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*Denison University*

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# How Do Student Views on Foreign Policy Compare to Professors?

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Paul A. Djupe

December 5, 2023

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Between climate change, US-China relations, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the current Israel-Hamas war, there are so many weighty issues in global politics for Denison students to think about right now. They have plenty of opportunities to do so as well, whether that be in the classroom, conversations with their peers, through exposure to different media sources, or from expert presentations in outlets such as the [Global Studies Seminar](#). All of these experiences ultimately come to shape what issues students believe are important, how worried they are about the outbreak of war, and whether they feel the Biden Administration is doing a good job in terms of US foreign policy.

When it comes to global politics, how much daylight is there between the average Denison student and the average international relations (IR) professor? Do students and professors have different views on foreign policy, or do they look at the world through a similar lens? I would expect there to be some differences. After all, IR professors and students have very different perspectives. Having once been a student at a small liberal arts college and now as a professor who studies international politics for a living, I can attest to how different my outlook is now versus 10 years ago. But, I'm just one person, and a survey of size  $N = 1$  isn't likely to be of much use in answering my question.

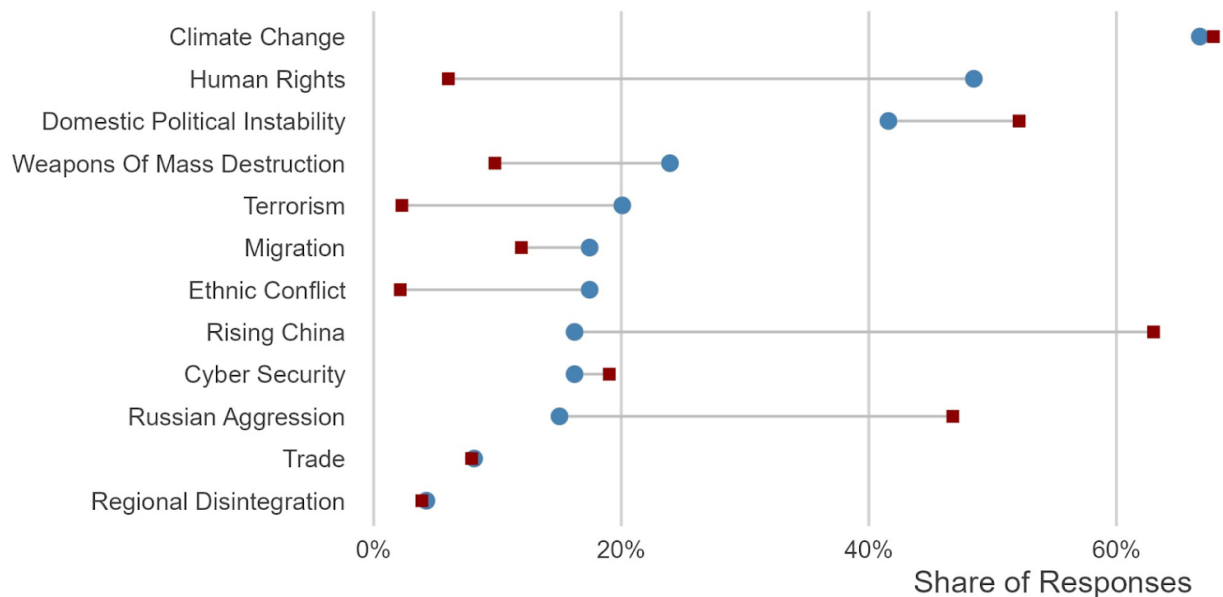
Thankfully, Prof. Djupe let me add some foreign policy questions to the recent student survey, which has many more data points ( $N = 504$ ) compared to my  $N$  of 1. Even better, the questions I had him add were actually borrowed from another survey conducted by [TRIP](#) (Teaching, Research, and International Policy), which is a research lab at the College of William & Mary. Starting in October 2022 and running through January 2023, TRIP surveyed over 5,000 IR scholars who work at universities or professional schools in the US, and they got responses from over 900.

Since all these faculty were asked similar questions to what were asked in the recent student survey, I was able to put together a quick analysis cross-referencing Denison student responses with those of IR faculty across the US. While ideally we'd want to compare surveys taken at or near the same point in time, many of the problems in the world that were salient at the end of 2022 (when IR professors were surveyed) were ongoing as of October of 2023 (when Denison students were surveyed).

Alright, let's dig in. First up, I wanted to check differences in attitudes about the importance of different foreign policy issues. The figure below shows the share of survey responses for both Denison students (blue) and IR professors (red) who were asked to indicate "the THREE most important foreign policy issues facing the United States today" from a list of several different options. As you can see, students and IR professors said an issue was among the most important at nearly identical rates in some cases. Climate change in particular stands out. Not only is it the most frequently picked foreign policy issue by Denison students and IR professors, but also, each picked climate change at nearly the same rate of 67%! Conversely, when it comes to the next most mentioned foreign policy issues, the differences are chasmic. While over 60% of IR professors picked the rise of China as a top three most important issue, less than 20% of Denison students did. Instead, the next most commonly picked issue by students was human rights, at a rate of just under 50%. Only 6% of IR professors agree. A similar cleavage exists on Russian aggression against its neighbors (such as Ukraine). While north of 46% of IR professors think Russian aggression is a top three issue, only 15% of Denison students think the same.

## What foreign policy issues are Denison students concerned about?

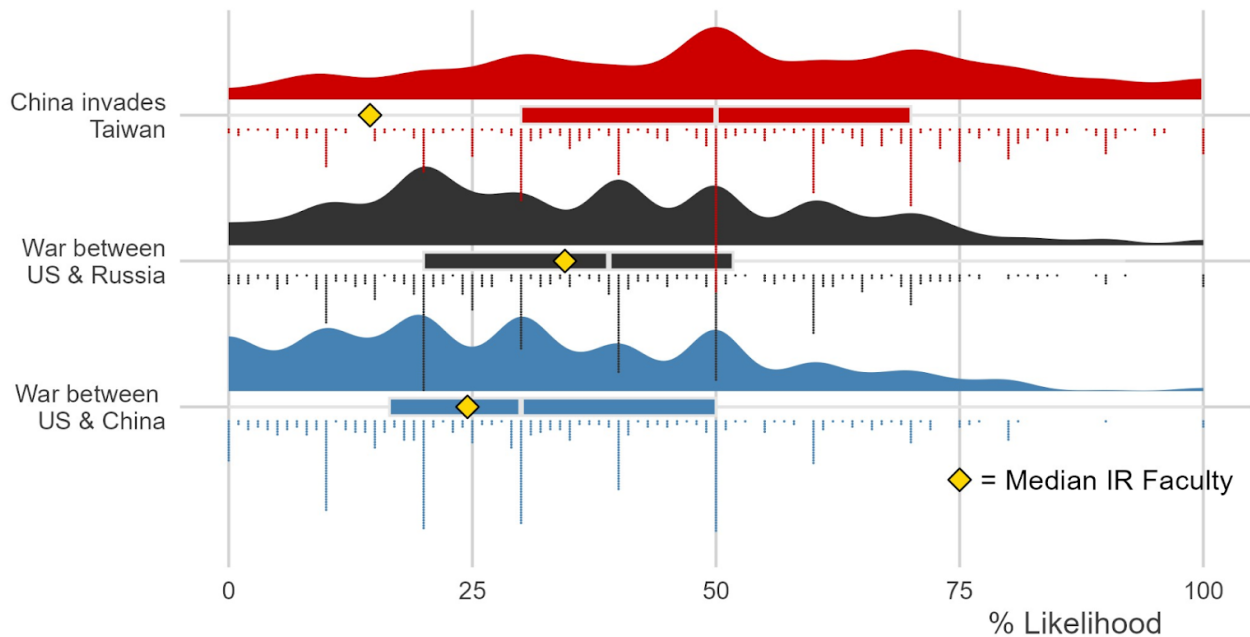
*Students* versus *IR professors*



There are also some interesting differences between IR professors and Denison students on their beliefs about how likely certain conflicts are in the future. The next figure is a raincloud plot that shows the distribution of student responses to a question that asked them to indicate on a scale from 0 to 100 how likely the following wars are: (1) war between the US and China in the next decade, (2) war between the US and Russia in the next decade, and (3) a Chinese invasion of Taiwan in the next year. The median IR professor response is indicated using a gold diamond. In general, students are way more concerned than IR

professors that these conflicts will become a reality in the near future. This is especially true in the case of China invading Taiwan. While the median Denison student indicated a 50% chance that China invades Taiwan in the next year, the median IR professor put the chances at closer to 15%.

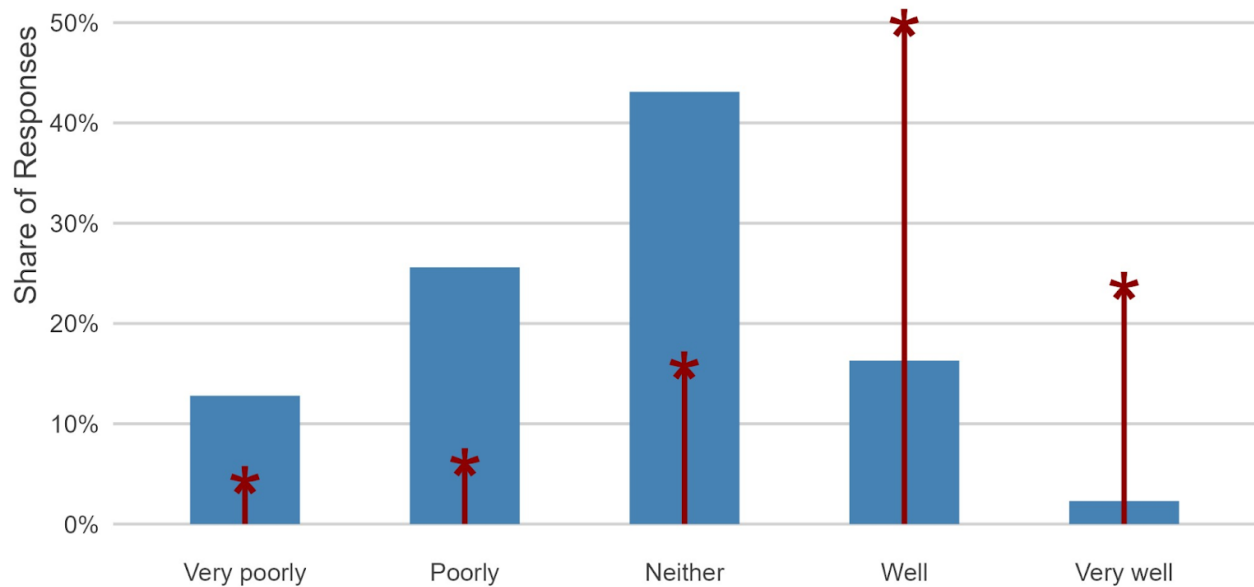
## How likely do Denison students think the following conflicts are in the next 10 years?



For one final figure, I wanted to compare how Denison students and IR professors think President Biden is doing in foreign policy. The following figure is a bar chart that shows how each rated how Biden has been doing over the past three years on a scale from “very poorly” to “very well.” It’s clear from the data that Denison students are way more critical of Biden than IR professors. While 38% of students feel Biden is doing poorly or very poorly in foreign policy, only 18% feel he is doing well or very well. Conversely, over 73% of IR professors think Biden is doing well or very well, whereas only 10% think he’s doing poorly or very poorly. That’s quite the difference!

# How do Denison students think Biden has performed in foreign policy the last 3 years?

*Students* versus *IR professors*



These results only raise more questions for me. Why are Denison students so critical of Biden's foreign policy? Why are they so worried about China invading Taiwan? At the same time, why are they so unconcerned about a rising China? Some recency bias among students as a result of the recent escalation between Israel and Hamas could explain some of these differences (especially students' much higher concern for human rights than IR professors'). Unfortunately, since these surveys weren't done at quite the same time, it's hard to say. I look forward to trying to find answers to these questions (and more) in my courses: War, Wealth, and World Politics (DPR 190) and Death, Destruction, and Data (DPR 390).

*Miles D. Williams ("DrDr") is an avid gym rat and wannabe metal guitarist who teaches courses for Data for Political Research. He tries to talk about his research on Twitter (it's not "X"), but could do better.*