

RALLYING-ROUND-DEMOCRACY: WARTIME PANEL SURVEY FINDINGS IN UKRAINE¹

Mikhail Alexseev, San Diego State University

Serhii Dembitskyi, Ukraine National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology

Henry E. Hale, George Washington University

Can Ukraine survive the ongoing Russian aggression not only as a nation, but as a democracy? How do different kinds of war exposure and related circumstances and perceptions affect democracy support among individuals as the war unfolds? Does war affect social support for democratic values, institutions, leaders and international alliances differently? These questions are pertinent to both Ukraine's future and our fundamental understanding of the origins and evolution of political systems. Ukraine's democratic resilience—evidenced by a surge of public support for democracy as a political system and of trust in democratic institutions since Russia's mass invasion in February 2022 (Alexseev and Dembitskyi 2022; Onuch 2022)—showed that public support for democracy may increase, and not decline in states experiencing armed conflict, as a significant body of literature suggests. Notably, Ukraine's democratic resilience surged under conditions that previous studies found related to diminishing democracy support—namely, personal loss and trauma; economic hardship and social polarization; incentives for rule-breaking; and diminution of intergroup tolerance (Dyrstad 2013; Walter 2015; Tir and Singh 2015).

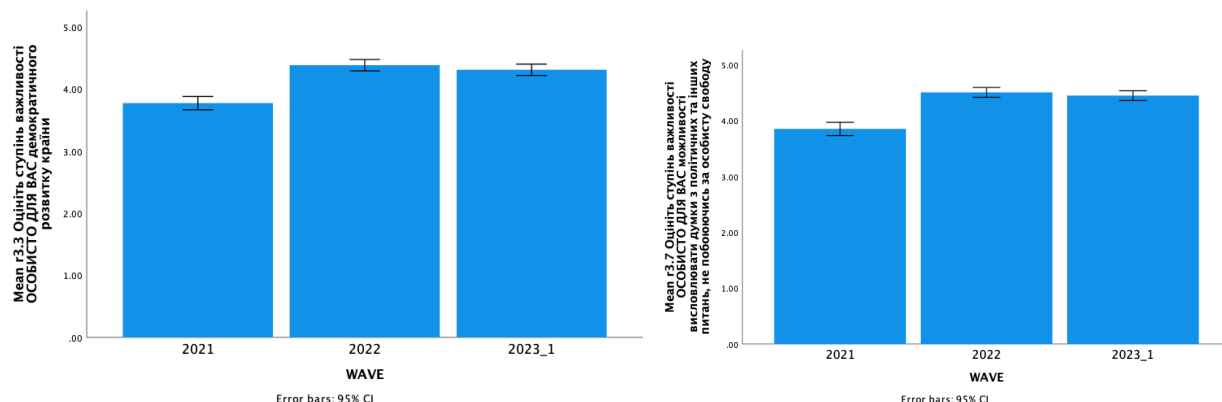
And yet, students of war effects on democracy could still ask whether the 2022 survey findings in Ukraine reflected the special case of immediate social mobilization under a massive attack and were conducted at the time of rising optimism, as the Russian attempt to capture Kyiv was repelled, the Russian forces were being pushed out of Ukraine's north, Russia's Black Sea Fleet flagship was sunk, and the U.S. and its allies increased military assistance and imposed sweeping economic sanctions on Russia. By late 2022, however, the frontlines stabilized, and Ukraine was on the defensive again in the East, fighting grinding battles against the regrouped Russian forces that leveraged Russia's massive superiority in population, economic resources, and military capabilities. How would democracy support fare amidst the exhausting war of attrition?

We now have new survey data showing trends in democracy support in Ukraine from 2021 through mid-2023 and we offer some analysis of what may explain them.

TRENDS

1. Support for democratic values (democracy importance as a political system and free speech importance) has stayed high, with small declines not being statistically significant (Fig. 1)

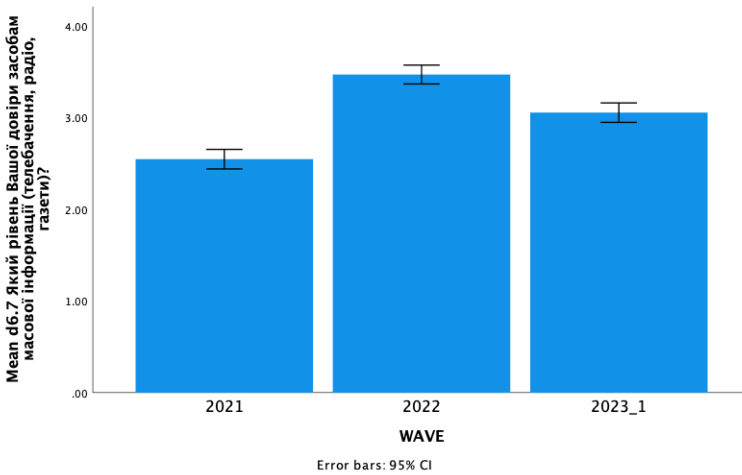
Fig. 1.



¹ Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2, 2023, Los Angeles. Research presented here was made possible by the National Science Foundation RAPID program (SES 2309901)

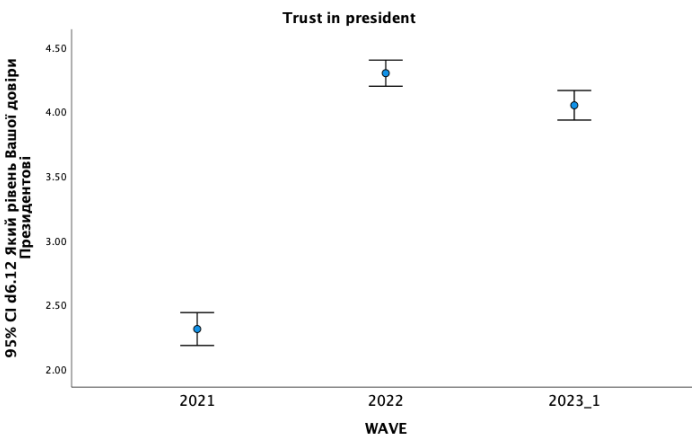
- Trust in democratic institutions showed a statistically significant decline although the levels of trust are still significantly higher than before Russia's full-scale invasion, as illustrated by trust in the media (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2.



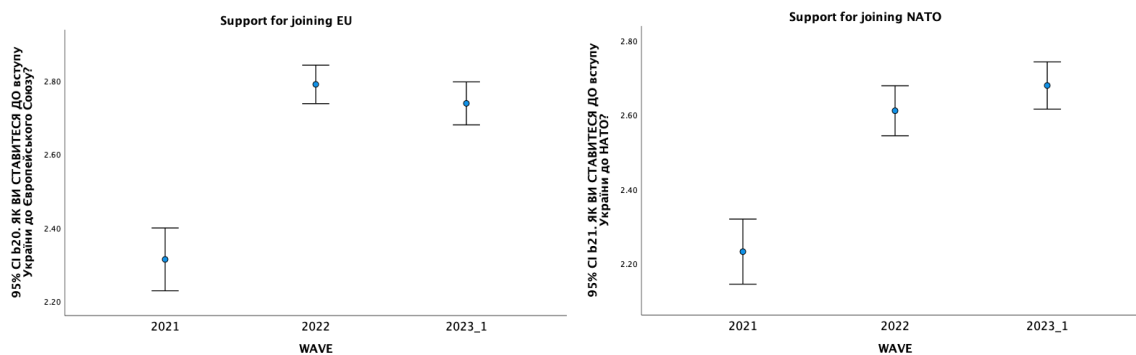
- Trust in the president (and Zelensky's rating) dropped slightly, and while statistically significant, remained exceptionally high substantively.

Fig. 3.



- Support for EU and NATO membership showed no significant change from 2022.

Fig. 4.



EXPLANATIONS

We ran mixed linear models (MLL) with the panel survey data of the same respondents polled in November 2021, June-July 2022 and June 2023 (N=329) in surveys of Ukraine National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology [We also conducted a separate survey of 869 respondents in June 2023 and the distributions of responses on key measures closely approximates that in the third (2023) of the panel survey [graphs available], while the 2022 survey (N=475) closely matched the sociodemographic characteristics of the original (2021) baseline national monitoring survey (N=1,800). We used this model to estimate predictors of democracy support controlling for both between- and within-subject effects. Our principal variable of interest was war effects over time (WAR), as it represented the impact of two distinct war phases: the initial response (Feb-Jul 2022) and most of the prolonged grinding war (Nov 2022 – Jun 2023). We also estimated the impacts of war loss, trauma, prior-to-the-war consumption of news from Russia, Ukraine's civic national identity, language use, region; and we controlled for age, income, and gender. Our dependent variables are democracy importance and free speech importance, trust in the media, parliament and president (all on the 5-point Likert scale), and support for EU and NATO membership (on a 3-point Likert scale).

Test 1: MLL 2021-2023 (three repeated measures) (Tables 1-3): war onset & duration effect.

- (i) We find that the initial “rallying” burst for democracy has by and large endured, with our WAR variable having statistically significant effects on all indicators, except for trust in Rada (parliament)—indicating mounting dissatisfaction with this body at war time (at the very least compared to the presidency and the media).
- (ii) We also find that mobilization of national identity correlates significantly with democracy support – Ukrainian language use was a highly significant predictor of all outcome variables and respondents’ primary identification as Ukrainian citizens (from a list of several options) had a significant effect on democracy and free speech importance, as well as on trust in the president and support for EU and NATO membership.
- (iii) Contrary to earlier findings in the former Yugoslavia, we find that respondents who reported personal loss from the war (business, job, housing, as well as family members and friends killed, wounded, or displaced) were significantly more likely to see democracy and free speech as important and to support EU & NATO membership. This is an important finding, indicating that Russia’s strategy of bombing Ukraine into disillusion with democratic values and Euro-Atlantic aspirations has for the most part backfired.
- (iv) Interestingly, we see that in regions more directly affected by the war (Center and East) trust in institutions, notably the Rada, holds up, while in the West trust in Rada declined at statistically significant levels.
- (v) One alarming finding, indicating long-term negative effects of Russian media, consistent with prior research (Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018), was that respondents who listed Russia-based media as one of their two main news sources in November

2021 were significantly less likely than others to view democracy as important and to support Ukraine's bid for the EU and NATO.

Table 1. **Democracy Support (2021-2023)**

	DEMOCRACY IMPORTANCE			FREE SPEECH IMPORTANCE		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	0.172	0.039	<.001	0.203	0.041	<.001
AGE (Older, LN)	0.156	0.102	0.127	-0.048	0.104	0.647
Income	0.036	0.028	0.193	0.062	0.029	0.03
Trauma (nightmares)	-0.022	0.065	0.738	0.001	0.068	0.994
Language Ukrainian	0.223	0.078	0.004	0.193	0.081	0.018
Male	0.053	0.07	0.451	0.021	0.071	0.764
War Loss	0.232	0.065	<.001	0.213	0.067	0.002
Civic Identity	0.22	0.067	0.001	0.177	0.07	0.012
Russian Media2021	-0.613	0.132	<.001	-0.183	0.134	0.173
WEST2021	0.042	0.075	0.575	-0.001	0.077	0.989
CENTER2021	0.02	0.075	0.788	-0.036	0.076	0.634
EAST2021	0.05	0.09	0.583	0.014	0.092	0.881

Table 2. **Trust in Institutions (2021-2023)**

	TRUST MEDIA			TRUST RADA			TRUST PRESIDENT		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	0.158	0.047	<.001	0.086	0.051	0.093	0.734	0.053	<.001
AGE (Older, LN)	0.168	0.114	0.14	-0.241	0.13	0.064	-0.041	0.129	0.75
Income	-0.024	0.032	0.451	0.011	0.036	0.75	0.035	0.037	0.346
Trauma (nightmares)	0.122	0.077	0.115	0.031	0.085	0.713	0.057	0.087	0.516
Language Ukrainian	0.351	0.092	<.001	0.331	0.102	0.001	0.369	0.104	<.001
Male	0.036	0.078	0.64	-0.088	0.089	0.326	-0.048	0.089	0.593
War Loss	0.01	0.076	0.892	0.127	0.084	0.133	0.124	0.086	0.152
Civic Identity	0.137	0.08	0.087	0.162	0.088	0.065	0.326	0.091	<.001
Russian Media2021	-0.015	0.147	0.921	-0.032	0.168	0.847	-0.296	0.168	0.078
WEST2021	-0.068	0.084	0.418	-0.067	0.096	0.49	-0.072	0.096	0.451
CENTER2021	0.022	0.083	0.794	0.253	0.095	0.008	0.274	0.095	0.004
EAST2021	0.038	0.1	0.707	0.288	0.115	0.013	0.367	0.114	0.001

Table 3. **Support for Joining Euro-Atlantic Institutions (2021-2023)**

	EU			NATO		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	0.1	0.026	<.001	0.111	0.027	<.001
AGE (Older, LN)	0.154	0.066	0.021	0.118	0.075	0.116
Income	0.072	0.018	<.001	0.046	0.02	0.019
Trauma (nightmares)	0.033	0.044	0.448	-0.005	0.046	0.912
Language Ukrainian	0.336	0.052	<.001	0.363	0.055	<.001
Male	0.081	0.045	0.077	0.074	0.051	0.149
War Loss	0.178	0.043	<.001	0.212	0.046	<.001
Civic Identity	0.172	0.045	<.001	0.171	0.048	<.001
Russian Media2021	-0.454	0.086	<.001	-0.53	0.097	<.001
WEST2021	-0.005	0.049	0.926	0.001	0.056	0.983
CENTER2021	0.015	0.049	0.765	-0.029	0.055	0.593
EAST2021	0.054	0.059	0.36	-0.001	0.066	0.994

Test 2: MLL 2022-2023 (two repeated measures): war duration effect only (Tables 4-6).

- (i) Here we find that war duration (WAR) had no significant effect on support for democracy as a system and for free speech, although it had a statistically significant and sizeable negative effect on trust in the media, Rada, and the president, and a slight negative effect on support for joining the EU.
- (ii) Countervailing war effects was identity mobilization (Ukrainian language use was significantly related to six out of seven measures), and Ukrainian civic identity undergirded trust in the president.
- (iii) Prewar use of Russian news sources continued to have negative effects, with significant coefficients for democracy importance, trust in the president, and support for EU and NATO.
- (iv) The test also confirmed the impact of region, with residency in the Center and the East associated with stronger trust in the Rada and the president.
- (v) Here we also observe the importance of maintaining economic well-being at war time, with income level significantly related to free speech importance, trust in the president and support for the EU.

Table 4. Democracy Support (2022-2023)

	DEMOCRACY IMPORTANCE			FREE SPEECH IMPORTANCE		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	-0.072	0.052	0.166	-0.065	0.05	0.195
AGE (Older, LN)	0.21	0.115	0.068	-0.004	0.111	0.972
Income	0.054	0.032	0.091	0.089	0.031	0.004
Trauma (nightmares)	-0.091	0.063	0.153	-0.085	0.061	0.163
Language Ukrainian	0.2	0.107	0.061	0.212	0.102	0.039
Male	0	0.079	0.995	-0.059	0.076	0.437
War Loss	0.141	0.074	0.056	0.119	0.071	0.094
Civic Identity	0.096	0.083	0.248	0.032	0.08	0.69
Russian Media2021	-0.474	0.148	0.002	-0.097	0.143	0.5
WEST2021	0.037	0.085	0.665	0.033	0.082	0.692
CENTER2021	0.119	0.083	0.154	0.093	0.081	0.247
EAST2021	0.064	0.101	0.525	0.021	0.098	0.834

Table 5. Trust in Institutions (2022-2023)

	MEDIA			RADA			PRESIDENT		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	-0.414	0.058	<.001	-0.53	0.071	<.001	-0.263	0.051	<.001
AGE (Older, LN)	0.202	0.135	0.135	-0.287	0.159	0.071	0.14	0.143	0.328
Income	-0.001	0.037	0.975	0.003	0.044	0.947	0.082	0.035	0.02
Trauma (nightmares)	0.129	0.072	0.073	-0.001	0.087	0.987	0.045	0.066	0.498
Language Ukrainian	0.32	0.122	0.009	0.385	0.147	0.009	0.241	0.116	0.038
Male	0.056	0.093	0.545	-0.077	0.109	0.482	-0.001	0.099	0.99
War Loss	-0.141	0.084	0.096	0.037	0.101	0.713	-0.065	0.079	0.413
Civic Identity	0.07	0.095	0.459	0.102	0.114	0.372	0.4	0.088	<.001
Russian Media2021	0.058	0.175	0.738	-0.049	0.205	0.812	-0.362	0.186	0.052
WEST2021	-0.046	0.1	0.648	-0.095	0.118	0.418	-0.105	0.107	0.326
CENTER2021	0.127	0.098	0.196	0.301	0.115	0.009	0.228	0.104	0.03
EAST2021	0.032	0.119	0.786	0.273	0.14	0.051	0.321	0.126	0.011

Table 6. **Support for Joining Euro-Atlantic Institutions (2021-2023)**

	EU			NATO		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	-0.059	0.03	0.051	0.057	0.035	0.102
AGE (Older, LN)	0.115	0.069	0.094	0.127	0.081	0.12
Income	0.038	0.019	0.043	0.033	0.022	0.137
Trauma (nightmares)	-0.013	0.037	0.719	-0.039	0.043	0.372
Language Ukrainian	0.259	0.063	<.001	0.318	0.073	<.001
Male	0.106	0.047	0.025	0.125	0.056	0.027
War Loss	0.093	0.043	0.032	0.167	0.051	0.001
Civic Identity	0.049	0.049	0.311	0.084	0.057	0.139
Russian Media2021	-0.329	0.089	<.001	-0.363	0.105	<.001
WEST2021	0.043	0.051	0.402	0.05	0.061	0.413
CENTER2021	0.095	0.05	0.057	0.033	0.059	0.581
EAST2021	0.084	0.06	0.164	-0.008	0.072	0.906

Test 3: OLS for 2023 sample (N=869): between-subject effects, ongoing war (Table 7).

- (i) These tests confirmed the findings on wartime resilience, showing that respondents who experienced wartime personal loss were significantly more likely to view democracy and free speech as important as well as to support NATO membership.
- (ii) Ukrainian language use was a significant predictor of trust in the media and support for the EU and NATO.
- (iii) In probably the most interesting finding, belief in Ukraine's victory in the war was the most robust predictor, except for free speech importance.
- (iv) One intriguing finding calling for careful consideration is that projecting that the war would last less time correlated significantly with trust in the media, the Rada, the presidency, and support for the EU. One way to interpret it is that respondents who believed the war would last longer had less faith in the capacity of Ukrainian institutions to rise to the challenge and in Ukraine's EU membership prospects. But another way to interpret it, is that those respondents who felt the institutions were trustworthy and the EU could embrace Ukraine, felt the war would end sooner.

Table 7. **Democracy, Trust, and Alliance Support (2023)**

	Democracy	Free Speech	Media	Rada	President	EU	NATO
AGE (Older, LN)	***		***	*		*	
Male			**		*		*
Income							
Language Ukrainian			***			***	***
Trauma							
War Loss	***	**					*
Victory	*		**	*	***	***	***
War Long			***	***	***	*	
Civic Identity							
WEST2021						**	*
CENTER2021							
EAST2021					*		

Note: *** ($p < .001$), ** ($p < .01$), * ($p < .05$); faint shades mark p around 0.056-0.057.

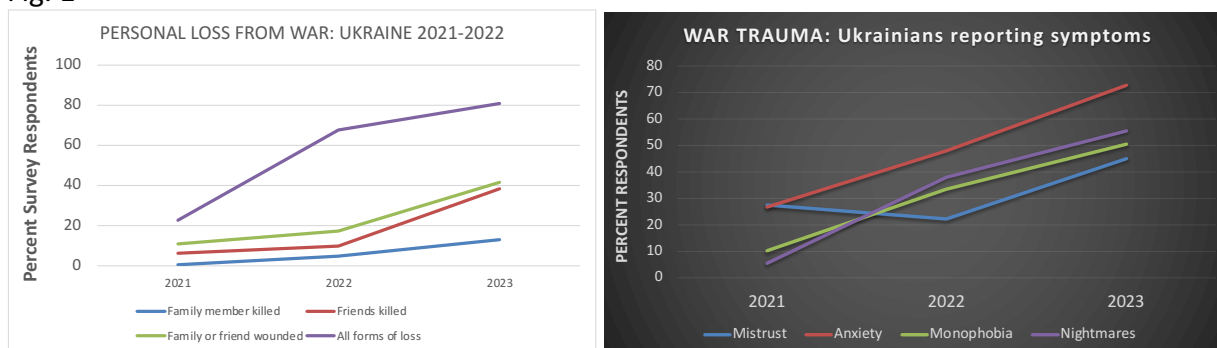
- (v) We had no measure for Russian media use, but a measure of ethnic distance (on the Bogardus scale) was not significant in robustness checks.

IMPLICATIONS & SIGNIFICANCE

With respect to the literature, our findings indicate that war effects on democracy support are significantly more complex than one might conclude based on studies showing either how war undermines democracy (Rasler and Thompson 2004; Davis and Silver 2004; Janoff-Bulman 1992; Hetherington and Suhay 2011) or how war mobilization bolsters democratic resilience (Skocpol 2002; Gaines 2002; Woods 2011; Berinsky 2009). They are context/time-contingent and relational.

Ukraine is in a long, brutal war. Our survey data shows deep and widespread sense of personal loss and trauma (Fig. 1). These are exactly the effects typically associated with diminution of democracy support (Dyrstad 2013). Our findings indicate that on democracy importance as a political system--the indicator most relevant to democracy survival as shown in large-N multiyear studies (Claassen 2020)—the initial “rallying” held up through unimaginable suffering and deprivations.

Fig. 1



This finding also indicates that the attrition of trust in the media and the parliament is likely to reflect not necessarily the ebbing of democratic commitment, but the increase in public demands for institutions to perform better and to facilitate Ukraine’s war victory (understood by over 80 percent of respondents as restoring Ukraine’s sovereignty within the 1991 borders).

It also appears that as the war persisted, the charge it gave to national identity has continued to boost support for democracy and Euro-Atlantic orientation, as evidenced in the findings on Ukrainian language use’s association with outcome variables (descriptively, we noted the rise in the number of respondents opting to speak Ukrainian in their interviews).

REFERENCES

- Alexseev, Mikhail A., and Serhii Dembitskyi. 2022. "Striking Back at the Empire: Ukrainians Converge on Values and National Belonging." *Program on New Approaches to Research on Security (PONARS Eurasia) Policy Memo No. 793*.
<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/striking-back-at-the-empire-ukrainians-converge-on-values-and-national-belonging/>.
- Berinsky, Adam J. 2009. *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Claassen, Christopher. 2020. "Does Public Support Help Democracy Survive?". *American Journal of Political Science* 64: 118-34.
- Davis, Darren W. , and Brian D. Silver. 2004. "Civil Liberties Vs. Security: Public Opinion in the Context of the Terrorist Attacks on America." *American Journal of Political Science* 48: 28–46.
- Dyrstad, Karin. 2013. "Does Civil War Breed Authoritarian Values? An Empirical Study of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Croatia." *Democratization* 20: 1219-42.
- Gaines, Brian J. 2002. "Where's the Rally? Approval and Trust of the President, Cabinet, Congress, and Government since September 11." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35: 531-36.
- Hetherington, Marc, and Elizabeth Suhay. 2011. "Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans' Support for the War on Terror." *American Journal of Political Science* 55: 546-60.
- Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. 1992. *Shattered Assumptions: Toward a New Psychology of Trauma*. New York: Free Press.
- Onuch, Olga. 2022. "Why Ukrainians Are Rallying around Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 33: 37-46.
- Peisakhin, Leonid, and Arturas Rozenas. 2018. "Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine." *American Journal of Political Science (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)* 62: 535-50.
- Rasler, Karen, and William R. Thompson. 2004. "The Democratic Peace and a Sequential, Reciprocal, Causal Arrow Hypothesis." *Comparative Political Studies* 37: 879-908.
- Skocpol, Theda. 2002. "Will 9/11 and the War on Terror Revitalize American Civic Democracy?". *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35: 537-40.
- Tir, Jaroslav, and Shane P. Singh. 2015. "Get Off My Lawn: Territorial Civil Wars and Subsequent Social Intolerance in the Public." *Journal of Peace Research* 52: 478-91.
- Walter, Barbara. 2015. "Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59: 1242-72.
- Woods, Joshua. 2011. "The 9/11 Effect: Toward a Social Science of the Terrorist Threat." *The Social Science Journal* 48: 213-33.