

# Women on the Frontlines: Military Conscription and Perceptions of Women's Political Leadership

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## **Abstract**

Military service has long been linked to civic inclusion, raising the possibility that women's participation in the military could likewise advance women's political empowerment by changing gender attitudes, signaling women's equal contribution and competence in national defense. We argue, however, that extending conscription to women may instead reinforce barriers to women's political leadership by increasing the salience of militarism, thereby strengthening preferences for masculine leadership. To test this argument, we conduct a multi-country survey experiment in Finland, Denmark, South Korea, and Taiwan. We find that exposure to news about women's conscription significantly reduces support for female political candidates, with effects similar to those of news about men's conscription. We also, surprisingly, find no meaningful differences across women's and men's conscription conditions in downstream gender attitudes or support for women leaders. These findings suggest that gender-neutral conscription policies may reinforce rather than weaken existing gender hierarchies in political leadership.

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## Introduction

National security is fundamental to state survival (Enloe 2013; Huntington 1981), yet women remain significantly underrepresented in positions shaping security and foreign policy (Barnes and O'Brien 2018; Karim and Beardsley 2017). Research shows that higher levels of women's representation in political institutions are linked to less conflictual foreign policy behavior and lower risks of conflict recurrence through increased public trust, more inclusive peace agreements, and reduced likelihood of militarized dispute escalation (Barnhart and Trager 2023; Good 2024; Koch and Fulton 2011; Omelicheva and Carter 2024; Shair-Rosenfield and Wood 2017), underscoring the importance of including women in political leadership. Nevertheless, gender disparities persist across the political pipeline, from the decision to run for office to campaigning and exercising authority once elected (Clayton 2021; Wängnerud 2009).

The longstanding link between military service and civic inclusion has generated debate over whether women's participation in the armed forces could advance their broader political leadership. Proponents of the liberal feminist "right to fight" perspective contend that granting women equal access to military roles and acknowledging them as full participants advances their broader inclusion in public life (Kennedy-Pipe 2017; Newby and Sebag 2021). Because military service has long been linked to the attainment of political rights, expanding women's involvement in the armed forces may create new pathways to political inclusion (Cohen, Huff, and Schub 2021; Krebs 2006) by signaling full civic membership (Persson and Sundevall 2019; Best, Hunter, and Thomas 2021) and demonstrating their capacity to defend the nation and exercise leadership (Caverley and Krupnikov 2025; Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019).

Yet others caution that women's participation in military combat should not be mistaken for liberation (Duncanson and Woodward 2016). From an anti-militarist perspective, the military is fundamentally embedded in patriarchy and violence, sustaining the very systems of domination feminism seeks to dismantle (Enloe 2013). Within this framework, women's inclusion does not challenge the military's patriarchal foundations but rather incorporates women into its power structure (Dharmapuri 2011), reinforcing male dominance by situating women within the very system that upholds inequality (Kennedy-Pipe 2017). Despite this rich normative debate, empirical evidence remains limited on whether women's military participation translates

into meaningful political inclusion.

Drawing on debates over women’s military participation, we extend these theories to military *conscription* — one key institutional form through which women’s service could become broadly formalized, particularly in societies that already conscript men. We argue that policy changes surrounding ‘gender-neutral’ conscription, while appearing equitable, may, at least in the short-term, reinforce rather than reduce the barriers women face in politics. We contend that advancing conscription policies inevitably heightens the salience of national security and militarism, which reinforces societal preferences for traditionally masculine forms of political leadership (Falk and Kenski 2006; Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2011, 2022; Kim and Kang 2022; Lawless 2004). Militarism—defined by Stavrianakis and Selby (2012, p. 3) as “the social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, organized political violence”—has long been associated with stereotypically masculine traits such as toughness, aggression, and decisiveness, leading societies shaped by militarism to internalize the perception that these traits define effective leadership (Baaz and Stern 2009; Enloe 2014; Jang 2026). Because women’s conscription signals a state’s intention to deepen militarization, such discussions may further disadvantage women, who are often perceived as lacking masculine-coded leadership attributes even when their records demonstrate otherwise (Best, Hunter, and Thomas 2021; Bhatia and Monroe 2023; Carlin, Carreras, and Love 2020; Thomas and Hunter 2019). Consequently, we argue that policies seeking to integrate women into military institutions are more likely to reinforce existing gender hierarchies in political leadership than to dismantle them.

To investigate the downstream political consequences of exposure to policy changes surrounding conscription, we run a pre-registered, multi-country survey experiment in Finland, Denmark, South Korea, and Taiwan. These countries were selected based on three criteria: first, each maintains active conscription for men; second, each has recently expanded (Denmark) or is actively debating (Finland, South Korea, Taiwan) the expansion of military conscription to women alongside changes to men’s conscription rules; and third, each faces ongoing security threats from neighboring adversaries (Russia, North Korea, China), rendering military service politically salient. All four are consolidated democracies, which allows us to examine how

public opinion responds to gendered military reforms in contexts where it is most likely to influence policy and leadership outcomes. Thus, while their political and social contexts differ, their shared exposure to external threats provides a basis for identifying both cross-national patterns and potential heterogeneity in how conscription politics shapes attitudes toward women's leadership.

Our online survey experiment included 2,489 respondents (roughly 600 per country), randomly assigned to one of three conditions. The first treatment exposed respondents to a vignette about women's military conscription (a recent policy change or ongoing debate); the second presented a similar vignette about further expansion of men's conscription; the control group read a placebo vignette about recycling policy. The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, we compare each treatment to the control to test whether information about conscription reduces support for women's political representation by activating militaristic attitudes. Second, we compare the two treatments directly—since both discuss conscription, this comparison isolates the effect of the gendered dimension of conscription policies on attitudes toward women's representation.

We find that exposure to information about women's conscription significantly decreases support for women political candidates, with effects substantively similar to those of exposure to men's conscription. Respondents across both treatment conditions also reported significantly heightened hawkishness compared to the control, indicating that both conscription vignettes significantly heightened militarism, even without directly discussing any national security threats. Notably, we find no differences between the two treatments or compared to the control on gender attitudes. This suggests that conscription discourse activates militarism regardless of whose service is at stake—and that militarism, not shifting gender attitudes, is what decreases support for women's leadership. Our experimental evidence thus shows that women's conscription *reproduces* rather than *counteracts* the well-established negative effect of men's conscription (Enloe 2013; Kwon 2000) on women's political leadership.

This study makes several contributions. First, an extensive literature documents the consequences of men's military conscription for public views on war (Erikson and Stoker 2011; Horowitz and Levendusky 2011), political integration (Krebs 2006; Zhang and Lee 2025), gen-

der attitudes (Amelia Gibbons and Rossi 2022; Bjarnegård et al. 2023), and political participation (Davenport 2015). We extend this literature by examining the political implications of including *women* in the conscription system, showing that effects on the gendered leadership penalty are surprisingly similar to those of men’s conscription. Second, we contribute to the gender and politics literature on whether women’s military service translates into greater political equality (Caverley and Krupnikov 2025; Cohen, Huff, and Schub 2021; Etcheson 2020; Hardy et al. 2019; Schroeder, Best, and Teigen 2023), showing that policy changes surrounding women’s conscription do not affect gender attitudes but can engender heightened militarism, with adverse consequences for support for women leaders. Third, by focusing on the political effects of conscription *debates*—as Finland, Taiwan and South Korea have yet to implement these proposed changes—we show how conscription can reinforce masculine conceptions of political authority even *before* its implementation in official policy. Debates over gender-neutral conscription have become a recurrent and politically consequential feature of contemporary politics, as rising security concerns fuel prolonged discussions in many countries (see e.g. BBC (2026)). We focus on these debates as moments in which societies negotiate who counts as a legitimate defender of the nation and what forms of leadership national security demands—showing that even debates centered on women’s capacity and contribution to national defense can trigger a sense of militancy that reinforces gendered leadership norms, undermining their broader political inclusion.

## **Conscription as a Pathway to Equal Citizenship**

The link between military service and citizenship has deep historical roots. Before debates on the equal rights and duties of men and women, a core question for states was whether all *men* were equal and whether citizenship should be universally granted. The military thus became a prominent pathway for men to gain civic equity, from ancient Athens and Rome, where service shaped civic status and even granted citizenship (Reinmuth 1952; Mathisen 2006), to the late 19th century, when European nations institutionalized conscription to foster national unity (Cohen 2019), a reciprocal arrangement that helped expand voting rights to previously excluded men (Ingesson et al. 2018).

This idea of “earning” citizenship rights through military service persisted in the modern era. In the United States, military service was positioned as a pathway to equal citizenship for Black Americans, from the Civil War (Taylor 2020) through World War II (Mettler 2007) and the Korean and Vietnam wars, where “black soldiers assumed a special position at the front line of the fight for racial equality, [having] served their military duty despite Jim Crow, now black veterans returned to collect the recognition and rights due to them as men” (Knauer 2014, p. 3). This link between service and citizenship remains institutionalized in the U.S. under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA § 329; 8 U.S.C. § 1440), which permits non-citizens who served in the Armed Forces during designated periods of armed conflict to obtain expedited naturalization. Military service can also ground claims to equal citizenship beyond race: in Ukraine, LGBTQ individuals who served in the ongoing war with Russia have called for legal recognition, including the right to marry, explicitly invoking their battlefield contribution (Levenson 2022). These demands reflect a broader logic that participation in national defense legitimizes calls for civic equity across marginalized groups.

The link between military service and civic standing has also extended to political leadership. In many democracies, military service has functioned as a credential signaling patriotism, sacrifice, discipline, and fitness to govern—from Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and John McCain in the United States to Charles de Gaulle in France and Yitzhak Rabin in Israel (Caverley and Krupnikov 2025; Jost and Kertzer 2024; Horowitz and Stam 2014). Conversely, politicians perceived as having avoided military service have faced backlash. In the United States, accusations of draft avoidance shadowed Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump, while John Kerry’s Vietnam service became a central issue in the 2004 presidential campaign (Balz 1992; CBS 2004; PBS 2004; Whitlock 2015). In South Korea, both candidates in the 2022 presidential race (Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung) faced scrutiny over medical exemptions from mandatory military service (Choi 2022; Nam 2022). Military participation, in short, shapes not only formal citizenship rights but broader perceptions of political legitimacy and leadership potential.

## **Militarism & Support for Women’s Political Leadership**

The historical role of conscription in expanding civic inclusion has led some scholars to argue that drafting women could advance their inclusion in politics. As Krebs (2006, p. 135) notes, “the association between military service and citizenship had prevented women from enjoying full membership in the civic life of the nation,” and moments when this boundary shifted have generated significant political gains for women. During World War I, American women’s extensive participation in war industries allowed them to claim equal contribution to the national war effort, with President Wilson explicitly framing women’s suffrage as a continuation of this expanded civic role (Krebs 2006). Building on this logic, the liberal feminist “right to fight” tradition contends that treating women as equal partners in national defense can reshape public beliefs about women’s competence in traditionally masculine domains (Kennedy-Pipe 2017; Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019) and challenge essentialist notions that women are inherently peaceful or less capable of violence (Alison 2004)—stereotypes often invoked to exclude them from leadership during periods of national insecurity (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2016; Swers 2007). Equal-terms conscription could thus disrupt the gendered division between protectors and protected, undermining biases that confine women to subordinate civic roles rather than positions of political power.

The debate over gender-neutral conscription has gained particular momentum over the past two decades. Prior to 2000, only two democratic countries conscripted women alongside men: Peru and Israel.<sup>1</sup> In 2000, however, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 sought to expand women’s roles in military operations, aiming to promote more cooperative and constructive approaches to soldiering and reverse women’s “significantly limited access to command and senior leadership positions” (UN 2024). Since then, several democratic countries have introduced female conscription or begun domestic policy debates on the issue. Norway led the way in 2015 as the first NATO country to implement gender-equal conscription; Sweden followed in 2017. In 2024, Denmark announced a plan to conscript women beginning in 2026 (which was subsequently brought forward to 2025), and this policy is now in effect. Meanwhile, Taiwan, South Korea, and Finland, which currently conscript only men, have all begun actively

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<sup>1</sup>Peru conscripted women in the 1990s, but has since abolished their conscription system.

debating whether to formally extend conscription to women, as have several other nations.<sup>2</sup>

Countries consider gender-neutral conscription for many reasons; however, political elites have often discussed women's conscription as a political commitment to equal rights and obligations, presenting their inclusion in the draft as a signal of their formal equal status with men. Specifically, male-only conscription has been criticized for limiting women's representation in national defense (Persson and Sundevall 2019) and placing a disproportionate burden of national security on men (Kwon 2000). Expanding conscription to include women is thus positioned as a step toward greater equality, whereby "rights and responsibilities should be equal for all" (Fouche, Koranyi, and Char 2013).<sup>3</sup> For example, when Norway introduced women's conscription, the government couched its decision in the language of gender equity:

Universal conscription is important for two main reasons. Firstly, *in all parts of society women and men have—and should have—equal rights, obligations and opportunities*. Secondly, from a military perspective, the armed forces need to be able to recruit among the most capable candidates [...] We cannot afford to exclude half of the population in the recruitment process. In terms of human resources, the state sends a very clear message that *competency is not down to gender*, in this case the male gender (2017).

Political leaders thus frame gender-equal conscription as a step toward *broader* societal equality, not merely equal access to military service. By ensuring equal opportunities in the military, women's inclusion in conscription is expected to expand their pathways to other leadership roles (Cohen, Huff, and Schub 2021). US Senator and combat veteran Tammy Duckworth, for example, argued explicitly on International Women's Day 2021 that the military can be a place for women to "prove" their leadership ability, paving the way for broader societal equity. (Duckworth 2021):

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<sup>2</sup>For example, Germany is another prominent nation currently considering bringing back its conscription system on a gender-neutral basis (Azer News, 2026).

<sup>3</sup>The argument is not new. Indeed, Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion famously argued as such when formulating plans for conscription in Israel's newly-founded army in 1948: "The army is the supreme symbol of duty and as long as women are not equal to men in performing this duty, they have not yet obtained true equality. If the daughters of Israel are absent from the army, then the character of the Yishuv [community] will be distorted" (JewishVirtualLibrary 2022).

I've spent my entire life in male-dominated fields — first in the military, now in Congress. On International Women's Day, I'm thinking of all the women didn't take no for an answer and *proved that we are just as patriotic, just as brave, just as capable of leading as men are*. [...] It's past time we fully ensure our daughters have the same rights, representation and opportunities as our sons. Our work for true equality continues.

In short, advocates and policymakers often discuss women's inclusion in military institutions as a way to close the gender gap in political leadership, assuming that shared sacrifice and civic duty can enhance public perceptions of women's capacity to lead—paving the way for more women in elected office and national defense. While these arguments have historically focused on voluntary service, recent policy debates have extended them to conscription as well.

### **Militarism as a Barrier to Women's Leadership**

Yet the notion that military service can advance women's equal citizenship remains contested. Feminist scholars from an anti-militarist tradition argue that participation in combat does not necessarily translate into empowerment (Duncanson and Woodward 2016). From this perspective, the military is a fundamentally patriarchal institution that normalizes violence and hierarchy, reproducing the gendered power structures feminism seeks to challenge (Enloe 2013), making women's service or conscription unlikely to generate meaningful progress toward equal status in public life (Dharmapuri 2011). Rather than promoting equality, conscription is seen as normalizing militarization and reinforcing existing power structures (Kennedy-Pipe 2017), rendering women's conscription morally untenable. We contend that the anti-militarist critique of women's conscription is not only a matter of *normative* justifiability but also a lens for empirically examining conscription's impact on support for women in political leadership. We argue that the militarism engendered by conscription debates will, paradoxically, suppress public support for women's leadership, even when these debates emphasize women's commitment and capacity to serve and protect their nation.

The past few decades have witnessed unprecedented progress in women's political representation (Armstrong et al. 2023; Barnes and O'Brien 2018; O'Brien 2015), yet formal and informal barriers to women's advancement remain. In societies facing national security threats, women face a particularly uphill battle to gain and keep positions of political leadership. The

anticipation of violence and the salience of national defense shift public expectations toward a leadership style centered on order, strength, and protection (Damann, Kim, and Tavits 2024; Federico and Malka 2018; Gratton and Lee 2024), historically masculine-coded traits, while long-standing gender norms casting men as natural guardians and women as those in need of protection are reactivated (Agerberg and Kreft 2023; ?). These two cognitive frameworks work in tandem: framing leadership as control over violence and casting men as communal protectors make male politicians appear especially suited to crisis leadership (Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals 2014), while public discourse and media narratives further narrow the symbolic space in which women can credibly assert authority on national security (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2016; Glaurdić and Lesschaeve 2023). This leaves women frequently judged as lacking crisis leadership traits even when their records demonstrate otherwise (Bhatia and Monroe 2023; Carlin, Carreras, and Love 2020). These dynamics directly shape electoral behavior: voters are more likely to favor male candidates when security threats rise (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2022; Lawless 2004; Swers 2007), and once militarized expectations become embedded in politics, they reshape norms of electability and stall gender progress over the long term (Jang 2026; Kim and Kang 2022; Schroeder 2017; Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019).

Because militarism is fundamentally tied to the preparation and execution of violence (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012), it is inevitably bound to conscription, a state-driven mechanism designed to mobilize populations for armed conflict. For example, analyzing survey data from 84 countries, Kim and Kang (2022, p. 13) find that a key factor depressing support for women's leadership in countries facing security threats is the militarization engendered by large militaries and conscription. Israel illustrates this pattern: although it has conscripted women since its founding, including into frontline combat roles, women constitute only 25% of Knesset members, which is not substantially higher than in other advanced democracies (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy 2017). Experimental evidence further suggests that women's visible participation, and even sacrifice, in combat does not consistently increase support for gender equality in political leadership (Cohen, Huff, and Schub 2021). Together, this evidence suggests that conscription's inherently militaristic nature may remain deeply intertwined with masculinity,

undermining rather than advancing women’s political inclusion.

## Cross-National Conscription Debates

Debates over women’s conscription emerge across varied national contexts, yet often center on a similar set of push and pull factors competing against deeply ingrained gender norms against female military service and combat. Pull factors include gender egalitarian arguments framing conscription as a matter of equal rights and civic obligation, while push factors include demographic pressures, recruitment shortfalls, and heightened security threats (Stachowitsch and Strand 2024). These motivations are not mutually exclusive—most national debates involve some combination of both—and their balance shapes the ideological coalitions that form around conscription policy.

Despite surface differences, however, conscription debates across societies tend to cover familiar ground. Scandinavian countries, widely regarded as among the most gender-equitable societies globally (Bergqvist 1999), have often framed the expansion of women’s conscription around the pull factor of women’s rights and gender equality (Anadolu Agency 2025), and have become some of the first democratic nations to institute gender-equal conscription.<sup>4</sup> Yet push factors also enter the discussion: in Finland, the only Scandinavian country currently without female conscription, a *2024 Citizen’s Initiative* called for gender-neutral conscription to “respond to the challenge posed by shrinking age groups...and correct the problems related to equality in the current system.” Debates in East Asia have similarly emphasized push factors, including security threats posed by rival states (Wei 2025), shrinking populations (Chen and Chung 2025; Jung 2026), and resentment over unequal defense burdens (Ryall 2024; Bae and Lee 2024; Pan 2021), yet gender egalitarian arguments are common here too (Kwon 2000). In Taiwan, for instance, proponents have argued that restricting conscription to men violates constitutional equality and denies women equal civic obligations and opportunities (Sobol 2025). Thus, despite differences in baseline gender egalitarianism and ideology across societies, the debates surrounding women’s conscription tend to cover similar themes.

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<sup>4</sup>Norway and Sweden introduced women’s conscription in 2015 and 2018 respectively, and Denmark in 2025.

We therefore theorize that the heightened militarism invoked by conscription debates will consistently reduce support for women’s political leadership across countries. Military institutions remain strongly associated with masculinity even in the most gender-egalitarian societies (Persson and Sundevall 2019; Stachowitsch and Strand 2024), and militarism has been linked to lower support for women’s leadership across a wide range of national contexts (Kang and Kim 2020; Kim and Kang 2022), suggesting that conscription debates should activate masculine leadership preferences regardless of local political culture or the particular parties advocating for expanded conscription. At the same time, our cross-national approach allows us to examine if and how effects vary across these distinct societies, identifying portability and scope conditions (Egami and Hartman 2023).

## Research Design

To test the effects of women’s conscription debates on voters’ preference for women’s political leadership, we conduct a multi-country, online survey experiment in Finland, Denmark, South Korea, and Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> Each country includes two treatment conditions (male or female conscription) and one control condition (a government recycling program). This three-arm design addresses confounders that can otherwise hinder causal inference about women’s military service and political attitudes, testing the immediate attitudinal consequences of exposure to conscription debates across societies with distinct histories of women’s representation and geopolitical threats.

## Experimental Hypotheses

We argue that information about the conscription of women will *reduce* public support for women’s political leadership, as drafting women is likely to increase security salience and militarism. Relatedly, we expect exposure to men’s conscription should similarly increase militarism and, as a result, reduce support for women’s political leadership.

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<sup>5</sup>This study was pre-registered on OSF prior to fielding (ID: REDACTED FOR REVIEW). The anonymized version of our pre-analysis plan is attached as separate supplementary material.

- **H1a:** Exposure to news of women’s planned conscription *decreases* support for women’s leadership relative to the control.
- **H1b:** Exposure to news of men’s planned conscription *decreases* support for women’s leadership relative to the control.

As outlined above, we expect these effects to operate through heightened security salience and militarism. Thus, our secondary mechanism hypotheses, which are not mutually exclusive, are as follows:<sup>6</sup>

- **H1-M1:** Exposure to news of women’s (men’s) planned conscription *increases* perceptions of national security threat relative to the control.
- **H1-M2:** Exposure to news of women’s (men’s) planned conscription *increases* prioritization of national security relative to the control.
- **H1-M3:** Exposure to news of women’s (men’s) planned conscription *increases* hawkish attitudes relative to the control.

What is the specific impact of conscripting women compared to conscripting men, holding the expansion of conscription constant? One strong possibility is that conscription information produces *no* meaningful shift in gendered leadership preferences: individuals may focus on national security implications rather than gender equality, since conscription debates—whether about men or women—primarily signal external threat. If women’s conscription does affect gender attitudes differently than men’s conscription, however, the direction is theoretically ambiguous. We therefore have competing hypotheses grounded in the longstanding feminist debate over whether women’s participation in militarized institutions advances perceptions of their competence and commitment or instead reinforces preferences for masculine leadership.

On the one hand, exposure to information about women’s conscription may *increase* public support for women’s leadership more than exposure to information about men’s conscription.<sup>7</sup> This could occur through changed beliefs about the fairness of the national service burden

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<sup>6</sup>We compare the women’s and men’s conscription conditions separately to the control, but present them together here for brevity.

<sup>7</sup>We nevertheless expect any positive effect of H2a to be *smaller* in magnitude than the negative effect of H1: i.e., the negative difference between women’s conscription and control should exceed any positive difference between women’s and men’s conscription.

(Krebs 2006), reduced benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske 1996), or enhanced perceptions of women's competence in national security (Duncanson and Woodward 2016).

- **H2a:** Exposure to news of women's planned conscription *increases* support for women's leadership relative to men's conscription.

Yet greater gender inclusion in the military may also provoke public backlash, *reducing* support for women leaders, whether due to concerns about violations of traditional gender hierarchies (Goldstein 2018; Millar and Tidy 2017; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Akerlof and Kranton 2000), women's presence undermining institutional performance (Akerlof and Kranton 2000), or the erosion of masculine culture in historically male domains (Millar and Tidy 2017; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). A competing hypothesis is therefore that:

- **H2b:** Exposure to news of women's planned conscription *decreases* support for women's leadership relative to men's conscription.

These competing hypotheses and mechanisms thus present two opposing pathways through which exposure to women's planned conscription could shape public attitudes toward women's political leadership, beyond the militancy pathway.<sup>8</sup>

Given the cross-national approach to our study, we also assess the relative similarity of public responses across the four countries included in our study.<sup>9</sup> We argue that the increased militarism triggered by discussions of women's conscription is a generalized phenomena across societies. As such, our *ex ante* expectation regarding these effects is that responses to women's conscription will be broadly similar across countries, despite baseline differences in gender

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<sup>8</sup>See Appendix D.1 for more details on these secondary pre-registered mechanism hypotheses.

<sup>9</sup>For example, responses may differ depending on whether women's conscription is presented as a potential reform or an existing policy: in Denmark, where gender-neutral conscription is already in place, public debate has shifted from whether women should be conscripted to how the policy should be implemented, which may generate different attitudinal responses. We thus use Denmark as the omitted condition in all country-interaction models.

attitudes and the political parties associated with women's conscription. This leads to the following null hypothesis:<sup>10</sup>

- **H3:** There will be no difference in relative levels of support for women's political leadership in response to hearing about women's conscription compared to the control across the four countries of study.

## Sampling

We field this multi-country survey online through TGM Research, an international survey firm operating in all four countries, to ensure maximum comparability.<sup>11</sup> Samples consist of adults aged 18 and older, with quotas ensuring national representativeness on age, gender, and region, and randomization conducted among panelists matching project requirements. The final sample includes 640 respondents in Denmark, 633 in Finland, 603 in South Korea, and 613 in Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> We implement stratified randomization to ensure equal numbers of men and women across conditions.

## Experimental Design

Respondents first answer questions on potential pre-treatment moderators, including baseline gender attitudes, and a pre-treatment measure of our dependent variable (support for women's leadership) to increase statistical precision (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021).<sup>13</sup> Participants who fail the attention check are excluded from the experiment.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See Appendix E for a detailed discussion of how we assess whether a null result reflects substantive true-null explanations.

<sup>11</sup>See Appendix A.1 for details on TGM's panels and validation procedures.

<sup>12</sup>See Appendix E.2 for power analysis.

<sup>13</sup>See Appendix E.3 for heterogeneous effects analyses. We also include pre-treatment items capturing deference to authority, trust in institutions, perceptions of civic obligations, and right-wing authoritarianism. These items support the authors' other ongoing projects and help mask the study's focus on gender equity, reducing potential demand effects. Full question wording appears in the pre-analysis plan.

<sup>14</sup>We find little evidence of differential attrition across sociodemographic categories based on attention check failure (Appendix G.2).

Respondents are then randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions (two treatments and a control). The first treatment exposes participants to a vignette about women’s military conscription, framed either as a recent state decision (Denmark) or as part of an active policy discussion (Finland, South Korea, and Taiwan). This is a no-deception study, as subjects are reading vignettes that align correctly with the current political and policy debates in their country.<sup>15</sup> The second treatment presents a similar vignette about expanding men’s conscription. Both vignettes are closely aligned so that the gender of those conscripted is the main distinguishing factor between them.<sup>16</sup> Each treatment also includes an image of a male or female soldier carrying a weapon, captioned “A [female] [country] combat soldier.” The control group reads a placebo vignette about a government recycling policy, engaging in a similar reading task without invoking security or gender equity considerations. Treatment vignettes for all four countries are presented in Figure 1 and Appendix C.3; control vignettes appear in Appendix C.3.

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<sup>15</sup>See Appendix B for discussion of experimental ethics.

<sup>16</sup>Text highlighted in red indicates differences in treatment text between the women’s and men’s vignettes within each country. Denmark’s vignettes are naturally most similar, while the other countries require more variation to accurately reflect their specific policy environments.

## DENMARK

## Treatment 1: Women



Figure 3: A Danish Woman Combat Soldier

Under a law passed by Denmark's parliament in June 2023, Denmark will require **women** turning 18 after July 1, 2025 to register for military conscription. Denmark has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 10,000 soldiers.

The government's extension of compulsory military service for **women** is an effort to **advance gender equity** and strengthen national defense. This change requires **women** to serve in the military, including in frontline combat roles. The government believes this will increase the strength of Denmark's fighting forces.

## Treatment 2: Men



Figure 4: A Danish Combat Soldier

Under a law passed by Denmark's parliament in June 2023, Denmark will require **men** turning 18 after July 1, 2025 to register for a **lengthier period** of military conscription. Denmark has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 10,000 soldiers.

The government's extension of compulsory military service for **men** is an effort to strengthen national defense. This change requires **men** to serve in the military for **eleven months**, including in frontline combat roles. The government believes this will increase the strength of Denmark's fighting forces.

## FINLAND

## Treatment 1: Women



Figure 6: A Finnish Woman Combat Soldier

A recent survey of Finnish political party leaders found that **several parties support expanding military conscription to include women**. Finland has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 24,000 soldiers (280,000 when fully mobilized).

The political discussion of plans to extend conscription service to **women** is an effort to **advance gender equity** and strengthen national defense. This change would require **women** to serve in the military, including in frontline combat roles. Many political leaders believe this will increase the strength of Finland's fighting forces.

## Treatment 2: Men



Figure 7: A Finnish Combat Soldier

A recent proposal circulated by the Finnish government supports changes to **men's military conscription, including raising the upper age limit of male army reservists**. Finland has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 24,000 soldiers (280,000 when fully mobilized).

The political discussion of plans to extend conscription service for **men** is an effort to strengthen national defense. This change would require **men** to serve as **reservists** in the military **until age 65**, including in frontline combat roles. Many political leaders believe this will increase the strength of Finland's fighting forces.

## TAIWAN

## Treatment 1: Women



Figure 9: A Taiwanese Woman Combat Soldier

In a recent interview, the Minister of National Defense stated that there was **"room for discussion"** in the government on requiring women to register for military conscription. Taiwan has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 150,000 active-duty soldiers.

The government's **consideration** of compulsory service for **women** is an effort to **advance gender equity** and strengthen national defense. This change **could** require **women** to serve in the military, including in frontline combat roles. Many political leaders believe this will increase the strength of Taiwan's fighting forces.

## Treatment 2: Men



Figure 10: A Taiwanese Combat Soldier

Recently, Taiwan announced **men turning 18 after January 1 2025 will be required to register for a lengthier period** of military conscription. Taiwan has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 150,000 active-duty soldiers.

The government's **extension** of compulsory military service for **men** is an effort to strengthen national defense. This change requires **men** to serve in the military for **12 months**, including in frontline combat roles. Many political leaders believe this will increase the strength of Taiwan's fighting forces.

## SOUTH KOREA

## Treatment 1: Women



Figure 12: A Korean Woman Combat Soldier

In October 2023, the Constitutional Court of Korea upheld the lawfulness of the Military Service Act requiring men's conscription. Following this ruling, **the court also indicated that legislation to expand military conscription to include women should be seriously considered**. South Korea has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 450,000 active-duty soldiers.

The political discussion of extending conscription service to **women** is an effort to **advance gender equity** and strengthen national defense. This change **could require women to be conscripted** in the military, including in frontline combat roles. Many political leaders believe this will increase the strength of South Korea's fighting forces.

## Treatment 2: Men



Figure 13: A Korean Combat Soldier

In October 2023, the Constitutional Court of Korea upheld the lawfulness of the Military Service Act requiring men's conscription. Following this ruling, **the South Korean National Assembly held further discussions in 2025 on potential changes to the nation's military conscription system, including broadening eligibility rules for mandatory military service for men**. South Korea has long had compulsory military service for men and maintains a standing army of approximately 450,000 active-duty soldiers.

The political discussion of extending conscription for **men** is an effort to strengthen national defense. This change could **ease the criteria for active-duty classification** for men, including in frontline combat roles. Many political leaders believe this will increase the strength of South Korea's fighting forces.

Figure 1: Treatment vignettes for women's and men's conscription conditions, by country. Text highlighted in red indicates differences between vignettes within each country. Treatments are closely aligned so that the gender of conscripted soldiers is the main distinguishing factor, though wording varies across countries to accurately reflect each country's policy environment, enhancing the contextual and external validity of the treatment.

The treatments in our experiment are thus informational, providing respondents with details about government policies (Denmark) or potential plans (Finland, South Korea, and Taiwan) to extend conscription to women or further expand men's conscription. The text of these treatments was carefully designed to convey several important points.

First, to ensure treatments are externally valid with respect to real-world conscription debates and are not interpreted as abstract or hypothetical, each vignette opens with country-specific details about recent conscription policies or debates. This tailoring may introduce some noise in cross-country comparisons, but is necessary to ensure respondents interpret the scenario in a realistic and culturally coherent way, preserving the external validity of our inferences. Second, the vignettes make clear that women's conscription extends to *combat*. One key mechanism by which women's military service is theorized to improve perceptions of their political leadership is demonstrated competence in the national security domain; emphasizing women's effective service in combat roles is therefore central to the treatment. The vignettes explicitly state that conscription will 'include frontline combat roles' and that 'the government believes this will increase the strength of fighting forces,' subtly highlighting women's competence. To visually illustrate these points, the treatments also include an image of a real woman combat soldier in uniform holding military weaponry alongside a caption labeling her as a combat soldier. Third, to ensure respondents are aware that men are already subject to compulsory service and to highlight fairness considerations—another mechanism through which women's conscription could increase support for women's leadership—each vignette notes that the country currently conscripts men. Finally, the treatment deliberately does *not* invoke explicit security threats from relevant rivals (Russia, North Korea, or China) or manpower shortages, including only a generic clause about 'strengthening national defense.' This poses a *harder* test of our theorized militarism mechanism: if militarism is heightened simply by discussing conscription, without mentioning security threats or military weakness, pairing conscription with threat assessments, as commonly occurs in real-world debates, would likely produce even larger effects.

Nonetheless, this informational treatment still has limitations. Namely, our treatment is not women's military service itself, but rather information about a new or potential policy change in

this area. This means we cannot test two longer-term mechanisms by which women’s military service could affect support for women’s political leadership: prolonged contact with women service members (Dahl, Kotsadam, and Rooth 2021) or women’s post-service utilization of their military credentials (Caverley and Krupnikov 2025). As such, our experiment captures the shorter-term effects of changes to military conscription policies on support for women’s political leadership, rather than the long-run effects of years of women’s military service. We return to this point more in the discussion.

## **Outcome Measurement**

Following Ofofu, Seeberg, and Wahman (2026), we measure support for women’s political leadership using a forced-choice conjoint experiment. Immediately following the treatment, participants complete six candidate choice exercises in a hypothetical electoral context. Each exercise presents two candidates randomized on gender (M/F), ideology (liberal, moderate, or conservative), age (35/45/55/65), prior political experience (2/7/15 years), and prior career (business/law/education/social work), and respondents select their preferred candidate. Attribute order is randomized across respondents to minimize order effects.

This measurement strategy has several advantages. First, it captures candidate preferences in a way that more directly reflects electoral decision-making, improving external validity. Second, it minimizes social desirability bias and demand effects by allowing respondents to justify choices based on non-gendered attributes. Moreover, since age, ideology, political experience, and prior career (Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018) have all been identified as reasons voters may disprefer women candidates (i.e. women may be inferred to be younger, more left-wing, less experienced, and from care-oriented careers), this design allows us to examine whether women candidates are preferred even when these factors are held constant or when candidates are ‘contrary to type.’<sup>17</sup> Importantly, studies suggest that conjoint candidate choice experiments *overstate* expressed support for women candidates (Clayton et al. 2020; Schwarz and Coppock 2022). However, as Ofofu, Seeberg, and Wahman (2026) note, designs that embed conjoint experiments within randomized treatment conditions, as we do here, mitigate this concern by

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<sup>17</sup>In Appendix G.4, we examine these other attributes.

focusing on differences in the effect of candidate gender across treatments, holding the overall response bias constant (Ofosu, Seeberg, and Wahman 2026).

We also include an attitudinal measure of support for women’s political leadership, asking respondents what proportion of leadership roles should be held by women across four domains: heads of state, national legislators, national security officials, and military officers. Because this measure does not reference current levels of women’s representation, it allows consistent comparisons across contexts. Our outcome variable is the average response across the four domains. To capture a further dimension of support for women’s leadership, respondents also indicate their preferred leadership style on a sliding scale from “decisiveness and assertiveness” to “collaboration and communication.”<sup>18</sup> While these measures capture important dimensions of support for women’s leadership, they are prone to social desirability bias; accordingly, we rely on the conjoint as our primary dependent variable.

We also include several questions to directly assess secondary beliefs that may be shaped by information about women’s potential conscription. These include measures of (a) perceived threat, (b) prioritization of national security, and (c) a hawkish attitudes index (Eadeh and Chang 2020). Together, these questions allow us to assess whether our conscription treatment increases security salience and militarism, which we hypothesize would *reduce* support for women’s political leadership (H1-M1, -M2, and -M3). We also examine potential mechanisms related to gender attitudes including: perceptions of the fairness of military service burden, benevolent and hostile sexism, views of women’s competence in security, and beliefs that women undermine military performance or threaten masculine culture.<sup>19</sup>

The study then concludes by collecting demographic information from respondents and

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<sup>18</sup>To assess whether these preferences align with beliefs about men’s and women’s relative strengths, we include a follow-up item asking who performs better as politicians across the same two dimensions. Only 7% of respondents indicate that women perform better on decisiveness and assertiveness, whereas 38% report that women perform better on collaboration and communication. These patterns confirm that respondents associate women more strongly with collaborative leadership and men with assertive and decisive leadership.

<sup>19</sup>More discussion of the pre-registered hypotheses on gender attitude mechanisms is in Appendix D.1.

providing a short debrief (Appendix C.6). Respondents are also asked about their relative support for women’s conscription and whether they had heard about these debates before. The full survey instrument is available in Appendix C.

## Estimation Strategy

To test H1a and H1b—that exposure to women’s or men’s conscription news, relative to control, will decrease support for women’s leadership—we estimate an OLS regression on conjoint candidate evaluations, comparing each treatment condition to the control:

$$Y_{ip} = \alpha + \beta_1 F_{ip} + \beta_2 T_i^W + \beta_3 T_i^M + \beta_4 (F_{ip} \times T_i^W) + \beta_5 (F_{ip} \times T_i^M) + \mathbf{A}_{ip}\boldsymbol{\tau} + \mathbf{X}_i\boldsymbol{\theta} + \varepsilon_{ip}$$

where  $Y_{ip}$  denotes respondent  $i$ ’s evaluation of candidate profile  $p$  and  $F_{ip}$  indicates whether the hypothetical candidate is female.  $T_i^W$  and  $T_i^M$  indicate assignment to the women’s conscription and men’s conscription treatment conditions, respectively, with the control as the reference category. The interaction terms  $\beta_4$  and  $\beta_5$  capture how the effect of candidate gender varies across treatment conditions relative to control, and constitute our primary quantities of interest. The vector  $\mathbf{A}_{ip}$  includes the remaining randomized candidate attributes: ideology, age, political experience, and prior career.  $\mathbf{X}_i$  is a vector of individual-level controls that exhibited significant imbalance across treatments, and  $\varepsilon_{ip}$  is an idiosyncratic error term at the respondent-profile level. Because each respondent evaluates multiple profiles, standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

For attitudinal measures, we fit the following OLS regression:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i^W + \beta_2 T_i^M + \beta_3 Y_{i0} + \mathbf{X}_i\boldsymbol{\gamma} + \varepsilon_i$$

where  $Y_i$  is the post-treatment outcome for individual  $i$ .  $T_i^W$  and  $T_i^M$  indicate assignment to the women’s conscription and men’s conscription treatment conditions, respectively, with the control as the reference category. The coefficients  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  capture the average treatment effects relative to the control condition. Here, we include the pre-treatment measure  $Y_{i0}$  to improve precision, with  $\beta_3$  adjusting for baseline differences.  $\mathbf{X}_i$  is a vector of individual-level controls that exhibited imbalance across treatment conditions, and  $\varepsilon_i$  is an idiosyncratic error term. All mod-

els include country fixed effects to account for level differences across countries.<sup>20</sup> To test H2a and H2b—that exposure to women’s conscription news relative to men’s will increase/decrease support for women’s leadership—we re-specify the model with the men’s conscription condition as the reference category. We report heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors and use two-tailed hypothesis tests with of  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

To examine potential mechanisms, we adopt an intermediate outcomes approach, estimating the same regression models with secondary attitudes (i.e., proposed mechanisms) as the dependent variable.<sup>21</sup> If certain pathways are unaffected by treatment, they are unlikely to be primary causal mechanisms (Green, Ha, and Bullock 2010). While this approach is common as a plausibility probe, recent work has noted it relies on strong assumptions regarding homogeneous treatment effects (Green, Ha, and Bullock 2010) and monotonicity (Blackwell, Ma, and Opacic 2024); these tests are thus treated as plausibility probes rather than confirmatory tests.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, to test for potential differences across countries (H3), we include an interaction of Treatment Status  $\times$  Country. We run this model for each of our outcome measures (support for women’s leadership and underlying mechanisms). For these interaction models we use Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted p-values to account for multiple testing, as pre-registered.

## Results

Our final sample consists of 2,489 respondents who passed the attention check, of whom 50% are women and 50% are men, with a mean age of 41.2 years. Among men, 68.5% report prior military service, consistent with the male conscription systems in all four countries; among

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<sup>20</sup>Given the small number of countries, we do not rely on country-clustered standard errors.

<sup>21</sup>We include pre-treatment measures only for main attitudinal outcomes, not mechanisms, due to survey length constraints and respondent burden.

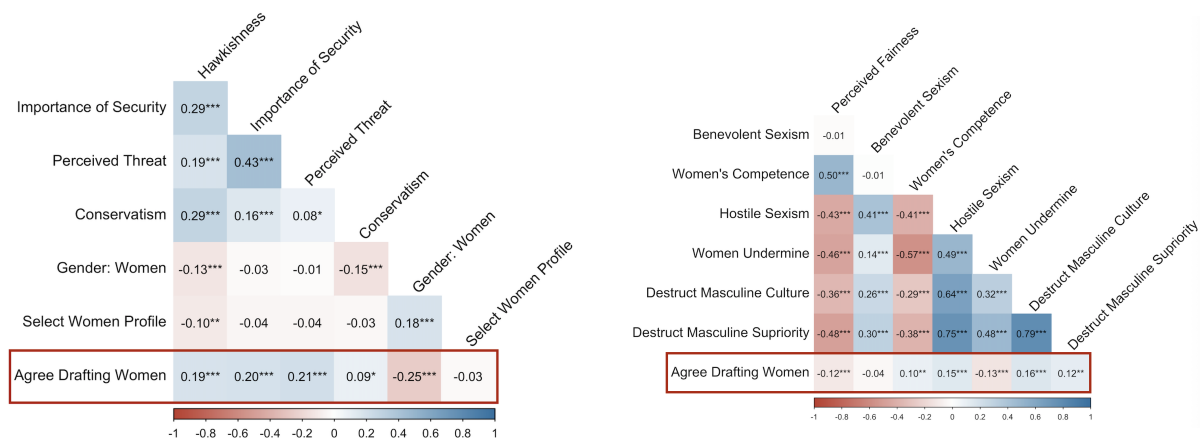
<sup>22</sup>In Appendix E.3, we explore heterogeneous responses to women’s conscription by gender attitudes, gender, and ideology—all shown to strongly impact support for women leaders—but find no significant differences across subgroups.

women, 4.2% report prior service.<sup>23</sup> Appendix A.2 reports detailed summary statistics including ideology, education, income, and religiosity. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: 824 to control, 832 to women’s conscription, and 833 to men’s conscription. Appendix Table G.1 confirms balance across conditions on key sociodemographic characteristics.

## General Attitudes toward Women’s Conscription & Political Leadership

A large share of respondents in the control condition reports prior exposure to public debates about drafting women: approximately 73% in Denmark, 63% in Finland, 50% in South Korea, and 58% in Taiwan. Awareness is even higher among politically interested respondents, with roughly 78-92% indicating prior exposure. Women’s conscription is thus already visible in public discourse across all four countries, underscoring the importance of understanding its political consequences and suggesting that our treatment constitutes a relatively weak but realistic intervention.

Figure 2: Correlation Matrix



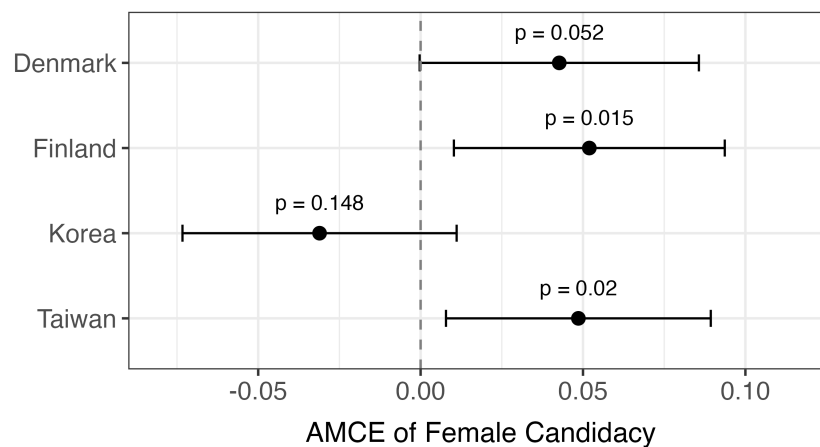
*Note:* Pairwise Pearson correlations among militarism, gender attitudes, support for women’s conscription, demographic characteristics, and preference for female candidates, estimated among control group respondents. Positive values indicate a positive association; negative values indicate a negative association. All variables are measured at the individual level.

We begin by examining pairwise correlations across key variables among control group respondents. As Figure 2 illustrates, agreement with women’s conscription is positively associ-

<sup>23</sup>Denmark began conscripting women on July 1, 2025 for individuals turning 18 after this date. Of the 15 women who reported military service, one identified as a conscript.

ated with militaristic attitudes—including hawkishness, prioritization of national security, and perceived threat—suggesting that individuals who prioritize security concerns are more open to including women in military service. However, notably, militarism is also highly correlated with ideological conservatism and lower support for women candidates. This means that the people who most support conscripting women are not necessarily those most likely to support women political candidates.

Figure 3: Baseline Preference for Female Candidates by Country



*Note:* This figure presents the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of female candidacy among control group respondents in each country. The AMCE captures the average difference in the probability of selecting a candidate associated with the candidate being female, holding all other attributes constant. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. All models control for candidate attributes (ideology, age, experience, and prior career) and task fixed effects.  $p$ -values are displayed above each estimate.

Figure 3 presents baseline preference for female candidates in the control group across the four countries. Respondents in Finland and Taiwan exhibit a significant positive preference for female candidates ( $p = 0.015$  and  $p = 0.002$ , respectively) and those in Denmark show a similar positive preference, just short of statistical significance ( $p = 0.052$ ). This is consistent with prior studies showing that respondents often overstate support for women candidates in conjoint settings (Clayton et al. 2020; Schwarz and Coppock 2022; Ofosu, Seeberg, and Wahman 2026), and may also reflect high levels of gender egalitarianism in these contexts, as Denmark and Finland rank among the most gender equal societies in the world and Taiwan has the highest share of women in parliament in Asia. In contrast, South Korean respondents show no such preference, if anything slightly favoring male candidates, though not significantly so ( $p = 0.148$ ).

We next examine baseline attitudes toward women’s conscription. In the control condition, support for women’s conscription is about evenly split in the sample, peaking in Denmark (where women’s conscription is already in effect) at approximately 79%, and somewhat lower in Finland (56%), South Korea (58%), and Taiwan (66%). Across all four countries, men are more likely than women to support drafting women. The gender gap is largest in South Korea, where men’s support exceeds women’s by more than 31 percentage points, followed by Taiwan and Finland (both 21 percentage points) and Denmark (14 percentage points).<sup>24</sup>

## Main Effects of Conscription Treatments

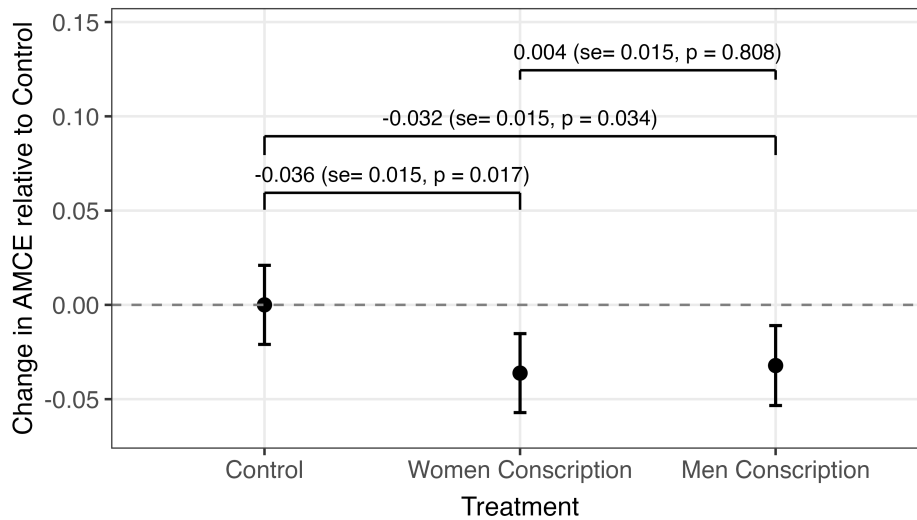
We now turn to our main findings. Figure 4 illustrates the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of female candidacy in each treatment condition, expressed as the difference from the control group baseline. Women candidates receive a modest preference advantage over otherwise identical male candidates in the control condition ( $\beta = 0.028, p = 0.008$ ). However, exposure to conscription information significantly reduces this advantage: the women’s conscription treatment decreases the female candidate AMCE by 3.6 percentage points ( $\beta = -0.036, p = 0.017$ ) and the men’s conscription treatment produces a similar reduction of 3.2 percentage points ( $\beta = -0.032, p = 0.034$ ). Thus, the women-candidate advantage observed in the control condition disappears when respondents are exposed to information on conscription. Indeed, the combined point estimates for the treatment conditions fall below zero ( $\beta = -0.008$  and  $-0.004$ , respectively), indicating a preference for male candidates. This strongly supports H1a and H1b: exposure to conscription—for both men and women—significantly reduces sup-

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<sup>24</sup>Respondents generally did not perceive support for conscription as coming from only one ideological camp within the country, though there was some cross-country variation: center attributions were most common in Denmark (54%) and Taiwan (65%). South Korea showed a mixed center-right attribution (46.5% center, 42.5% right), while Finnish respondents most often attributed the argument to the right (55.3%). These percentages are non-mutually exclusive, as respondents could select more than one ideological source.

port for women’s political leadership.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 4: The Effect of Women and Men’s Conscription on Female Candidate Selection



*Note:* Average marginal component effect (AMCE) of female candidacy in each treatment condition, expressed as a deviation from the control group estimate. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. Models control for candidate attributes (ideology, age, experience, and prior career), task fixed effects, and country fixed effects. Full regression results in Appendix Tables F.1 and F.10.

Interestingly, however, the two treatment conditions do not differ significantly from each other, indicating that the effect is *not* driven by whether the policy concerns women’s or men’s conscription. Instead, the results suggest that raising the possibility of expanded military obligations for *either* gender reduces the electoral advantage previously observed for women candidates. Thus, we do not find support for either H2a (that women’s conscription increases support for women’s leadership relative to men) or H2b (that it decreases support).

The conjoint results are particularly meaningful given that *attitudinal* measures showed no significant differences across treatment conditions. As Appendix Table F.2 shows, exposure to conscription information did not shift respondents’ stated preferences for women’s representation in political decision-making or their preference for feminine leadership traits. This dissociation between stated attitudes and revealed preferences suggests that conscription in-

<sup>25</sup>See also Table F.1. Full regression tables for all results are available in Appendix F. In Appendix G.4, we examine whether treatment effects on female candidate selection vary by other candidate attributes. Women candidates who are older appear somewhat more likely to be penalized, but effects do not otherwise vary systematically across candidate profiles.

formation activates a latent gender bias in leadership evaluation that does not surface in self-reported beliefs, but nonetheless shapes electoral behavior. That this bias is detectable only in the forced-choice setting further underscores the value of the forced choice task for uncovering gendered evaluations that conventional survey measures may obscure.

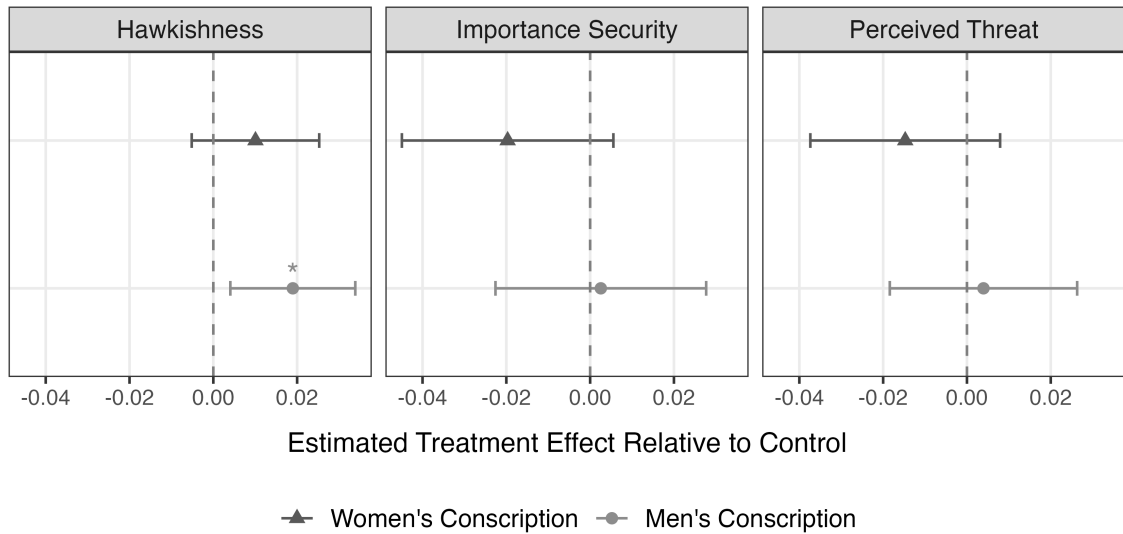
## **The Role of Militarism**

Our theory posits that conscription information reduces support for women’s leadership by increasing security salience and heightening militarism. We measure militarism using a hawkish attitudes index (Eadeh and Chang 2020) (*Hawkishness*), along with questions capturing how important national security is in shaping respondents’ vote choice (*Importance Security*) and how worried respondents are about national security threats facing their country (*Perceived Threat*) to capture security salience. The results in Figure 5 partially support our expectation, particularly with respect to militarism. The left panel shows that respondents exposed to the men’s conscription condition report significantly higher *Hawkishness* relative to the control group ( $\beta = 0.019, p = 0.013$ ). Although the effect of women’s conscription does not reach statistical significance, it moves in the same direction, with higher hawkishness observed in the women’s conscription condition compared to the control ( $\beta = 0.010, p = 0.195$ ).<sup>26</sup> The change in hawkishness after treatment is particularly notable given that we find little evidence that conscription treatments alter gender attitudes (Appendix Table F.4), even though our treatment wording purposefully highlighted women’s fighting capacity and de-emphasized security threats.

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<sup>26</sup>See also Table F.3.

Figure 5: Treatment Effects on Militarism



*Note:* This figure reports OLS regression results with each militarism measure as a dependent variable. Three specifications are estimated for each outcome: a women’s conscription model and a men’s conscription model, each with the control group as the reference category. All models include country fixed effects. Outcome measures are rescaled to 0-1 prior to analysis. Full regression results are reported in Table F.3 in the Appendix.

By contrast, respondents’ perceived importance of national security in electoral decision-making (center panel in Figure 5) and level of perceived threat (right panel in Figure 5) does not significantly shift. For women’s conscription, the effect actually trends negative, which may reflect respondents’ opposition to the idea of conscripting women or, perhaps, the belief that women’s conscription reduces security threats. Nonetheless, because these results are not statistically significant, we avoid over-interpreting the negative direction.

Taken together, these results provide support for the militarism mechanism, with hawkish attitudes (H1M3) emerging as the particular dimension most consistently heightened by the conscription treatments rather than national security prioritization (H1M2) or perceived threat (H1M1).

### Comparing Women’s and Men’s Conscription

As we discuss above, the conjoint experiment reveals no significant difference in the probability of selecting female candidates between respondents exposed to the women’s conscription treatment and those exposed to the men’s conscription treatment (see Figure 4). While respondents

informed about women’s conscription showed a slightly lower probability of selecting female candidates, the difference is negligible in magnitude and statistically indistinguishable from zero ( $\beta = 0.004, p = 0.808$ ).<sup>27</sup> As shown in Appendix Table F.11, this same pattern appears in the attitudinal measures where we see no significant difference between the two conditions both in support for women’s political representation and their preference for feminine leadership traits.

Respondents exposed to the women’s conscription treatment also did not differ from those exposed to the men’s conscription treatment on their gender attitudes (Table 1). All estimates across both positive (fairness, benevolent sexism, and women’s competence) and negative gender mechanisms (hostile sexism, perceptions that women undermine the military, and destructive masculinity) are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero.<sup>28</sup>

Table 1: Treatment Effects on Gender Attitude Variables

	Fairness	Benevolent sexism	Hostile sexism	Women’s competence	Undermine performance	Destruct culture	Destruct superiority
Women’s Conscript.	−0.011 (0.009)	0.007 (0.009)	−0.002 (0.012)	−0.002 (0.008)	−0.005 (0.009)	−0.007 (0.011)	−0.013 (0.011)
Num.Obs.	1635	1587	1604	1623	1611	1572	1584
R2	0.100	0.036	0.013	0.086	0.025	0.014	0.011
R2 Adj.	0.098	0.033	0.011	0.084	0.022	0.011	0.008

<sup>1</sup> *Signif. Codes:* \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

<sup>2</sup> *Note:* OLS regression results with each mechanism measure as the dependent variable. The reference category is the men’s conscription treatment. All models include country fixed effects. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

One potential explanation for these null results is that the treatment generates offsetting responses across individuals. To assess this possibility, we examine heterogeneous treatment effects by gender, pre-treatment sexist attitudes, and political ideology, which are among the strongest predictors of gender attitudes. As shown in Appendix E.3, we find no evidence of heterogeneity along any of these dimensions. We therefore rule out the possibility that the null results are driven by offsetting effects across subgroups.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>See also Table F.10.

<sup>28</sup>Militarism also shows no differences across these two conditions. See Table F.12.

<sup>29</sup>In Appendix E, we present additional diagnostics confirming the robustness of the null result: the effect remains non-significant under a 90% confidence interval ( $\beta = -0.004$ , 90%

We further verify that the null result between the two conscription treatments reflects a true absence of meaningful differences rather than insufficient power or heterogeneous responses. Negligible effect and equivalence tests confirm the two treatments are statistically equivalent, and the 95% confidence interval for the interaction term excludes effects as large as the main treatment effect.<sup>30</sup>

Together, these results suggest that it is conscription salience—not the gender of those being drafted—that drives the reduction in support for female candidates. Both treatments produce similarly heightened hawkishness and leave gender attitudes unchanged, indicating that the electoral penalty women candidates face is a consequence of militarism rather than any shift in how respondents view women specifically.

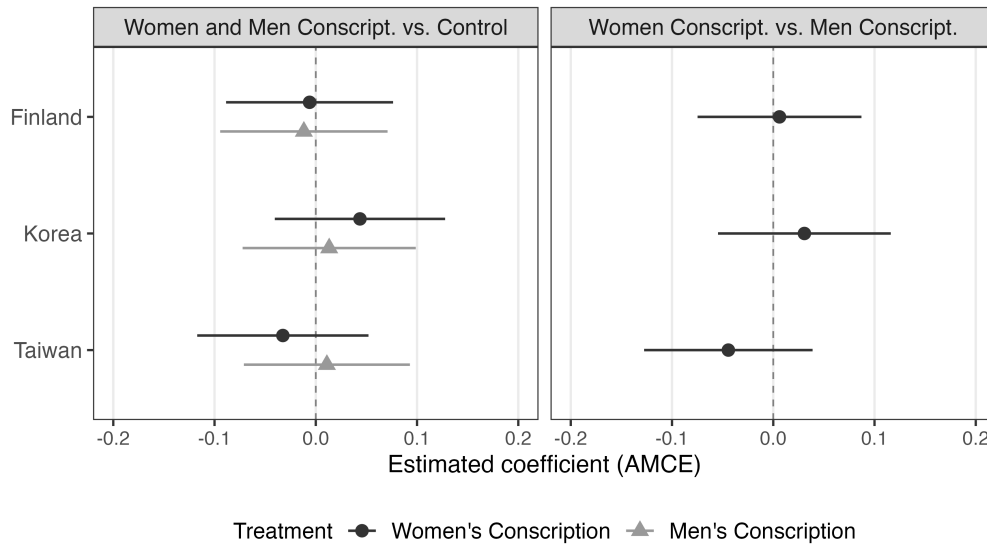
### **Treatment Effects across Countries**

Finally, we examine potential cross-national differences. To assess cross-national variation, we incorporate a three-way interaction between female candidacy, treatment condition, and country, with Denmark as the reference category. As shown in Figure 6, none of the interaction terms reach significance before or after p-value correction, suggesting the reduction in support for female candidates is not driven by any particular national context, consistent with H3. Appendix F.4 confirms this pattern across attitudinal and mechanism outcomes. The only exception is that women’s conscription significantly increased benevolent sexism among Finnish respondents relative to the men’s conscription treatment and the Danish reference group.

CI = [-0.029, 0.021]); a TOST equivalence test places it within a negligible range ( $\pm 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.013$  upper;  $p = 0.042$  lower); and the 95% confidence interval ([-0.033, 0.026]) excludes effects as large as the main treatment effect, suggesting that the null is unlikely to be driven by insufficient statistical power.

<sup>30</sup>See Appendix E.1 for full details.

Figure 6: Cross-national Similarities in Treatment Effects on Female Candidate Selection



*Note:* Three-way interaction between female candidacy, treatment condition, and country, testing whether treatment effects on female candidate selection differ across countries. Denmark is the reference category; interaction terms for Finland, Korea, and Taiwan indicate whether their treatment effects differ significantly from Denmark's. Standard errors clustered by respondent (CR2). Full results in Appendix Table F.5.

The absence of meaningful cross-national heterogeneity indicates that the mechanisms underlying reduced support for female candidates operate similarly across varied political environments and are not contingent on country-specific factors such as party systems, gender norms, or baseline threat perceptions, reinforcing the broad scope of our findings.

## Discussion

Our findings reveal that exposure to conscription debates, whether about men *or* women, significantly reduces public support for women political candidates. This effect is consistent across four countries with distinct political cultures, security environments, and gender egalitarianism, and operates primarily through heightened militarism rather than any shift in underlying gender attitudes. Notably, the gender of those being conscripted does not seem to have an independent effect: women's and men's conscription produce statistically indistinguishable effects, suggesting that it is the salience of military mobilization itself, not symbolic recognition of women's civic contribution, that shapes how citizens evaluate women's fitness for political leadership.

These results also speak to an underexamined stage of the policy process. Existing research

focuses on the downstream effects of enacted policies, examining how military service shapes veterans' political trajectories or how women's inclusion in the military alters gender egalitarian attitudes (Caverley and Krupnikov 2025; Dahl, Kotsadam, and Rooth 2021; Finseraas et al. 2016). While valuable, this does not capture how public opinion forms prior to policy adoption. Conscription policies are contested in the public sphere long before implementation, exposing broad audiences to militarized discourse well before any law is passed. As our data indicate, a majority of respondents report prior exposure to debates about drafting women. Our study shifts attention to this earlier stage, showing that conscription debate itself can carry significant negative consequences for how citizens evaluate women's political leadership.

This study advances theoretical and empirical understanding of how gendered military policies influence public perceptions of women's political leadership. Although women's conscription may seem to offer a pathway to improving women's status, no cross-national study has yet tested that assumption across diverse geopolitical settings. Our research fills this gap with two key strengths. First, we adopt an experimental approach that sidesteps the endogeneity concerns plaguing observational analyses: governments may implement gender-neutral conscription in response to demographic decline, normative commitments to equality, or rising security threats, making it difficult to determine whether policy shifts public opinion or merely reflects preexisting conditions. By exogenously varying exposure to conscription debates, our design isolates the causal impact on attitudes toward women's leadership. Second, we uncover the mechanisms driving preferences against women leaders—pointing to militarism rather than any specific shift in gender attitudes—which is crucial for understanding why gender-equal conscription policies can engender *unequal* political consequences.

We are nevertheless cautious about the scope of what our experiment can reveal. Our design cannot test two long-term pathways through which women's conscription might enhance support for women's leadership. The first involves an increase in women with direct military experience who later pursue political office (Duckworth 2021). Studies show that women with veteran status are more likely to be viewed as strong candidates (Caverley and Krupnikov 2025), and conscription may over time generate a greater supply of women leaders with military backgrounds. The second involves men's longer-term exposure to female peers in

military service, which could gradually increase support for gender integration in civic life (Dahl, Kotsadam, and Rooth 2021; Finseraas et al. 2016), a pattern that has been observed in post-military racial integration (Fischer, Lundquist, and Vachon 2016). These mechanisms are fundamentally longitudinal and cannot be captured by short-term information exposure. Even long-term, however, the current evidence is mixed: women who have served in combat roles often continue to be identified primarily as women rather than soldiers (Best, Hunter, and Thomas 2021; Thomas and Hunter 2019), and military service may do little to shift longer-term gender attitudes (Dahl, Kotsadam, and Rooth 2021), improve perceptions of women’s authority on national security (Caverley and Krupnikov 2025) or heighten electoral support for women candidates (Schroeder, Best, and Teigen 2023).

Our findings ultimately point to an important tradeoff. Even if long-term gains are possible, the short-term effects of introducing or advocating for women’s conscription are not uniformly positive. Rather, this evidence suggests their conscription can *reduce* support for women’s political leadership. Women’s inclusion in the military may be normatively and institutionally valuable for many reasons beyond its effects on public support for women’s leadership. Nevertheless, this work underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of women’s military service: gender-equal conscription, while symbolically important, does not automatically translate into broader public support for women’s leadership. Policymakers should therefore approach such reforms with careful attention to how they are perceived across different segments of the public and to the potential for unintended consequences for women’s political representation.<sup>31</sup>

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