Battlefield Casualties and Ballot-Box Defeat: Did the Bush–Obama Wars Cost Clinton the White House?

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ABSTRACT

In the 2016 election, foreign policy may have played a critically important role in swinging an important constituency to Donald Trump: voters in high-casualty communities that had abandoned Republican candidates in the mid-2000s. Trump’s iconoclastic campaign rhetoric promised a foreign policy that would simultaneously be more muscular and restrained. He promised to rebuild and refocus the military while avoiding the “stupid wars” and costly entanglements of his predecessors. At both the state and county levels, we find significant and substantively meaningful relationships between local casualty rates and support for Trump. Trump made significant electoral gains among constituencies that were exhausted and politically alienated by 18 years of fighting. Trump’s foreign policy shows a president beset by competing militaristic and isolationist impulses. Our results suggest that giving into the former may come at a significant electoral cost.
continued in the 2006 midterms as both Senate and House Republi-
cans lost significant electoral ground in high-casualty constitu-
cencies (Gartner and Segura 2008; Grose and Oppenheimer 2007;
Kriner and Shen 2007).

Existing scholarship, however, is generally silent on whether
and how a political party—or a presidential candidate from that
party—can recapture such electoral support once lost. Our anal-
ysis suggests that Trump’s 2016 campaign resonated with many
voters in communities that have borne the lion’s share of the
human costs of America’s wars since 9/11. Even after controlling
for other factors, we find that there is a significant and meaningful
relationship between a community’s casualty rate and its support
for Trump.

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DONALD TRUMP AND THE POLITICS OF WAR CASUALTIES

In retrospect, the bombastic campaign of the billionaire
businessman-turned-politician appears consciously calculated to
appeal to communities frustrated by 18 years of costly and inconclu-
sive war. The core of Trump’s nationalist, populist message was to
“make America great again.” Although the details of the message
shifted as the campaign developed, Trump regularly praised the
military—while also noting that much of their sacrifice seemed to
have been for naught.

On the campaign trail, Trump sometimes sounded like a tradi-
tional hawk. He repeatedly mocked the Obama administration’s
passive approach toward the Islamic State and boasted of his inten-
tion to “bomb the hell out of ISIS.” Similarly, he derided the Iran
nuclear pact as one of the “worst deals” ever and promised a more
aggressive posture with increasingly bellicose rhetoric. Channeling
his inner Reagan, Trump also called for greater military spending
across the board, including on nuclear weapons—even if these moves
threatened to trigger a new arms race. Perhaps above all, Trump reg-
ularly pledged in his stump speeches to take care of the military.
He argued repeatedly that the military’s resources, especially its
manpower resources, were “depleted.” A Trump administration, he
promised, would bring fresh manpower and weapons.

However, other Trump campaign themes were decidedly icon-
oclastic. Whereas few Republicans openly lauded the Iraq War in
2016, Trump vehemently denounced it and the Republican president
who waged it. In his first campaign speech, Trump both criticized the
Iraq War and recognized the sacrifice of American troops: “We spent
$2 trillion in Iraq, $2 trillion. We lost thousands of lives, thousands
in Iraq. We have wounded soldiers, who I love, I love—they’re great—
all over the place, thousands and thousands of wounded soldiers.”

In a nationally televised debate before the South Carolina primary,
Trump minced few words: “I want to tell you. They lied. They said
there were weapons of mass destruction, there were none. And they
knew there were none.” As the campaign wore on, Trump refused
to back down; he continued to label the Iraq War “a disaster” and
pledged to keep the United States out of “stupid” wars.

In summary, Trump promised a foreign policy that would be
simultaneously more muscular and more restrained. Trump
promised to rebuild and reforge the military: “Our active-
duty armed forces have shrunk from 2 million in 1991 to about
1.3 million today…. Our military is depleted, and we’re asking our
generals and military leaders to worry about global warming.”
He also promised to be more reticent in its use: “Our friends and
enemies must know that if I draw a line in the sand, I will enforce
it. However, unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and
aggression will not be my first instinct. You cannot have a foreign
policy without diplomacy. A superpower understands that cau-
tion and restraint are signs of strength.”

ASSESSING TRUMP’S ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE IN
HIGH-CASUALTY CONSTITUENCIES

In one sense, all Americans have been affected by almost two
decades of nearly continuous war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Americans of all stripes have watched the developments of each
conflict unfold through extensive media coverage, movies, and
personal stories from veterans returning from combat. Indeed, so
great are the posited effects on American society that some ana-
lysts proclaimed the emergence of an “Iraq Syndrome,” echoing
the growing popular reluctance to use force that emerged after
Vietnam (Mueller 2005).

However, on another tangible dimension, some Americans
have experienced the costs of war much more acutely than others.
Most directly, of course, the costs of war have been concentrated
on those men and women who fought and died in foreign theat-
ers as well as on their families. However, Americans’ exposure to
these costs also has varied significantly according to the expe-
rience of their local communities. In the Iraq and Afghanistan
wars, for example, seven states suffered casualty rates of 30 or
more deaths per million residents. By contrast, four states suf-
ered casualty rates of 15 or fewer deaths per million. As a result,
Americans living in these states have had different exposure to
the war’s human costs through the experiences of their friends
and neighbors and local media coverage (Althaus, Bramlett, and
Gimpel 2012). Past research across multiple conflicts has shown
unambiguously that this variation in local exposure to casual-
ties affects Americans’ wartime opinions and political behavior
(Gartner and Segura 2000; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997;
Hayes and Myers 2009; Kriner and Shen 2009).

At lower levels of aggregation, the disparities often are even
more extreme. For example, as of the 2016 election, slightly more
than 50% of US counties had experienced a casualty rate in Iraq
and Afghanistan of one or fewer deaths per 100,000 residents.
However, more than 25% had experienced a casualty rate more
than 3.5 times greater, and 10% of counties had suffered casualty
rates of more than seven deaths per 100,000 residents. Voters
in these communities increasingly abandoned Republican candi-
dates in a series of elections in the 2000s.

To examine whether the Trump campaign was able to reverse
the GOP’s earlier losses among those constituencies hardest
hit by the nation’s recent wars, we conducted analyses at both
the state and county levels. Following previous research on the
electoral impact of local casualties (e.g., Karol and Miguel 2007),
we operationalized the dependent variable as the change in the
two-party vote share received by the Republican candidate from 2012 to 2016. This allowed us to examine where Trump outperformed Mitt Romney four years prior. Moreover, using the change in vote share from one election to the next provided an important measure of statistical control because many factors that affect the GOP vote share in a constituency should have remained roughly unchanged during this short four-year period.

However, on another tangible dimension, some Americans have experienced the costs of war much more acutely than others.

To measure variation in communities’ exposure to wartime casualties, we accessed data from the Defense Casualty Analysis System of the Department of Defense (DoD) on 6,856 American soldiers killed pursuant to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of these service members, 6,732 listed home-of-record information from one of the 50 states, and 10 hailed from the District of Columbia. From these data, we constructed casualty counts for each state and divided them by state population to construct a casualty rate per million residents. For most of these soldiers, the DoD also provided a home county of record. To capture the greater nuance in the uneven geographic allocation of casualties across the country, we constructed casualty counts for each county and then divided them by each county’s population to create a casualty rate per 10,000 residents.

Because the relationship is easiest to visualize at the state level, we first constructed a scatter plot showing each state’s casualty rate on the x-axis and the change in GOP vote share from 2012 to 2016 on the y-axis (figure 1). Trump outperformed Romney in 40 of 50 states. However, the clear positive relationship shown in the scatter plot illustrates Trump’s ability to make electoral inroads among high-casualty states. The bivariate relationship also is substantively meaningful. A two-standard-deviation increase in a state’s casualty rate produced an estimated 2.6% increase in electoral support for Donald Trump. President Trump won the presidency despite losing the national popular vote by almost 3 million votes because of razor-thin margins in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. All three of these states experienced casualty rates close to the national median. A simple bivariate model suggests that if each state had suffered a lower casualty rate—for example, that of New York—Trump could have lost between 1.4% and 1.6% of the vote. Such a shift would have changed all three states from red to blue and sent Hillary Clinton to the White House.

However, most states are large, heterogeneous places. The wartime experiences and direct exposure to war costs of residents of Upstate and Western New York, for example, may look different from those living in the New York City suburbs. To account for these intrastate differences and to paint a more nuanced picture, we conducted a follow-up analysis of the relationship between Iraq and Afghanistan war casualties and Trump’s electoral success at the county level. The first column in table 1 presents results of a bivariate ordinary least squares regression of the change in GOP vote share from 2012 to 2016 on a county’s casualty rate. As in the state-level analysis, the relationship is positive and statistically significant. Trump was even more successful in surpassing Romney’s 2012 performance in communities that had suffered disproportionately high casualty rates.

Prior research has shown that Iraq and Afghanistan war casualties are not randomly distributed across the country (Kriner and Shen 2016). Rather, they correlate significantly with other demographics that also might identify communities particularly receptive to Trump’s candidacy. To ensure that county casualty rates are not serving only as a proxy for another characteristic identifying counties predisposed to support Trump to a greater degree than Romney, we estimated a second regression model including a number of control variables. Perhaps most important, because prior research has shown that recent war casualties have hailed disproportionately from communities with lower levels of income and educational attainment, we controlled for each county’s median family income and percentage of adult residents with a college degree. Exit polls from 2016 showed that Trump performed well among voters without a college degree; as a result, this is a particularly important control. We also included three variables indicating each county’s racial composition: the percentage of residents that were white, black, or Latino. Trump struggled to connect with African American voters, and his hardline immigration policies alienated him from many Latinos. As a result, we expected Trump to struggle to make electoral inroads in
politics: battlefield casualties and ballot-box defeat

counties with large nonwhite populations. Finally, we controlled for the percentage of each county’s population that lives in rural areas, as well as the percentage that are military veterans. The results are presented in column 2 of Table 1.

Even after including all of these demographic control variables (for which all of the regression coefficients align with expectations), the relationship between a county’s casualty rate and Trump’s electoral performance remains positive and statistically significant. Trump significantly outperformed Romney in counties that shouldered a disproportionate share of the war burden in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the county level, the relationship between local casualty rates and Trump’s vote share is substantively modest yet politically meaningful. A two-standard-deviation increase in a county’s casualty rate produced more than a half-point swing in the predicted two-party vote share from Clinton to Trump.

**An Electoral Check on Military Adventurism?**

Whereas many analysts pointed to public frustration with the Iraq War as a contributing factor to President Obama’s victory in 2008, the greatly escalated war in Afghanistan received little attention in 2012. Moreover, in the postelection analysis of the 2016 cycle, discussion of war fatigue was all but absent. America’s ongoing wars in Central Asia may appear politically invisible precisely because their costs are largely hidden from view and paid disproportionately by a small segment of the electorate. Nevertheless, our analysis suggests that Trump recognized and capitalized on this inequality in sacrifice. Trump recaptured voters in this constituency that had begun to turn away from Republican candidates in the mid-2000s in large part by breaking from the party’s foreign-policy orthodoxy. His message resonated with voters in communities largely abandoned by traditional politicians in both parties.

*Nevertheless, our analysis suggests that Trump recognized and capitalized on this inequality in sacrifice.*

Table 1
County Casualty Rates and Change in GOP Vote Share, 2012–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Column 1</th>
<th>Column 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casualty Rate</td>
<td>0.371*</td>
<td>0.252*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.170)</td>
<td>(0.110)</td>
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<tr>
<td>% College Degree</td>
<td>-0.364**</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Family Income</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>0.025**</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>-0.104**</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino</td>
<td>-0.131**</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Rural</td>
<td>0.527*</td>
<td>(0.239)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Veterans</td>
<td>0.078**</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.781**</td>
<td>10.419**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.104)</td>
<td>(0.644)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>3.111</td>
<td>3.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.586</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. All significance tests are two-tailed. *p<0.05; **p<0.01.
on the party’s position on trade policy and economic inequality and emphasizes identity politics. However, Democrats also may want to reexamine their foreign-policy posture if they hope to erase Trump’s electoral gains among constituencies that were exhausted and alienated by 18 years of war.

NOTES
1. On Clinton’s messaging failures, see Ball (2016). On Trump’s connection with an angry electorate, see Guo (2016).
2. For data on the number of Americans who died or were wounded in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, see www.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/casualties.xhtml. For an estimate of the number of Americans who have served in theater, see http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/veterans.
3. Following most of the empirical literature in political science, we use the term “casualty” to refer to soldiers who were killed in a foreign war. Although the DoD routinely releases comprehensive data on fatal US casualties, it does not do so for nonfatal casualties. For an analysis of nonfatal casualty data in the war on terror through November 2009 obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests, see Kriner and Shen (2016, 562–64).
7. Specifically, we use the casualty lists provided by the DoD for Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn. Available at www.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/casualties.xhtml. Given the relatively small number of fatal casualties, our analyses pool casualties from both wars. However, replicating the regression models in table 1 with separate measures for Iraq and Afghanistan casualties (either in separate models or together in the same model) yields positive coefficients that often approach conventional thresholds of statistical significance, depending on the specification.
8. Military rules stipulate that the “home of record” is each soldier’s home at the time of enlistment. By contrast, soldiers’ “legal residence” can be changed to the location in which they are stationed if they intend to remain there (see www.army.mil/article/160640). The DoD records provided (or we were able to identify if missing) home-county data for 6,475 service members. For most of the remaining 257 service members, the DoD reported their home county as “multiple,” indicating that their home city of record spanned multiple counties.
10. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump). “As I have stated strongly before, and just to reiterate, if Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey (I’ve done before!). They must, with Europe and others, watch over...” Tweet, October 5, 2019, 8:38 a.m. Available at https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1182132249282138801.

REFERENCES