Are You Doing Your Part? Veterans' Political Attitudes and Heinlein’s Conception of Citizenship*

Jonathan D. Klingler† and J. Tyson Chatagnier‡

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Abstract

Drawing from the concept of citizenship in the novel, Starship Troopers, we consider public opinion in a world in which “service guarantees citizenship.” We do this by examining the political attitudes of U.S. (volunteer) veterans—a group generally neglected in the public opinion literature—relative to the adult population at large. Using data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we demonstrate that, as a group, veterans tend to be more ideologically conservative and more likely to identify as Republican than their non-veteran counterparts. This finding holds for both individual issues and self-identification.

Keywords: veterans; public opinion; foreign policy; domestic politics

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“A citizen accepts personal responsibility for the safety of the body politic of which he is a member, defending it, if need be, with his life.”
– Johnny Rico, film adaptation of the novel

1 Introduction

In his classic novel, *Starship Troopers*, Robert Heinlein describes a society in which citizenship—and consequently, the political franchise—is available only to those who have completed a term of voluntary federal service, which requires an individual to perform potentially dangerous tasks under military discipline.¹ A service requirement improves the citizenry in two ways: it acts primarily as a selection mechanism, weeding out those who are unable or unwilling to fulfill the obligations that come with political power; it is also meant to enhance any existing civic virtue in volunteers, and to foster a fundamental understanding of duty and honor in the context of the state. In short, service identifies individuals who would make superior citizens and makes them even better. By making it a prerequisite for citizenship, the state fundamentally increases the likelihood that sovereignty falls to those best suited to the job. The creation of an electorate that exhibits preferred virtues and political attitudes, in turn, leads to a more stable and better functioning state.

Because of its rigors, "federal service" in this context can only be comparable to military service within the American context. For this reason, Heinlein's citizens must be analogous to American veterans.² It is not clear how (if at all) one might assess Heinlein’s key claim that an electorate comprised entirely of veterans would lead to a government that ran more smoothly, and current research into veterans’ political opinions has tended to ignore volunteer veterans in the mass public entirely. However, the proposition raises a number of interesting questions that we believe deserve consideration as a first step toward understanding what causes veterans’ differentiated attitudes. In particular, we wonder what public opinion about policy issues would look like under such a system, as well as if the empirically verifiable components of Heinlein’s theory of citizenship are supported.

We use Heinlein’s claims about the policies of the Terran Federation as a theoretical
dropping-off point for the investigation of veterans’ attitudes on a variety of domestic and military matters. We derive a series of hypotheses about veterans attitudes, based on the theoretical claims, which we test using data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). We rely on an array of demographic characteristics and summary statistics to determine whether and to what degree veterans’ political attitudes differ from the general public. Finally, we use our findings to argue that it is necessary to dig deeper under the surface with new data that can isolate the effects of socialization and selection on veterans’ attitudes, and can uncover the differences between subgroups of the population of veterans.

2 Previous Research

In building a society governed solely by veterans, Heinlein engages in a fascinating thought experiment. The question of what a Heinleinian society might look like in the real world is interesting in itself, but this is accentuated by the fact that veterans tend to be an understudied group within the public opinion literature. This is somewhat surprising, given that veterans make up more than one-tenth of the U.S. population, and that military service is often seen as an especially formative part of an individual’s transition into adulthood. As such, veterans make up a significant—and theoretically distinct—subset of the American electorate. Veterans make up a similar proportion of the American population as Hispanics, blacks, and the poor, but the political behavior and attitudes of these other groups have been studied to a significantly greater degree.

It is notable that while veterans are usually acknowledged to have distinct beliefs and behaviors as citizens, as well as qualities that set them apart as candidates for and occupants of public office, the study of veteran politics is underdeveloped. A recent examination of the literature on veterans in this journal pointed out that more research is needed on the study of veterans as a distinct voting bloc, and that a reassessment of the findings of veterans research from the Vietnam conscription era among veterans from the volunteer military is necessary. The very definition of the term “veteran” is ambiguous in the literature, as governments
different countries may not officially designate an individual as a veteran until certain service lengths have been reached or an individual has been deployed to a combat zone. In other cases, such as China (and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union) in the mid-20th century, the government has used its power to redefine the term for political reasons. Furthermore, as research conducted in the UK demonstrates, public opinion differs on whether anyone who serves is a veteran, or if the term should be reserved for older generations, such as those who fought in the either of the two World Wars. While some research does exist on public opinion of veterans, it tends to be relatively narrow in scope, or to have a fairly parochial sample group. Little extant research looks at the general political views of veterans at a mass level.

Of the political studies of veterans that do exist, a number have concentrated primarily on turnout and voting behavior. In terms of turnout, the very factors that Heinlein illuminates for their importance in generating good citizens (commitment to duty, civic virtue) may lead veterans to differ systematically from the general population. Those who elect to join the military may have an inherently higher affinity for their country and be more willing to make sacrifices on its behalf, such as paying the cost to vote. Additionally, as a socialization mechanism, the military is an “insulated institution that makes specific efforts to inculcate its members with patriotism.” This should have the effect of either amplifying the characteristics described above, or instilling those that are absent. These factors together should predispose veterans toward participation, making them, *ceteris paribus*, more likely to vote than non-veterans. Indeed, research into the subject finds this generally to be true.

In studies of vote choice, the special qualities of veterans again surface, this time as an explanation for veterans’ general affinity for the Republican Party. First, individuals most likely to volunteer for military service tend to have much in common with individuals likely to support the Republican Party, in terms of demographic characteristics. Second, military service increases the salience of foreign policy issues for an individual. Increased attention to foreign policy combined with Republican “ownership” of the national security issue should increase the likelihood that veterans vote for Republicans over Democrats.

However, empirical research into vote choice is largely inconclusive. While Bishin and
Incantalupo find that veterans tend to be more Republican than the public at large, Barreto and Leal report that—for Latinos—prior military service made a Kerry/Edwards vote more likely in 2004, and Teigen generally finds little or no relationship between veteran status and vote choice.\textsuperscript{15}

It may be that the vote choice literature has faced difficulty in reaching a consensus because veterans’ political views are less straightforward than the previous argument makes them seem. The decision to cast one’s vote for a Republican or a Democrat is a joint function of a number of factors. Even if military veterans tend to be more hawkish, this does not automatically translate into a Republican vote. If veterans tend to be more liberal on domestic issues—as was the case, to some extent, with Vietnam veterans—then the relationship may be nonexistent or even reversed.\textsuperscript{16} Relatively few studies have taken the necessary step of looking at individual political opinions in veterans. Generally, these studies have found little effect of veteran status on political opinions.\textsuperscript{17} The exception to this is in the realm of foreign policy, where—at least among elites—veterans tend to be somewhat more dovish, reserving the use of military force only for those situations that pose a significant threat to national security.\textsuperscript{18}

While interesting for its somewhat counterintuitive nature, the research by Gelpi and Feaver tells us only about beliefs of elites, and nothing at all about veterans’ opinions on domestic issues. While the other studies deal more with the mass public, they were conducted in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, and only shortly after the introduction of the all-volunteer military. Both of these factors are likely to have a significant effect on the results, making them less likely to be applicable today. Given that approximately one-third of Vietnam veterans, half of Korea veterans, and two-thirds of World War II veterans entered the military via the draft, the effect of the self-selection mechanism may have been significantly diluted in the era captured by the earlier studies.

One reason that veterans’ political opinions have not been studied more frequently at a mass level may simply stem from a lack of available data. Until recently, no major national political survey has asked respondents about veteran status. As such, scholars interested in
studying veterans have had to make use of census data, aggregate level data, or more limited and specialized surveys that capture either fewer issues or a narrower sample. Fortunately, some national surveys (e.g., the 2008 NES and 2006 CCES) have recently begun asking respondents about prior military service, making empirical examinations of veteran opinions at the mass level more feasible. This allows us to assess the political attitudes of veterans in the mass public. Given the absence of theory-building in the literature, we begin with a duty-based theory of citizenship derived from Heinlein’s work.

3 The Duty-Based Citizenship Theory

In *Starship Troopers*, Heinlein weaves an implicit theory of veteran political behavior that has not been formally discussed in the discipline, despite the novel’s controversial nature and relative fame. According to Heinlein, in the Federation, “personal freedom for all is the greatest in history, laws are few, taxes are low, living standards are as high as productivity permits, crime is at its lowest ebb.” Additionally, the justice system adopts a policy of public corporal retribution against criminals rather than rehabilitation and officially believes in expansionism, under the axiom that a species’ right to territory is dependent on its ability to defend that territory. Thus, the policies of the Federation appear to tend toward *laissez-faire* economic policy, hawkish foreign policy, and a tolerant social policy, with the exception of the use of corporal punishment. If we make the assumption that these policies generally reflect those of the median citizen in the Federation, Heinlein’s statements imply that this median citizen (i.e., the median veteran) is essentially a hawkish libertarian. As we can assess the preferences of the median veteran in the U.S., this claim lends itself to empirical analysis.

Heinlein discusses the selection mechanism by which voluntary military service identifies individuals who are willing to make sacrifices for the community in some depth in the book, with the opening quote to this paper serving as one prominent example. Citizens are defined by their willingness to take responsibility for the security of society, subordinating their own
desires to that of the public and its legitimately chosen officers, and they are exclusively identified through voluntary service. The bridge between his general claim that service selects individuals with a stronger innate sense of duty and the apparent hawkish libertarian political beliefs of those individuals is left poorly defined on Heinlein’s part, and the rationale is not immediately clear.

An especially plausible explanation can be found in the false consensus effect, whereby individuals tend to view their own tendencies as common or moral traits. In general accordance with the false consensus effect identified by Ross et al., individuals with a strong sense of duty should tend to believe that most others have the selfsame sense of duty. The false consensus effect should lead individuals who strongly value duty to expect the same not only of others in the military world, but of civilians as well. If this is true, then these dutiful individuals can also be expected to assume that all people will take action on their own to serve society, free of coercion. It is important, however, to distinguish between dutifulness and altruism. Dutiful individuals defer to institutional authority, while altruistic individuals may be more likely to adopt the liberal view that institutions are corrupting influences. Dutiful individuals, then, should assume that all people will serve society voluntarily, whether individually or within institutions.

This expectation carries implications for domestic policy preferences. If others can be trusted to serve the public good voluntarily, there is little need to use government action to compel them to contribute to public goods or follow conscientious business. This suggests that veterans should express laissez-faire positions on economic policy. Also, since dutiful individuals believe others can be trusted to make responsible, public-minded decisions in their personal lives, veterans should be fairly liberal socially.

A person who finds it easier to make sacrifices for the good of others would likely also find it easier to bear the costs of war, even in a non-military role, and believe that warfare is less costly than individuals who are not as duty-minded. Under these assumptions, such hawkish libertarian policies seem the natural best choice of the Federation citizen, as individuals would be trustworthy enough to handle their own moral development and social
welfare, unless they demonstrate a deficient sense of duty. In light of this discussion, it seems unsurprising that in the Federation, "the basis of all morality is duty."\textsuperscript{29}

With a few assumptions to bridge the gap, Heinlein’s statements imply that voluntary military service should be a powerful indicator of a strong sense of duty, which will translate into hawkish libertarian policy preferences.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, by the means of the selection mechanism outlined by Heinlein, we should expect veterans to be more fiscally conservative, socially permissive, and willing to support the use of military force than the population at large. Portions of this claim have found some support in a study by Bachman et al., which found that high school students who were planning to enlist exhibited significantly more conservative beliefs.\textsuperscript{31} As ideology is a strong predictor of party identification, we should also expect veterans to be more likely to identify with (and thus vote for) the Republican Party.

The causal relationship may also work in another way. That is, the institutional connections linking the military with the Republican Party may socialize veterans as Republicans first. Alternatively, military service may induce a stronger sense of duty, drawing veterans toward identification with conservatives or Republicans, who are more likely to emphasize duty and deference to authority. Over time, identification as both a veteran and a Republican could influence individuals to adopt more conservative political beliefs. Unfortunately, we would need individual-level panel data to differentiate fully between these two mechanisms. However, we can test a number of hypotheses relating to the expected ideology, party identification, and issue positions of veterans, relative to the general public. In particular, we test three related hypotheses, derived from the theory outlined above.

**Hypothesis 1:** Veterans will identify more strongly than the general public with conservatism and the Republican Party.

**Hypothesis 2:** Veterans will be more likely than the general public to support fiscally conservative and socially liberal policy positions.

**Hypothesis 3:** Veterans will be more likely than the general public to support the use of military force.

Testing these three hypotheses allow us to investigate the nature of observed differences
between veterans and non-veterans, in accordance with the duty-based theory of citizenship, and gain understanding of what policies produced by an all-veteran electorate would look like.

4 Research Design

In order to understand the differences between the policy output of an all-veteran electorate and that of our own, it is necessary to compare public opinion among volunteer military veterans to that of non-veterans. This provides a clearer picture of how an all-volunteer citizenry might be expected to feel about various important issues. To the extent that policy responds to public opinion, it can also suggest what policy would look like in a world with a Heinleinian conception of citizenship.

Comparing public opinion among veterans and the electorate as a whole requires a national survey of political opinions on important policy questions that inquires about veteran status. The 2006 CCES serves this purpose well. It is a national stratified sample survey of more than 30,000 Americans, with questions about both domestic and foreign policy issues. Importantly, it provides demographic information on respondents, including current or former military service. This allows us to assess the opinions of both veterans and non-veterans on a number of major issues. By using this data set, we avoid the pitfalls of previous studies, with a broad sample of both groups drawn from the mass public, and a wide range of issues on which the respondents were polled.

Because we are interested in attitudes of citizens in both possible electorates, we begin by dropping all non-citizens from the survey. Fortunately, this is a relatively small subset, accounting for just over 1% of the sample, leaving us with a total of 35,947 observations. Next, because we want to assess duty-based citizenship, we create a dummy variable for veteran status. Veteran status ideally gets at the two concepts described earlier: self-selection into the military, and civic virtue instilled by training and other experience. While all veterans would receive any socialization effects, both socialization and selection factors should be present only in volunteer veterans. The bureaucracy chosen by a veteran electorate
not only eschews the draft, but “recruiters” actively attempt to discourage individuals from joining.\textsuperscript{33} Unfortunately, the CCES does not ask respondents whether they volunteered or were conscripted. Furthermore, during the conscription era, the self-selection mechanism may be polluted by “reluctant volunteers,” who choose to enlist rather than wait to be drafted, in order to receive better assignments, and would not have volunteered otherwise.\textsuperscript{34} Additionally, the US military offers inducements for enlistment (e.g., money for college), which produces veterans who may not be entirely motivated by civic virtue. However, this should only indicate that any suggestive findings would be stronger in the absence of such inducements. To ensure that we do not bias the analysis in favor of our hypotheses, our sample of veterans includes only those individuals who have previously served in the military and could not have been drafted (i.e., all males born after 1952, and all females).\textsuperscript{35} Henceforth, we will use “veterans” to refer to this group, and “all veterans” to refer to all individuals with prior military service. A description of this nomenclature, and the portion of the data that each category represents can be found in Table 1.

### Table 1. Description of Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>All respondents to the 2006 CCES survey</td>
<td>36,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electorate</td>
<td>All U.S. citizens over the age of 18 who responded to the CCES survey</td>
<td>35,947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Veterans</td>
<td>All respondents in the Electorate group, who have not previously served in the military</td>
<td>28,764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Veterans</td>
<td>All respondents to the CCES survey who have previously served (but are no longer serving) in the military</td>
<td>7,183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>All female respondents and all male respondents born after 1952, who have previously served (but are no longer serving) in the military</td>
<td>2,835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Duty</td>
<td>All respondents currently serving in the military</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An important point is that we do not include individuals currently engaged in military service in our group of veterans. Rather these respondents are referred to as "active duty" servicemembers and treated differently. Theoretically, this is because the effects of duty-based citizenship show themselves only when service has ended. The reason for the policy decision,
given in the novel by Cpl. Rico, is that, given the opportunity, “the idiots might vote not to make a drop.” That is, the Federation may fear that soldiers might choose self-preservation over what is best for society by acting in an especially dovish manner. However, the Federation may simply find the possibility (however unlikely) that rank-and-file military could overturn their orders to be an offense against the all-important principles of military discipline and duty. This suggests a question about how veterans’ beliefs on foreign policy differ from currently-serving soldiers (Gelpi and Feaver note that they tend to track relatively closely), which is testable in our data set.

Examining potential policy differences between veterans and the general public requires an analysis of the two groups' viewpoints on important political issues. The CCES asks respondents about their opinions on a variety of issues, including the three general areas of economic policy, social policy, and military policy. We look at responses to seven questions about policy issues and seven questions about the appropriate use of military force. The policy questions are all asked in the form of a roll call vote, with respondents expressing whether or not they support a particular policy. The military questions inquire about whether or not the respondent supports the use of military force in particular situations. The economic policy issues that we examine include the minimum wage, capital gains taxes, and the creation of a Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). The social policy issues that we examine include: partial birth abortion, federal funding of stem cell research, citizenship for illegal immigrants. The military policy issue that we examine was setting a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. These topics make up the universe of policy questions asked on the CCES. They are useful for the analysis in that they all came up for roll call votes during the 109th Congress, and generally represented the important questions of the day. Thus, respondents should be especially likely to have meaningful opinions about them. The situations in which respondents are asked whether they would support military force include: securing an oil supply, destroying a terrorist camp, stopping a genocide, spreading democracy, protecting allies, and assisting the United Nations. Respondents are also asked if they believe that none of these situations justifies the use of military force. The wording and coding for all of these questions can be found in the Appendix.
The survey also includes questions about ideological self-placement (five-point scale) and party identification (seven-point scale).

As we are interested in the difference between public opinion in our electorate and in a veteran-only electorate, we want to compare the opinions of veterans on these questions to those of non-veterans, as well as to those of the electorate as a whole. Given this goal and the wording of the questions on the CCES survey, the obvious way of investigating the research question is by comparing responses between the various groups. Thus, our analysis involves examining the mean placements on party identification and ideology measures, as well as the proportion of each group that favors or opposes a given policy stance. Simple difference-of-means and difference-of-proportions tests can indicate whether veterans’ views are significantly different from those of the public at large. We use this approach to compare subsets of the U.S. electorate, and later discuss the potential for more sophisticated research designs, given additional data.

5 Demographics

Before looking specifically at the political views of veterans, we find it informative to examine the more general demographic characteristics of veterans, relative to the entire CCES sample. These comparisons will add context to the initial examination of political attitudes and characteristics. In particular, we look at gender, race, marital status, church attendance, income, education, and age.

Table 2. Demographic Comparison of Veterans and General Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 2,835)</td>
<td>(n = 2,835)</td>
<td>(n = 2,835)</td>
<td>(n = 2,756)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entire CCES</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>(n = 35,947)</td>
<td>(n = 35,947)</td>
<td>(n = 35,947)</td>
<td>(n = 34,747)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 describes the CCES data, in terms of gender, race, and marital status, comparing veterans to all individuals surveyed. What is perhaps most notable about the table is the fact that veterans are overwhelmingly male. Although females account for more than half of the individuals in the overall CCES survey, they make up less than 30% of the sample’s veteran respondents.
Table 2 also suggests that minorities account for a significantly greater percentage of veterans than of the population at large, and that veterans are more likely than non-veterans to be married.

Table 3. Demographic Comparison of Median Values for Veterans and General Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age (n)</th>
<th>Income (n)</th>
<th>Church Attendance (n)</th>
<th>Education (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>45 (2,835)</td>
<td>$60,000--$69,999 (2,549)</td>
<td>Less than once a month (2,797)</td>
<td>Some College (2,831)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entire CCES Sample</td>
<td>49 (35,947)</td>
<td>$50,000--$59,999 (30,963)</td>
<td>Less than once a month (35,275)</td>
<td>Some College (35,881)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 provides the median values for other demographic characteristics. For each group, we calculate the sample median and present the corresponding categorical value in the table. The data indicate that veterans are younger, on average, than the population as a whole, with a median age of 45 years, compared to the overall median of 49.\textsuperscript{39} Contrary to some beliefs, veterans also appear to be slightly wealthier than their non-veteran counterparts. Finally, the median members of both groups attend church less than once a month and had some college education, suggesting no real difference between the two. The differences that we have identified with respect to demographic characteristics are not consistent with any particular ideological association. As veterans are more likely to be male, more likely to be married, and have a higher median income, they might be expected to be more conservative. On the other hand, veterans are younger and more likely to be minorities, both of which are generally correlated with more liberal leanings, which should temper the effects of the other demographic indicators. Perhaps most interesting about this preliminary analysis, however, is that veterans tend to be a diverse group that is relatively highly educated and wealthy. This seems to contrast with popular claims that military recruitment exploits undereducated and poor minorities,\textsuperscript{40} such as John Kerry’s 2006 warning to California high school students that they must study hard and do their homework or risk getting “stuck in Iraq.”\textsuperscript{41}

Having examined the demographic characteristics of veterans, we now turn to an
analysis of self-assessed ideology and party identification. Both conventional wisdom and Hypothesis 1 (which draws from Heinlein's theory) suggest that veterans should be more conservative and more Republican than the population at large. Our results bear this out. Using the conventional five-point ideological self-placement measure, in which a 1 indicates that the respondent is very liberal and a 5 indicates that the individual is very conservative, the overall mean is 3.18, while the mean among veterans is a more conservative 3.35. Similarly, on the seven-point party identification self-placement measure, for which a 1 is a strong Democrat and a 7 is a strong Republican, the overall mean is 3.94, while the mean among veterans is 4.34. In both of these cases, as predicted by Hypothesis 1, the difference is statistically discernible, and indicates that the average veteran is significantly to the right of the average adult citizen. Our initial results indicate than an America in which only veterans gained the franchise would be a more conservative America.

Ideology and party identification, however, are relatively crude measures and can allow for a wide range of variance on actual policy issues. This is especially true in the area of foreign policy, where conservative Republicans may be divided over interventionist versus isolationist policies, and hawkish liberal Democrats may disagree with their more dovish copartisans. The fact that foreign policy issues are likely to be especially salient for veterans dictates that we dig deeper, comparing preferences on specific policy questions.

6 Preferences Over Policy

Our initial policy analysis involves looking at the proportion of each group that responds in the affirmative to a given question in roll call format. We obtain the proportions for veterans, non-veterans, and the electorate as a whole, and then compare these quantities. A necessary condition for an expectation of different policy in a veteran-only electorate would be that the proportion of the present electorate in favor of a policy be significantly different from
the proportion of veterans in favor of the same policy. More interesting would be a case in which a majority of one group favors a policy, while a majority of the other opposes it.

We begin by looking at policy questions. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4. In almost all cases, we find that, in the aggregate, veterans’ preferences differ significantly from those of non-veterans and the electorate in general. The one exception to this trend is support for CAFTA, which is virtually the same for the two groups. In addition to the two groups having different levels of support for various policies, we can see that the break is ideological in nature. For each policy on which the two groups differ, veterans appear to be significantly more conservative, both fiscally and socially. This runs counter to Hypothesis 2, in that veterans do not appear to be more socially liberal than the general public; however, it supports the conventional wisdom that veterans tend to be a more conservative group than voters in general.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the largest difference between groups is on a policy that deals explicitly with the military: whether or not a timetable should have been set for withdrawal from Iraq. Here, we find that support among the general electorate was roughly 20% higher

Table 4: Proportions of Groups in Favor of Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Veterans (Baseline)</th>
<th>Non-Veterans</th>
<th>Electorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ban Partial-birth Abortion</td>
<td>0.62 (n = 2,540)</td>
<td>0.57* (n = 25,399)</td>
<td>0.58* (n = 31,820)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stem Cell Research</td>
<td>0.62 (n = 2,596)</td>
<td>0.70* (n = 25,623)</td>
<td>0.68* (n = 32,218)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship for Illegals</td>
<td>0.32 (n = 2,642)</td>
<td>0.40* (n = 25,872)</td>
<td>0.38* (n = 32,686)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq Timetable</td>
<td>0.52 (n = 2,672)</td>
<td>0.65* (n = 26,170)</td>
<td>0.62* (n = 32,994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise Minimum Wage</td>
<td>0.68 (n = 2,700)</td>
<td>0.79* (n = 27,192)</td>
<td>0.77* (n = 34,070)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Capital Gains Tax</td>
<td>0.56 (n = 2,581)</td>
<td>0.47* (n = 24,529)</td>
<td>0.50* (n = 31,235)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAFTA</td>
<td>0.33 (n = 2,370)</td>
<td>0.34 (n = 21,544)</td>
<td>0.34 (n = 27,750)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Difference from baseline is significant at p < .05 level.
than it was among veterans. However, in both groups, majorities expressed support for withdrawal. While opinion might have been more tepid in an electorate comprised of veterans, the general preferences on this issue would have been the same.

This is the case with almost every question. Generally, while veterans are more conservative, the difference is not large enough to put majorities of the two groups on opposing sides. The only case in which we see this is on the extension of capital gains tax cuts. Here, most veterans express support for such cuts, while a minority (47%) of the non-veterans as a whole prefers to eliminate them. However, even here, we would not expect to have seen a policy shift, as Congress ultimately voted to extend the capital gains tax cuts through 2010.

The results from the analysis of opinion on military questions is presented in Table 5. Here, we find that veterans’ views are significantly different from those of the electorate on every question, and that the results are supportive of Hypothesis 3. Interestingly, however, the magnitude of the differences are substantially smaller. The largest difference (eight percentage points) is on the relatively uncontroversial situation in which the military is used to destroy a terrorist camp, which is supported by more than 70% of the electorate, and nearly 80% of veterans. Moreover, the average difference between the two is about five percentage points on military questions, and about six points on policy questions, indicating that the two groups are slightly closer on military issues.
Once again, we can see a general direction in which the differences between the groups run. Veterans tend to be more hawkish than the electorate as a whole, being more likely to support the use of military force in all situations but one: assisting the United Nations. Fewer than half of veterans support the use of military force to help the United Nations uphold international law. It is not clear whether this is because veterans are more reluctant to subordinate the military to an international force, whether, being generally more conservative, they tend to be mistrustful of the U.N., or whether it is a combination of both of these factors.

As with the policy questions, majorities of the two groups tend to lean in the same direction, despite the differences in aggregate levels of support. Here, use of the military in a supporting for the U.N. is the sole instance in which the groups lean in different directions (and again, the majority opposed is between 49 and 50%). While policy based solely on veteran opinions might be slightly more hawkish, we do not generally see differences in the median for each group, and so we would likely see similar outcomes.

We also see that there are fewer differences between veterans and their active duty counterparts on military issues. Veterans and active duty servicemembers only have distinguishable opinions regarding military action in the situations where the military is used to destroy a terrorist camp, prevent genocide, or spread democracy. In these scenarios, the active duty servicemembers are substantially more hawkish than veterans. The concern that “the idiots might vote not to make a drop” appears to have little supporting evidence. In fact, in situations in which the military is asked to prevent genocide or spread democracy, the difference in hawkishness between active duty and veterans is greater than the difference between veterans and the electorate as a whole. Thus, inclusion of active duty servicemembers into an otherwise veteran-only electorate would likely lead to somewhat more hawkish policies, but in no case would the inclusion of active duty servicemembers cause the median citizen to change position.

7 Discussion

The results of our analysis provide partial support for the hypotheses derived from the duty-based theory of citizenship outlined earlier in this paper. As hypothesized, veterans tend to be relatively
hawkish supporters of free market policies; however, they are also unexpectedly conservative with respect to social issues. These findings suggest an alternative (but related) manner in which the emphasis that military service places on duty (whether a result of selection or socialization) may influence political beliefs. If veterans believe that duty is a paramount trait or virtue and they exhibit this trait to a degree that civilians do not, then veterans may be willing to utilize government intervention to make up for the perceived moral shortcomings of civilians. This alternative theory of how duty drives the political opinions of veteran citizens is consistent with our finding that veterans hold socially conservative ideological beliefs, which are in concordance with government policies that place a high priority on duty, discipline, and deference to authority or established norms. On fiscal issues, on the other hand, veterans may believe that a small group of dutiful individuals are capable of providing adequate voluntary funds for the provision of public goods while others free ride. Individuals who volunteer to join the military may be willing to provide other volunteer members of the military with a significant amount of forebearance on social issues, or preventing some intolerable public “bads,” while insisting on stricter restrictions on the behavior of non-veterans, who do not demonstrate dutiful, and thus moral, behavior. While we have primarily addressed the theory that military service is associated with particular issue positions through a worldview built around a strong individual sense of duty, it is also possible that a strong sense of duty acts to draw veterans toward identities which value duty, and that their relatively homogenous issue positions emerge from the mindsets inculcated by these identities. Further research is needed to assess this new theory, and we outline some fruitful next steps below.

The results of our analysis of volunteers present an important challenge to some previous studies. Gelpi and Feaver argued that veteran political elites---specifically members of Congress---and military elites were more reluctant to engage in force than non-veteran political elites. Our study of the mass public suggest that veterans are instead more willing to use force for a variety of purposes than the civilian public. This is a puzzle which warrants further study, as the exposure of servicemen and veterans to additional methods of achieving national security objectives as they reach positions of power may be inculcating dovishness.

The vote choice literature on veterans shows mixed results, and our study finds support
for Bishin and Incantalupo’s finding that veterans as a whole identify more strongly with the Republican party than does the civilian public, and challenges the findings of Barreto and Leal and Teigen. This analysis cannot speak to the degree to which veterans vote for Republican candidates more often than those of other parties, but strong Republican party identification advantage and across the board conservatism among veterans provides additional support for Bishin and Incantalupo’s argument.

Finally, a number of studies during the 1970s of the political beliefs of conscripted veterans from the Vietnam era suggest that veteran status is either not associated with political opinions, or that veterans are hawkish on foreign policy matters but hold liberal positions on domestic matters. Our results do not support either of these earlier findings. The average volunteer veteran holds conservative, rather than liberal or even libertarian, values on nearly every policy variable in our dataset, and these individuals are more conservative generally than the civilian public. The question of why these differences exist warrants further study. The differences in the findings of our analysis and those of previous studies of both conscript, volunteer and reluctant volunteer veterans could be due to a number of causes. However, they do suggest that the distinct qualities of today’s veterans are derived in part from selection effects.

8 Conclusion

The research presented here began with a question prompted by a science fiction novel: what would the policy in the United States look like if only veterans could vote? As we began investigating this question, we discovered that, until now, mass political attitudes of volunteer veterans have been understudied. Veterans make up a proportion of the population roughly equivalent to Hispanics, senior citizens and African-Americans, making them a relatively large and important bloc of voters. However, unlike these other groups, the study of veteran politics has been mostly limited to questions of turnout rates and the effects of veteran status on candidacies for political office, rather than questions about policy preferences at the mass level. Even leaving aside the fact that veterans are a large, and politically active part of the population, it seems to us that it is worthwhile to learn more about the political beliefs of a group
of individuals who are willing, if need be, to sacrifice their lives on behalf of their country.

In answer to our initial question, we find that an America in which only veterans could vote would likely be more aggressive internationally and somewhat more conservative domestically. Our examinations of veterans’ aggregate opinions provide mixed support for Heinlein’s general theory that veterans are likely to be more libertarian and hawkish than the general electorate. We find that veterans are more likely to hold fiscally conservative views on taxes, socially conservative views on domestic issues, protectionist views on trade, and hawkish views on the military and foreign policy. It is important to note that, within the sample analyzed, few policies have majority support among veterans and do not have majority support among the population as a whole. However, if we conceptualize the policy space as continuous for any general issue, it is likely that a rightward shift in the views of the median voter would result in a rightward shift in the policy selected by the recomposed electorate.

Our analysis is meant to serve as a first step toward learning more about veterans’ attitudes. We present our findings to make an argument that the political study of military veterans is both important and worthwhile, but much remains to be done. The initial analysis presented here relies on summary statistics and simple difference-of-means and difference-of-proportions testing. Future research should include regression analysis to control for potential confounding factors; however, this is difficult given current data. One particular problem with our analysis was our inability to distinguish between conscripts, volunteers, and reluctant volunteers prior to 1973. This confounds our ability to draw inferences about the effect of service as a selection mechanism. Moreover, simple regressions based on the data currently available would likely be afflicted by selection bias. An alternative would be to use matching estimators to look for treatment (i.e., socialization) effects. However, these are equally untenable, as pre-treatment variables are scarce. The study of veteran politics, much like the study of education and citizenship, revolves around isolating selection and socialization effects. Addressing these questions requires the collection of panel data on individuals before, during, and after they serve in the military.

Future surveys should also inquire about the decision to serve (or not), as well as related
matters, such as branch of service, length of time served, pay grade attained (or simply whether the individual was an officer or enlisted), peacetime versus wartime service, and whether the individual served in combat. Among officers, it would be useful to determine whether the individual was trained at a service academy, OCS, or ROTC. These factors may affect the findings reported above, and aid in addressing other important questions. We urge political scientists to begin to recognize the importance of military service with respect to political attitudes, to collect higher quality data that include questions about military service, and to investigate more thoroughly the role that prior military service plays in American politics.

Additionally, societies outside the United States offer opportunities both for future examination of the processes that develop veterans’ political positions and for the application of our findings. There is a great opportunity for future study to examine the extent to which political opinions of volunteer and conscripted veterans differ from those of the electorate as a whole in other societies. If the peculiar political leanings of volunteer veterans in the United States follow from a worldview built on the importance of duty, then we should expect to see similar political leanings among veterans in other societies. This may explain why military regimes tend to adopt socially conservative and free-market policies. However, if these political positions are derived from the mindsets of identities which are specific to the American context, substantial variation should be observed. In addition, comparison of veterans in states with compulsory and volunteer service will be informative in examining the role of socialization and selection in the development of these distinct sets of political beliefs among veterans. Understanding why and how veterans develop peculiar political positions is of particular importance for states with military regimes, where the selectorate is comprised of individuals exposed to the mechanisms we outline above, and should be considered by policy makers as they consider whether military service should be compulsory or voluntary.

The large numbers and distinct attitudes of veterans in American society indicate that the political behavior, opinions, and representation of veterans is a substantively interesting and important component of American political life. In spite of these qualities, studies of veteran behavior have been limited in ways that studies of comparable groups have not. Existing theories have thus far failed to explain the distinctiveness of veterans adequately, and available data on
veterans’ political behaviors and attitudes are small or lacking in relevant questions. Our results lead us to call for broader theory-building and empirical investigation of veterans’ politics and the recognition of the important role which this distinct group of citizens plays in American politics.
Appendix: Question Wording and Coding

Questions used in this analysis are drawn from the 2006 CCES study. For policy questions, we recode the responses to be consistent with typical dichotomous coding procedure (0/1). For self-placement questions, we use the five- and seven-point scales given in the survey. The ideological self-placement measure use the following wording and coding:

- Thinking about politics these days, how would you describe your own political viewpoint?
  (1 = Very Liberal, 2 = Liberal, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Conservative, 5 = Very Conservative)

The partisanship measure is constructed by asking the respondent about party affiliation, with a followup question based on that answer. The first question asked of respondents is:

- Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a ... ?
  (Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other)

If the respondent identifies with either party, then they are asked:

- Would you call yourself a strong [response] or a not so strong [response]?
  (Strong, Not so strong)

If the respondent does not identify with either party, then they are asked:

- Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic or the Republican Party?
  (Lean Democrat, Lean Republican, Independent)

Based on these responses, the respondent is coded as follows:

(1 = Strong Democrat, 2 = Weak Democrat, 3 = Lean Democrat, 4 = Independent, 5 = Lean Republican, 6 = Weak Republican, 7 = Strong Republican)

Policy questions use the following wording and coding:

- Partial Birth Abortion: First, we’d like to ask about a proposal in Congress to ban a type of late-term abortion sometimes called "partial-birth abortion." Some argue that late-term abortion is a barbaric procedure and should be banned. Others argue that late-term abortions
are extremely uncommon and used only in exceptional circumstances best determined by a doctor, not the Congress. The proposed legislation could also be the opening to a broader ban on abortion. How about you? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against banning late-term abortion?

(0 = Oppose ban, 1 = Support ban)

• Stem Cell Research: Now we’d like to ask you about whether the federal government should fund stem cell research. Some in Congress argue that this research may lead to cures for diseases and disabilities affecting large numbers of Americans, and should be funded. Others argue that a potential human life has to be destroyed in order to use these cells, and funding it would be unethical. What do you think? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against federal funds for this research?

(0 = Oppose federal funding, 1 = Support federal funding)

• Citizenship for Illegals: Another issue is illegal immigration. One plan considered by the Senate would offer illegal immigrants who already live in the U.S. more opportunities to become legal citizens. Some politicians argue that people who have worked hard in jobs that the economy depends should be offered the chance to live here legally. Other politicians argue that the plan is an amnesty that rewards people who have broken the law. What do you think? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against this proposal?

(0 = Oppose path to citizenship for illegals, 1 = Support path to citizenship for illegals)

• Iraq Timetable: Congress also debated a proposal that the president begin phased redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq starting this year and submit to Congress by the end of 2006 a plan with estimated dates for continued phased withdrawal. Some politicians argue that setting out a plan to withdraw would make Iraqis take responsibility for their country and become more independent of the U.S. Others argue that it is too early to start withdrawing, and that doing so would make terrorists grow bolder. What do you think? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against a plan to start withdrawing
troops this year?

(0 = Oppose timetable for withdrawal, 1 = Support timetable for withdrawal)

- **Minimum Wage:** Congress considered a proposal to increase the federal minimum wage from $5.15 to $6.25 within the next year and a half. Some politicians argue that the wage should be increased because it hasn’t changed since 1997 and many workers still live in poverty. Other politicians argue that raising the wage might force small businesses to cut jobs and would hurt the economy. What do you think? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against increasing the minimum wage?

(0 = Oppose minimum wage increase, 1 = Support minimum wage increase)

- **Capital Gains Tax:** We’d like to ask about cutting taxes on the money people make from selling investments, also referred to as capital gains. This past year the Senate considered a bill to extend capital gains tax cuts passed in 2001. Some politicians argue that these tax reductions make the economy strong and encourage people to invest more. Others argue that the plan would mostly benefit people who are already rich and that any tax cuts should be shared more fairly among all taxpayers. What do you think? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against these tax cuts?

(0 = Oppose extending tax cuts, 1 = Support extending tax cuts)

- **CAFTA:** This year Congress also debated a new free trade agreement that reduces barriers to trade between the U.S. and countries in Central America. Some politicians argue that the agreement allows America to better compete in the global economy and would create more stable democracies in Central America. Other politicians argue that it helps businesses to move jobs abroad where labor is cheaper and does not protect American producers. What do you think? If you were faced with this decision, would you vote for or against the trade agreement?

(0 = Oppose ratification, 1 = Support ratification)

For the questions about when the use of the U.S. military is appropriate, respondents are asked to indicate whether or not they support the use of troops in each of a number of
situations. The order of the situations is given randomly. Responses are coded such that 0 represents a negative answer and 1 indicates an affirmative answer. The question is as follows:

For each of the following reasons, would you approve of the use of U.S. military troops? Please check all that apply:

1. To ensure the supply of oil

2. To destroy a terrorist camp

3. To intervene in a region where there is genocide or a civil war

4. To assist the spread of democracy

5. To protect American allies under attack by foreign nations

6. To help the United Nations uphold international law

7. None of the above

To those who would argue that Heinlein’s federal service was primarily non-military, we offer two arguments. First, we do not believe that there exists a real world institution other than the military that is comparable to service in Heinlein’s world (e.g., a job in the U.S. federal bureaucracy is not so much a “term of service” as a lucrative and rewarding career choice). Second, in discussing service, Heinlein refers almost exclusively to military service. In the rare instances that he mentions an alternative, he implies that it is not entirely different from the military. Indeed, non-military jobs are described as “dirty, nasty, [and] dangerous” (Heinlein 1959:44).

The questions raised by Heinlein about the implications of military service for citizenship are taken seriously outside of the academy. Indeed, *Starship Troopers* has been included on the professional reading lists lists in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps, and is presently included on the Navy reading list for junior enlisted personnel as a book on leadership. As of June 2012, the relevant Navy reading list is located online at http://www.usnwc.edu/Navy-Reading/Books.aspx.

Heinlein’s principles have also been cited in at least two proposals for real-life service-for-privilege policies. Richard Dagger, “Republican Virtue, Liberal Freedom and the Problem of Civic Service.” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Political Science Association, Boston, Massachusetts, August 29-September 1, 2002); Laura Schmitz, “National Service: Every Citizen Plays a Part.” (Contemporary Issues Paper, United States Marine Corps Command Staff College, 2009)

Around 12%, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.


As is addressed later in the paper, veterans tend to be wealthier, and to be more likely to be male or married than the population at large. On the other hand, a disproportionately large number of minorities—who are more likely to be Democrats—are veterans.


Teigen, “Enduring Effects of the Uniform.”

Bishin and Incantalupo, “From Bullets to Ballots?”


Gelpi and Feaver, “Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick?”


Ibid., 141-143.

Ibid., 161.


Ibid.

Duty in this sense should be distinguished from altruism, as duty includes a sense of obedience to institutional authority. Thus, the standard liberal view that institutions corrupt people who are inherently good would be different from the view of the dutiful person that people and institutions are generally trustworthy but that those who are not dutiful are morally deficient.

Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, 145.

We recognize that conscripted veterans may also exhibit a strong sense of duty. There were strong duty-based pressures on drafted individuals in the early and middle 20th century, but we are not primarily concerned with comparing volunteer veterans and drafted veterans in this paper.
31 Bachman et al., “Distinctive Military Attitudes among US Enlistees.”

32 The data can be accessed from http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/data

33 Heinlein, Starship Troopers, 44.


35 We would prefer for our sample to include all individuals who would have volunteered for military service, but this sample is not available. Our options were limited to either looking only at veterans born after the draft (i.e., removing any veteran born prior to 1952), or including all veterans that we knew could not have been drafted. Using the former criterion would eliminate 300 women from the sample (approximately 10% of the total number of veterans in our overall sample). Looking at the data, we find that the group of older female veterans does not hold substantially different opinions from the rest of the sample, and see no problem with including them.

36 Heinlein, Starship Troopers, 129.

37 Bransislav Slantchev points out that this belief runs counter to the novel’s main premise (see his review at http://www.gotterdammerung.org/books/robert-heinlein/starship-troopers.html). The very idea of federal service is that individuals are willing to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the body politic. The mere fact that they are the ones in harm’s way should not affect individuals’ opinions about an appropriate course of action. We agree, and our analysis demonstrates that such fears are unwarranted.

38 Gelpi and Feaver, “Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick?”

39 This is due to the fact that we were forced to drop a number of older veterans because of conscription. Indeed, when we look at all veterans, the mean increases to 59.


42 To assess robustness, we also looked at proportions for all veterans. The results are substantively the same for all question with one exception: the use of military force to prevent genocide. Here, non-veterans and the electorate are significantly more likely to support intervention than are all veterans.

43 It is not immediately clear what accounts for the similar levels of opposition to CAFTA. It may be due to the relative complexity of the agreement and a general lack of information about the agreement. Alternatively, it may be that the idea of protectionism versus free trade cuts across ideological viewpoints, and is not strongly associated with conservative or hawkish views. Ultimately, however, we are unsure why we see this.

44 Feaver and Gelpi, Choosing Your Battles; Gelpi and Feaver, “Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick?”

45 Bishin and Incantalupo, “From Bullets to Ballots?”
