
Michael C. Horowitz
University of Pennsylvania and Center for a New American Security

Prepared for 2015 CCW Meeting of Experts on LAWS
April 2015
How does the general public think about the issue of lethal autonomous weapon systems?
Martens Clause and Public Opinion

• What does it mean for a weapon system to violate “the dictates of the public conscience”?

• Public opinion is one part of how to evaluate the “public conscience”, though not the only part
The Bar For Claiming That A Weapon System Violates The Dictates Of The Public Conscience Is High

• Hard to measure the public conscience

• Public opinion is often nuanced and malleable – especially on emerging issues

• Implication: Need clear evidence of overwhelming public opposition to be confident LAWS violate public conscience
What Do We Know Right Now About Public Opinion And Autonomous Weapon Systems?

• Existing research (Carpenter, Moon et al.) suggests autonomous weapon systems are unpopular and that the public supports a ban, especially in the United States.

• Is this true?

• Their findings depend in part on how they asked the questions.
• Survey details:
  • Sample size
  • The questions you ask
  • How you ask them

• On new topics where the public lacks knowledge, providing **context** is critical to gathering informed opinions

• Study: Ask populations in US and India questions about autonomous weapon systems to gauge support/opposition
Test #1a: Ask About A Military Intervention And Whether US Public Supports Sending LAWS or Humans

• Country: United States

• Type of sample: Nationally representative

• Date: October 2014

• Sample Size: 1000

• Concept: Respondents asked about a hypothetical military intervention by the United States and whether they would rather the United States use LAWS or US military personnel to intervene
Question: Do you support sending LAWS or US military personnel in a hypothetical military intervention?

- Support using human forces, 29%
- Support using autonomous weapons, 34%
- No preference, 37%

Public not significantly more opposed to autonomous weapons.
Test #1b: Ask About A Military Intervention And Whether The Indian Public Supports Sending LAWS or Humans

- Country: India
- Type of sample: Convenience (not nationally representative)
- Date: April 2015
- Sample Size: 300
- Concept: Respondents asked about a hypothetical military intervention by India and whether they would rather India use LAWS or Indian military personnel to intervene
Question: Do You Support Sending LAWS or Indian military personnel in a hypothetical military intervention?

- Support using human forces, 36%
- Support using autonomous weapons, 48%
- No preference, 16%

Public not significantly more opposed to autonomous weapons.
Test #2a: Ask US Public About Support For LAWS In A Particular Usage Scenario

• Country: United States

• Type of sample: Nationally representative

• Date: October 2014

• Sample Size: 1000

• Concept: Respondents asked directly about whether they would support the US government developing and using LAWS in a particular context
Question: Should the US develop and use LAWS to protect US ships, planes, and military bases from attack?

Only 13% oppose LAWS in this scenario.
Test #2b: Ask Indian Public About Support For LAWS In A Particular Usage Scenario

- Country: India
- Type of sample: Convenience (not nationally representative)
- Date: April 2015
- Sample Size: 300
- Concept: Respondents asked directly about whether they would support the Indian government developing and using LAWS in a particular context
Question: Should India develop and use LAWS to protect Indian ships, planes, and military bases from attack?

Only 9% oppose LAWS in this scenario.
So What Does The Public Really Think About Autonomous Weapon Systems?

• Complicated and depends on context: how you ask the questions and who you ask really matters

• Bar for claiming that survey results speak for the conscience of humanity should be extremely high

• Results demonstrate, at the very least, that it is too soon to say that autonomous weapon systems necessarily violate the “public conscience” provision of the Martens Clause from a public opinion perspective

• Next steps: Representative survey samples in other countries
For more information, including details on the survey questions, methods, or results, contact Michael C. Horowitz at:

Email: horom@sas.upenn.edu
Twitter: mchorowitz
Web: https://www.sas.upenn.edu/polisci/people/standing-faculty/michael-c-horowitz