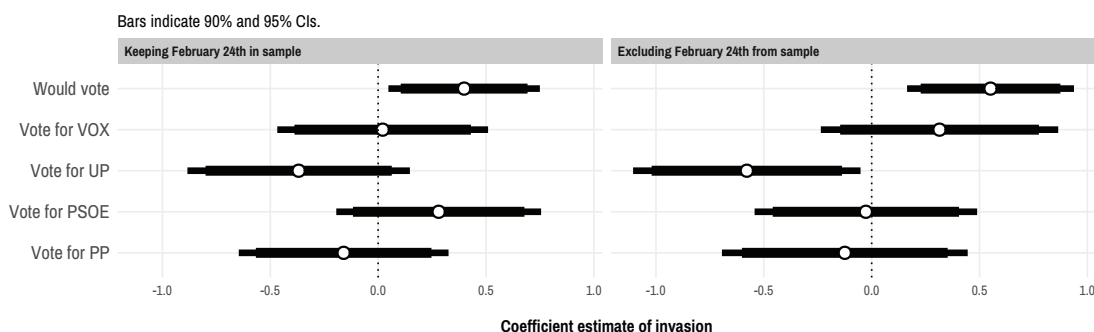


Figure 3: Effects of invasion on turnout and direction of vote (complementary survey)

We now turn to analyzing the effects of the invasion on the propensity to vote and on the direction of the vote, using the complementary survey.¹⁶ Figure 3 shows that the invasion prompted a significant increase in the likelihood of voting of around half a point (in a 0-10 scale), but did not have clear effects on the direction of the vote.¹⁷ We do not observe increased support for the parties in the government (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE, and *Unidas Podemos*, UP), but we find decreased support for UP in one of the models. This might be due to the ambiguous reaction of UP towards the invasion—with some of their leaders putting some blame on NATO.¹⁸ Overall, we find activation, but not directional effects, which can be interpreted as citizens being more politically engaged and supportive of the state in face of external threats. We do not find support for a “rally around the flag” effect.

¹⁵ These searches were more common than those related to the economy, which suggests that, at the time of the study, people were more concerned about security than about the economic consequences of the invasion.

¹⁶ For these analyses, we present results both including and excluding responses from February 24th since it is unclear whether responses from this day are pre- or post-invasion (see Appendix A).

¹⁷ We show in Appendix L the results of placebo tests and additional analysis depicting day-to-day changes.

¹⁸ E.g., *Libertad Digital*, February 24th, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yc5ryy6s>, accessed November 3, 2022.

Conclusion

International conflict can have significant attitudinal effects among citizens in third-party states. We present evidence that Russia's unexpected invasion of Ukraine increased the salience of national identification in Spain, though not at the cost of regional (or substate national) identification. Given Spain's geographic and cultural distance from Ukraine, one striking contribution of the study is to show that even threats that are unlikely to be realized (or purely imagined) may still buttress national cohesion (Stein, 1976). Given that the results do not seem to hold for peripheral nationalists, we further speculate that the effect is conditional upon accepting the basic link between the (Spanish) nation, the (central) state, and collective security that underlies modern nationalism (Smith, 1981).

What broader implications might these effects have on domestic and regional politics? One possibility is that "the wars of others" can be windows of opportunity for nationalist mobilization, which could help bring more extreme candidates to power. Further work is needed to assess the second-order effects of international conflict and, particularly, the interplay between international and domestic politics.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for excellent feedback to Maya Tudor, Dominika Koter, and Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, and to 40db for sharing the data of the complementary survey. Simón Ballesteros provided great research assistance. Finally, we also thank three anonymous reviewers and the editors for their constructive comments and feedback.

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Biographical Statement

Laia Balcells a Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor of Government at Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057.

Juan Fernando Tellez is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis, CA 95616.

Francisco Villamil is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain.