

# Public Opinion, Democratic Accountability and Evaluation of Defence (OPIDEF)

Defence is a key public policy of our modern states. Yet, we do not know much about the perceptions, preferences and expectations of the public about it. The consequences of such data scarcity are twofold. First, it prevents scholars from understanding how attitudes towards defence are structured. Second, it prevents them from assessing the alignment between defence policies and citizens' preferences. This is problematic for a domain already characterised by a lack of democratic scrutiny. Combining insights from public policy, public opinion studies and cognitive sciences, we conduct a series of small-scale survey experiments to fill this gap.

## Research objectives

**RO1.** The first objective of OPIDEF is methodological. Overall, we seek to improve the quality of how we measure opinions on defence-related issues as well as our understanding of how citizens form their attitudes on issues that are often said to be remote from their daily preoccupations.

**RO2.** We argue that defence is a multidimensional policy that cannot be restricted to its most sensational component, that is the use of force. We investigate the variations of attitudes towards different aspects of defence, and analyse the relationship between those attitudes and broader political values.

**RO3.** We conduct our experiments in France, Germany and the United Kingdom. These countries vary in their military power, professionalisation of their armed forces, participation to multilateral operations, etc. The third objective is hence to examine the influence of what one might call a national "strategic culture" on attitudes towards defence policies.

## Study 1: Mapping defence issues in France, Germany and the UK

**Main research objectives:** The goal of this study is to document the variability of defence issues on different attribute dimensions: obtrusiveness, emotional intensity, concreteness, and relevance (i.e. the perceived importance for the society). A fifth dimension refers to the respondents' feeling of being informed (awareness).

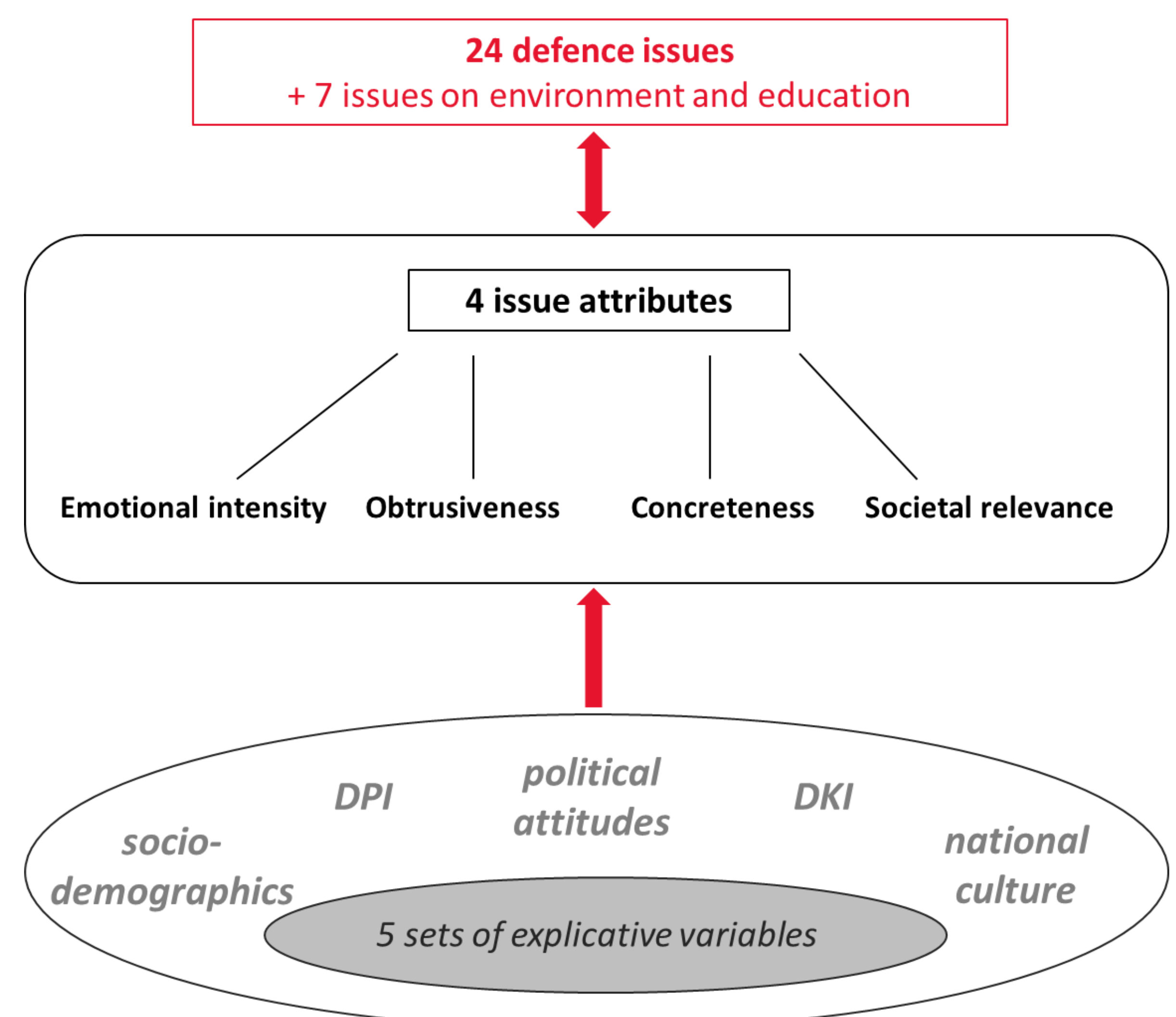
Furthermore, we aim at testing the existence of national differences between France, Germany and the UK as issue attributes may vary depending on each country's strategic culture.

Finally, we assess the influence of individual characteristics on perceptions of those defence issues. Besides the traditional socio-demographic variables and political attitudes, we introduce an original Defence Proximity Index (DPI) that measures respondents' links to the defence sector. We also assume that the level of knowledge affects those perceptions, and test this hypothesis using a Defence Knowledge Index (DKI).

**Methodology:** We conduct a survey using a representative sample in each country (N = 700 per country). A total of 24 defence issues, as well as 4 issues on education and 3 on environment, are presented to the respondents. Participants rank each issue on those four issue attributes plus awareness using a 6-point scale.

The DPI is composed of two subscales: one assessing the degree of proximity based on the respondents' personal and professional links to the defence sector; the second one based on their social connections to the defence sector (through friends, family or acquaintances).

The DKI is composed of 15 true-false questions, 11 of which are related to defence and 4 to general politics.



[Link to Study 1:](#)

## Next steps: Terminology effects, information effects & budget preferences

### Study 2. Does terminology matter?

Three experiments to assess the effect of terminology on individuals' perceptions and opinions on defence.

We hypothesise that the way defence issues are framed – in terms of "the military", "defence" or "national security" – could impact opinions on these issues independently of their objective content.

A first experiment focuses specifically on preferences on public spending presented as "military", "defence" and "national security" expenditures.

By analysing respondents' choices and reaction times, a second experiment aims to measure the emotional valence associated with the framing and terminology of defence questions.

A third experiment uses a word association task to measure the effect of terminology on the representations of political domains.

### Study 3. Does information increase opinion quality?

Four experiments to assess the effect of information on individuals' opinions depending on the defence issue at hand.

The minimalist paradigm states that people's opinions on defence cannot be trusted due to a lack of information. However, to what extent providing information affects individuals' opinions remains to be determined.

Each experiment tests the effect of providing information in the target question on respondents' answers, for a given topic, that has been selected depending on its attributes (cf. Study 1).

We hypothesise that providing information has an effect depending on: (1) respondents' level of knowledge; (2) the main attribute of the issue; (3) respondents' national culture.

### Study 4. Can choice shape budget preferences?

Five experiments to assess how constrained choices affect individuals' preferences on public spending.

Budgeting translates government priorities. Studying citizens' spending preferences is hence a good way to check if the latter translate in public policies.

However, opinions on budget are often asked as (absolute) preferences rather than (relative) choices. It could create a discrepancy between actual public preferences and governmental decisions. Constrained choices – between different public policies (e.g. education vs. defence) and between different defence priorities (e.g. a new aircraft carrier vs. soldiers' salaries) (cf. Study 1) – may contribute to making governments more accountable and more responsive.

## Axe Evaluation de la démocratie

### Lou SAFRA



Lou Safra is Assistant professor in political psychology at the CEVIPOF-Sciences Po and an associate researcher at the Institut d'Études

Cognitives of École Normale Supérieure of Paris. She is interested in the cognitive mechanisms underlying social and political behaviour. In particular, she adopts an ecological and evolutionary approach to better understand inter-individual differences in these domains, across both space and time

### Cyrille THIEBAUT



Cyrille Thiébaud is a postdoc researcher at Agora (CY Cergy Paris University) and an associated researcher at

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Friederike Richter is a research associate at the Universität der Bundeswehr München and a Ph.D. candidate

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