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Zachary E. Griffiths

ABSTRACT: Retired United States general and flag officers participate politically as individuals and in groups. Purportedly, participation damages civil-military relations. But this article argues these activities, including but not limited to endorsements of candidates, do little harm to US democratic institutions and to the nonpartisan reputation of the military institution.

Keywords: civil-military relations, general officers, promotions, flag officers, political participation

With every presidential election, the public turns toward retired general and flag officers to see whom they will endorse. Senior leaders such as retired General Martin E. Dempsey and retired Admiral Michael G. Mullen have criticized these endorsements despite also participating in the political process themselves. This article presents the first holistic description of retired flag officer participation in politics. Drawing on the participation typology of Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, this research finds retired general officers participate politically in nearly every manner, individually and collectively.¹ It also finds, in contrast with other scholarship, that current levels of political participation by retired general officers do not significantly harm civil-military relations.

In 2016, Dempsey penned an op-ed in *USA TODAY*, encouraging professional athletes to “stand and pay it forward for what you think America should do” instead of kneeling to protest police brutality.² A month earlier, however, he wrote, “retired generals and admirals can but should not become part of the public political landscape.”³ Dempsey aimed his criticism solely at participation by retired flag officers in formal partisan politics, while he himself participates politically in many other ways.

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1. Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, “Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology,” *Human Affairs* 22, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 283–300.

2. Martin E. Dempsey, “Why We Stand for the Flag: Gen. Dempsey,” *USA TODAY*, September 18, 2016.

3. Martin E. Dempsey, “Keep Your Politics Private, My Fellow Generals and Admirals,” *Defense One*, August 1, 2016.

Political participation is more than just voting. It includes a range of activities such as “voting, persuading, campaigning, giving, contacting, attending, and signing.”⁴ In one guide for servicemembers, the Department of Defense authorizes “voting and making a personal monetary donation” but prohibits partisan political activities.⁵ In the framework chosen for this article, even engagement in civic life and abstention from politics are characterized as political activities because of the resulting political impact.

In Dempsey’s case, his wide-ranging civic and political participation certainly has political consequences. Dempsey sits on boards of nonprofits and leads the youth participation program of the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Jr. NBA. The NBA pursues political interests—new basketball stadiums, favorable regulations, and tax breaks—by donating and meeting with politicians. During the same election cycle in which Dempsey criticized his peers, the NBA contributed \$190,010 to candidates.⁶ Several authors agree “Dempsey’s Twitter feed, which never mentions [Donald] Trump specifically, seems to be a continuing sub-tweet of the president, hashtagged under ‘#Leadership.’”⁷ Through his political participation, Dempsey seeks change. Other retired general and flag officers participate politically as well. But does their political participation harm civil-military relations?

Beyond just endorsing candidates for public office, the manifest political activities of general and flag officers, their participation in civil society, and even their disengagement from public affairs have some impact on government policy and civil-military relations. The first obligation of military professionals is “to do no harm to the state’s democratic institutions.”⁸ Such harm might take three forms. First, political leaders may lose trust in the advice of military leaders. Second, increased public expressions of partisan views may undermine trust by political leaders in the military. Finally, the public may lose trust in the military as a nonpartisan entity.

4. Steven J. Rosenstone, John Mark Hansen, and Keith Reeves, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Longman, 2003), 5.

5. US Department of Defense (DoD), “FAQs Social Media and Political Activities-Guidance for Members of the Armed Forces,” Standards of Conduct Office, August 31, 2017, 1.

6. Center for Responsible Politics, “Influence & Lobbying/Lobbying/Clients/Client Profile: National Basketball Assn: 2018,” OpenSecrets, accessed May 27, 2018.

7. Tom Nichols, “Trump Escalates His Assault on Civil-Military Relations,” *Atlantic*, January 2, 2019; Carol Giacomo, “This General Doesn’t Mention Trump, but His Tweets Speak Volumes,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2019; and Paul Szoldra, “Former Joint Chiefs Chairman: Sending Troops to the Border Is ‘A Wasteful Deployment,’” *Task & Purpose*, November 2, 2018.

8. Marybeth P. Ulrich and Martin L. Cook, “US Civil Military Relations since 9/11: Issues in Ethics and Policy Development,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 5, no. 3 (November 1, 2006): 165.

The impact of retired general officer political participation is inconsequential—neither negative nor significant—in our large and diverse republic. Dempsey and other writers on civil-military relations scarcely mention retired flag officer voting, donations, board memberships, or abstention from politics. But they do comment on their endorsements of presidential candidates every four years.⁹ Despite these criticisms of endorsement, current retired general officer political participation does not significantly harm civil-military relations.

Retired flag officers are exceptional and ambitious former military officers. They clear at least six promotion hurdles to reach the summit of the Department of Defense’s “up-or-out” system. The military’s promotion process culls between 6 and 45 percent at each rank between O-4 and O-6.¹⁰ The services promote only about 3.4 percent of O-6s to O-7—the first general and flag officer rank.¹¹ About 82 general and flag officers retire each year with 28 to 35 years of service. This body is small: in 2017, there were 7,428 living retired officers in the O-7 to O-10 pay grade compared to 109,920 officers who retired in the pay grade of O-6. Despite receiving a comfortable pension at an average of \$91,432 per year, general officers often begin a second career in government, academia, or business.¹²

After leaving senior positions in the military, flag officers face frequent criticism for their employment and political decisions after retiring. Despite the variety of potential paths for retired officers, retired Major General Paul D. Eaton suggested about “80 percent of his peers took ‘less honorable’ jobs in the military-industrial complex.”¹³ Some experts criticize this revolving door because of “conflicts of interests that may arise in such a second act.”¹⁴ Beyond defense-related conflicts of interest, retired general officers may influence the opinions of active-duty personnel or the general public.¹⁵

9. Marybeth Peterson Ulrich, “‘Cashing In’ Stars: Does the Professional Ethic Apply in Retirement?,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2015).

10. Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MLDC), “Promotion,” Decision Paper (Arlington, VA: MLDC, February 2011).

11. MLDC, “Promotion.”

12. For the source of the author’s calculations, see DoD “Statistical Report on the Military Retirement System, Fiscal Year 2017” (Alexandria, VA: Office of the Actuary, 2017), 144; and Ulrich, “‘Cashing In’ Stars,” 102.

13. Paul Eaton (retired major general), interview by Zachary Griffiths, July 19, 2018.

14. Ulrich, “‘Cashing In’ Stars,” 105.

15. James Golby, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, “Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion about the Use of Military Force,” *Armed Forces & Society* 44, no. 1 (January 2018): 44–71; and Kori Schake, “Why Donald Trump’s Endorsement by 88 Generals Is So Dangerous,” *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2016.

The influence of retired flag officers on the military and general public concerns many commentators. Of the scholarly articles surveyed for this article, all but one criticized these endorsements.¹⁶ Arguments critical of candidate endorsements by retired general officers suggest a slippery slope from such endorsements to three outcomes.¹⁷ First, partisan activities such as endorsements may cause elected leaders to lose trust in the military's advice.¹⁸ Second, they may increase the politicization of the active-duty force.¹⁹ Finally, they may undermine popular perceptions of the military as nonpartisan.²⁰ The next section explores how retired flag officers participate politically and reviews recent political science research to see whether these concerns are legitimate.

Political Participation

Of all the ways retired flag officers participate in politics, only endorsing draws negative attention. For example, Dempsey participates broadly: voting, writing op-eds, leading for-profit and not-for-profit enterprises, and actively *not* endorsing. Other retired general officers participate differently, but they all participate. But, negative commentary focuses overwhelmingly on endorsement, despite the broad range of activities highlighted. Table 1 details retired flag officer political and civic participation using Ekman and Amnå's participation typology.²¹

Previous typographies of political participation focused primarily on formal and informal political participation. Ekman and Amnå recognize civil engagement and nonparticipation can be political acts, and they also recognize people participate as individuals and collectively. In total, their typology includes three forms of political engagement: nonparticipation, civic participation, and political participation (see table 1).

16. Clifford M. Bayne, "From Stars to Stumps: How Retired Flag Officer Political Endorsements Effect Civil Military Relations" (master's thesis, Air University, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2016); Steve Corbett and Michael J. Davidson, "The Role of the Military in Presidential Politics," *Parameters* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2009–10): 58–72; Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Military Officers Political without Partisanship," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 88–101; Richard H. Kohn, "Tarnished Brass: Is the U.S. Military Profession in Decline?," *World Affairs* 171, no. 4 (2009): 73–83; and Richard Swain, "The Obligations of Military Professionalism: Service Unsullied by Partisanship" (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2010).

17. Martin L. Cook, "Revolt of the Generals: A Case Study in Professional Ethics," *Parameters* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2008); and Corbett and Davidson, "Role of the Military," 58–59, 67–69.

18. Owens, "Military Officers," 97–99.

19. Swain, "Obligations of Military Professionalism," 16.

20. Golby, Feaver, and Dropp, "Elite Military Cues," 60.

21. Ekman and Amnå, "Political Participation."

Table 1. General officer and flag officer participation in politics²²

	Nonparticipation		Civic Participation		Political Participation		
	Active	Passive	Social	Civic	Formal	Informal ²³	Illegal
Individual	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Collective		X	X	X	X	X	

(X indicates some general and flag officers participate in a specific way.)

Nonparticipation

Some retired general officers choose not to engage in politics after retiring because they adhere to the military's nonpartisan ethic. *The Army Profession* reflects this ethic when it states "senior Army leaders have a direct stewardship responsibility . . . to political nonpartisanship in the execution of their duty."²⁴ Nonparticipation can be active or passive. Dempsey's op-ed criticizing endorsement is an example of active nonparticipation—a public statement against political participation by retired military members. Passive nonparticipation takes place out of the public eye. "The overwhelming majority of retired officers" refrain from politics to avoid politicizing the military.²⁵ Others may leave the military and not participate out of indifference toward politics. But they still participate passively—even those who eschew voting are likely to engage in civil society activities, which have political effects.

Civil Engagement

Civil engagement takes two forms. The first form is social participation. As individuals, retired general and flag officers bring attention to issues important to them in their interactions with others. For example, retired Major General John Batiste hosted a fundraiser to raise awareness about veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁶

22. I coded retired general and flag officers as participating in a specific activity if I found any evidence of that form of participation. I coupled this research with eight interviews focused around general and flag officer decisions to endorse partisan presidential candidates.

23. Ekman and Amnå describe this category as "extralegal" but "informal participation" better describes retired general and flag officer participation in this arena.

24. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *The Army Profession*, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2015), 45.

25. Richard H. Kohn, "Building Trust: Civil-Military Behaviors for Effective National Security," in *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, ed. Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 283.

26. Robin Kaminski, "Retired U.S. Army General to Head 'Stand for the Troops' Fundraiser Tonight at Mitchells of Westport," *Hour*, May 7, 2012.

Others participate socially by joining advocacy groups or identifying with a political party. According to the *Boston Globe*, 3 of 39 flag officers retiring in 2007 joined the boards of directors for nonprofit organizations.²⁷ The other form, civic participation, requires more personal effort than social participation. Civic-minded retired general officers attempt to persuade others of their views. Retired General Stanley McChrystal drew on his status as a “34-year combat veteran” when he argued in support of the Public Broadcasting Service as a “small public investment that pays huge dividends for Americans.”²⁸ Collectively, civic-minded individuals volunteer their time with social, faith-based, or other organizations.

Political Participation

In the final category, political participation, individual retired flag officers engage formally and informally. In their formal participation, retired general officers individually vote, donate money to candidates, and lobby. Retired General Colin Powell first donated money to candidates in 1994, only one year after he retired, and has since donated 55 times (as of January 2020).²⁹ Research reveals nearly 80 percent of officers with greater than 21 years of service voted.³⁰ Likewise, 18 percent of officers reported donating money to political campaigns.³¹ Beyond voting and donating, at least 7 retired admirals registered as lobbyists between 2000 and 2014 and lobbied on defense and transportation-related issues.³²

Retired flag officers also participate collectively through organizations. The Flag and General Officer’s Network, established in 1995 as a social club, is now a 501.C.19 organization “authorized to engage in active participation with the U.S. Congress and federal government” on military issues.³³ Other retired general officers lead or join the boards of directors for large nonprofit organizations that lobby the government. After retired Admiral Patrick M. Walsh left the Navy in 2012, he joined the board of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Foundation. That foundation employs a full-time lobbyist and donated an average of \$85,000 a year between 2014 and 2018.³⁴ Historically, the predecessors of veterans’ organizations,

27. Bryan Bender, “The 2007 Class of Retiring Generals,” *Boston Globe*, December 26, 2019.

28. Stanley McChrystal, “Stanley McChrystal: Save PBS. It Makes Us Safer,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2017.

29. Center for Responsible Politics, “Search/Donor/Colin Powell,” OpenSecrets, accessed May 27, 2018.

30. Jason K. Dempsey, *Our Army: Soldiers, Politics, and American Civil-Military Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 135.

31. Dempsey, *Our Army*, 133.

32. Center for Responsible Politics, “Official Position Lookup for ‘Admiral,’” OpenSecrets, August 1, 2018.

33. “About Us,” Flag and General Officers’ Network, “About Us,” accessed January 15, 2020.

34. Center for Responsible Politics, “Influence & Lobbying/Clients/Veterans of Foreign Wars/2018,” OpenSecrets, accessed August 1, 2018.

like the Society of the Cincinnati in the post-Revolutionary War period, have drawn negative attention. But today, veterans organizations are broadly accepted as part of the political process.

Informal participation, the next category of political participation, includes legal efforts to persuade political leaders. When retired flag officers endorse as individuals, they fall into this category. An individual endorser in the 2014 elections, McChrystal spoke carefully for only himself when he endorsed Representative Seth Moulton of Massachusetts and retired Major General Irving L. Halter Jr. of Colorado.³⁵ Other retired general and flag officers endorse collectively.

Following a political endorsement by retired General Paul X. Kelley in 1988, collective endorsements exploded, reaching their peak when 501 retired flag officers endorsed Governor Mitt Romney in 2012.³⁶ By matching endorsements with campaign contribution data, researchers found retired general officers endorse largely because of their social connections, suggesting interpersonal connections play a more important role in endorsements than political preferences or desire for material advancement.³⁷ This work built on a 2012 survey that found a significant though small impact of retired flag officer endorsements on low-information and independent voters.³⁸ Beyond presidential candidates, retired general officers collectively endorse around issues, such as higher physical education standards, support for the State Department, gun control, and nuclear missile defense.³⁹

The final category of political participation is illegal participation including political violence or terrorism. There were no examples of retired flag officer participation in these behaviors.

Retired general officers are citizens with interests. No one should be surprised when such officers engage in politics across the entire typography, both individually and collectively. Of the 11 forms of participation retired flag officers engage in, only collective endorsements garner significant criticism from military professionals and scholars

35. Martin Matishak, "McChrystal Wades into Midterm Races," *The Hill*, August 28, 2014.

36. Campaigns recruit retired general and flag officers from all ranks to support their candidates. Between 2004 and 2016, 110 O-10, 278 O-9, and 952 O-8 and O-7 retired officers made endorsements. Author's calculations.

37. Zachary Griffiths and Olivia Simon, "Not Putting Their Money Where Their Mouth Is: Retired Flag Officers and Presidential Endorsements," *Armed Forces & Society*, December 9, 2019.

38. James Golby, Kyle Dropp, and Peter Feaver, "Military Campaigns: Veterans Endorsements and Presidential Elections" (Washington DC: Center for New American Security, October 2012).

39. Tom Lisi, "Retired Generals Oppose Grand Bargain's Lower Phys Ed Standards," NPR Illinois, February 22, 2017; US Global Leadership Coalition, "Over 120 Retired Generals, Admirals, on State and USAID Budget: 'Now Is Not the Time To Retreat: The Letter,'" February 27, 2017; Veterans Coalition for Common Sense to Mitch McConnell et al., letter, March 14, 2017; and "Read: An Open Letter from Retired Generals and Admirals Opposing the Iran Nuclear Deal," Open Letter, August 25, 2015.

of civil-military relations (see table 2). This criticism may occur because it is hard to distinguish retired flag officer private political action from political positions taken based on military expertise. The collective nature of these endorsements, with headlines focused on the number of retired general officers involved, make differentiation even harder and at least partly explains the negative reception.

Table 2. Criticism for retired general and flag officer endorsements of presidential candidates by military professionals and scholars of civil-military relations

	Nonparticipation		Civic Participation		Political Participation		
	Active	Passive	Social	Civic	Formal	Informal	Illegal
Individual	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Collective	X		X	X	C	X	

(X indicates some general and flag officers participate in a specific way; C indicates the activity is widely criticized.)

Endorsement is distasteful to those familiar with Samuel P. Huntington’s theory of objective control, which expresses concern about the state of civil-military relations. In his op-ed criticizing retired flag officer endorsements, Dempsey argued endorsing a candidate is different than running for office because elected officials are accountable to the voter.⁴⁰ Also, individual endorsements from retired general officers open each individual to public criticism as their names appear in the media. This critique of political stances weighs on some retired flag officers. In an interview, retired Lieutenant General Daniel W. Christman expressed concerns his endorsements might undermine his position at the US Chamber of Commerce.⁴¹

Unfortunately, the media rarely highlights individual retired general or flag officer endorsements because these officers are not well known.⁴² Retired officers from the reserve component may be known in their state, but active-duty officers move frequently, removing their familiarity with hometown issues. Without connection to specific places, such endorsements are most valuable on national security issues. But these individuals are not well enough known to be picked up by the media as influential individuals. (Even Dempsey, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, leveraged his title in his op-ed on kneeling professional athletes.)

40. Dempsey, “Keep Your Politics Private.”
 41. Daniel W. Christman (retired lieutenant general, US Army; senior counselor for international affairs at the US Chamber of Commerce), interview by Zachary Griffiths, February 14, 2018.
 42. For a rare exception, see McChrystal, “Save PBS.”

Impact on Civil-Military Relations

Notwithstanding the relatively rare cases of political endorsements by individual retired general officers, concerns have been raised about the effects of these individual and collective endorsements. This article will now evaluate three theorized harms to civil-military relations resulting from endorsements. First, elected leaders may lose trust in military advice if retired flag officers endorse candidates.⁴³ Second, endorsements may lead the active-duty force to assert increasingly political views.⁴⁴ Finally, endorsements may undermine the confidence in the military that is rooted in the view of the military as nonpartisan.⁴⁵

The concern that a president may lose trust in his military advisors is reasonable. Presidents nominate the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from a small pool of existing senior military officers. Some evidence exists indicating presidents nominate politically sympathetic officers for senior posts when their copartisans control Congress, making it less likely a president will distrust the chairman.⁴⁶ However, if the president loses trust in the chairman, the National Security Council might make worse decisions or miss important military considerations.

Unfortunately for this theory, case-based research presents limited evidence that retired general officer endorsements undermine relationships between senior active-duty military members and political leaders. In a study on the impact of high-profile individual endorsements on civil-military relations, of six cases considered, only Admiral William Crowe's endorsement of then Governor Bill Clinton undermined trust between the military and then President George H. W. Bush.⁴⁷ Crowe retired as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Bush in 1989 and joined Clinton's campaign in 1992. After Crowe's endorsement of Clinton, Bush said, "I was pretty disappointed in Bill Crowe."⁴⁸ The study concluded that personal relationships between the president and senior military officers exacerbate or reduce trust concerns, but broader impacts on civil-military relations by endorsements are limited by the public's ability to "distinguish between the individual and the organization."⁴⁹

43. Owens, "Military Officers," 97–99.

44. Swain, "Obligations of Military Professionalism," 16.

45. Golby, Feaver, and Dropp, "Elite Military Cues," 60.

46. James Golby, "Duty, Honor . . . Party? Ideology, Institutions, and the Use of Military Force" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2011), 129.

47. Bayne, "Stars to Stumps," 57.

48. Bayne, "Stars to Stumps," 58.

49. Bayne, "Stars to Stumps," 59.

With the increasing number of endorsements since Kelley's groundbreaking first endorsement, military members may have taken a cue from retired flag officers to participate more. As previously mentioned, political activity of active-duty servicemembers is restricted by the Department of Defense.⁵⁰ After retiring, however, the political activities of flag officers may set an example of increased partisanship or participation for those still in the ranks. As more retired general officers endorse political candidates, some would expect active-duty servicemembers also to participate more.

In surveys of military members' political participation in 2004 and 2009, some scholars found limited evidence that participation changed during the period when endorsing became more common.⁵¹ These years align closely with the 2004 and 2008 presidential election cycles where 343 and 311 retired flag officers endorsed presidential candidates, the second- and third-largest number of endorsing general officers.⁵²

Despite the increasingly prominent role of retired flag officers in presidential politics, however, officer corps' political activities remained remarkably stable over time. On the subject of donations and public partisan displays, 2010 survey results "closely mirror [Jason] Dempsey's findings" from 2005.⁵³ These findings indicate "Army officers' political views remained intact and largely unaffected by combat deployments" and their active-duty service in general.⁵⁴

Although the negative effects of political participation by retired flag officers are limited with regard to high-level civil-military relations or as this participation influences active-duty servicemembers, such activities by prominent military experts might still undermine public trust in the military as a nonpartisan institution. Researchers proposed and tested a similar idea: cues from military endorsers about the use of force could influence a public with low interest in foreign affairs. Based on a series of surveys of 12,000 respondents, some research concludes endorsements can move public

50. DoD, *Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces on Active Duty*, Directive 1344.10 (Washington, DC: DoD, 2008), 1.

51. Dempsey, *Our Army*; and Heidi A. Urben, "Civil-Military Relations in a Time of War: Party, Politics, and the Profession of Arms" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2010).

52. Griffiths and Simon, "Retired Flag Officers," 2.

53. Urben, "Civil-Military Relations," 93.

54. Urben, "Civil-Military Relations," 152.

opinion, especially if an individual is Republican or the military recommends against the use of force.⁵⁵

A similar mechanism could work with public confidence in the military overall. Visibly increased political participation by retired general and flag officers might reduce public confidence in a nonpartisan military for those who disagree with these officers' positions. Fortunately, national polls have collected data on confidence in the military since retired general officers started endorsing presidential candidates in 1988. Surprisingly, the rise of retired general and flag officer endorsements corresponded with increased *confidence* in the military as an institution. Between 1988 and 2016, Gallup surveys report a 15 percent increase in the public reporting a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military.⁵⁶

Over the same period, the total retired flag officer endorsements in presidential election cycles increased from 1 to 180, with a peak of 506 endorsements in 2012.⁵⁷ Increased general officer endorsements are strongly correlated with confidence in the military. Though oversimplified and omitting other possible explanatory variables, a linear model with the count of retired flag officer endorsements on public opinion finds that each endorsement is associated with a 2.67 percent increase in public opinion.⁵⁸ While a causal relationship between retired general and flag officer political endorsements and public confidence in the military is unlikely, this provides evidence increased participation by these officers has not significantly undermined public trust.

In short, the impacts of political participation by retired general officers appears very limited and perhaps is constrained to cases where participation undermined trust in personal relationships between politicians and flag officers. As previously discussed, in only one of six cases did endorsement undermine trust with politicians.⁵⁹ Active-duty officers maintained a constant level of political participation throughout the period of increased participation by retired general officers. Finally, increased participation

55. Golby, Feaver, and Dropp, "Elite Military Cues," 54.

56. "Confidence in Institutions," Gallup, accessed August 2, 2018.

57. Griffiths and Simons, "Retired Flag Officers," 2.

58. Using *r* statistical software, the author calculated this linear regression coefficient with the dependent variable being Gallup's confidence in the military (great deal/quite a lot) from Note 57 and the number of endorsements as gathered by Griffiths and Simon between 1988 and 2019.

59. Bayne, "Stars to Stumps," 61.

by flag officers did not undermine confidence in the military but is associated with a period of *increased trust*.

Conclusion

Like other people, retired general officers participate in politics in a variety of ways for many reasons. Some of these officers retire and then abstain from high-profile political participation. The nonpartisan ethic inculcated through several decades of service pushes many in this direction. Others choose to participate in civic life, either individually or collectively. Leaning on their military experience, many retired flag officers write op-eds to influence policy debates or on behalf of organizations they support. Politically, general officers participate in nearly every way. A few run for office while most vote and others chose to endorse candidates either as individuals or collectively. A select few register as lobbyists. None engage in violent or illegal protest. In short, retired flag officers participate in political life like other civilians.

While the increase in political endorsements by general officers has been a cause for concern, recent political science research indicates the nature of current retired general and flag officer political participation does limited harm to civil-military relations. Flag officers are high-profile individuals who capture the attention of researchers of civil-military relations and the general public when they participate in collective political endorsements. Yet despite this participation, none of the theorized harms to civil-military relations has occurred.

Relationships between serving general officers and politicians remain firm. As of December 2019, the US Senate continues to confirm general and flag officers by voice vote—hardly an indication of mistrust in military officers by national political leaders.⁶⁰ Likewise, the active military is less partisan today than when party politics were pushed out of the military “by ending the practice of electing officers.”⁶¹ Today’s troops vote in elections and abide by policies limiting political expression. Finally, confidence in the military remains high, perhaps because of its culture of selflessness, absence from domestic politics, or its distance from the average citizen.⁶² Increased participation by retired flag officers has not impacted this confidence.

60. “PN1253 – Air Force,” United States Senate, 116th Congress (2019–2020), November 12, 2019; “PN1287 – Maj. Gen. Douglas M. Gabram – Army,” United States Senate, 116th Congress (2019–2020), December 18, 2019; and “Nominations Confirmed (Non-Civilian),” United States Senate, February 28, 2019.

61. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 93.

62. Andrew A. Hill, Leonard Wong, and Stephen J. Gerras, “‘Self-Interest Well Understood’: The Origins & Lessons of Public Confidence in the Military,” *Daedalus* 142, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 54.

General officer political participation has not undermined civil-military relations in at least these three areas.

Although available evidence indicates few challenges to civil-military relations, researchers must continue to investigate why civil-military relations in the United States remain stable while other nations suffer from military coups. Where Clifford M. Bayne focused on individual endorsements, future research should consider how senior government officials, the media, and the voters interpret endorsements and other political participation. Comparative analyses involving other countries could be especially illuminating.

Researchers could also consider why political participation is different for these retired senior officers. As private citizens, they are free to participate politically. However, discerning private political sentiments from those expressed based on military expertise is challenging, and retired general officers cannot escape their military credentials. Deeper understanding of this tension could help us better understand this participation.

Quantitative methods could also generate answers. As noted earlier, confidence in the military increased from 1988 to 2016, suggesting the public's view of the military is not swayed by endorsements. But there may be measurable changes in civil-military relations at lower levels. Textual analysis of Congressional hearings could indicate whether collective endorsements impact the policymaking or nomination processes. Finally, surveys could unpack assumptions about the interpretations of collective endorsements by the public.

Flag officers maintain high profiles after retiring, which may lead civil-military researchers to overly focus on their behavior. In other countries, retired general officers can wreak havoc. Fortunately for the United States, retired flag officers participate in politics like other citizens. This participation does not significantly harm civil-military relations. Barring major shifts in American politics, political activities of retired general officers are unlikely to significantly undermine political and public trust or politicize active-duty troops.

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