The Secrecy Heuristic: Inferring Quality from Secrecy in Foreign Policy Contexts

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Three experiments demonstrate that in the context of U.S. foreign policy decision making, people infer informational quality from secrecy. In Experiment 1, people weighed secret information more heavily than public information when making recommendations about foreign political candidates. In Experiment 2, people judged information presented in documents ostensibly produced by the Department of State and the National Security Council as being of relatively higher quality when those documents were secret rather than public. Finally, in Experiment 3, people judged a National Security Council document as being of higher quality when presented as a secret document rather than a public document and evaluated others’ decisions more favorably when those decisions were based on secret information. Discussion centers on the mediators, moderators, and broader implications of this secrecy heuristic in foreign policy contexts.

KEY WORDS: decision making, intuition, heuristic, judgment, secrecy

“There’s no more truth to be found in classified records than there is to be found in unclassified records.”

—Steven Aftergood (NPR Interview, October 26, 2010)

In July 2010, the web site WikiLeaks—controversial online publisher of leaked government information—released approximately 75,000 U.S. government documents on military operations in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2009. The Afghan War Diary, as the document set has become known, was the single largest information leak in the history of warfare. Many of the documents were classified as Secret and Top Secret by the U.S. government, implying that their release would cause “grave damage” to U.S. national security.

Although the Afghan War Diary was unprecedented in scope, the incident hardly represents a new political phenomenon. In recent decades, the United States has endured protracted episodes of imbroglio resulting from information leaks. The Pentagon papers, Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, and, most recently, WikiLeaks, are but a few examples that illustrate this point. Such events, when they occur, draw attention to a political universal: secrecy pervades politics. Political candidates withhold politically vulnerable attitudes from constituents, governments conceal information about the true purpose of uranium enrichment plants, and intelligence agencies routinely engage in
counterintelligence measures. Political actors and institutions keep secrets from each other and about each other as a matter of course.

In this article, we examine how secrecy influences people’s evaluation of information in foreign policy contexts. Past research on secrecy in politics has focused on secrecy’s impact at the institutional level and on normative concerns about the appropriate balance between citizens’ right to transparency and a government’s need for secrecy (Stiglitz, 2002; Thompson, 1999). The present research, in contrast, examines citizens’ use of secrecy as a heuristic to judge informational quality. This “secrecy heuristic” can increase the perceived value and decision weight of information that happens to be secret, independent of any genuine differences in informational quality. Specifically, we test the hypotheses that (a) people weigh secret information more heavily than public information when making decisions, (b) people perceive the same information as being of higher quality when it is portrayed as secret rather than public, and (c) people evaluate others’ decisions more favorably when those decisions are based on secret information rather than on public information.

Although secret information can certainly be valuable, secret information need not be of higher quality than public information. In the aftermath of WikiLeaks’ release of the Afghan War Diary, for example, many astute political observers were left wondering what exactly we had learned from the leak that we didn’t already know. In some cases, keeping information secret may even be problematic, as when negotiators fail to achieve optimal negotiated settlements because they keep priorities secret (Thompson & Hastie, 1990), when pluralistic ignorance persists because people fail to voice their private attitudes (Prentice & Miller, 1996), or when a government fails to convey its genuinely nonaggressive intent to internationally appointed peacekeeping coalitions.

Political science research has shown that political actors rely on heuristics when making judgments and decisions (Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). This approach stands in contrast to the rational actor model, the view that political actors make choices rationally on the basis of available information. Foreign policy decision makers rely on heuristic processing when evaluating national security and foreign policy information (Mintz & Geva, 1997), voters cast their votes based largely on heuristics of party affiliation or candidate appearance (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), and people evaluate policies more favorably when those policies are associated with people’s own political party rather than the opposing political party (Cohen, 2003). We believe that secrecy is an important heuristic in political domains and that it may be especially influential in foreign policy contexts.

At least three factors may contribute to the use of a secrecy heuristic in foreign policy contexts. First, secret information is sometimes genuinely better information than public information, particularly in strategic contexts. Consider financial decision making. Investors often stand to profit from possessing secret information—knowledge that gains value from the very nature of its secrecy (Jaffe, 1974) and loses value when it becomes public. If a Silicon Valley insider, for instance, were to have advance knowledge that a certain technology company was going to release an innovative tablet computer or smart phone, the financial advantage of buying that company’s stock at a low price is diminished if there were widespread knowledge of the company’s plan, in which case the stock price would have already changed to reflect the new information. Or consider negotiations between buyers and sellers. Each side has a price that it will not cross. This limit price is of tremendous strategic value: should the buyer learn the seller’s lower limit, the buyer would be at a considerable advantage over the seller. In strategic contexts such as those described above, the secrecy heuristic may be ecologically valid.

Second, people may view secret information as being of higher quality than public information because of personal experience with their own and others’ secrets. People often keep to themselves highly informative (often embarrassing) information. They may reason, “The secrets I keep reflect important information about me, so the secrets others keep probably reflect important information about them.” Moreover, keeping secrets can set in motion processes of thought suppression and subsequent intrusion (Lane & Wegner, 1995) that increase the accessibility, and hence the perceived importance, of secret information in one’s own thoughts. Socially, gossip and rumors often involve
the transmission of secret information of substantial social value (Dunbar, 2004). “Don’t tell anyone else, but you won’t believe what I heard about Al . . .” is usually a signal that one is about to receive important information about Al. Personal experience may therefore contribute to an association between informational secrecy and quality in everyday life.

Finally, governments often behave, in foreign policy contexts, as though secret information is valuable and of high quality. Governments devote substantial resources to the collection and protection of “state secrets.” Intelligence agencies, for instance, routinely invest heavily in obtaining secrets from other states and in protecting the secrets of their own states. In the United States, such investment has led to noteworthy foreign policy successes, including tracking down the Libyan intelligence officers convicted in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103, capturing Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind behind the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing, and locating and assassinating al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in 2011. These examples highlight the potential value of state secrecy and communicate that the state values secret information.

These factors may lead people to use informational secrecy as a cue to infer informational quality, the same way that effort may be used as a cue to the quality of creative products (Kruger, Wirtz, Van Boven, & Altermatt, 2004), and source expertise and attractiveness may be used as cues to the quality of persuasive information (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Because judgments about a target attribute of a certain object (e.g., the quality of creative products or information) are often relatively difficult to assess, people often rely on heuristic attributes of that object (e.g., effort, expertise, and attractiveness) that are more easily assessed (Kahneman & Frederick, 2002). In the case of secrecy, when asked to make the relatively difficult assessment of informational quality, people may rely instead on the more easily and naturally assessed heuristic quality of informational secrecy. As with other judgmental heuristics, the existence of the secrecy heuristic can be established by testing whether people use secrecy to infer quality in situations where there is no genuine association between secrecy and quality. Such a result would establish that people use secrecy to infer quality from secrecy independent of any differences of informational content.

We report three experiments that examine people’s use of a secrecy heuristic in foreign policy contexts. Specifically, we test whether secret information is weighed more heavily than public information in foreign policy decisions. Participants were asked whether they would recommend to the Secretary of State that the United States support the election of four different foreign political candidates. Participants read one piece of positive and one piece of negative information about each candidate. In each case, one piece of information was secret, and the other was public. We predicted that participants would weigh secret information more heavily than public information, as evidenced by stronger support for the candidates associated with secret positive information (and public negative information) and weaker support for candidates associated with secret negative information (and public positive information).

**Experiment 1: Information Weighing**

We first tested whether secret information is weighed more heavily than public information in foreign policy decisions. Participants were asked whether they would recommend to the Secretary of State that the United States support the election of four different foreign political candidates. Participants read one piece of positive and one piece of negative information about each candidate. In each case, one piece of information was secret, and the other was public. We predicted that participants would weigh secret information more heavily than public information, as evidenced by stronger support for the candidates associated with secret positive information (and public negative information) and weaker support for candidates associated with secret negative information (and public positive information).
Method

Ninety-seven respondents from the United States (47 females; \(M_{age} = 33.95\) years, \(SD = 12.98\) years) participated in an online survey in exchange for $0.50. Survey respondents were recruited using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk requester service (for information on such samples, see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

Participants were asked to imagine they were an advisor to the Secretary of State responsible for making recommendations about whether the United States should support the election of four politicians in four foreign countries. Participants read, “U.S. intelligence agencies (such as the CIA and National Security Council) have gathered information about each of the four candidates” and have made “some of this information widely available to the public” but kept “other information classified, available to people like you who have top security clearances.”

Participants learned that they would read one piece of positive information and one piece of negative information for each of the four candidates (see Table 1). Candidate ordering was constant across all participants, and the positive information was always presented first for each candidate.

We experimentally manipulated which piece of information, positive or negative, was presented as secret. Counterbalancing across four candidate scenarios all combinations of two secret positive (negative) and two public positive (negative) resulted in six conditions to which participants were randomly assigned. This design ensured that information content and source (e.g., CIA and NSC) were not confounded with informational secrecy.

After reading the summary of each candidate, participants rated their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) that the United States should support the candidate’s election campaign.

Table 1. Descriptions of Foreign Political Candidates, with One Positive and One Negative Piece of Information, and Participants’ Endorsement of the Candidates for Versions When the Positive Information Was Secret (and the Negative Information Public) and When the Negative Information Was Secret (and the Positive Information Public)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate and Information</th>
<th>Secret Information</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoweri Musevini (Uganda)</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+) Maintained a good record on human rights issues, which the U.S. wants to encourage.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(–) Linked with rebel factions in the northern territory of Uganda.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander Lukashenko (Belarus)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+) More willing to cooperate with U.S. diplomats than with Russian or Chinese diplomats.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(–) Concern exists over whether Lukashenko plans to establish a monarchy in place of Belarus’ constitutional democracy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valdis Zatlers (Latvia)</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+) Has been praised for his keen decision making in response to a border dispute between Latvia and Russia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(–) Some people believe Zatlers is corrupt and has been laundering government money to fund his extravagant lifestyle.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando Salvajo (Nicaragua)</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+) Will work to unite the country by making sure that all the major Nicaraguan political parties are represented in his cabinet.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(–) Has been linked to drug trafficking groups operating in southern Nicaragua.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants endorsed the candidates for whom the positive information was secret (M = 3.01, SD = 1.01) more than the candidates for whom the negative information was secret (M = 2.53, SD = 1.09), t(96) = 3.83, p = .0002 (see Table 1). Examining each candidate separately, participants’ endorsement was stronger when the positive rather than the negative information was secret for Musevini, t(95) = 3.07, p = .003, Lukashenko, t(95) = 1.71, p = .09, Zatlers, t(95) = 3.18, p = .002, and for Salvajo, although this difference was not significant, t < 1. These results provide evidence that people weigh secret information more heavily than public information when making (hypothetical) decisions in a foreign policy context.

Experiment 2: Evaluating Information Quality

We next examined whether people evaluate secret information as being of higher quality than public information. Participants read two governmental policy papers regarding potential U.S. intervention during the mid-1990s in the sale of military aircraft from Belarus to Peru. A document produced by the Department of State recommended in favor of intervention; a document produced by the National Security Council recommended against intervention. Depending on random assignment, one of the two documents was described as having been secret at the time of its creation. We predicted that participants would rate the secret information as being of higher quality than the public information when evaluating the information presented in the two documents.

Method

Fifty-six undergraduate students at the University of Colorado Boulder (27 females) participated in exchange for course credit. Participants were told they would read two documents written in 1995 concerning potential U.S. intervention to stop the sale of fighter jets from Belarus to Peru. One document, purportedly written by the Department of State, recommended in favor of intervention; the second document, purportedly written by the NSC, recommended against intervention (see Figure 1). This was a genuine policy debate that confronted the United States in 1995. Both documents were adapted from genuine materials released through the Freedom of Information Act.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: either the NSC document was secret (and the Department of State document was public) or the Department of State document was secret (and the NSC document was public). The secret document was labeled as having been secret (classified) in 1995. On this document, the word “declassified” was printed in large text, indicating that the document was “classified” at the time of the decision. The other document was described as public, and the word “public” was printed in small text on the top of each page. Otherwise, the two documents conveyed the same information in a format characteristic of official government correspondence.

After reading the two documents, participants completed an unrelated word search for 10 minutes before answering questions about the two documents. Participants then rated how accurate, influential, and well-reasoned each document was (1 = not; 11 = very), which we averaged into an information quality index for each source (Department of State $\alpha = .68$, NSC $\alpha = .86$).

Results and Discussion

To analyze the judgments of information quality, we conducted a 2 (secrecy condition: Department of State secret, NSC secret) × 2 (information source: Department of State, NSC) ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor. The relevant means are given in Table 2. The effect of
Figure 1. Sample documents, purportedly written by the Department of State (secret condition displayed below, four pages total), which recommended that the United States intervene to stop the 1995 sale of fighter jets from Belarus to Peru, and purportedly written by the National Security Council (secret condition displayed below, two pages total), which recommended against intervention. The public versions of these documents were identical except the declassified stamps and secret labels were removed.
1. **CLASSIFIED BY PETER P. ROMBO FOR 1.4 (A), (B) AND (D). THIS IS AN ACTION MESSAGE.**

**BACKGROUND**

2. **(U) WE ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT THESE REPORTS IN LIGHT OF THE CONSEQUENT GROWING DISTRUST IN ECUADOR AT THE PRESENT MOMENT IN THE PEACE PROCESS. WE REGARD THE TIMING OF PERU'S DECISION TO TAKE DELIVERY OF THE MIG-29'S AT THIS JUNCTURE IN YOUR NEGOTIATIONS WITH ECUADOR.**

3. **(U) WE RECOGNIZE PERU'S LEGITIMATE NEED FOR SECURITY, DETERRENCE AND MODERNIZATION, BUT THE PURCHASE OF MIG-29'S AND SU-25'S COULD NOT BE VIEWED AS MORE REPLACEMENTS FOR PERU'S EXISTING INVENTORY OF LOSES FROM ATTRAITION. WE REMIND PERU OF ITS PLEDGE OF OCTOBER 6, 1995 WHICH RECOGNIZED THAT QUOTE IT IS ESSENTIAL TO AVOID THE RISKS OF AN ARMS RACE SO AS NOT TO UNDERMINE THE END OF HOSTILITIES OR OTHERWISE DAMAGE THE PEACE UNIQUELY SHOULD A BREAKDOWN OCCUR IN THESE TALKS BETWEEN ECUADOR AND PERU, IT COULD NEGATIVELY AFFECT OUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE PEACE PROCESS.**

**STATE 253562 1200332**

4. **(C) WASHINGTON AGENCIES ARE SERIOUSLY CONCERNED THAT AN SU-25 PURCHASE COULD SET BACK EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE PERU-ECUADOR BORDER DISPUTE, MIGHT SPAWN A REGIONAL ARMS RACE, AND IS AN UNWISE EXPENDITURE FOR A NATION LIKE PERU WHICH MUST DEAL WITH SERIOUS CONTROLLNARCOTICS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ISSUES. IN ADDITION, PERU NEEDS TO TAKE ADDITIONAL STEPS, SUCH AS TIMELY PRIOR CONSULTATIONS WITH ITS NEIGHBORS, ABOUT SUCH A POSSIBLE PURCHASE.**

5. **(C) WE ASK THAT PERU GIVE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION TO WHETHER SUCH A PURCHASE IS CONSISTENT WITH YOUR EFFORTS TO APPLY A HEAVY DEBT LOAD THROUGH PARIS CLUB AND BRUSSELS RESTRUCTURING. A SU-25 PURCHASE COULD RAISE SERIOUS QUESTIONS FROM PERU'S CREDITORS.**

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**Page 2**

UNCLASSIFIED

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**Figure 1.** (cont.)
IN RESPONSE TO THE DECEMBER 2 NEWS THAT PERU IS ACTIVELY SEEKING TO PURCHASE 14 SUHOI-25 FIGHTER JETS AND 18 MIG-29 FIGHTER AIRCRAFTS FROM BELARUS, AND RECOMMENDING AGAINST DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTION:


-- US POLICY TOWARDS BELARUS IS FOCUSED ON PROMOTING A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION FROM BELARUS' PAST STATUS AS SOVIET SATELLITE COUNTRY TO A STABLE DEMOCRATIC AND PROGRESSIVE FORCE IN THE REGION THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A FREE-MARKET ECONOMY AND DEMOCRATIC IDEALS. ANY DIPLOMATIC DEMARCHE UNDERMINING OUR COMMITMENT TO THE BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT COULD SEVERELY SET BACK A STRONG PATTERN OF PROGRESS IN US-BELARUS RELATIONS.

-- PERU HAS A RIGHT AS A SOVEREIGN NATION TO PURSUE DEFENSE MEASURES THAT ARE IN LINE WITH ITS ASSESSMENT OF WHAT IS NECESSARY TO SATISFY NATIONAL PROTECTION - STIPULATED IN THE SAN JUAN ACCORD OF 1991. THE PENTAGON ESTIMATES THAT THE PERUVIAN AIR FORCE CONSISTS OF LESS THAN 75 AIRCRAFTS, MANY OF WHICH ARE OUT OF DATE TECHNOLOGIES. THE US, AS WELL AS PERU'S LATIN AMERICAN NEIGHBORS, SHOULD BE HESITANT TO LABEL SUCH A PURCHASE AS OVERLY BELLIGERENT WHEN A DECISION TO PURCHASE AIRCRAFTS MAY BE MERELY AN ATTEMPT TO UPDATE AN AGING AIR FORCE FLEET.

-- US DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTION COULD SERIOUSLY JEOPARDIZE PEACE

NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN PERU AND ECUADOR OVER A LONGSTANDING BORDER DISPUTE. IT WOULD ALSO STRAIN US-PERU RELATIONS AS WE CONTINUE TO COLLABORATE ON COUNTER-NARCOTIC INITIATIVES AND ECONOMIC REFORM.

RECOMMENDATION

CONCERN OVER THE PERU-BELARUS PROPOSED WEAPONS SALE IS WARRANTED GIVEN THE TENSES ITAMARAY PEACE DECLARATION SIGNED LAST YEAR BETWEEN PERU AND ECUADOR, INDEFINITELY ENDING A LONGSTANDING BORDER DISPUTE. IT IS QUESTIONABLE WHETHER PERU'S MOTIVES AREN'T ENTIRELY DEFENSIVE. IT IS ALSO QUESTIONABLE WHETHER PERU SHOULD BE SPENDING HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS ON DEFENSE WHEN THEIR ECONOMY IS SEVERELY DEPRESSED AND BY SOME ESTIMATES UP TO ONE-FIFTH OF THEIR CITIZENS LIVE IN POVERTY. HOWEVER, THERE IS FAR TOO MUCH DIPLOMATIC CAPITAL TO BE SACRIFICED IF WE CHOOSE TO INTERVENE BY THREATENING TO IMPOSE SANCTIONS OR OTHER PUNITIVE MEASURES ON PERU AND BELARUS. AT THIS JUNCTURE, IT IS IN OUR ESTIMATION UNADVISABLE TO ATTEMPT TO DIPLOMATICALLY INTERVENE IN THE PROPOSED ARMS DEAL. INSTEAD, US POLICY SHOULD CONTINUE FOSTERING DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS IN BELARUS AND HOLD A SECOND ROUND OF PEACE TALKS BETWEEN PERU AND ECUADOR, AS PREVIOUSLY PLANNED.
secrecy in this analysis is captured by the interaction between condition and information source because the means on one diagonal of this table are judgments of secret information, and the means on the other diagonal are judgments of public information. This predicted interaction was significant, $F(1, 54) = 5.42, p = .024$. On average, the judgment of information quality when it was secret ($M = 7.46$) was significantly greater than the judgment information quality when it was public ($M = 6.93$).

The analysis also revealed a main effect of information source, $F(1, 54) = 5.69, p = .021$. Information from the NSC was judged as being of higher quality than information from the Department of State. Interpretation of this effect of information source is unclear, however, because the information content was confounded with source. It is possible that information from the NSC is generally judged of higher quality than information from the Department of State (an effect of source) or that the specific information was judged more favorably (an effect of information). In any event, the key finding is that independent of source, secrecy led to higher judgments of information quality.

### Experiment 3: Evaluating Others’ Decisions

We next sought to conceptually replicate and extend our findings in two ways. First, we examined whether secret information would be evaluated more favorably than public information in a fully between-persons design, which avoids explicit comparisons of secret and public information thereby minimizing demand characteristics. Second, we examined whether secrecy would influence people’s evaluations of other people’s decisions—specifically, whether people would evaluate others’ foreign policy decisions based on secret information more favorably than information based on public information. The possibility that secrecy influences evaluations of others’ decisions is important because although most people do not themselves make foreign policy decisions, they do evaluate others who make foreign policy decisions (e.g., by voting).

We asked people to evaluate a 1978 document from the NSC regarding a genuine policy dilemma concerning the potential sale of military jets to Taiwan. The document presented an assessment of the situation and was described either as having been secret or public at the time. Participants also learned that the NSC had made a decision based on the information presented in the document. We predicted that people would evaluate the decision more favorably when based on secret rather than public information and that secret information would be evaluated more favorably than public information.

### Method

Fifty undergraduate students at the University of Colorado Boulder (participant gender was not recorded) participated in exchange for course credit. Participants were asked to read a 1978
letter “issued by the United States National Security Council (NSC) regarding the proposed sale of fighter jets to Taiwan.” The letter was a genuine governmental missive written in 1978 by members of the NSC to Zbigniew Brzezinski, then the National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. The letter concerned a recommendation that the United States sell F-4 rather than F-5 fighter jets to Taiwan in continuing support of Taiwan’s sovereignty. The letter outlined various factors including the quality of jets, financial costs, and diplomatic considerations (Figure 2). Depending on random assignment, participants were either told that the letter had been a “secret document, for exclusive use by the National Security Council” and was declassified as part of the 2003 Freedom of Information Act, or that the letter had been a “non-classified, public document.”

To measure evaluations of the NSC’s decision, participants read that “shortly after [the] letter was issued, the National Security Council made a decision . . . based largely on information provided in the letter.” Participants were asked to make four ratings that we averaged into an index of decision evaluation ($\alpha = .83$): how much the decision was advisable (1 = inadvisable; 11 = advisable), wise (1 = unwise; 11 = wise), whether they would repeat the decision (1 = would not repeat decision; 11 = definitely repeat decision), and whether the decision made good use of the information (1 = didn’t make good use of the information; 11 = made good use of the information). To measure perceived informational quality, participants considered the situation at hand and rated how much the information was useful, important, valuable, influential, and accurate, all on 11-point scales (1 = not; 11= very) that we averaged into an index of information evaluation ($\alpha = .85$). Finally, as a manipulation check, participants rated how public versus secret the document was (1 = public; 11 = secret) and how many people knew about the document at the time it was written (1 = very few people; 11 = very many people), which we averaged into an index of perceived secrecy ($r = .53$), after appropriate reverse scoring.

Results and Discussion

Confirming our manipulation, participants in the secret-information condition rated the document as having been more secret and known by fewer people ($M = 8.86$, $SD = 2.02$) than did participants in the public-information condition ($M = 7.02$, $SD = 2.48$, $t(48) = 2.86$, $p = .006$).

As predicted, participants evaluated the NSC’s decision to act upon the information more favorably when the document was secret ($M = 8.20$, $SD = 1.29$) than when the document was public ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.60$), $t(48) = 3.27$, $p = .002$ (see Table 3). Conceptually replicating Experiment 2, participants also evaluated the information more favorably when the document was secret ($M = 8.19$, $SD = 1.01$) than when the document was public ($M = 7.51$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(48) = 1.91$, $p = .062$ (see Table 3). Finally, participants’ evaluation of the decision quality was closely correlated with their evaluation of the information quality, controlling for secrecy condition, partial $r(47) = .41$, $p = .003$.

These results indicate that people evaluate expert government agencies’ foreign policy decisions more favorably when those decisions are based on secret information rather than on public information. These results also replicate that people evaluate secret information as being of higher quality than public information. They further demonstrate that information evaluation is associated with evaluation of decision quality, consistent with the interpretation that people evaluate decisions based on secret information more favorably than decisions based on public information because people perceive secret information as being of higher quality.

General Discussion

The results of three experiments show that, in foreign policy contexts, people judge secret information as being of higher quality than public information (Experiments 2 and 3). People also
Figure 2. Document from the secret information condition in Study 3 containing a letter written by the National Security Council to Zbigniew Brzezinski regarding the sale of fighter jets to Taiwan in 1978. The document in the public information condition was identical, except the word “DECLASSIFIED” and secret did not appear on the document.
Weigh secret information more heavily than public information when making their own foreign policy recommendations (Experiment 1) and when evaluating governmental agencies’ decisions (Experiment 3). These findings provide evidence for a secrecy heuristic, a tendency to infer informational quality from informational secrecy.

We suspect that secrecy influences perceptions of information quality in at least two ways. First, secrecy may influence the interpretation and construal of information. Just as partisans can interpret the same information differently based on their partisan stance (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), people who believe information is secret may interpret that information differently—with greater credulity, for example—than do people who believe information is public. Second, secrecy may serve as an independent cue to quality. That is, regardless of the information itself and how it is construed, secrecy may be a simple cue used to infer quality.

A question for future research is whether perceptions of information quality by experts—in this case, foreign policy experts—are influenced by secrecy in a manner similar to novices. Past research on expertise in judgment and decision making offers mixed perspectives on this issue. On one hand, expert decision makers often hold deeper and more nuanced mental representations of a given problem (Chi, Feltovich, & Glaser, 1981; Glaser & Chi, 1988; Larkin, McDermott, Simon, & Simon, 1980), commanding a more extensive store of declarative knowledge (Anderson, 1983). A deeper understanding of both problem and context may render heuristic inferences of quality based on secrecy less impactful for experts than for novices. Furthermore, experts who are familiar with certain policy issues are more likely to hold strong preexisting attitudes toward these issues. Thus, issue familiarity and attitude strength, both of which are likely to covary with expertise, may override the use of secrecy as a determinant of quality. It is also possible that actual foreign policy analysts are less influenced by secrecy simply because they view secret information as less novel and less salient than people who rarely encounter secret information.

On the other hand, experts in contexts that frequently trade in secrecy (in this case, for example, those in the CIA, Department of State, and the NSC) may be even more inclined, perhaps in a self-fulfilling and self-affirming way, to value informational secrecy. To this point, there is concern that a “culture of secrecy” has been on the rise in the U.S. government over the past 80 years with relatively little oversight (Thompson, 1999). Jervis (1968) writes, “The CIA has developed a certain view of international relations and of the cold war which maximizes the importance of its information gathering, espionage, and subversive activities. Since the CIA would lose its unique place in the government if it were decided that the “back alleys” of world politics were no longer vital to U.S. security, it is not surprising that the organization interprets information in a way that stresses the continued need for its techniques” (p. 468).

Moreover, some researchers have argued that experts and novices alike rely on heuristics when making political decisions. For example, among samples of high-ranking national security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Secrecy</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Secret</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision Evaluation</td>
<td>6.86 (1.60)</td>
<td>8.20 (1.29)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Evaluation</td>
<td>7.51 (1.46)</td>
<td>8.19 (1.01)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
advisors as well as undergraduate students, Mintz and colleagues found converging evidence for a two-stage “poliheuristic” process of decision making in experimental foreign policy contexts (Geva, Driggers, & Mintz, 1996; Mintz & Geva, 1997). This, however, is not to suggest that differences do not exist between expert and novice political decision making. Others have proposed that, although experts and novices each utilize heuristics in political decision-making contexts, experts differ in their increased ability to apply the right heuristic to the right decision-making context (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Sniderman et al., 1991). It has also been suggested that political experts draw on a larger store of relevant heuristics when making decisions. Whether, and under what conditions, the secrecy heuristic factors into the decision-making practices of real-world intelligence analysts is an important question for future research to address.

Future research may also examine the ways in which individual differences in cognitive processing styles and personality may moderate people’s use of the secrecy heuristic. For instance, people who are more inclined to engage in cognition or reflection may be less likely to use the secrecy heuristic (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Frederick, 2005). Or, people who possess a high social dominance orientation (SDO) or authoritarian personality may be more attuned to secrecy given their tendency to endorse “chains of command” and support societal hierarchies (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

One can speculate on the contextual and situational factors that moderate people’s use of the secrecy heuristic. For instance, are there cross-national differences in the application of the secrecy heuristic by the general public? Our studies imply that, among average U.S. citizens, secret information is used as a cue to infer informational quality. This suggests that when government leaders claim, for example, that secret information indicates that enemy nations are building weapons of mass destruction—and that military intervention is therefore warranted—citizens may be more likely to endorse their government’s position even though there is no opportunity for public vetting of that information. However, in countries where governments are less trusted than in the United States, citizens may be less inclined to use the secrecy heuristic. Even within nations, perceptions of government secrecy may be subject to change due to contextual factors. After episodes of perceived government mendacity (e.g., when Lyndon Johnson faced a “credibility gap” in the 1960s to 1970s), citizens may become more skeptical of government statements based on classified information. These speculations highlight the dynamic relationship between secrecy, public opinion, and context.

A final question for future research is whether inferences of quality based on secrecy improves or detracts from judgments and decisions, which invites a wider discussion of what is the appropriate role of secrecy in government. In the context of the present experiments, the nature of information was held constant and secrecy was perfectly orthogonal to quality, so there is no way to assess the quality of judgments and decisions. But what about beyond the laboratory? As outlined earlier, secrecy has undeniable advantages in some strategic situations, and secrecy is absolutely necessary in certain political contexts (e.g., in protecting the safety of public officials). Research by Tetlock (2005), however, has shown that the predictions of political outcomes by experts who have access to secret information are no better than the predictions of well-read individuals with limited or no access to secret information. If having access to secret information does not lead to more accurate judgments, it is difficult to imagine that weighing secret information more than public information would improve political decision making. Then there is the matter of how secrecy affects our evaluation of other’s decisions. Our studies imply that citizens view government decisions more favorably when told those decisions are based on secret information. For a society which values open and critical exchange of information, this should be a cause of concern and a call for further study.
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