# 'Vox Populi?:' Assessing NATO Popularity Relative to Political and Economic Indicators in Selected Member Nations

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the impact of political and economic conditions on a nation's popularity/favorability ratings towards North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the world's most powerful military alliance. It is found that in random-effect models there exists a significant positive relationship between a country's democratic strength and favorability, as well as a negative relationship regarding unemployment. In fixed-effect models, however, there is slight evidence of a positive relationship with per-capita GDP, as well as negative relationships with the unemployment rate and the trade index. Overall, differences in member-nations largely account for whether democratic or macroeconomic conditions influence support.

## Keywords

## Cover Page Footnote

**Introduction**

In December 2019, President Donald Trump chose not to mince words when attending a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit of numerous world leaders in London. Speaking of Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau during a meeting with German Chancellor Merkel, the then-president said to reporters:

> I find him to be a very nice guy but you know the truth is that I called him out [on] the fact that he's not paying two percent [of gross domestic product] … He's not paying two percent and he should be paying two percent. Canada – they have the money. (Wintour and Mason, 2019).

Even as a candidate three years prior, Mr. Trump had long been calling on other NATO member-states to contribute more to the Alliance, or risk losing American protections (Gould, 2020; Vinograd, 2016). Approximately seventy percent of NATO funding comes from the United States, leading to potential criticism despite bipartisan support (Fagan, 2020; Fagan and Poushter, 2020; Tirpak, 2020). Indeed, for these reasons President Trump was driven to even entertain leaving the Alliance altogether (Crowley, 2020).

According to the US State Department (2020), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded in 1949 to provide collective security against the Soviet Union and greater Eastern Bloc. The original signatories were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. NATO has welcomed many new members in the succeeding decades, including many former Soviet-influenced nations.

In 2014, each nation made a commitment to spend at least two percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on NATO defense by the year 2024. However, no incentivization or punishments exist to aid member-states in reaching this goal, and less than a third are on track to do so (Chollet et al., 2020).

In terms of structure, under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, an act of aggression against one member is considered an act of aggression against all NATO members (NATO, 1949). This provides the benefits of collective defense to all NATO members in the event of an attack. To date, the only instance in which Article 5 was invoked was the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, in which members mobilized to help guard American airspace as well as assist in antiterrorism operations in the eastern Mediterranean (Gordon, 2001; Pruitt, 2018). Regarding conflict post-Cold War, every nation in NATO receives the same level of mutual protection from the other twenty-nine member-states' militiaries, regardless of amounts contributed (Kottasová, 2017). This differs from, for example, the financial operations of the International Monetary Fund, where assistance levels are dependent on how much each country contributes into the

system. Furthermore, in times of conflict, nations often voluntarily make additional contributions of manpower or weapons (Daalder and Goldgeier, 2006).

**Theory**

Extensive past research has been conducted attempting to ascertain the effectiveness of NATO, and its role in the future of global political and military affairs. However, none have examined the aspect of domestic political and economic indicators impactors on a nation's internal public perception. It is the goal of this paper to contribute to that standing gap in literature.

Simply put, across the NATO membership, what impact does the state of a nation's government have on domestic favorability? From a public economics perspective, what of standard of living, international trade, or macroeconomic performance? How do they impact civilian attitudes towards the Alliance? Do NATO member-states' people tend to have worsened positive perceptions over time, or rather do they improve with tenure of membership?

The author hypothesizes that stronger domestic economic performance and political stability will be associated with greater support for NATO. A nation experiencing an economic downturn, it can be supposed, would typically have residents less supportive of international alliances and initiatives. Citizens would become more adverse to international cooperatives they believe counter to economic interests (Gelpi and Grieco, 2008). Similarly, a country more integrated into the global economic system via international trade may have greater favorability towards NATO. Stronger democracies also can have citizens more committed to an organization that protects fellow democratic institutions and overall principles (Waterman et al., 2002).

The intent of this paper is to examine the effect of political and economic factors on popularity regarding the Alliance. Its goal is to determine whether such a relationship exists at a significant level. Analysis is conducted through an OLS regression and panel data methodology.

**Literature Review**

There exist previous empirical studies on the economic and political theory surrounding NATO. This paper's research is unique however in that it utilizes cross-national survey data relative to non-military indicators, and treats this survey data as the dependent variable.

The research Kiratli (2020) aligns to an extent with this paper, utilizing PRC data in an analysis of support for NATO and the United Nations (UN) and finding that dissatisfaction with the economy is associated with less support towards both groups.

Nations who are not members of NATO share some research with the purview of this paper. White et al. (2006) examined survey data in Belarus, Russia,

and Ukraine, analyzing support for and opposition to NATO membership relative to participant indicators such as gender, education, income level, and age. Ydén et al. (2019) worked to further understand the political environment regarding NATO in Sweden (an officially neutral non-member-state), noting its continued governmental closeness to the Alliance and its operations despite somewhat ambiguous public opinion on it. Zilberman and Weber (2003) studied "aspirant [member] countries."

In addition, among member-states, the existence of a Cold War-era alliance following the end of the Cold War gives ambiguity to the modern role and validity of such a partnership (Yost, 1998; Daalder and Goldgeier, 2006; Tirpak, 2020); this feeling may well be shared by policymakers and survey respondents alike.

Specific to public opinion, Baum and Potter (2008) note increased attention to a number of policy issues (to include economics) in the short term following the topic's mentioning by Queen Elizabeth. Przeworski (1996) studied how economic conditions impacted public support for economic reform in Poland. Milner and Tingley (2013) posit a liberal-conservative ideological divide regarding public opinion on the economics of foreign aid. While DeRouen and Peake (2002) suggest that governments may initiate force to divert public attention from underperforming national economies, they do not note public opinion nor alliances. Oneal and Tir (2006) similarly note that very slow growth rates increase the likelihood of military confrontation.

Reviewing past articles and research, it is evident that none have yet accounted for the impact of changes within national politics or economics on domestic favorability in the ways proposed here. This paper hopes to make such a contribution to existing research by analyzing the influence of how domestic favorability is potentially affected in such ways.

**Data**

This paper uses two separate datasets on perceptions of NATO, and then a combined dataset of both. The varied sourcing of data as measures of the dependent variable also thereby serves as a robustness check.

The first dataset from the Pew Research Center (PRC) (Fagan, 2020; Fagan and Poushter, 2020) tracks favorability towards NATO among several European nations, as well as the USA and Canada, between 2009 and 2019 (except for 2014). PRC used a mix of face-to-face and phone interviews, with its 2019 survey totaling 21,029 respondents. The second dataset is from the *Transatlantic Trends* series of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (2021). Respondents there, numbering about a thousand per country per year, were asked if they believed NATO was still essential to their respective country's security. Partial response data have been collected from 2002 to 2014, as well as 2020. The third dataset combines the two survey datasets; while results hardly overlap, in the few instances of

overlapping results (e.g., two popularity ratings for France in 2020), values are averaged, giving each equal credence in analysis. Linear interpolation is also used for missing data, accounting for 14.86% of datapoints.

All member nations for which there were survey data are being examined. These include member states Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic. Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition, Russia, Sweden, and Ukraine, non-members, have reported data in the PRC dataset only, and are included in the PRC and combined datasets at certain points.

Economically, GDP per capita is included as a proxy for nation-wide standard of living, with data from the World Bank (2021). Unemployment rates are used as an indicator of national macroeconomic performance with data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2021). Politically, an index of the strength of liberal-democratic institutions, as reported by the University of Gothenburg's V-Dem Institute (2021), accounts for quality of governance. Values in the index range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more democratic institutions. This descriptive index is used rather than other measures such as Polity5, which only takes on an absolute value ranging from -10 to 10; the democracy dataset used here is more nuanced.

Trade indices (OECD, 2021) measure the level of national integration into the global economy. The tenure variable, the difference between the year of each survey and the year in which that country joined NATO, most accurately measures the length of time during which that nation has been a member.

For controls, I include data on population (UN, 2021) to account for country size, and military expenditure as a share of GDP (SIPRI, 2020) to account for the relative militarization of, and risk in, each country. The former controls for potential 'free-rider' status among sparsely-populated members states (Zannella, 2020), while the later aims to control for contemporary international phenomena (Kostadinova, 2000).

**Table 1. Data and Sources**

| Variable | N | Mean | St. Dev. | Min | Max | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| GDP per capita (2015 US dollars) | 276 | 26,064.6 | 195,994.52 | 644.39 | 60,386.77 | World Bank (2021) |
| Unemployment rate | 266 | 9.072 | 5.11 | 1.33 | 27.467 | |
| Liberal democracy index | 275 | 0.74 | 0.172 | 0.11 | 0.882 | V-Dem Institute (2021) |
| Trade index (proportion of GDP) | 276 | 0.888 | 0.428 | 0.234 | 1.907 | Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) |
| Population (millions) | 277 | 53.153 | 68.527 | 2.794 | 329.484 | United Nations (2021) |
| Military expenditure (percent of GDP) | 277 | 1.772 | 0.819 | 0.763 | 4.923 | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2020) |
| Tenure of membership | 269 | 48.617 | 22.395 | 3 | 72 | North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2021) |
| Support for NATO | 115 | 56.139 | 14.143 | 12 | 82 | Pew Research Center (Fagan, 2020; Fagan and Poushter, 2020) |
| Consider NATO essential | 140 | 60.897 | 10.178 | 30.309 | 91.8 | German Marshall Fund of the United States (2021) |

**Methods**

The objective of these models is to account for relative domestic economic and political factors that affect the degree to which a member-nation's population supports NATO. Therefore, the following regression model is proposed:

*(1)*     $\Delta\text{FAV}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\Delta\text{GDP}_{it} + \beta_2\Delta\text{UN}_{it} + \beta_3\Delta\text{DEM}_{it} + \beta_4\Delta\text{TRADE}_{it} + \beta_5\Delta\text{POP}_{it} + \beta_6\Delta\text{EXP}_{it} + \beta_7\text{TENURE}_{it} + \in$

$i = 1, 2, 3, \ldots 23$
$t = 1, 2, 3, \ldots 19$

Where, for a given nation *i* in year *t*, $\Delta$GDP is the change in GDP per capita; $\Delta$UN is the change in the unemployment rate; $\Delta$DEM is the change in index of liberal democracy; $\Delta$TRADE is the change in the index of trade; $\Delta$POP is the change in population; $\Delta$EXP is the change in national military expenditure; TENURE is the aforementioned tenure variable; and $\Delta$FAV, the dependent variable, is the change in the proportion of citizens reporting favorable views towards NATO.

When incorporating data which include nations not members of NATO (Russia, Ukraine, and Sweden), I substitute the TENURE variable for a standard trend variable TREND, which accounts for longitudinal changes in non-member states:

(2)     $\Delta\text{FAV}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\Delta\text{GDP}_{it} + \beta_2\Delta\text{UN}_{it} + \beta_3\Delta\text{DEM}_{it} + \beta_4\Delta\text{TRADE}_{it} + \beta_5\Delta\text{POP}_{it} + \beta_6\Delta\text{EXP}_{it} + \beta_7\text{TREND}_t + \in$

Finally, my third specification uses a dummy variable equal to 1 when a nation is a NATO member and 0 otherwise, to more thoroughly juxtapose member and non-member nations:

(3)     $\Delta\text{FAV}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\Delta\text{GDP}_{it} + \beta_2\Delta\text{UN}_{it} + \beta_3\Delta\text{DEM}_{it} + \beta_4\Delta\text{TRADE}_{it} + \beta_5\Delta\text{POP}_{it} + \beta_6\Delta\text{EXP}_{it} + \beta_7\text{TREND}_t + \beta_8\text{MEMBER}_{it} \in$

The use of fixed-effect or random-effect methods is somewhat ambiguous. A series of Hausman (1972) tests (results in Table 2) indicates that random-effect methods are best for the individual PRC dataset, while either random- or fixed-effects are best for the GMFUS dataset and the combined dataset. Therefore, random-effect methods are utilized for all models, while the PRC dataset is omitted from the fixed-effects table. (The membership dummy must also be precluded from the fixed-effect results, as they are already captured in the cross-sectional intercept differences inherent to the method.)

## Table 2. Hausman Test Results

$H_0$: *Both fixed- and random-effect methods give consistent estimators.*
$H_a$: *Fixed-effect methods give consistent estimators.*

| Dataset | PRC | GMFUS | Combined |
|---|---|---|---|
| P-value | 0.282 | 0.0000 | 0.0002 |
| $Chi^2$ statistic | 8.61 | 62.90 | 28.45 |
| Appropriate method | Random | Fixed | Fixed |

All changes are in logarithmic form. Regressions were calculated using the software Stata, version 16.1.

**Results and Discussion**
The models yield several results at statistically significant levels. Results are depicted in Tables 3 and 4.

## Table 3. Random-Effect Regression Results

| | Pew Research Center Data | | | *Favorability* German Marshall Fund Data | | Combined Dataset | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
| GDP per capita | 0.3051* | 0.1150 | 0.0984 | -0.0245 | 0.0192 | 0.0249 | 0.0257 |
| | (0.052) | (0.140) | (0.140) | (0.222) | (0.247) | (0.208) | (0.190) |
| Unemployment rate | -0.0846* | -0.1576*** | -0.1628*** | -0.0156 | -0.0578** | -0.0863*** | -0.0925*** |
| | (0.060) | (0.003) | (0.003) | (0.698) | (0.035) | (0.006) | (0.003) |
| Liberal democracy index | 0.1611 | 0.3545*** | 0.3006** | 0.2972*** | 0.0222 | 0.3058*** | 0.2770*** |
| | (0.259) | (0.002) | (0.019) | (0.009) | (0.822) | (0.000) | (0.006) |
| Trade openness | 0.0185 | 0.2072 | 0.1831 | -0.1557 | 0.0765 | 0.1043 | 0.0961 |
| | (0.865) | (0.143) | (0.204) | (0.137) | (0.390) | (0.318) | (0.347) |
| Population | -0.0186 | -0.0013 | -0.0058 | -0.0620 | 0.0020 | -0.0121 | -0.0098 |
| | (0.764) | (0.982) | (0.922) | (0.190) | (0.862) | (0.783) | (0.817) |
| Total military expenditure | 0.0568 | 0.0736 | 0.0691 | -0.0912 | 0.0112 | -0.0110 | -0.0205 |
| | (0.383) | (0.366) | (0.398) | (0.299) | (0.862) | (0.874) | (0.764) |
| Tenure | -0.0071** | | | 0.0016 | -0.0007 | | |
| | (0.014) | | | (0.301) | (0.565) | | |
| Trend | | -0.0096** | -0.0100** | | | -0.0005 | -0.0008 |
| | | (0.047) | (0.040) | | | (0.872) | (0.765) |
| Member | | | 0.1567 | | | | 0.2430** |
| | | | (0.338) | | | | (0.033) |
| $R^2$ | 0.2829 | 0.5437 | 0.5524 | 0.2363 | 0.2143 | 0.4714 | 0.4957 |
| N | 123 | 139 | 139 | 128 | 216 | 232 | 232 |

*p-values in parentheses. \* p < 0.100 \*\* p < 0.050 \*\* p < 0.001*

(1) PRC dataset of member states, 2009 – 2019
(2) PRC dataset of member and non-member states, 2009 – 2019
(3) PRC dataset of member and non-member states, with membership dummy
(4) GMFUS dataset of member states, 2009 – 2019
(5) Combined dataset of member states, 2002 – 2019
(6) Combined dataset of member and non-member states, 2002 – 2019
(7) Combined dataset of member and non-member states, 2002 – 2019, with membership dummy

## Table 4. Fixed-Effect Regression Results

| | Favorability | | |
| | GMFUS Data | | Combined Dataset |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| GDP per capita | 0.7168*** | 0.0143 | 0.0081 |
| | (0.002) | (0.398) | (0.691) |
| Unemployment rate | 0.1350** | -0.0030 | 0.0096 |
| | (0.011) | (0.921) | (0.790) |
| Liberal democracy index | 0.2001 | -0.1479 | -0.0754 |
| | (0.323) | (0.209) | (0.553) |
| Trade openness | -0.6309*** | 0.0322 | -0.0148 |
| | (0.000) | (0.774) | (0.918) |
| Population | -1.2167 | -1.1328** | -1.6891*** |
| | (0.150) | (0.011) | (0.005) |
| Total military expenditure | -0.1173 | 0.0073 | 0.0017 |
| | (0.326) | (0.919) | (0.984) |
| Tenure | 0.0067 | 0.0011 | |
| | (0.221) | (0.584) | |
| Trend | | | 0.0053 |
| $R^2$ | 0.0065 | 0.0019 | 0.0298 |
| N | 128 | 216 | 232 |

*p-values in parentheses. * p < 0.100 ** p < 0.050 ** p < 0.001*

(1) GMFUS dataset of member states, 2002 – 2014
(2) Combined dataset of member states, 2002 – 2019
(3) Combined dataset of member and non-member states, 2002 – 2019

Random-effect results tend to suggest a positive relationship between the democracy index and favorability, as well as a negative relationship between the unemployment rate and favorability. The only column in Table 3 without a significantly negative relationship regarding unemployment is (4), the GMFUS partial dataset of member states. As the models progressively differentiate based on membership status, first through the incorporation of non-member data and then the addition of a dummy variable, the impact of unemployment on favorability grows in magnitude. E.g., the changes made to PRC data from columns (2) to (3), or the changes to the combined dataset columns between (5), (6), and (7). Respective to dataset, each unemployment-related coefficient lessens in value (i.e., the negative relationship becomes more pronounced). Regarding democracy, the opposite appears true. Better differentiation and juxtaposition based on membership status lessens the impact of democratic institutions' strength on favorability.

In fixed-effect models which by definition hold constant cross-sectional country differences, results are parsimonious. The GMFUS dataset (the PRC dataset was omitted due to the Hausman test's results, as mentioned) reports significant relationships regarding GDP per capita (positive), unemployment (negative), and trade openness (negative). The unemployment coefficient is significant at the 95% confidence level, while GDP per capita and trade are significant at the 99% confidence level. A negative coefficient with respect to trade may be indicative of distorted political preconceptions given changing trade environments, as discussed by Rankin (2001).

These economic results dissipate when combining the PRC and GMFUS datasets, with only national population being a significant negative impactor (i.e., more populated nations favor NATO less). The combined-dataset impact of population grows stronger when including non-member states in data, and its confidence level rises. Again, all changes are logarithmic.

**Conclusion**

This research was conceived and conducted with the goal of identifying political and economic impactors on a the perceptions of NATO by a nation's people. It has been demonstrated here that democratic institutions and the unemployment rate both emerge as factors influencing national support for NATO, though these are almost certainly due to cross-country differences; only when accounting for these differences does slight evidence of a positive relationship with macroeconomic performance (GDP per capita and the unemployment rate) and a negative relationship with global economic (trade) integration. This affirms the stipulations of Milner and Tingley (2013), who note relative stability on public support for

foreign aid (irrespective to NATO) between countries. Heinrich et al. (2016) build on this, attributing lack of public support for foreign aid during economic downturns as an instigator of cuts.

In terms of policy implications, the aspect of domestic support for defense alliances as a consequence of non-defense policy developments in such a context may provide future insight for policymakers and military leadership alike concerning government accountability, as well as the world's largest military alliance in particular. An informed and engaged public across the former 'First World' increasingly appears to associate lower-performance and weaker national democracies with dissatisfaction towards the Alliance, in an apparent clash between foreign and domestic objectives.

In relatively democratic nations and global leaders such as those countries that constitute NATO, it is the hope of the author that this paper may serve to some degree to inform the policy debate in the western world concerning contributions to, and expenditures by, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Regarding limitations, this author regrets that this research was unable to assess policy developments, such as the 2014 Ukraine crisis, in its analyses. It is hoped that future research expands on these models and concepts within such a context (for instance, two-way fixed-effect analysis) so as to better inform the scholarly community and world about an organization that may well ensure peace and prosperity in the modern era.

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