

Who Rallies around the President when a Country is Invaded?

A Panel Study of Zelensky's Approval in Ukraine 2021-22¹

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We know international hostilities frequently trigger rallying-around-the-flag, but comparatively little is known about who precisely rallies. In this study, we address the phenomenon of wartime rallying in a country targeted for foreign aggression by examining the case of Ukraine. In February 2022, the Russian Federation launched an all-out invasion of this country, catalyzing widely documented rallying-around-the-flag behavior among its citizens, including a surge in support for their president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. We study this behavior through a nationally representative multi-wave panel survey with a pre-event baseline interview taken in November 2021 and follow-up interviews in 2022. While two additional waves have been conducted in 2023, we focus here predominantly on the initial rally as of 2022 and leave the analysis of the 2023 data (which indicate a gradual ebbing of the rally) to future analysis in part because the latter data have only recently arrived.

While this analysis is only our very first initial cut, made before we were able to compile all the data we will eventually use, some preliminary findings emerge. Perhaps most evident is that Ukraine's 2022 rally was very broad and deep, sweeping up large swaths of the population across essentially all demographics, identity categories, views, and experiences. Some patterns nevertheless stand out. Zelensky drew new supporters disproportionately from Ukraine's Western regions, the less well-off, women, and people who in 2021 did not support EU integration. Remaining persistent critics of Zelensky were people from the southeast, older people, those with higher education, men, and individuals who (after the war started) expected the war to be protracted. In conclusion, we discuss some initial insights based on the 2023 data as well as the repeated measures analysis to suggest some ways to contextualize these findings and flesh out our contributions to theory.

Data

The data come from a rare panel survey that relatively tightly spans a rally-generating event, Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion (FSI) of Ukraine. The original survey was a large-scale (N=1,800) longitudinal social survey carried out in November 2021 by the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology (UNASIS), one of Ukraine's original and leading academic institutions regularly conducting surveys of public opinion in the country. The sample was drawn through a random nationwide selection of phone numbers, giving us something very close to a true random sample of the population in the country's unoccupied territories. This latter claim, of course, must be qualified with the important caveat that Ukraine

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has been in considerable social turmoil since 2014, including the occupation of considerable portions of its eastern and southern territory. We could not interview people in the occupied territories, so all references herein to percentages “of Ukraine’s population” should be understood to mean that population that was reachable in areas under Kyiv’s control.

After the FSI, funding was obtained to reinterview the same respondents by the same method as soon as possible, with the second wave of the survey taking place in July 2022, about five months after the world-changing attack. A total of 482 of the original 2021 respondents were successfully reinterviewed, with checks indicating no significant biases in sample attrition despite the massive upheaval, resulting in an albeit smaller sample that was still solidly representative of the country as a whole. In 2023, we conducted two more waves of the survey and carried out a “refresh” survey along with Wave 3 that included a full new nationally representative sample against which we could study attrition patterns in our ongoing panel and add to the panel so as to obtain a new basis for studying trends after this time. In the study reported in this paper, we examine Waves 1 and 2 except where otherwise noted.

Contours of the Rally

While our survey includes multiple questions we will ultimately use to study the rally, here we report results from arguably the most intuitively straightforward measure, which involves job approval ratings for President Volodymyr Zelensky. Respondents were asked to rate their level of approval of his performance as president using a 10-point scale, where 10 represented the highest level of approval and 1 the lowest. From this, we create a binary approval variable coded 1 for respondents giving an answer higher than 5 and coded 0 for all others.

Since this same measure was asked in all survey waves, we identify “ralliers” as people who went from a position of non-support in 2021 (as captured in our binary variable) to a position of support in 2022. To understand ralliers in the context of other patterns of behavior, we also coded the following categories of individuals using the same variables: “loyalists” are people who supported Zelensky in both 2021 and 2022, “critics” are those who were non-supporters before the FSI and remained so afterwards, and “defectors” are residents of Ukraine who began in 2021 as Zelensky’s supporters but became nonsupporters by our 2022 survey. These categories comprise a four-category variable that we use in the main analysis below, with 475 observations after dropping a handful of observations with missing values. Because there were only 8 defectors in the panel, too few to yield meaningful results from statistical analysis, we do not report results for them in the tables and figures below. The breakdown of these categories is summarized in Figure 1.

To situate the 2021-22 rally in larger context, we report in Figure 2 the findings from Waves 1-4 on the share of ralliers in the population. This indicates that July 2022 was a peak in our data. While the rally remains overall strong as of our latest survey wave in late 2023, with two-thirds of the population approving Zelensky’s performance in office, this quantity has ebbed throughout the past year and a half, which actually reflects an unusually enduring rally in comparative perspective (Edwards and Swenson 1997).

Figure 1. Changing Ukrainian attitudes to Zelensky’s job performance over 2021-22

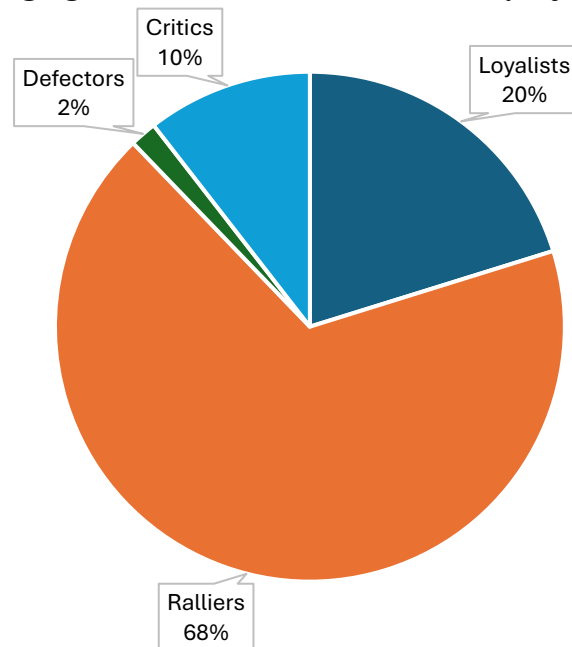
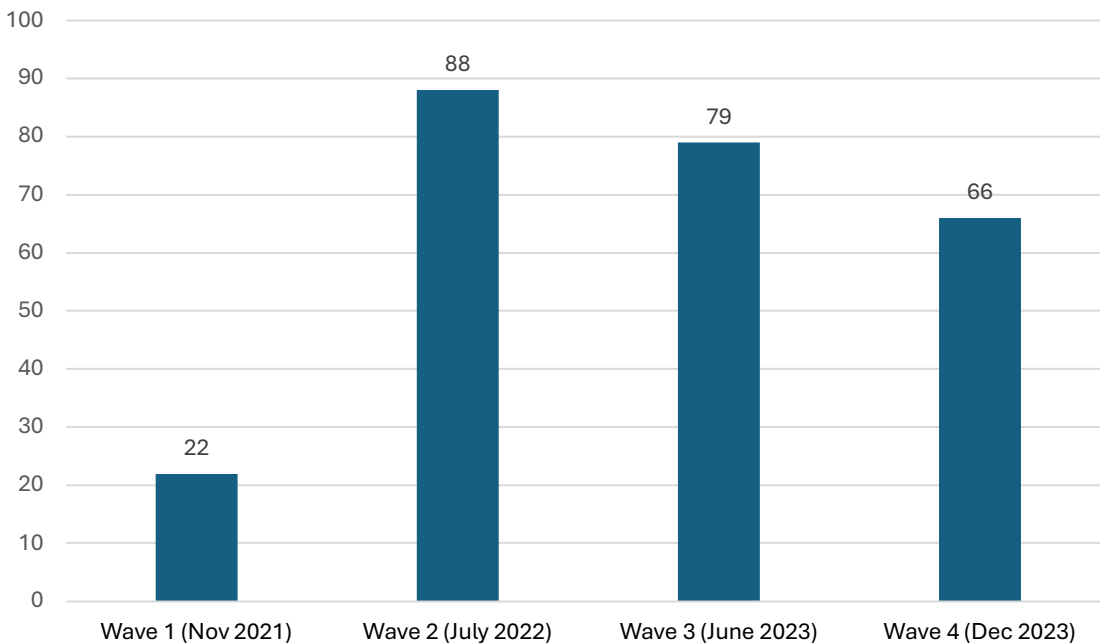


Figure 2. Percent of Ukraine’s population approving Zelensky’s performance in office



Predictors of rallying in the context of other forms of behavior

We are primarily interested in identifying factors that can help us predict (and hence contribute to explaining) rallying behavior in Ukraine. For this, we take full advantage of the panel element. That is, because the same individuals are interviewed before and after the FSI, we can measure predictors (explanatory variables) of rallying *prior* to the rally-triggering event, in November 2021. This gives us complete confidence that our measures of the correlates of

rallying are not themselves a product of the rally itself. In what follows, then, independent variables are created using only 2021 measures, with exceptions explicitly noted as such.

While further preparation of our data will enable us to consider some other variables, for the purposes of this preliminary discussion we consider the influence of three categories of possible pre-event predictors, with each category posited by some prior research to be related to rallying behavior. These are demographics, dimensions of identity, and political views and sources of political information. In addition, we consider whether certain experiences and expectations coming after Russia's full-scale invasion are correlated with rallying behavior, but of course these variables can only be measured in 2022, after the FSI began.

To test the ability of these variables to predict rallying behavior and to understand them in the context of other possible shifts (or lack thereof) in opinions about Zelensky, we regress our four-category variable on these possible predictors using a multinomial logit model. From this, we estimate the average marginal effects of each factor on whether someone is what we refer to as a loyalist, a rallier, or a critic over the course of 2021-22. To make the results maximally intelligible and to facilitate comparing the magnitude of effects of different factors, we rescale each non-binary variable to range from 0 to 1, with these bounds representing the lowest and highest value on each variable in the dataset. The resulting quantities are referred to as "full effects." We proceed by looking at each block of variables in turn, reporting and discussing their full effects on whether someone behaves as a loyalist, rallier, or critic in our study.

Demographics

Figure 3 looks at what kinds of people stand out for consistent political approval of Ukraine's president. We see a good degree of demographic structuring of what one might call Zelensky's consistent "base" of support. Interestingly, the southeastern region from which Zelensky himself hails does not stand out as a steady base of his support. Not surprisingly, though, we find that Ukraine's west stands out for a lower likelihood of supplying Zelensky loyalists. Zelensky's hold on the country's youth remained strong, with the oldest people in the sample being nearly 30 percentage points less likely to count among his loyalists than are the youngest. Finally, we find Zelensky has consistently held approval through the FSI among the materially better-off elements of Ukrainian society.

The demographic predictors of rallying are presented in Figure 4, which shows that Zelensky's approval rose significantly among some of the populations that Figure 3 indicated were particularly unlikely to be among his loyalists. Western Ukrainians rallied strongly, we find, as did the least prosperous among his compatriots. We also detect (at the 90-percent statistical confidence level) disproportionate movement toward the president of women.

Figure 3.

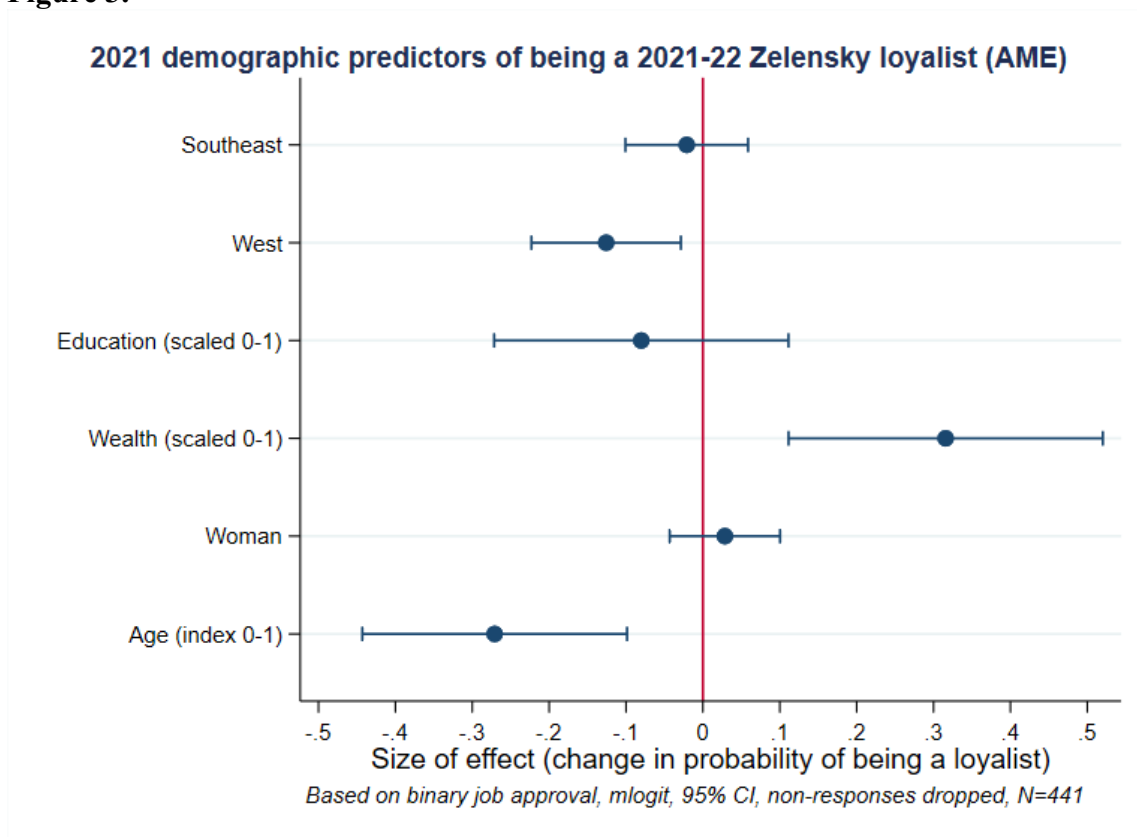
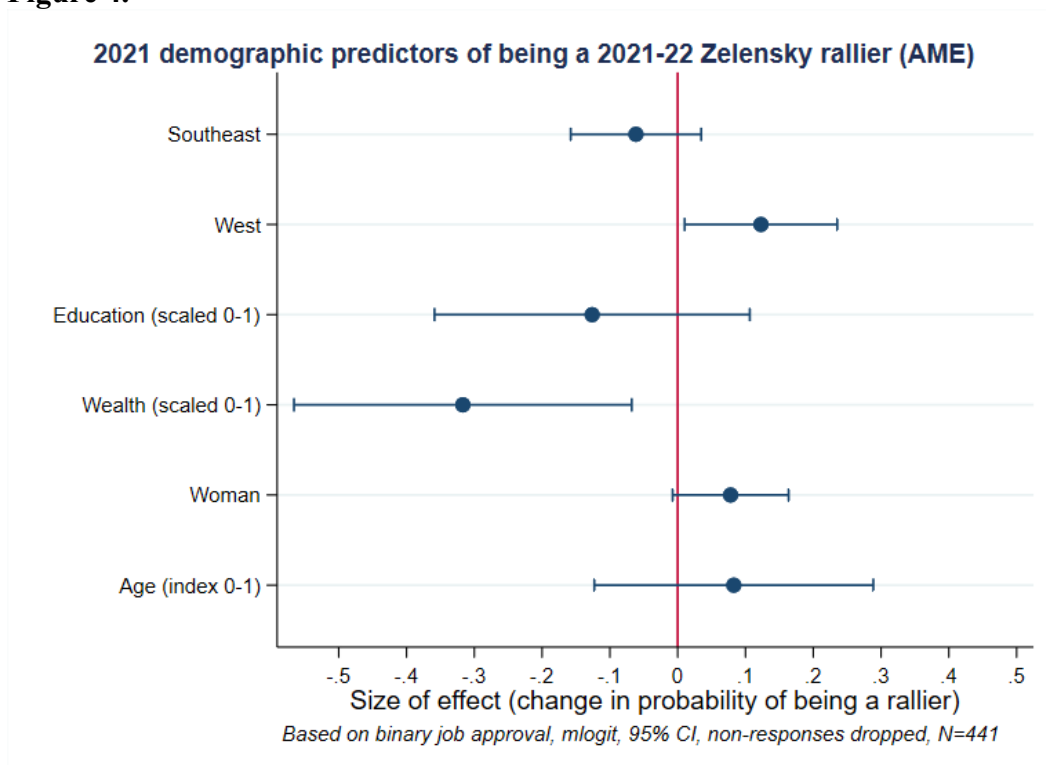
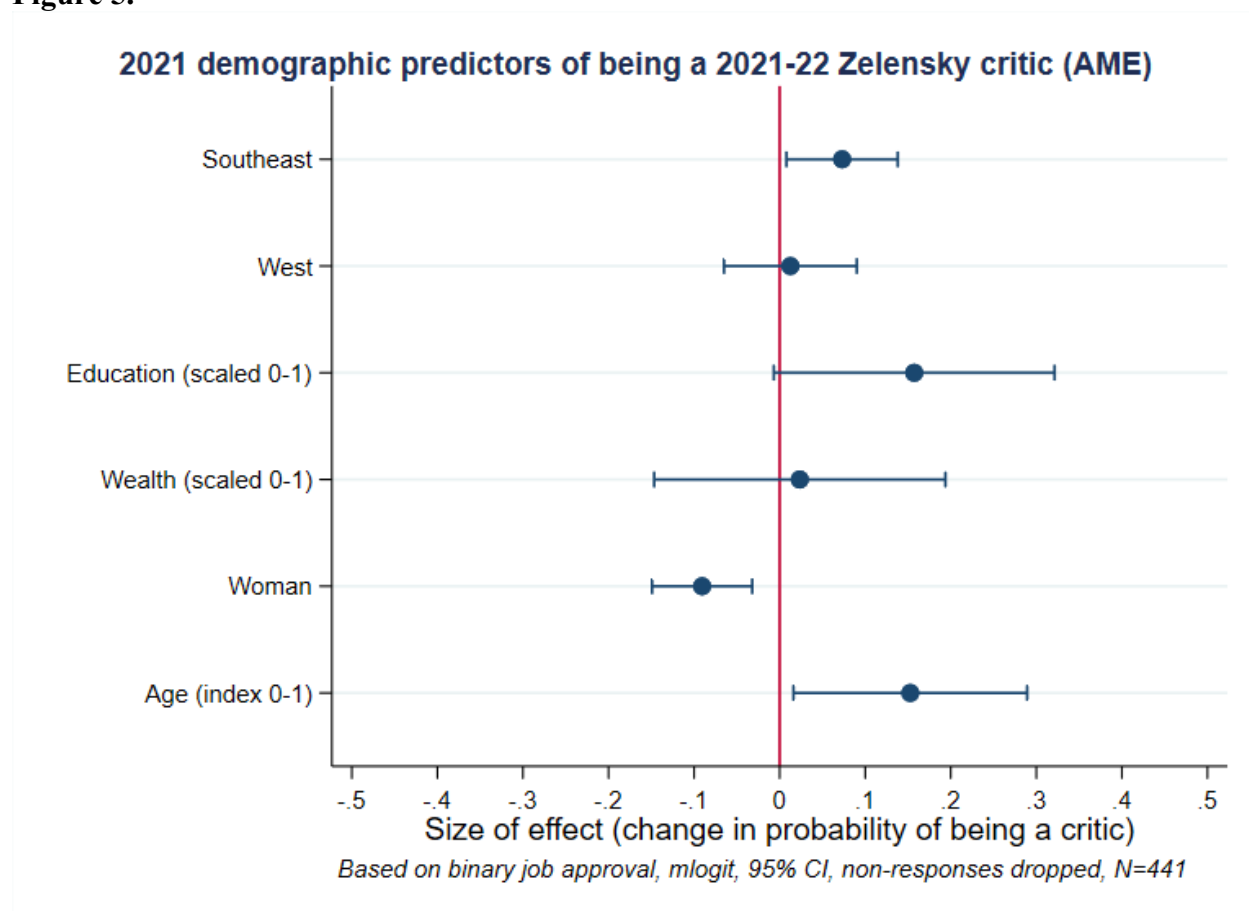


Figure 4.



Turning now to who remained a stubborn critic of Zelensky, dissatisfied with his leadership, Figure 5 indicates this set of people is comprised mainly of men, older people, and highly educated individuals (at the 90-percent confidence level). Residents of Ukraine’s southeast are found to stand out for such a position too, which is surprising given that this is the president’s home macroregion.

Figure 5.



Identity

We did not manage to prepare the data with other identity dimensions relevant in Ukraine that we plan to consider in time for this conference, but did have the data ready available for two of them. These are the choice of Russian instead of Ukrainian to take the survey (37 percent in 2021) and the selection of “citizen of Ukraine” as one’s primary identity from a list ranging from resident of one’s locality to citizen of the world. As can be seen in Figures 6-8 below, none of these are predictive of the behaviors that interest us here. Most pertinent for our purposes here, rallying is found to have drawn remarkably evenly across key identity dimensions in Ukraine.

Figure 6.

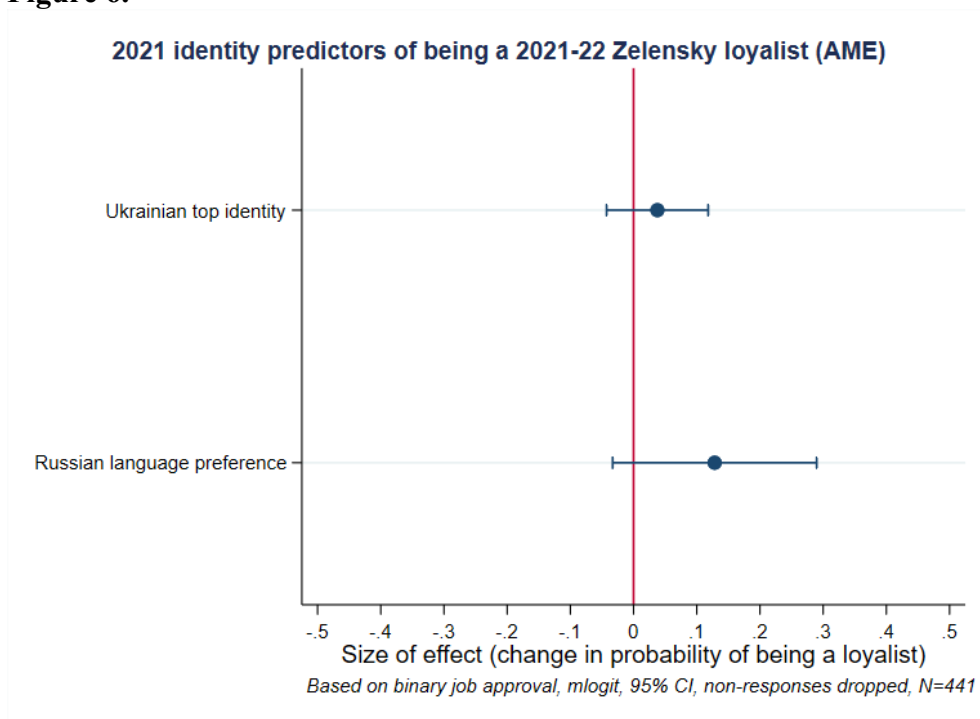


Figure 7.

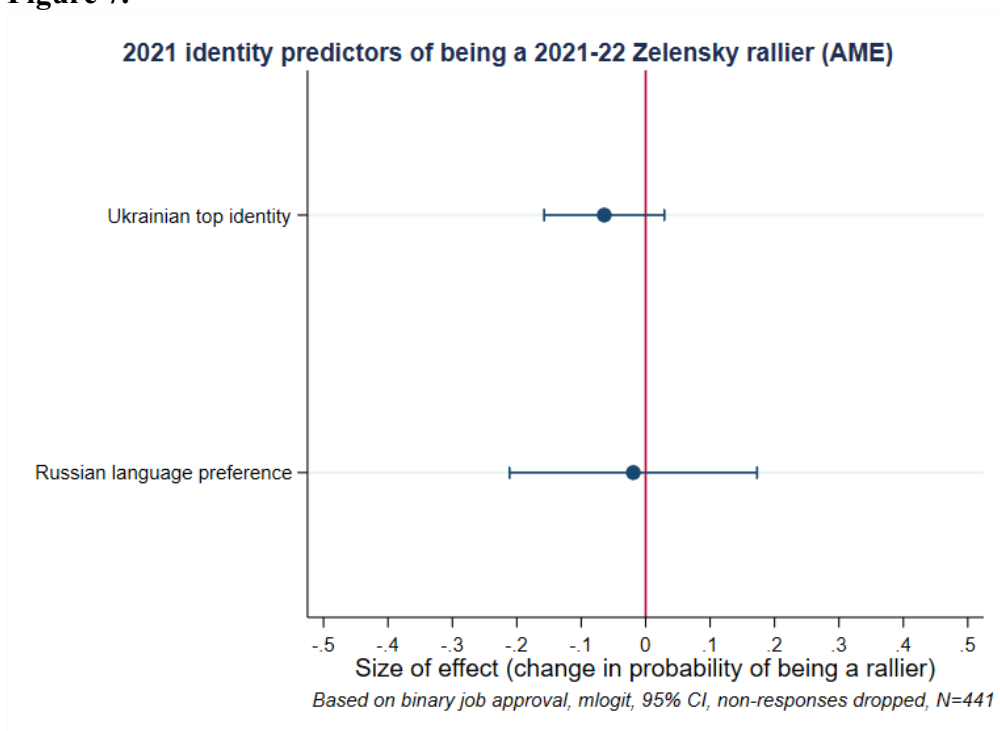
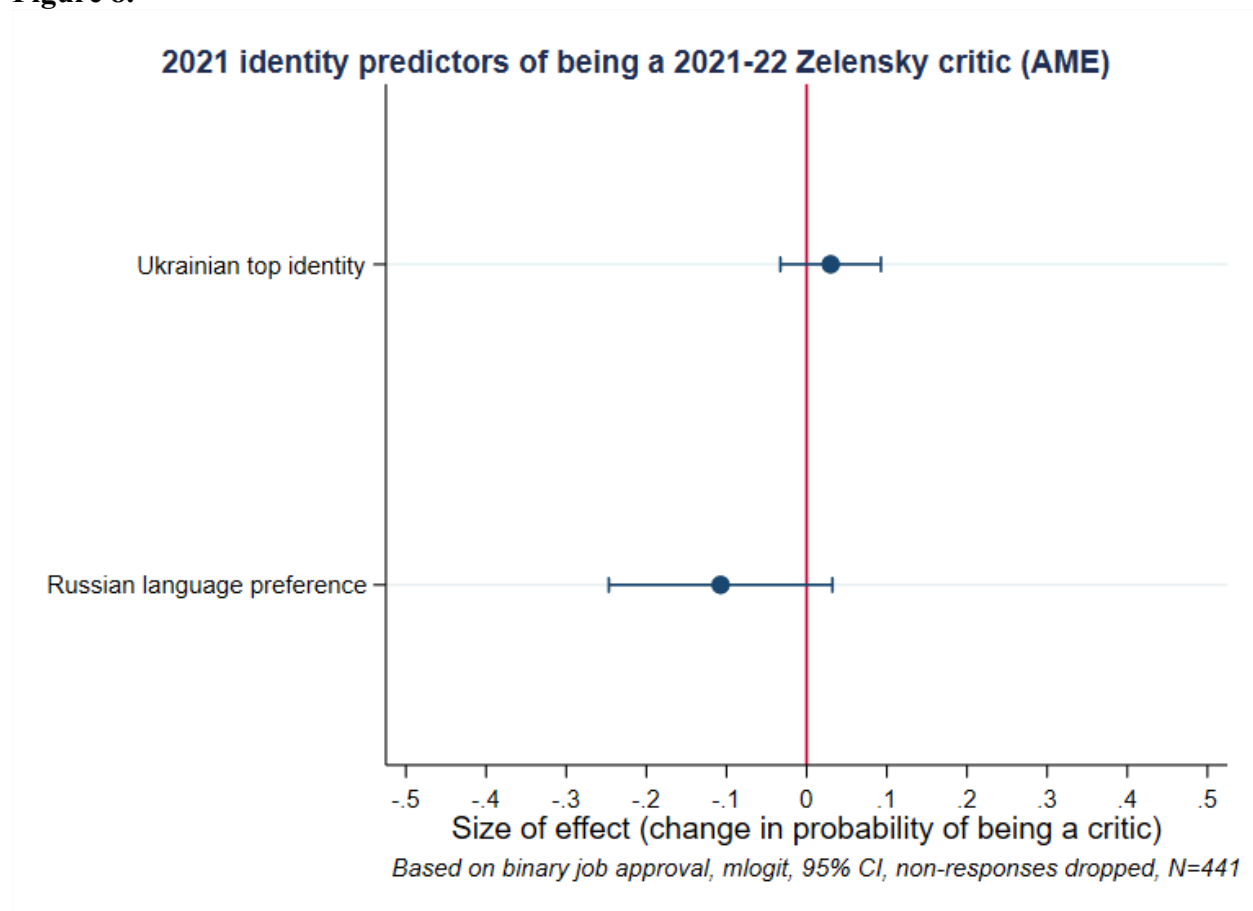


Figure 8.



Views and information sources

Next, we consider the predictive power of different political views and sources of information on contemporary events. The findings are reported in Figures 9-11. While we are constrained in the variables and measures we consider here in ways we will not be as we continue our study, one important finding emerges: The importance of pro-EU sentiment. In particular, while pro-EU Ukrainians² disproportionately comprise Zelensky’s political base of loyalists through 2021-22 (Figure 9), in keeping with his longstanding reputation for a European orientation for Ukraine (Onuch and Hale 2023; Pisano 2022), the FSI rally in 2022 strongly brought into his “coalition” people who had just months before counted among Euro-skeptics (Figure 10). We find no behavioral patterning, though, by attitudes to NATO³ or by how important people feel democracy is to them (a five-point scale). Perhaps surprisingly, pre-2022 reliance on media from Russia (whether alone or along with media from other countries—about 8 percent of the population as of November 2021) has no effect on whether one rallies or consistently supports/opposes Zelensky (though appears to come close to predicting constant critic status, as seen in Figure 11).

² A binary variable coded 1 for people who, when asked whether they generally had a positive or negative attitude to the EU or found it hard to say, and coded 0 for all others.

³ A binary variable constructed the same way as the pro-EU variable.

Figure 9.

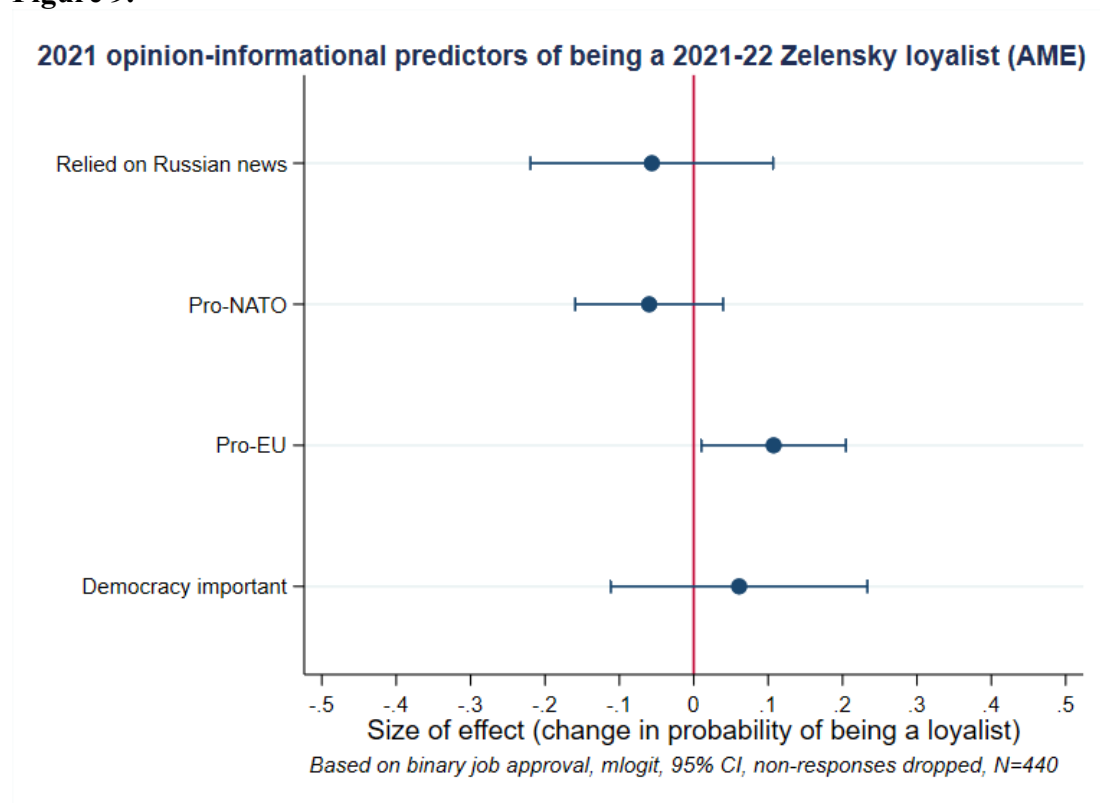


Figure 10.

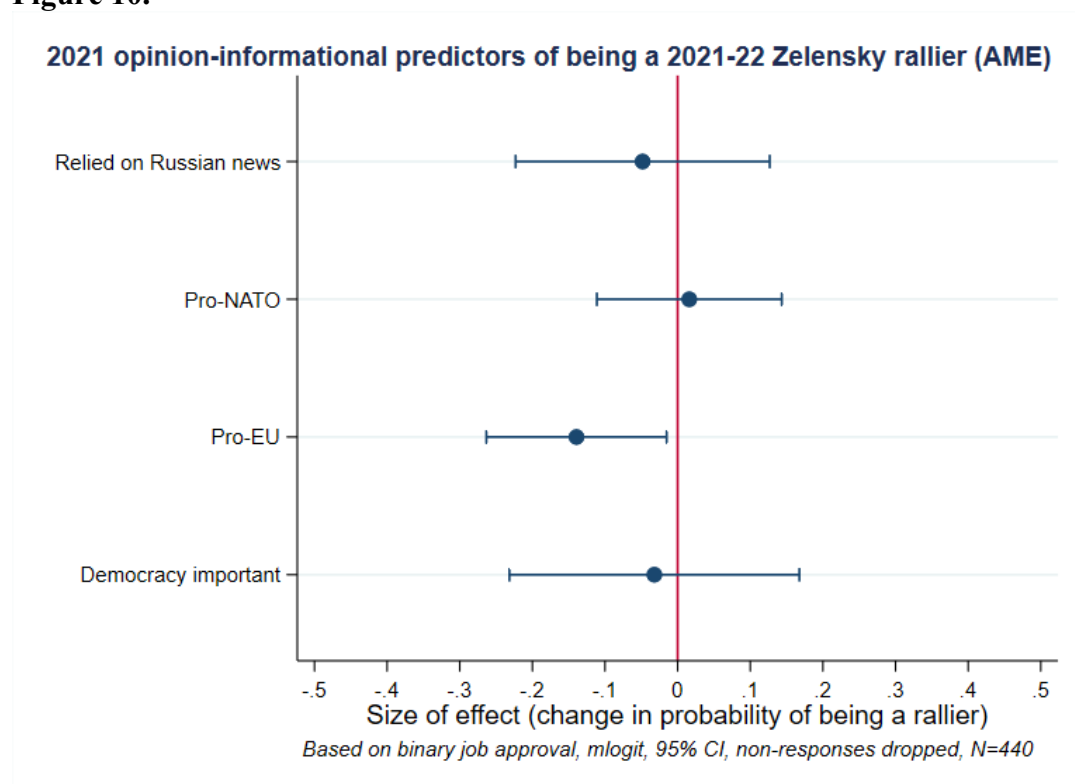
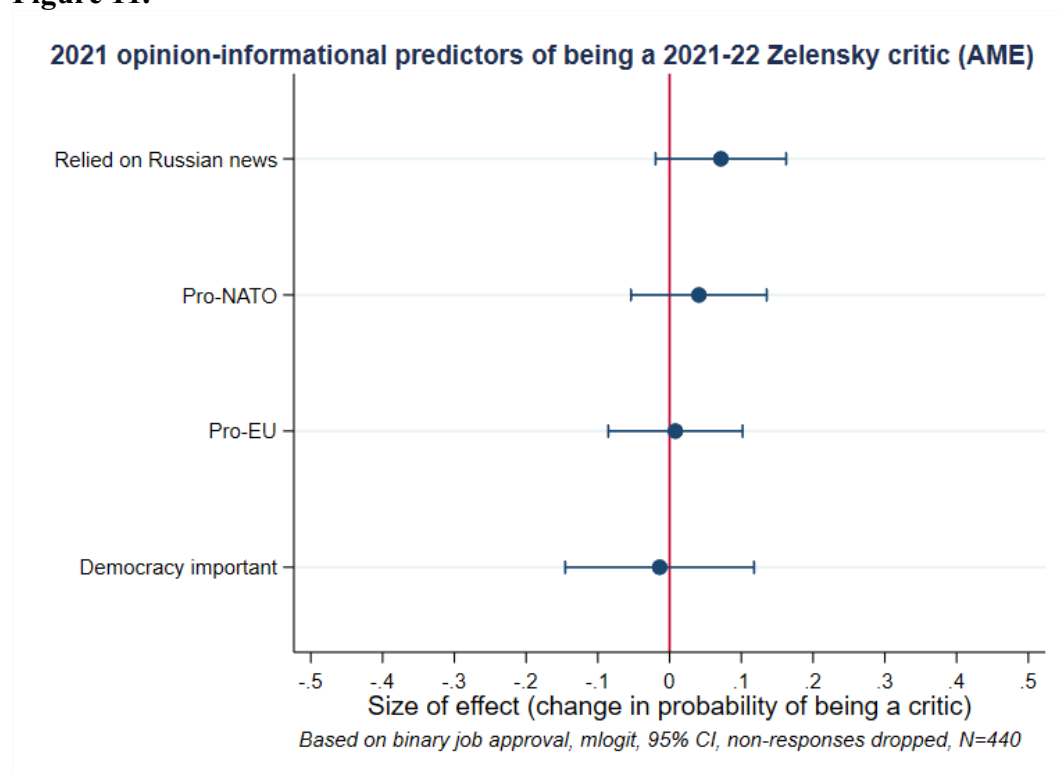


Figure 11.



War losses and beliefs

While our primary emphasis is on the predictivity of factors measured prior to the FSI, we are also interested in whether rallying behavior is related to experiences or perceptions of the war itself. We thus created two variables. The first is based on a question that gave people a list of many different forms of serious loss that many people in Ukraine have experienced since February 2022, ranging from the death of family and friends to the loss of work to displacement. We code all who said they had experienced at least one of these 1, and all others 0. Tragically, as of just July 2022, 68 percent reported such a loss. Such experiences, though, appear unrelated to patterns of stability or change in political support (Figures 12-14). We also asked respondents how long they thought the war would last: 71 percent in July 2022 predicted it would be over in a year. While such expectations are not predictors of loyalty or rallying to Zelensky, we do find weak evidence that people who expected a short war (Figure 14) were less likely to count among his constant critics and weakly (at only the 90 percent statistical confidence level) more likely to rally. It appears that those who rallied to Zelensky believed him capable of leading the country to a quick victory, and conversely that the minority who anticipated a long war did not find his initial actions fully adequate.

Figure 12.

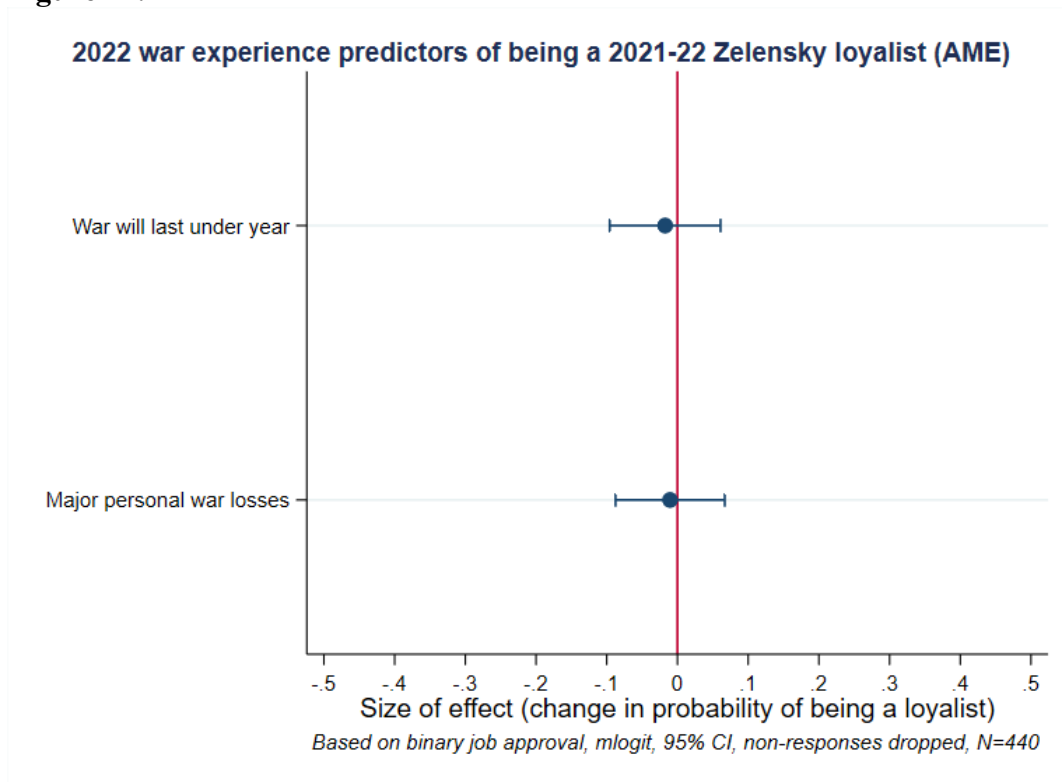


Figure 13.

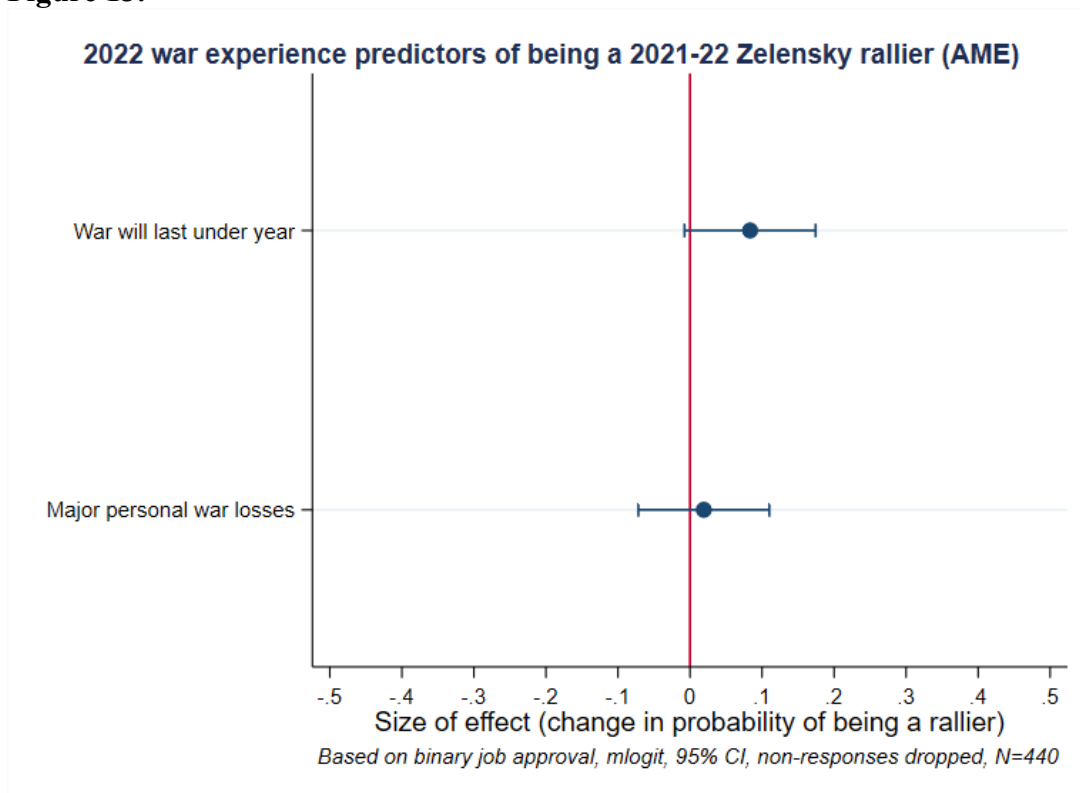
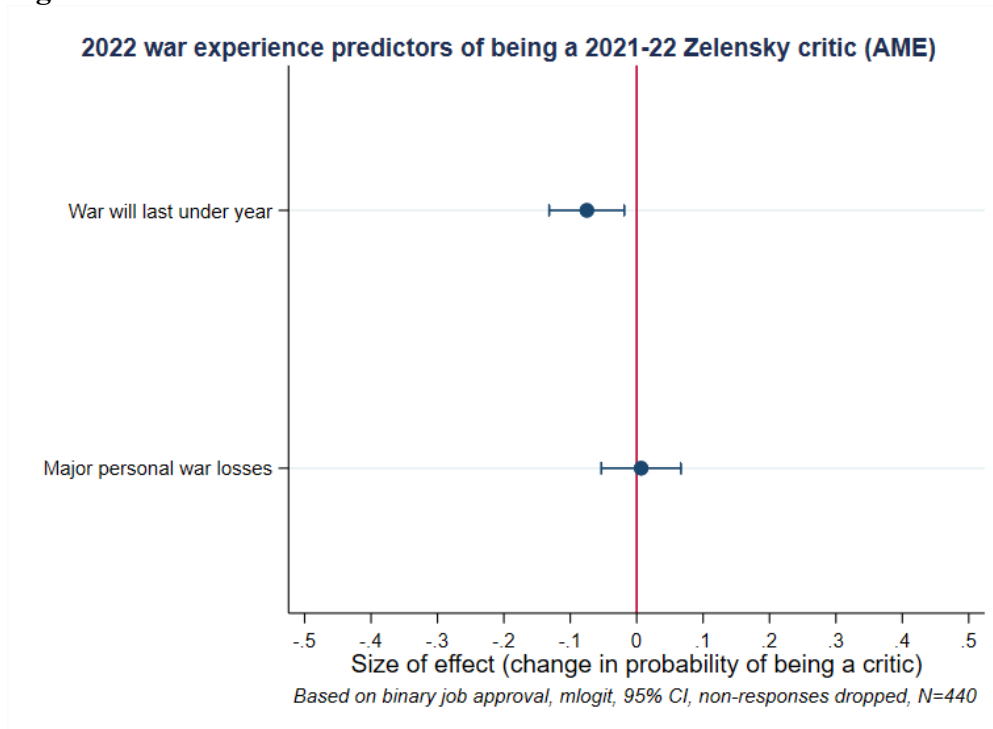


Figure 14.

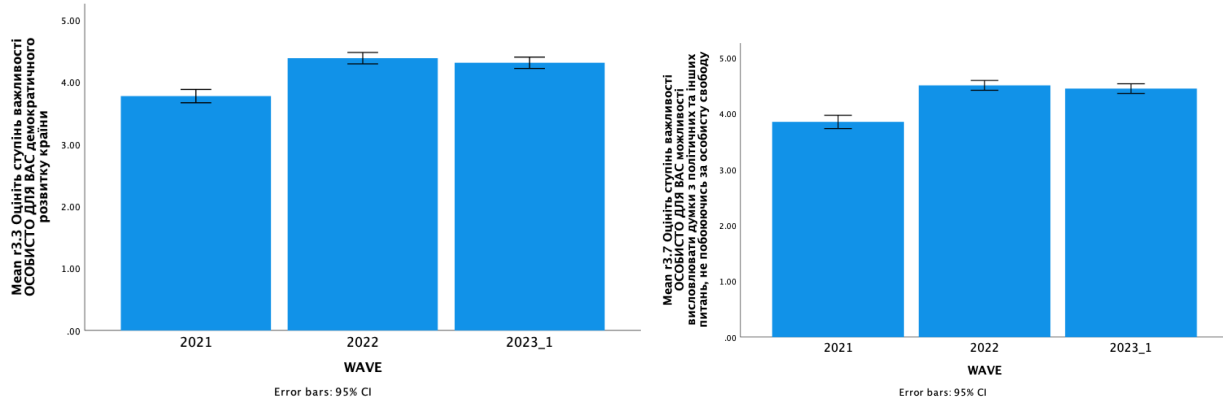


Context and Implications

While focusing on the classic aspect of rallying-‘round-the-flag – i.e., public approval of a democratically elected president (Mueller 1970)—and generating results broadly consistent with earlier research indicating that such rallying is likely to be more intense and robust in cases of aggravated hostility between parties, major military use of force, and conflict over territory (Oneal, Lian and Joyner 1996, p. 265; Baker and Oneal 2001; Tir 2012), our analysis in Ukraine’s context offers interesting new insights. For one thing, it indicates that some basic tenets of rallying theory hold up outside consolidated Western democracies and in a state subjected to a full-scale, brutal invasion by an external aggressor that has a significantly larger territory, population, economy and military capabilities.

It also points to the continuing need to examine more systematically not only who rallies, but for what, drawing on earlier indications that Zelensky’s rally was part of a broader mobilization of a pre-eminently democratic civic national identity in Ukraine that consolidated through the 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2013-14 Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity, and Russia’s full-scale invasion Onuch (2022). The lack of statistical significance of our identity indicators in multinomial logit is indirectly indicative of that, given some additional analysis we conducted. First, as Figure 15 shows, adding June 2023 data to the pre/post war-onset panel (with N=329), support for democracy held up significantly more than approval of the leader and government institutions over time.

Figure 15.



Longitudinal analysis using linear mixed-effects models controlling for both between- and within-subjects effects indicated that the strongest and most significant predictor of Zelensky's approval boost from November 2021 to June/July 2022 was the war onset (coded as Year), cutting across sociodemographic, regional, and informational factors as well as war loss and trauma (Beta=1.971, s.e.= .061, $p<.001$ with only Year in the model and Beta=1.986, s.e.= .071, $p<.001$ with controls for age, gender, Ukrainian language use in the survey, education, income, war loss, war-related stress, and region of residence in 2021), with only income and location in the Center being also significant predictors, albeit at lower levels of significance ($p<.05$ and $p<.01$, respectively). Running the same LMM analysis for the panel from June/July 2022 through June 2023 showed that while Year (War) variable was no longer a significant predictor of sustained support for democracy and free speech (indicating of the enduring mobilization of democratic civic identity), it had a significant impact on reduced trust in the president and institutions (Rada and the media). In other words, Ukrainians showed a sustained, remarkable rallying for the flag, being more robust that rallying for the leadership.

Conclusion

To be written...

Appendix: Results behind Figures 2-14

Table A1. Predictors of being 2021-22 Zelensky loyalist in approval ratings

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age (index 0-1)	-0.27**	(0.09)		
Female	0.03	(0.04)		
Wealth	0.32**	(0.10)		
Education	-0.08	(0.10)		
West	-0.13*	(0.05)		
Southeast	-0.02	(0.04)		
Russian language preference		0.13	(0.08)	
Ukraine top identity		0.04	(0.04)	
Democracy important			0.06	(0.09)
Pro-EU			0.11*	(0.05)
Pro-NATO			-0.06	(0.05)
Russian news			-0.06	(0.08)
War losses				-0.01 (0.04)
Expect short war				-0.02 (0.04)
<i>N</i>	441	441	440	440

Notes: Based on binary job approval, multinomial logit model, average marginal effects with all independent variables scaled 0-1, standard errors in parentheses. Column 1: pre-war demographics measured 2021. Column 2: pre-war identity measured 2021, demographics as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). 3. Column 3: pre-war views and information sources measured 2021, demographics and identity variables as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). 4. Post-war self-reported war-related variables measured 2022, all other variables included as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). ⁺ $p < .1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table A2. Predictors of being 2021-22 Zelensky rallier in approval ratings

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age (index 0-1)	0.08	(0.11)		
Female	0.08 ⁺	(0.04)		
Wealth	-0.32*	(0.13)		
Education	-0.13	(0.12)		
West	0.12*	(0.06)		
Southeast	-0.06	(0.05)		
Russian language preference		-0.02	(0.10)	
Ukraine top identity		-0.06	(0.05)	
Democracy important			-0.03	(0.10)
Pro-EU			-0.14*	(0.06)
Pro-NATO			0.02	(0.06)
Russian news			-0.05	(0.09)
War losses				0.02 (0.05)
Expect short war				0.08 ⁺ (0.05)
<i>N</i>	441	441	440	440

Notes: Based on binary job approval, multinomial logit model, average marginal effects with all independent variables scaled 0-1, standard errors in parentheses. Column 1: pre-war demographics measured 2021. Column 2: pre-war identity measured 2021, demographics as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). 3. Column 3: pre-war views and information sources measured 2021, demographics and identity variables as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). 4. Post-war self-reported war-related variables measured 2022, all other variables

included as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). ⁺ $p < .1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table A3. Predictors of being 2021-22 Zelensky critic in approval ratings

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age (index 0-1)	0.15* (0.07)			
Female	-0.09** (0.03)			
Wealth	0.02 (0.09)			
Education	0.16 ⁺ (0.08)			
West	0.01 (0.04)			
Southeast	0.07* (0.03)			
Russian language preference		-0.11 (0.07)		
Ukraine top identity		0.03 (0.03)		
Democracy important			-0.01 (0.07)	
Pro-EU			0.01 (0.05)	
Pro-NATO			0.04 (0.05)	
Russian news			0.07 (0.05)	
War losses				0.01 (0.03)
Expect short war				-0.08** (0.03)
<i>N</i>	441	441	440	440

Notes: Based on binary job approval, multinomial logit model, average marginal effects with all independent variables scaled 0-1, standard errors in parentheses. Column 1: pre-war demographics measured 2021. Column 2: pre-war identity measured 2021, demographics as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). 3. Column 3: pre-war views and information sources measured 2021, demographics and identity variables as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). 4. Post-war self-reported war-related variables measured 2022, all other variables included as controls (marginal effects for them not estimated). ⁺ $p < .1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

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