

# When Backing Down Is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs

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*How do domestic political conditions shape when leaders get punished for backing down in international crises? We explore how three factors—the president’s partisanship, the reaction of other elites, and whether the president justifies his decision on the basis of new information—influence the size of domestic audience costs. While standard theories in American politics suggest that partisanship should exert a large effect over voter behavior, we offer an alternative theory explaining why the president’s unique informational advantage following a crisis will mute partisanship’s effect on audience costs. We argue that the president’s justification for why he backed down, however, will have a large effect on audience costs. Using a series of original survey experiments, we find strong support for our theoretical argument. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for the role of partisanship, framing, and the audience costs literature more broadly.*

How do the dynamics of domestic political conditions shape foreign policy decisions?<sup>1</sup> International relations scholars have long argued that domestic politics shapes foreign policy decision making via audience costs: domestic polities can penalize leaders who appear weak on the world stage, which in turn shapes leaders foreign policy incentives (Fearon 1994). While scholars have explored how factors at the international level affect audience costs (e.g., Guisinger and Smith 2002; Schultz 2001b; Tomz 2007), much less is known about how the dynamics of internal domestic politics shape audience costs. Understanding exactly how domestic factors shape foreign policy decisions—arguably the most consequential decisions made by any leader—is of vital interest to scholars of both domestic and international politics.

Audience costs have a distinguished intellectual pedigree in international relations research over the last two decades. Existing efforts to understand audience costs, however, focus on how the international environment shapes the size and extent of audience costs (see, e.g., Tomz 2007). We provide a new perspective explicating the microfoundations of

how domestic political factors shape the size and extent of audience costs imposed on leaders. In particular, we explore how three aspects of (U.S.) domestic politics condition the size of audience costs: the reason the president backed down and his justification, the response of other political elites, and the president’s partisanship. We argue that the content of the president’s justification for his decision, as well as the reaction of political elites, will have large and consequential effects on audience costs. In contrast, however, we expect that presidential partisanship will have a much smaller effect. This may seem surprising given the strong relationship between partisanship and presidential approval, but we explain below how the political dynamic created in the wake of an international incident (when the public would impose audience costs) mitigates the effect of partisanship.

We test our theory using original experiments embedded in representative national surveys. We find only minimal partisan effects on audience costs. Only strong partisans—those with the most developed ties to the party—impose audience costs in a partisan manner, and even there the effect is modest. For

<sup>1</sup>An online appendix containing supplemental information for this article is available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/jop>. Data and supporting materials needed to reproduce the numerical results will be made available at <http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/mleven> by the date of publication.

other citizens, partisan considerations remain in the background, and concerns about the national interest dominate their decision, consistent with our theoretical logic.

We further demonstrate that the president can reduce or potentially even eliminate audience costs depending upon how he justifies his decision. When the president gets new information and explains why backing down was in the nation's best interest, the audience costs he suffers shrink dramatically. This is driven by judgments about presidential competence: when the public thinks backing down was the right move, they see the president as more competent, and therefore punish him less severely. The public understands that backing down can sometimes be the right decision.

These findings have important implications for scholars of both American politics and international relations. American politics scholars will no doubt be surprised by the dearth of partisan effects given their ubiquity elsewhere (Bartels 2002). Below, we explain what distinguishes a short-term international crisis scenario from other situations where partisan considerations are more prominent and explain the implications for broader theories of American political behavior. Our findings also have implications for how presidents will invoke national interests when framing both foreign and domestic policies, as well as the effectiveness of this frame.

For international relations scholars, the results demonstrate *how* domestic political conditions shape whether the electorate punishes leaders for backing down. While we are not the first to make this claim, we provide specific, microlevel mechanisms documenting how and why domestic politics shapes the imposition of audience costs. While international factors play a key role (Tomz 2007), so do domestic ones, including how the president justifies his decision to back down. Our work here lays the foundation for future scholarship to explore how variation in domestic institutions and elite arrangements shape audience costs more generally.

## How Domestic Factors Shape Audience Costs

International relations scholars have spent much of the last 15 years explicating the logic of audience costs. Audience costs are the punishments, in the former of lower support, meted out by domestic populations against leaders that make foreign threats

but then ultimately back down. Voters punish leaders who back down for two related reasons. First, backing down harms the reputation of the state and the leader on the world stage, and second, leaders who back down are seen as less competent than those who carry out their threats (Schultz 2001b). This sanctioning mechanism implies that domestic accountability has a direct relationship to the credibility of threats made on the international stage (Guisinger and Smith 2002; Smith 1998), both in democracies (Fearon 1994; Schultz 1998) and autocracies (Weeks 2008). Scholars have tested this logic by examining, for example, the linkage between regime type and success in international conflict, generally finding (indirect) support for the audience cost model (e.g., Eyerman and Hart 1996; Gelpi and Griesdorf 2001; Partell and Palmer 1999).

What links all of these previous efforts to understand audience costs, however, is their focus on the international arena. Existing studies do not consider the way in which the domestic political environment *within* states shapes the size and extent of audience costs. While the international arena is important, the domestic political environment has a tremendous influence on the size and extent of audience costs imposed on leaders. By developing an overly parsimonious model of domestic politics, IR scholars have overlooked important variation in the size and scope of audience costs driven by domestic factors. For example, Schultz (1998, 2001b) examines how the presence of opposition parties changes the credibility of signals sent by democracies—the existence of an opposition party and the potential costs it can impose signals the state's resolve. This is an important insight, but without a theory of how domestic politics influences audience costs, we cannot incorporate how the opposition party's behavior shapes how the public will (or will not) punish the leader if he backs down. Perhaps when both the leader's party and the opposition party back the leader's decision to escalate a crisis, the public will punish the leader less harshly for backing town. In turn, facing a different set of audience costs, this might cause leaders to behave differently. International behavior, then, is conditioned by domestic political calculations.

Our article explores how domestic politics shape audience costs in the United States. We explain how the factors that shape the aftermath of a crisis situation—the period when citizens would theoretically impose audience costs—give rise to a particular political dynamic that governs how citizens evaluate the president. By starting with the likely reaction of voters (rather than states on the world stage), we can

more clearly and precisely explain the microfoundations of how domestic political arrangements structure the logic of crisis bargaining between states. By shifting the foci of the debate in this article, we provide a new way of approaching audience costs.

We build on Tomz (2007), who uses experiments to show that the public does actually impose audience costs on democratic leaders. We complement Tomz, since most of his analysis looks at international factors (the level of escalation, whether the involved states are historical rivals, etc.), while our work considers domestic factors.<sup>2</sup> Here, we consider three facets of domestic political arrangement that shape the degree to which citizens impose audience costs on their leaders.

Our core argument is that domestic political factors condition the degree to which citizens impose audience costs. In particular, how the president and other political elites<sup>3</sup> frame and respond to international crises shape the degree to which voters impose costs, in the form of lower approval, on the president. A number of scholars have found that elite actions shape mass opinion, especially with respect to foreign policy (Gaines et al. 2007; Jacobs and Page 2005; Zaller 1992). Moreover, in the early days of a foreign policy crisis—when citizens impose audience costs in the wake of the president backing down—elites (particularly the president) have an especially pronounced informational advantage over the mass public. In turn, their actions become especially influential, given that ordinary voters lack other credible sources of information (Baum and Potter 2008). We therefore argue that domestic political elites will play a key role in modifying the size of audience costs imposed on the president.

We examine three particular domestic factors that could be crucial determinants of the size of audience costs: the partisanship of the president, the reaction of other political elites, and finally how the president justifies his decision to back down. First, a long literature in American politics suggests that the partisanship of the president should play a significant role in how voters' impose audience costs. More than almost any other factor, partisanship shapes how voters see the world (Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes [1960] 1980). Most research shows that partisanship is a strong determinant of whether someone

approves of the president's performance in office: copartisan approve, opposite-party partisans do not (Gronke and Newman 2003). One might therefore expect to see partisanship playing a large role in the imposition of audience costs. Voters should impose smaller audience costs on a president from their own party: their common party ID will lead them to punish him less harshly for backing down. In contrast, voters should also punish opposite party presidents more harshly.

We take a different view. The unique details of the audience cost scenario greatly reduce partisanship's influence for two reasons. First, because voters impose audience costs in the immediate aftermath of a crisis decision by the president, the public will be especially susceptible to the effects of elite framing during this period. It is the period when reality is most "elastic" or malleable, and the president and other elites can most easily shape the public's reaction to a crisis (Baum and Groeling 2010). Second, and equally importantly, the president has a unique informational advantage in foreign affairs, making him the most persuasive source on the topic (Baum and Potter 2008). We argue that the president, in the wake of backing down, will frame his decision in terms of national interests, appealing to broad principles rather than more narrow partisan appeals. The fact that the president is the president, rather than a Republican or Democrat, becomes the crucial factor. As a result, the mass public will evaluate him using this national interest criterion, wanting to support the nation (Tomz 2007).<sup>4</sup>

In effect, in the very short-term, voters respond to the fact that there was an international crisis, and the president responded in what he felt was the best interest of the nation. The crisis itself primes citizens' national identity, which causes citizens to see the president as the national leader, rather than a partisan political figure (Kam and Ramos 2008). This decreases the likelihood citizens' evaluations of him will diverge along partisan lines. This leads us to state our first hypothesis: *there will be no partisan division in audience costs (i.e., voters will punish same-party and opposite-party presidents equally for backing down in a crisis).*

The public's reaction to President Clinton's missile strikes against suspected terrorist-related sites in Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998 exemplifies how the mass public may react in a nonpartisan fashion in

<sup>2</sup>For a related effort aimed at testing the crisis bargaining model, see Trager and Vavreck (2011).

<sup>3</sup>When we refer to elites, we mean partisan political elites (i.e., elected officials with some control over policy; see Lee 2002; Zaller 1992).

<sup>4</sup>While past work has demonstrated Democratic and Republican voters do not differ in their willingness to impose audience costs in the abstract (Tomz 2007), we focus on a different question: the match between mass and elite partisanship.

the short-term to a foreign policy crisis. President Clinton framed this policy in terms of protecting American security (Clinton 1998), and ordinary Americans approved equally of his decision with no partisan divide (Kohut 1999). While this scenario differs from an audience costs type scenario—the President launched an attack rather than backed down—the key point is that when policies are framed in terms of national interests, the president gets additional leeway in the early days of the crisis and citizens' need not respond in a partisan manner. Citizens, at least in the short term, give the president room to conduct policy as he sees fit.<sup>5</sup>

Second, we also consider how the reaction of other elites conditions the size of audience costs.<sup>6</sup> If voters look to elites for foreign policy cues, the way those elites react should shape how voters react. While the president is the most important cue giver, especially in the realm of foreign policy, members of Congress also have a crucial role to play in influencing the public (Hallin 1984; Howell and Pevehouse 2007). Because ordinary voters lack the information needed to make a careful assessment of the president's decision, they look to members of Congress (who have information about the quality of the president's decision) for cues about whether to approve or disapprove of the president's decision (a process termed "opinion indexing," see Groeling and Baum 2008). The reactions of members of Congress, therefore, should impact the size of the audience costs imposed on the president.

We consider two different potential elite reactions. First, elites might split along partisan lines, with the president's party supporting his decision and the opposition party criticizing his policy. This sort of partisan division has become the norm over the past few decades, with the rise of elite polarization and the demise of the bipartisan cold war consensus (Beinart 2008; Chollet and Goldgeier 2008; Lindsay 2000; Wittkopf 1990). In keeping with our nonpartisan model of audience costs, we argue that this split

should only have a minor effect on voter's decision making. As we discussed above, the presidential framing of the decision in terms of national interest renders the partisan frame moot in the short-term: voters are inclined to see audience costs style scenarios in terms of national interests, rather than partisan ones. This leads us to state hypothesis 2: *when congressional elites divide along party lines, this will have no effect on how voters impose audience costs on the president.*

In contrast, imagine that congressional elites from both parties rally to the president's defense and say he made the right decision to back down. In this case, voters see the typical partisan response turned on its head. This type of unexpected (disconfirming) cue has an especially large effect on voters' decision-making processes (Baum and Groeling 2009; Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken 1978). In effect, it sends voters a strong signal that this is not a partisan decision, but rather a decision about what is best for the nation. Further, the fact that even the president's rivals supported his decision suggests to voters that the president did make the right call, which should lead all voters (regardless of partisan affiliation) to punish the president less harshly, thereby minimizing audience costs.

An example from Brody (1991) illustrates the powerful effects of elite bipartisanship in general, though in a context distinct from the audience costs scenario. Despite the fact that military observers declared the Bay of Pigs invasion to be a serious blunder, President Kennedy suffered relatively little domestic political fallout. Why? Both Democratic and Republican leaders in Congress spoke out on the president's behalf and supported his decision to send agents to Cuba. Ordinary voters cued off this elite unity and rallied to the president's defense. When both parties rally to the defense of a leader, his stock rises in the mass public. This leads us to state hypothesis 3: *bipartisan support in Congress for the president's policy should decrease audience costs.*

## Presidential Justifications

Our third and final domestic political factor concerns how the president justifies his decision to back down in the crisis. The standard audience costs logic, for reasons of parsimony, focuses on the decision itself, not the potential justification. What happens if the president tells voters that the decision to back down was the right strategic decision and can effectively

<sup>5</sup>This should not be taken to imply that citizens give the president carte blanche authorization indefinitely; our argument here applies only to the immediate audience costs scenario. In the longer term, we suspect partisanship will reemerge, though exactly how that happens is a topic for future scholarship. We lack access to a panel, which would be critical to seeing whether partisanship would emerge, or whether our justification findings might fade over time. We recognize this limitation to our research, and it is an important area for future scholarship.

<sup>6</sup>While some earlier scholarship discusses how opposition parties can increase the credibility of threats (e.g., Schultz 1998, 2001b), no previous work has considered the implications for ordinary voters.

communicate that fact to the electorate? Will voters still punish him? Gowa (1999, 26) suggests that leaders and publics know that backing down may be the optimal strategy in some cases, like folding in a poker game, so they will not always punish leaders who back down. Changing circumstances and new information might cause the president to update and reverse course on an international intervention—simply because a policy was the right one when troops were deployed does not make it the right one for today's strategic environment.

In that situation, if the president explains the logic behind the decision to withdraw to the public, and that logic seems plausible, will the public still impose audience costs? Gowa's logic suggests that audience costs should shrink: by reasonably justifying why he backed down, the president should cost the nation less credibility on the international stage and the public should see him as more competent. If the president informs the public that he had a good reason for reversing course, we expect them to not punish the president as severely. Hypothesis 4: *when the president justifies his decision on the basis of new information he received, the imposition of audience costs will be significantly lower than if the president withdraws without an explanation.*

## Experimental Design

To test these theories, we turn to experiments embedded within a nationally representative survey. Our primary experiment was included in a survey fielded by Knowledge Networks from December 17 to 30, 2008 (see below for details on the other data sources). Knowledge Networks uses random digit dialing methods to generate a true probability sample of U.S. households, but then administers the questionnaires over the Internet. Data from Knowledge Networks compare favorably to other probability samples (Chang and Krosnick 2009) and have been used widely throughout political science (Clinton 2006).<sup>7</sup>

To be clear, we acknowledge that experiments are not a cure-all for political science researchers, partic-

ularly given concerns about external validity. However, in this case, they are crucial. Because leaders issue international threats strategically, we have a biased sample of cases where threats are made but states then back down: we fail to see the nonevents where states avoid making threats they will not carry out due to the potential of audience costs. Direct estimates of audience costs therefore suffer from a serious selection bias (Baum 2002, 2004; Schultz 2001a). While indirect tests are an important contribution to the literature (see, e.g., Eyerman and Hart 1996; Gelpi and Griesdorf 2001; Partell and Palmer 1999), they are just that: indirect. Experiments provide the most direct way to test the logic of audience costs (see also Tomz 2007). Further, experiments also give us an enormous amount of control over the scenarios presented to respondents, allowing us to isolate the specific causal factors that shape the degree to which citizens actually impose audience costs on leaders.

Experiments, however, have limitations of their own, particularly external validity: do the experiments actually tell us something about the way real citizens impose audience costs on leaders? This question boils down to two related concerns. First, there is the generalizability of our sample. Our sample consists only of respondents from one nation—the United States of America. This means that, strictly speaking, we cannot necessarily generalize our results to other nations, with different partisan dynamics, political environments, etc. While this is true, two arguments render this criticism less relevant than it appears at first glance. First, given the importance of the United States in the international security environment and the international economy, understanding American behavior is a vital task. The United States has the largest military in the world and its foreign policy choices profoundly impact every country around the globe. Second, results from related work suggest that findings based on the United States also generalize to at least some other nations (e.g., Argentina, see Tomz 2007). Further, our findings and general approach here should lay the foundation for other scholars interested in generalizing our partisan logic of audience costs to other settings. While our specific results can only most directly speak to the U.S. case, other scholars can use our work to make broader statements about how domestic conditions shape the imposition of audience costs.

Second, there is the question of the generalizability of the scenario itself. A critic might argue that because our scenarios are necessarily artificial, that they will have low external validity and are of limited utility. External validity does not hinge on the

<sup>7</sup>Because we have a true random sample of American adults, the demographic profile of our sample will match (up to sampling error) the demographic profile of individuals living in the sampling frame (e.g., noninstitutionalized individuals over 18 years of age living in households with working telephone numbers).

experiment actually mimicking a real-world scenario: they key is experimental realism, not mundane realism (Anderson and Bushman 1997; Berkowitz and Donnerstein 1982). Our claim is not that a survey context perfectly mimics the real world: clearly, it does not. Rather, our claim is that our survey experiment has some experimental realism: it engages the same causal processes that are engaged in the real world when citizens make decisions about whether or not to impose audience costs on leaders. That said, like any single study, we cannot definitively establish external validity, but our results suggest how domestic factors shape audience costs and help to generate further exploration of this topic in other contexts. As an additional validity check on our results, we have conducted follow-up experiments where we vary our scenario in several different ways. These supplemental experiments replicate our key findings, suggesting it is not simply this aspect of our design that drives our results; see the supplementary appendix for more details.

Our experiment presents respondents with a scenario involving the decision to use military force (for a similar setup, see Tomz 2007). All subjects are told that one nation threatens to invade its neighbor, and the threatened neighbor asks the United States for military assistance. The president prepares U.S. troops to go to war, but then ultimately backs down. What subjects then see varies by experimental condition. We manipulate three factors separately, giving us a 2x3x3 fully factorial design. We vary (1) whether the president justifies his decision in light of new information (e.g., whether subjects are told the president's decision to back down is the result of new information that the United States should stay out of the conflict), (2) the partisanship of the president (not given/ Democrat/ Republican), and (3) the response of members of Congress (not given/ only the President's party supports his decision/ both parties support his decision; for the specific question wordings, see the appendix). After receiving the experimental stimulus, subjects are then asked for their approval of the presidents' decision using a 5-point scale running from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve" (see the appendix for full question wording).<sup>8</sup> If our theory is correct, we expect to find that the presence and type of a congressional

response (hypotheses 2 and 3), and whether the president justifies his decision (hypothesis 4) will all affect the size of the audience costs imposed in our experiment, but that the partisanship of the president will have only a minor effect (hypothesis 1).

Our primary focus here is on the factors that condition the size of audience costs imposed on leaders. To verify that subjects do in fact impose audience costs in our setup, we also include an additional "no action" condition in our experiment. In the audience cost experimental setup, the President threatens to commit forces abroad but then backs down. In the no action condition, the President never commits U.S. troops and says we will stay out of the conflict between the two neighboring states. This condition allows us a clear measure of approval in the absence of audience costs (given that the president doesn't back down, no audience costs are imposed). To be clear, we regard the existence of audience costs as established in the extant literature (Tomz 2007). We seek here to examine moderators that influence the imposition of audience costs.

To ensure that our manipulations actually succeed in changing respondents' beliefs about the world, we included a series of manipulation checks at the end of our survey instrument. First, subjects are asked whether or not the president received new information about the crisis and are then asked how the members of congress responded to the presidents' decision. The first manipulation check ensures that subjects who were told the president received new information are actually more likely to think that he received new information, and they are ( $t_{1154} = 18.6$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Likewise, subjects also correctly recalled whether or not they had been given information about the congressional reaction ( $F(2,2072) = 74.8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and conditional on being given information, about whether just the president's party or both parties supported his decision ( $t_{868} = 26.5$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These checks ensure that our manipulations succeeded at affecting respondents' beliefs about what the president knew and how the congressional parties reacted. In turn, this means that if we find statistically significant results below, we can be confident that they are the result of our experimental manipulations, and not some other factors.

## Experimental Results

First, we ensure that randomization actually occurred properly (i.e., subjects were actually randomly

<sup>8</sup>We use the approval item here both to be consistent with previous work on this topic (Tomz 2007) and to reflect the reality that one key way leaders will experience audience costs is through a drop in their approval rating. As we explain below, such a drop in approval ratings has real and significant consequences for leader's reelection prospects and for their legislative agenda.

assigned to experiments conditions) by using ordered logistic regression to predict assignment to each experimental condition (treatment assignment) as a function of demographic variables, partisanship, and ideological self-identification. If treatment assignment truly is random, then all of the variables should be jointly insignificant (i.e., we should not be able to predict treatment assignment). We cannot reject the null hypothesis that all of these variables are jointly 0 (the likelihood ratio test statistic ( $\chi^2$  statistic) is 4.6, with 9 degrees of freedom, yielding a p-value of 0.87). Thus, we can be confident that the data are exchangeable—individuals were randomly assigned to treatment conditions, and any differences we find between conditions result from our manipulations and not differences based on background variables.<sup>9</sup>

If our experimental manipulations work as we predict, our data should show several patterns. First, we should find that subjects do impose audience costs on leaders when they back down in a crisis situation. Second, and more importantly, we should find that our experimental factors should change the size of those audience costs. To begin, Figure 1 shows how each of our experimental factors changes presidential approval.<sup>10</sup> The column labeled “no action” shows that in the scenario where the president never commits troops (and says the United States will stay out of the conflict), 33% of the public approves of his decision. In contrast, in the scenario labeled “baseline condition,” the president commits troops but then backs down and approval of the president’s decision drops to 11%. In the baseline scenario, subjects are given no information on the president’s partisanship, the reaction of Congressional elites, or whether the president updated in response to new information. The public imposes significant audience costs on leaders—presidential approval drops by two-thirds (relative to the “stay out” condition). The public punishes leaders who back down and expend political capital on the world stage.

These audience costs have significant implications for a president’s policy agenda and electoral fate. While a president’s top priority is to survive in office (Goemans 2008), even short-term relatively small changes in popularity matter a great deal.

<sup>9</sup>For the results of the regression, please see Table A1 in the appendix.

<sup>10</sup>The coding of same-party versus opposite-party mean that we have excluded pure independents from our analyses (though leaning partisans are included, see Keith et al. 1992). Given that pure independents only make up 4% of our sample, rerunning the results including independents does not change any substantive findings we report below.

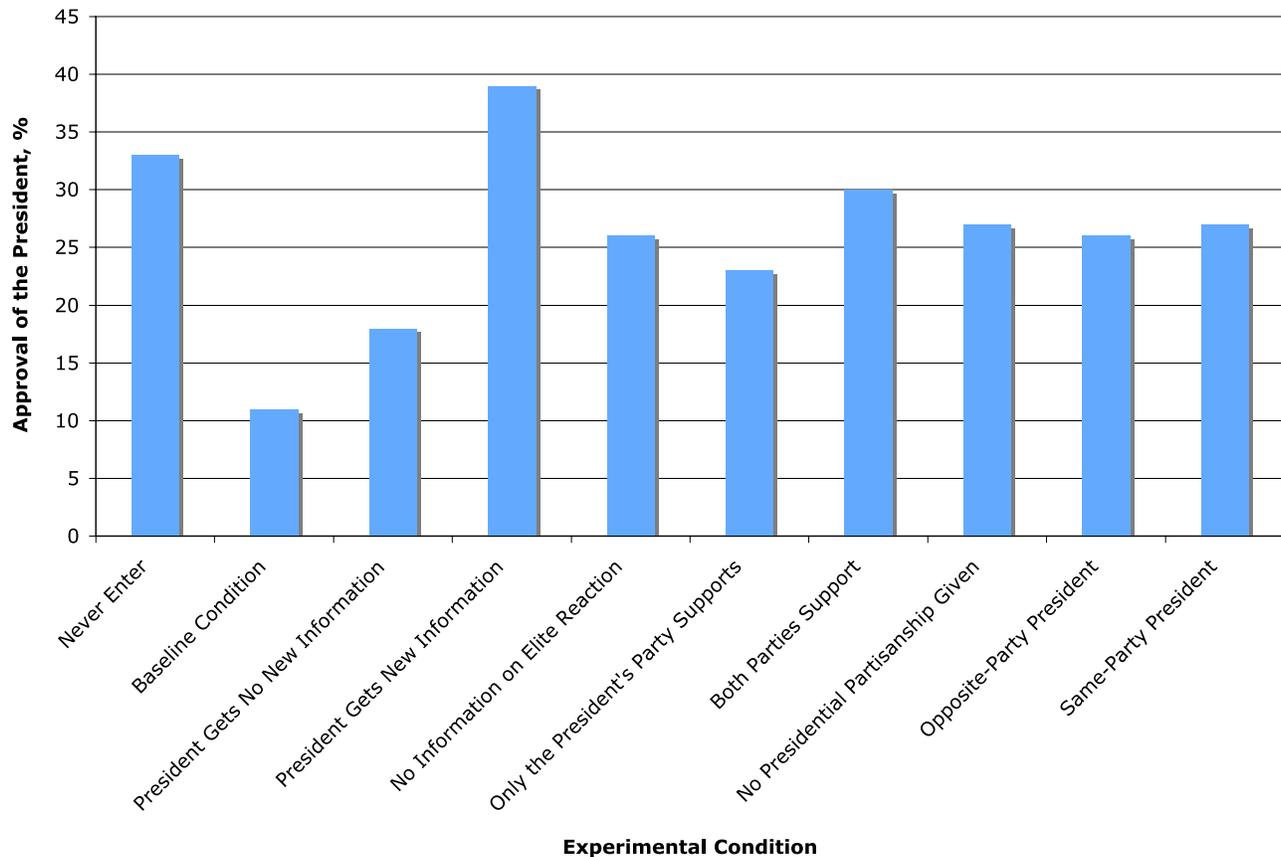
Presidents with lower approval ratings have a more difficult time enacting their agenda into law (Bond and Fleisher 1990). Further, approval ratings, including approval on foreign policy, influence electoral outcomes: when the public thinks the president has made poor foreign policy decisions, he suffers in the next election (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007). Consistent with this argument, when we ran a supplemental experiment that uses vote choice (rather than approval) as the measure of audience costs, we find that voters are less likely to reelect a president who backs down in a crisis (see the appendix). Large and statistically significant declines in approval ratings (or decreased probability of reelection) as the result of audience costs have substantial domestic political consequences for the president, even independent of any international ones.

Figure 1 also shows strong support for our hypotheses about how domestic factors shape audience costs. It demonstrates that audience costs appear to follow a nonpartisan logic, consistent with hypothesis 1: moving from a same-party to an opposite-party president only increases audience costs by 1% (from 27% to 26% approval).<sup>11</sup> Further, the president gets more support when congressional reaction is bipartisan rather than partisan (30% vs. 23%), consistent with hypotheses 2 and 3. Finally, the public imposes much smaller audience costs when the president justifies his decision to back down on the basis of new information, consistent with hypothesis 4: approval more than doubles from 18% to 39%. Indeed, note that approval here is higher even than in the baseline “stay out” condition, suggesting that in some circumstances, the president can substantially reduce or even eliminate any audience costs when backing down appears to be the right move.

To explore these findings more formally, we turn to an ordered probit analysis of our experimental

<sup>11</sup>Here, when we say audience costs increase (decrease) from scenario A to scenario B, we mean that the president’s approval is lower (higher) in scenario B than scenario A. This differs slightly from the technical definition of audience costs (the difference between approval when the president stays out vs. when he backs down), though we present those differences as well. Our use is consistent with the underlying concept of audience costs, however: differences in presidential approval as a result of his foreign policy decisions. Given that these shifts in approval affect the president’s domestic and international fate, understanding how various factors change approval ratings (and implicitly, audience costs) is essential to understanding the relationship between foreign and domestic policy. This is a relevant limitation to our findings, but even if our results only speak to variations in presidential approval, as explained above, these variations matter, so these findings are important on their own.

FIGURE 1 Approval of the President across Experimental Conditions



data in model 1 of Table 1. Here, we opt for ordered probit because we model approval on a 5-point scale (strongly approve to strongly disapprove; see the appendix for the specific question wording and response options).

The most striking feature of model 1 is the size of the presidential justification factor: when the president uses new information to explain that backing down was in the best interest of the nation, many more citizens approve of his decision. These results support Gowa's contention that if backing down seems to be the right decision, the public will be much less likely to punish the leader. Adding a series of control variables, including the respondent's hawkishness and prior military service (veteran status), in model 2 does not change our results.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, the reaction of congressional leaders to the president's decision also changes the president's

approval. Here, either a partisan or a nonpartisan congressional reaction increases presidential approval (thereby decreasing audience costs). While the effect of the bipartisan congressional response is slightly larger than the partisan effect (consistent with hypothesis 3), the difference is not statistically significant ( $p=0.92$ ). This is intriguing, especially in light of previous theories that emphasize the role of elite reactions in guiding mass opinion (Zaller 1992). We leave it for future work to explore this pattern more generally, though it does suggest that the specific nature of the audience costs scenario renders the standard logic less relevant here.

The president's partisanship, however, does not affect his approval. Seeing a same-party versus an opposite-party president has essentially no effect on approval—audience costs are largely nonpartisan.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>One related concern is that subjects are overly influenced by their opinions on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We conducted a follow-up study to test this hypothesis, and found that controlling for those attitudes did not affect our results (see the appendix for more details).

<sup>13</sup>Another possibility is that the large updating effect simply overwhelms the partisan effect. We examined this possibility by analyzing subjects who are not told the president updated, and even here, there is still no partisan difference. More generally, we explored a number of different interactive hypotheses, and found little support for them. See the appendix for more details.

TABLE 1 How Domestic Political Factors Shape Audience Costs

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Opposite-Party President	0.02 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.10)	0.09 (0.07)
Same-Party President	0.07 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.10)	0.001 (0.07)
Only the President's Party Supports Him	0.18*** (0.06)	0.17*** (0.06)	0.07 (0.10)	0.17*** (0.06)
Both Parties Support the President	0.20*** (0.06)	0.20*** (0.06)	0.12 (0.10)	0.21*** (0.06)
President Justifies His Decision On The Basis Of New Information	0.61*** (0.06)	0.63*** (0.05)	0.62*** (0.05)	0.62*** (0.05)
Military Service		0.01 (0.08)		
Female		0.08 (0.05)		
Age		-0.05 (0.08)		
Age Squared		0.006 (0.009)		
College-Educated		-0.22*** (0.05)		
Hawkish Attitudes		-0.05*** (0.01)		
Strong Partisan				-0.06 (0.09)
Opposite-Party President*Only the President's Party Supports Him			0.16 (0.15)	
Same-Party President*Only the President's Party Supports Him			0.16 (0.14)	
Opposite-Party President*Both Parties Support the President			0.03 (0.15)	
Opposite-Party President*Both Parties Support the President			0.22 (0.14)	
Opposite-Party President*Strong Partisan				-0.25** (0.13)
Same-Party President*Strong Partisan				0.19 (0.12)
Cutpoint 1	-0.66 (0.07)	-0.96 (0.21)	-0.72 (0.08)	-0.69 (0.07)
Cutpoint 2	0.21 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.21)	0.14 (0.08)	0.18 (0.07)
Cutpoint 3	1.08 (0.07)	0.80 (0.21)	1.02 (0.08)	1.06 (0.07)
Cutpoint 4	1.99 (0.08)	1.72 (0.21)	1.93 (0.09)	1.93 (0.08)
N	1895	1873	1895	1895

Note: Cell entries are ordered probit coefficients, with associated standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Consistent with our predictions, the unique nature of the audience cost scenario diminishes partisan divisions.<sup>14</sup> One might question whether this sort of simple experimental setup could ever generate partisan responses: simply saying “Democratic” or “Republican” president might not be enough to prime subjects into changing their attitudes. But previous work in other contexts finds partisan effects even from similar partisan manipulations (see, for example, Cohen 2003; Rahn 1993). Further, as we show below, this sort of design *can* generate a partisan response, but only under certain conditions.

<sup>14</sup>One additional way for partisanship to matter is for respondents to assess Democratic and Republican presidents differently given Republican “issue ownership” of foreign policy (e.g., the belief that Republicans are more competent in foreign affairs, see Petrocik 1996). We find a very slight tendency for this to be true, but it does not affect our substantive results, see the appendix for more details.

This suggests that our setup itself did not artificially induce this nonpartisan response.

But perhaps subjects only punish in a partisan manner, however, with extremely clear partisan cues. The clearest partisan cue in our experiment is when subjects see both a partisan president and the partisan Congressional reaction. If respondents see a Democratic (Republican) president make a decision that the Democratic (Republican) congressional delegation supports and the Republicans (Democrats) oppose, they get a very clear signal about whether they should support the policy. We know that more generally, these types of clear cues have a strong effect on behavior (Levendusky 2009). Even given the nonpartisan findings above, we still might find stronger partisan effects in this setting if we allow for interaction between the type of congressional response and the president's partisanship. Model 3 tests this hypothesis. Consistent with our nonpartisan

account above, however, there is no partisan division. Even given very clear partisan cues about whether to support the president, the public does not divide along partisan lines.

As one final test of the partisan logic of audience costs, we consider whether some types of partisans might be more willing to impose audience costs in a partisan manner. Our expectation is that strong partisans should be the most willing to impose audience costs in a partisan manner, because they have the strongest ties to the party (Campbell et al. [1960] 1980). Model 4 in Table 1 gives the results: strong partisans *do* react different to the partisan cues embedded in presidential partisanship. Strong partisans support an opposite-party president less, and they support a same-party president more, though this latter effect is only marginally statistically significant ( $p=0.11$ , two-tailed). Thus, there is a partisan dimension to audience costs, but it only exists for those with the strongest ties to their political party. More generally, audience costs follow a nonpartisan logic.

To further explore the role partisanship plays in citizens' decision to impose audience costs, we also administered a series of follow-up studies to explore the limits of partisanship in the audience costs context. Our first follow-up study showed subjects the audience costs scenario discussed above and then asked them to justify why they approved or disapproved of the president's decision (for a similar design, see Tomz 2007). We defer a full discussion of the results to the appendix, but we note here that subjects approved or disapproved of the president's decision because of the reputational consequences on the world stage. Partisanship—even when we explicitly signal to respondents that it is an acceptable rationale for supporting or opposing the president's decision—does not enter into most citizens' decision calculus. This underlines our argument above: in many scenarios, partisanship is not a major driver of how citizens impose audience costs.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Another objection might be that the timing of the survey, in December 2008, occurred at a unique time of national “unity” following the election of Obama or that temporary shifts in party demographics might skew the data. There is no reason to suspect this would systematically bias the results in either direction, but future research, which would occur at a different point in time, could test for this possibility. In addition, given the strength of general partisanship findings in American politics research, it is unlikely they could be totally eliminated simply due to good feelings over Obama. Finally, participants were asked about their general leanings, rather than who they voted for in the last election or their partisan registration, making this criticism less relevant.

We also conducted follow-up experiments where we primed subjects' partisanship in several different ways (see the appendix for more details). These sorts of partisan primes *do* generate a more partisan response. But this actually reinforces our argument: the context of the audience costs scenario matters a great deal. Some circumstances of the audience costs scenario depress the role of partisanship, but it can (of course) reemerge under other conditions. Our argument is *not* that partisanship never matters; it is that in the audience cost scenarios, its role is more limited than it usually is in standard American politics contexts.

Building on this logic, a vital topic for future research is understanding how partisanship exerts a larger role over time as elites debate the issue and clarify the parties' positions (see also Baum and Groeling 2010). We focus here on the short-term dynamics of the audience costs scenario, but the dynamics of a longer-term conflict will inevitably be different. The example of U.S. public opinion toward the People's Republic of China in the 1940s and 1950s illustrates how partisanship emerges over the course of a foreign policy event. In 1948, when polled concerning whether the United States should help Chiang Kai-Shek against the Chinese communists in the Chinese Civil War, there was no significant difference in support between Democrats and Republicans (68% Democrats and 65% Republicans supported helping Kai-Shek,  $p > 0.10$ ). However, partisanship grew in the 1950s, with a 1951 poll about whether the United States should do “all it could” to help Chiang against the Chinese communists yielding a significantly larger number of Republicans than Democrats favoring full backing for Chiang (50% Republicans versus 45% Democrats). By 1958, the divide had widened further. During the Quemoy/Matsu crisis of 1958, Republicans supported American military action to back Taiwan by a full third more than Democrats (33% Republicans versus 22% Democrats).<sup>16</sup> Over time, as Democratic and Republican elites divided over the conflict, and respondents took these elite cues, mass opinion becomes more divided along partisan lines. In the immediate aftermath of the initial crisis, however, there is no partisan divide. This underscores our point about the uniqueness of the immediate period following an international crisis.

<sup>16</sup>Data comes from surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (1948, 1951) and Gallup (1958). For information on these studies, see the supplemental appendix.

The evolution of public opinion during the 1991 Gulf War, a case where the United States did intervene, also demonstrates this shift. When elites divided along partisan lines and actively sought to highlight criticism of the President's approach, the gap in support among ordinary voters increased (Entman and Page 1994). By the time the congressional vote to approve the use of force occurred on January 12, 1991, an extended elite debate had exacerbated partisan tendencies. The Senate vote approved the use of force by a 52–47 vote along mostly partisan lines, pushing the mass parties apart as well.

Extended partisan debates drive apart the mass parties, a condition missing from our experiment.<sup>17</sup> Our scenario captures a different dynamic, one more like the elite-level debate over the war in Afghanistan during the first few weeks following 9/11, when almost all of the elite debate was framed around protecting national security, and little attention was paid to partisan or ideological conditions. As a result, our scenario, much like public opinion on Afghanistan in the early months of the war, shows little partisan split. In conditions like the evolving set of crises involving China in the 1950s, or the later debate over Afghanistan, support would likely look quite different.

Note, however, that our results are *not* simply another example of the well-known “rally ‘round the flag’” effect (Brody 1991; Mueller 1973), though they are similar. Both our findings and the rallying literature demonstrate how unforeseen foreign policy crises can affect the credibility of the president. Our argument, however, differs from the rallying literature in two main ways. First, past research shows that rally effects are, at least in part, the product of a lack of elite debate and disagreement in the early days of a conflict as well as the movement of Independents and out-party partisans (Baum 2002; Brody 1991; Groeling and Baum 2008).<sup>18</sup> Our results differ from these standard causes of a rally event. Given that we

observe only extremely muted partisan reactions, our results cannot be attributed to movements of particular partisan groups. Additionally, if this were simply driven by a lack of elite debate, then our effect should disappear when subjects learn that support falls along partisan lines. Yet, as we see in Figure 1 and Table 1, this does not happen. These factors suggest that our scenario is somewhat distinct from a rally event.

One could argue, however, that the audience costs and rally events literatures are deeply linked in a way not directly acknowledged in much of the previous literature (though for an exception, see Baum and Groeling 2008, 2010).<sup>19</sup> The audience cost logic suggests that when the president backs down, he forfeits the popularity boost he normally receives from the international crisis (the rally event). Our results show that there are circumstances when the president can boost his popularity even when backing down: namely, when he can appeal to national interests and effectively justify his decision on the basis of new information. This suggests that future research could explore the limits of these sorts of scenarios and more clearly explicate the limits of both the audience costs and rally event phenomena.

A further potential criticism of our nonpartisan findings, however, is that they rely on a hypothetical scenario. While our results help establish a baseline for understanding the domestic political logic of audience costs, we also conducted an independent follow-up experiment measuring the imposition of audience costs in two different scenarios involving potential military action by China against Cambodia and Taiwan, respectively.<sup>20</sup> The results showed that the nonpartisan logic of audience costs held even in these specific cases, demonstrating that our findings were not just an artifact of the general nature of our experimental scenario.

## Information, Justifications, and Presidential Competence

Beyond the nonpartisan logic of audience costs, our findings in Table 1 above also suggest the importance of why and how the president justifies his decision: when the president explains why he backed down and the reason makes sense, the mass public imposes far

<sup>17</sup>Unfortunately, it is difficult to replicate the attitudes created by extended debate in an abstract experimental setting. One possibility might be a panel experiment with multiple responses over time (see Gaines et al. 2007 for a similar approach). Further, though we ignore it here, how the media covers this elite debate is also highly consequential (see, among others, Groeling and Baum 2008; Slantchev 2006).

<sup>18</sup>Baum and Groeling (2008, 2010) offer a more nuanced account of the elite debate argument, arguing that it is how the media covers this debate that will be most consequential. While our experiment black-boxes the media for simplicity's sake, as we indicated earlier (see footnote 17), incorporating the media as a strategic actor is an important topic for future research. We thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

<sup>19</sup>We thank an anonymous review for pointing this out to us.

<sup>20</sup>For full details on the scenarios, please see the supplementary appendix.

fewer audience costs. Theoretically, this should be due to how the public perceives his competence: they see a leader who backs down when it is the right call as being more competent than one who blindly charges ahead into an unwise military conflict. Given this, we should find that when the president explains why he backed down, subjects should rate him as more competent.

We designed an additional experiment to test this hypothesis and administered it to an online convenience sample in the summer of 2010. We presented subjects with the same basic scenario as in experiment 1, but here we only varied whether the president justifies his decision on the basis of new information (see the supplemental appendix for more details). The experiment is therefore a 2x2 factorial design where the president either backs down or stays out (factor 1), and either justifies his decision or says nothing (factor 2). As in experiment 1, subjects rate their approval of the president's decision, but here, they also assess the president's competence. Table 2 tests whether offering this particular justification affects these competence judgments.

The results in Table 2 strongly support our hypothesis: when the president backs down but explains the reason—new information made backing down the right decision—subjects see him as more competent than when he fails to provide a justification (i.e., the interaction term is positive and highly statistically significant). When the president backs down but does not offer a justification for his decision on the basis of new information, only 17% of subjects rate him as competent. But when he offers a rationale for backing down, that figure rises to 43%.

We can also explore whether these judgments about competence mediate the effects of presidential justification on approval (i.e., do these competence judgments drive the link between offering a justification and approval?). Using Sobel's (1982) mediation test, we find strong evidence that competence judgments mediate the effect of having the president offer a justification for his decision (Sobel's test statistic = 0.29,  $p=0.001$ ). Fully 62% of the effect of offering a justification is mediated via the competence judgments.<sup>21</sup> Not only can we explain how domestic factors shape audience costs, we can also explain why and how they matter. When the president justifies his decision in the wake of new information,

<sup>21</sup>Like all mediational analyses, we cannot definitively prove mediation, and our results might be subject to standard concerns about post-treatment bias (Bullock, Green, and Ha 2010). We present these mediational results as suggestive, though further work will be needed to clearly establish these linkages.

**TABLE 2 Presidential Justification Due To New Information Increases Judgments of Competence**

Variable	Coefficient Estimate
Back Down	-1.22*** (0.18)
President Justifies His Decision	0.15 (0.17)
Back Down*President Justifies His Decision	0.60** (0.25)
Cutpoint 1	-2.33 (0.20)
Cutpoint 2	-1.05 (0.13)
Cutpoint 3	-0.24 (0.13)
Cutpoint 4	1.09 (0.14)
N	300

*Note:* Coefficients are ordered probit coefficient estimates with associated standard errors underneath. See Table 1 for additional details.

he gets a powerful boost in approval because it looks like he made the right decision and subjects see him as more competent.

Some might object to our results because our initial information prime is relatively strong—the president not only communicates his reasoning for backing down, but also uses new intelligence and the views of military experts to bolster the credibility of his argument. While this is a “strong” setup, it is crucial to have this sort of information to test Gowa's (1999) argument that the public will not punish the president if backing down is the right decision. After all, absent this type of justification, it is not clear that backing down is the right decision. Further, because no one had ever tested this claim previously, we were unsure how respondents would react if we did not include some sort of justification (in the form of new intelligence or information) for the president's decision. Adding a reference to military information also makes the appeal much more realistic. Indeed, Baum and Potter (2008) and Baum and Groeling (2011) both argue that the president's unique access to intelligence and military advice gives him the ability to drive how the public understands a crisis as it unfolds. Because no one else can see this intelligence/information, the president has a unique first-mover advantage in foreign policy crises.

To address the concern that our experiment conflated presidential justification and new information, we designed a follow-up experiment where we separately varied these factors. The results, fully described in the appendix, demonstrate that our initial findings are not just an artifact of the way the president justified the decision. Even a very

simple president justification, absent the reference to intelligence information, drove down the imposition of audience costs. In the future, scholars can more carefully explore the limits of these sorts of appeals, and how variations in presidential appeals shape the effectiveness of this sort of justification.

## **Conclusion and Broader Implications**

This study began with a simple but understudied question linked to broad debates at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy: how do domestic political arrangements affect the imposition of audience costs? Unlike earlier efforts, which focused on the international determinants of audience costs, we begin with how voters make decisions about crisis scenarios, and explain how the logic of the crisis bargaining scenario highlights the role of some domestic political institutions, but downplays others. In particular, we focused on three conditions: whether the president tells voters his decision to back down was done because he received new information, the partisanship of the president, and the reaction of congressional elites. These concepts have all been shown to be important drivers of attitudes in other areas, but have not been applied to the audience costs case. We use original survey experiments to test these propositions, and find strong support for our argument that domestic political conditions shape the imposition of audience costs. Unlike many other areas of American politics, subjects respond in a nonpartisan manner. Given the unique setting of the audience costs scenario, subjects downplay partisan considerations and emphasize the national interest. Further, when subjects are told the president's decision to back down is the result of new information, they punish him less harshly because they deem him to be more competent, showing direct evidence in support of the theoretical claims linking audience costs and judgments about competence.

This study has important implications for scholars of both domestic and international politics. For American politics scholars, the major implication concerns how partisanship does—and does not—matter in our experiment. Here, by invoking a national interest, the president prevents a partisan divide from emerging within the electorate despite engaging in an activity—backing down—that a majority of people oppose. If he can frame other policies in terms of national interest, we may see a similar lack

of division. This has serious implications for the conduct of foreign policy. To the extent that leaders can delay elite criticism by framing policies in terms of broad national interests, they gain additional leverage to pursue policies even if citizens may not be inclined to approve. Our results suggest that while citizens do impose audience costs, and their impositions varies systematically with the circumstances, presidents get far more leeway than one might have commonly assumed (e.g., there's little partisan division, even in an era of considerable partisan polarization).

But that temporal qualifier is crucial: as elites debate stretches out, partisan divisions emerge and grow in the electorate. So if the president can prevent elites from fracturing along partisan lines too quickly, this can give him increased ability to lead U.S. foreign policy. This is where presidential persuasion of elites, and not simply the masses, is crucial: if the president can get elites to support his actions, then the mass public may well follow suit, though more study will be needed to definitively answer this question.

These findings extend not only to foreign policy decisions, but to domestic ones as well. For example, note that both Presidents Bush and Obama framed the 2008–09 bailouts of the financial and automotive industries in terms of national interest, rather than more typical concerns about government intervention and free markets (Sanger, Vlasic, and Maynard 2008). This is not to claim that the president can simply reframe at will (Baumgartner et al. 2009), but if he can frame policies in terms of national interest, this can be an effective heresthetical strategy. That said, however, pursuing this strategy in the current polarized political environment may well prove difficult. Other elites will undoubtedly resist this framing in many circumstances, and future work should explore the limits of this strategy in both survey and natural experimental contexts.<sup>22</sup> Our argument about timing suggests leaders can delay the creation of a partisan debate, in specific circumstances, but probably cannot prevent such a debate.

Beyond timing, the general amount of partisan division may also affect how long the leader can delay the emergence of partisanship in foreign policy decisions. At times when divisions are low, such as the months following Obama's election, appeals to national interest may prove more effective. At times of greater partisan strife (for example, during the Iraq

<sup>22</sup>As a further complication, note that even the conception of "national interest" can itself be the subject of partisan contestation in the real world.

War debate), such appeals may prove difficult. The logic of our argument suggests that, in some cases, partisanship's effect will be diminished relative to other spheres of American domestic politics, but the extent to which it is diminished may vary systematically with the political context. Future work will be needed to investigate this possibility. Nevertheless, our findings are important for laying a baseline expectation of this phenomenon.

In terms of international politics, our findings suggest that the reason why the president backs down matters a great deal in influencing the imposition of audience costs. If the president provides what the public believes is a strong explanation for changing course, the public is a lot less likely to punish that president than they otherwise would. Our results are an important first step in this respect, as we are the first to be able to test one of the causal mechanisms underlying audience costs (i.e., beliefs about competence). More work, however, will be needed in the future to parse out exactly how presidential justifications based on new information shape the mass public's attitudes. In particular, more work is needed to see how often, and under what circumstances, the president will release information about his foreign policy decisions to the mass public.<sup>23</sup> These results also suggest that adversaries who can provide a democratic leader with credible "information" that makes backing down more palatable for domestic audiences may be more likely to achieve their goals.<sup>24</sup>

One possibility for future research is varying the type of information the president gives to the public explaining the decision to back down and the way that other elites react. Our scenario laid out what should have been a relatively persuasive situation—new intelligence information suggesting the wisdom of withdrawal. Future research could vary this condition and present the information as coming from sources (third parties like the United Nations, the U.S. military, U.S. intelligence agencies, etc.) that might have different degrees of credibility with the American public. We could also explicitly link the type of information the president gives the public with the congressional reaction. These sorts of explorations would help establish the extent to

<sup>23</sup>Another potential extension is to see how other actors use these types of new information based justifications. For example, some congressional Democrats argued that they would have voted against the Iraq War had they realized the weakness of the evidence justifying the invasion (Reid 2006). We thank an anonymous referee for making this point to us.

<sup>24</sup>This is related to Putnam's (1988) argument about two-level games.

which the president can explain his way out of audience costs.

Additionally, our results show that, just as in other areas of international relations scholarship, specific domestic political arrangements play an important role. Future research should attempt to further unpack the way domestic arrangements condition the imposition of audience costs, focusing specifically on elite debates and framing by the president. More broadly, examining the causal mechanisms by which the public evaluates presidential behavior in the international realm is crucial to understanding not just audience costs, but foreign policy decision making more broadly.

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