

The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party

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We analyze the first large-scale, randomized experiment to measure presidential approval levels at all outcomes of a canonical international crisis-bargaining model, thereby avoiding problems of strategic selection in evaluating presidential incentives. We find support for several assumptions made in the crisis-bargaining literature, including that a concession from a foreign state leads to higher approval levels than other outcomes, that the magnitudes of audience costs are under presidential control prior to the initiation of hostilities, and that these costs can be made so large that presidents have incentive to fight wars they will not win. Thus, the credibility of democratic threats can be made extremely high. We also find, however, that partisan cues strongly condition presidential incentives. Party elites have incentives to behave according to type in Congress and contrary to type in the Oval Office, and Democratic presidents sometimes have incentives to fight wars they will not win.

In 1971, U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger advised President Richard Nixon to postpone ending the Vietnam War and withdrawing U.S. troops, “so that if any bad results follow they will be too late to affect the [1972] election” (quoted from White House tapes in Dallek 2007, 257).¹ Foreign policy decisions are sometimes shaped by expectations about domestic public opinion.² But in models of international crisis bargaining, the incentives of leaders are assumed largely to correspond to the material results of the crisis; and even when domestic electoral competition is modeled explicitly, it is assumed that leaders’ utilities (as derived from domestic pressures) correlate directly with objective outcomes.³ In this article, we question these assumptions and demonstrate conditions under which they can and cannot be supported, paying particular attention to the rhetoric leaders use when they make initial, preengage-

ment threats of force and the way party cues and partisanship affect public reactions to crisis outcomes. By empirically measuring presidential approval at every crisis outcome, including war, we have a full set of comparisons with which to illustrate the congruence and incongruence between material outcomes and domestic pressures in terms of incentives.

We investigate the relationship between these two sets of incentives using two large, randomized survey experiments conducted on representative samples of the population. In a previous experimental investigation of the topic, Tomz (2007) demonstrates that audience costs exist but does not evaluate the magnitude of these costs relative to the costs of going to war—thus leaving key questions about the credibility of threats by democratic leaders unanswered. For example, if the political costs of conflict are higher than the costs of backing down

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¹Data used in this study as well as an online appendix can be obtained at <http://www.roberttrager.com/>.

²Empirical analyses of the relationship between presidential political incentives and crisis decision making include Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2009), Tomz (2007), Chiozza and Goemans (2003, 2004), Schultz (2005), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (1999, 2003), Mueller (1973), DeNardo (1995), Stam (1999), Berinsky (2009), Holsti (2004), James and Oneal (1991), Jentlesen (1992), Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1997), Gaubatz (1991), Baum (2002), Gartner and Segura (1998), Bennett and Stam (1998), and Leeds (1997). The literature on general rally-round-the-flag effects and war popularity is particularly large and is addressed further below.

³See, for instance, Schultz (2001a), Smith (1998), Ramsay (2004), and Milner (1997).

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after a threat, the credibility of threats to use force will be much less than otherwise. Our investigation fills this gap, providing an estimate of the consequences of backing down after a threat *relative to all other crisis options*, not just relative to staying out of the conflict (the audience cost). Consistent with Fearon (1994, 1997), we show that audience costs can be made so large, relative to the declines in approval that come from fighting a war, that in some circumstances presidents are sure to prefer fighting wars they *will not win*. This implies that the credibility of threats can be made extremely high, and also that elite incentives based on domestic approval do not always mimic incentives derived from objective, material outcomes.

Our contribution is fourfold. First, we demonstrate that presidents can shape the magnitude of audience costs in the preengagement stage of crises through their rhetoric alone; second, as described above, we assess the credibility of these threats by investigating approval levels at every possible crisis outcome including war. By comparing the audience cost to the costs of fighting a successful or unsuccessful war (after making a threat), we provide an initial empirical comparison of backing down versus fighting a losing (or winning) war in terms of domestic pressures. Third, we test a set of assumptions that are common to nearly all models in the extensive crisis-bargaining literature. Finally, we account for the role of the president's party and the partisanship of voters in conditioning domestic approval ratings at each crisis outcome.

We begin with a simple question: how exactly can audience costs be made large or small? Tomz (2007) tests two possibilities: that audience costs associated with verbal threats are increased through displays of force *prior* to conflict, or that audience costs are increased when countries back down *after* a conflict has begun. Tomz (2007) finds evidence for the latter, but no evidence that audience cost magnitude is under presidential control *prior* to the initiation of hostilities. Thus, Tomz's results suggest that models such as Fearon (1994), in which leaders choose levels of increasing escalation by incurring ever-greater audience costs, do not represent international crisis bargaining very well. We focus the investigative light more sharply on whether presidents can control audience cost magnitude in order to signal resolve or tie hands *prior* to *actual conflict*. Our results indicate that the magnitude of audience costs are indeed under direct presidential control based on the rhetoric or language that presidents use when issuing threats. Vague threats, relative to specific ones, yield lower audience costs if left unfulfilled. In other words, we show that presidents do not have to engage the enemy militarily in order to increase the penalties that come from backing down—they just have to choose more dramatic, specific language.

Introducing the Role of Partisanship

While crisis outcome and presidential rhetoric affect presidential approval, these affects are mediated by party cues. We examine the role of partisanship at three levels—allowing the party of the leader, the partisan affiliations of voters, and the involvement of the opposition party in government to affect the incentives of leaders in a typical crisis-bargaining framework. Although we find no partisan effects on the basic audience cost relationship, we do find that partisanship plays an important role in structuring the reaction of voters and the incentives of leaders when the choice about whether to go to war is involved. Thus, while Americans dislike any president who goes back on his word, when a president keeps his word and goes to war, the outcome is judged differently depending on whether the president is a Democrat or a Republican. In fact, swings in voter support that turn on political cues are sometimes greater than the effects of objective changes, including whether the war is prosecuted successfully.

Our results are largely consistent with a simple theory of partisan cues. Democratic presidents have higher levels of approval than Republican presidents following lost wars, and Republican presidents have higher approval after peaceful crisis outcomes, specifically among independent voters. Similarly, support from Republicans in Congress increases presidential approval for Democratic presidents who choose peaceful options while support from Democrats in Congress increases approval only of Republican presidents who go to war. Thus, executives of the two parties face different incentives in international crises. Incredibly, particularly when the opposition in Congress is critical of the president's policies, Democratic presidents have incentives to fight losing wars that achieve nothing rather than remain out of crises. Republican presidents, by contrast, have strong incentives to stay out of losing wars. This incentive of party actors to behave according to type in Congress and contrary to type in the Oval Office may explain why international policy often changes little as a result of partisan turnover.

Before we turn to a discussion of the hypotheses to be tested, we want to say a quick word about domestic approval ratings and the incentives of leaders. It is nearly impossible to infer presidential preferences from observational data because of strategic selection effects and other factors. In an experimental setting, although we cannot evaluate presidential preferences directly, we can analyze the factors that affect levels of presidential approval. These levels have a close relationship to the

probabilities of election of leaders and parties.⁴ Since we expect politicians in democracies to be motivated by the prospects for election, we expect approval ratings to be an important factor in determining presidential objectives. In this article, therefore, for expositional simplicity, we sometimes treat presidential approval ratings as synonymous with presidential preferences. If we find that the ordering of decision-maker preferences over outcomes assumed in current models is different from the ordering of presidential approval ratings over those same outcomes, for instance, we will say that the assumptions of the model are not supported.

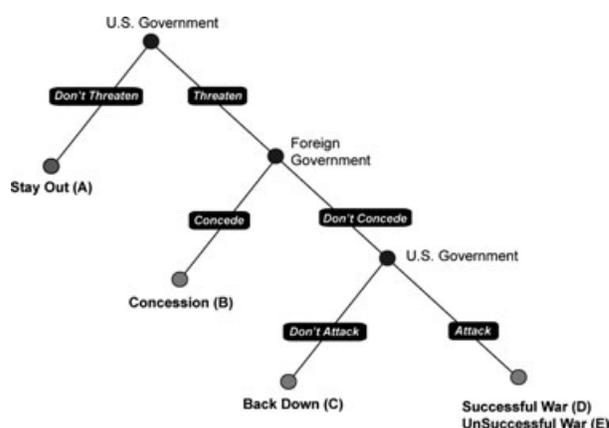
Tests of Crisis-Bargaining Model Assumptions

While they may contain additional complexity, in most international crisis-bargaining models, one state has an opportunity to make a threat, a second state has an opportunity to concede, and then the first state must decide whether to initiate a conflict. These models define utility in terms of a good or set of goods being negotiated or fought over, usually represented on a single dimension, as well as particular costs associated with certain actions. Fighting involves a cost of conflict; threatening and then not fighting may be assumed to carry an “audience cost” that makes this outcome worse for the threatening state than not threatening and not fighting. If there is a conflict, the side that wins gets the goods in question.

To see some of the assumptions implicit in this framework, consider the canonical model shown in Figure 1. Because most models of crisis bargaining are derivative of this simple model, we can use it to represent assumptions that are common to many models. The game form will be familiar to most readers and corresponds to the informal description of crisis-bargaining models given above. The possible outcomes are “Stay Out” (outcome A), “Concession” (outcome B), “Back Down” (outcome C), “Successful War” (outcome D), and “Unsuccessful War” (outcome E). In the analysis below, we shall sometimes refer to the Successful War and Unsuccessful War outcomes collectively as the “War outcomes.”

The general framework of almost all crisis-bargaining games implies a partial ordering of decision-maker preferences over outcomes that is fundamental to the dynamics of these models. We shall use the particular game in Figure 1 to describe this ordering. Decision makers prefer the Stay Out to the Unsuccessful War outcome because

FIGURE 1 Crisis-Bargaining Model



in neither case does their state get the good in question and, in the latter case, the state incurs the costs of conflict. Leaders must also prefer a full Concession from the other state to all other outcomes because here the state gets its way without paying a cost of conflict.⁵ If audience costs are assumed, leaders prefer the Stay Out to the Back Down outcome, where audience costs must be paid. Most obviously, this framework implies that leaders prefer the Successful War to the Unsuccessful War outcome. Prominent models that make all of these assumptions include Fearon (1994, 1997), Guisinger and Smith (2002), Kurizaki (2007), and Tatar and Leventoglu (2009). In Schultz (2001a), voters' evaluations of crisis outcomes produce a probability of the sides winning election, which is the quantity that competing domestic parties are assumed to maximize. While the impact of the crisis on the probability of election of the two sides is contingent on whether the opposition party has supported or opposed the government's policy, however, player probabilities of election increase monotonically in the factors described above. Thus, these assumptions apply here as well. Models that make all but the audience cost assumption include Fearon (1995), Powell (1996, 2004), Smith (1998), Wagner (2000), Slantchev (2003, 2010), Sartori (2005), Morrow (1989), and Trager (2010).⁶

Despite the prevalence of these assumptions in the crisis-bargaining literature, only two have been evaluated empirically. Using a similar experimental approach to the

⁵Note that concession sometimes means a middle range compromise. It will be an interesting question for future work to understand how such compromises are evaluated by voters.

⁶While some of these games are infinite horizon models, this fundamental set of payoff assumptions is still used in slightly modified form. The assumptions of Ramsay (2004) are arguably similar as well.

⁴For instance, see Campbell and Lewis-Beck (2008).

one we employ here, Tomz (2007) found experimental evidence that audience costs exist. Studies of observational data have also found evidence that support for war is affected by success more than by other factors (e.g., Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2009 and Johnson and Tierney 2006).

With respect to the remaining assumptions, it is not clear that voters will respond to leader choices as assumed. One reason is that voters have very little objective information on which to base their evaluations of leadership choices. Voters do not know the likely costs of conflict or the short- and long-term implications of inaction, for instance. Thus, even though staying out of a crisis is the best option in terms of national welfare or peace, voters may respond to other cues—such as the signals sent by partisan elites that suggest this was not the best course of action—and if the president elects to remain out of the crisis, voters may decide that the president's preferences are different from their own. In such cases, the assumptions of standard bargaining models are not in line with the domestic political incentives of presidents.

Using data on the tenure of leaders, Chiozza and Goemans (2004) cast further doubt on the validity of these standard assumptions. They find that democratic leaders do not have a longer expected tenure in office when they (a) receive a concession in a crisis than when they fight or stay out, (b) stay out of a crisis than when they lose a war, or even (c) win a war than when they lose one.⁷ These findings are striking, but their meaning and import are unclear. It may be that publics do not objectively evaluate crisis outcomes as we noted above. Or, the explanation for (a) may be that many voters view threat making to elicit a concession as negative in and of itself, even when successful. Alternatively, these results may be due to selection effects. For instance, leaders may select themselves into wars they can win or that will not too much harm their approval ratings when they lose. It is also possible that international crises simply have little effect on democratic elections.⁸

⁷There is a large and nuanced literature of long-standing on the determinants of the popularity of wars. Topics addressed include whether the level, trend, or proximity of casualties, degree of military success, media coverage, and nature of elite discourse affect popular support for wars. We do not address these topics directly. Instead, we evaluate the determinants of the popularity of successful and unsuccessful wars vis-à-vis other crisis options. A partial list of works related to the determinants of popular support for wars includes Lippmann (1922), Almond (1950), Rosenau (1961), Holsti (2004), Mueller (1973), Gartner and Segura (1998, 2000), Baum (2002, 2003), Feaver and Gelpi (2004), Eichenberg (2005), Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005), Boettcher and Cobb (2006), Berinsky (2009), Gartner (2008), Chapman and Reiter (2004), and Groeling and Baum (2008).

⁸Vavreck (2009), writing about recent U.S. presidential elections, argues that foreign policy is a difficult issue on which to base a winning presidential campaign. Her findings, however, are about which

We state the standard set of assumptions of crisis-bargaining models as the “objective outcome hypotheses.” Evidence in favor of these hypotheses will indicate that the assumptions of models used in the field and the political incentives of leaders in international crises are at least minimally aligned.

Objective Outcome Hypotheses: All else equal, presidential approval will be higher following:

- 1) a concession from the foreign state than at all other outcomes (i.e., approval at B should be higher than at other outcomes)
- 2) a successful war than after an unsuccessful war (i.e., approval at D should be higher than at E)
- 3) a decision not to enter a conflict and not to make a threat than after a president makes a threat and backs down (i.e., approval at Stay Out (A) should be higher than at Back Down (C)—note that the difference between approval at these outcomes is the “audience cost”).
- 4) a decision not to enter a conflict and not to make a threat than after an unsuccessful war (i.e., approval at Stay Out (A) should be higher than at Unsuccessful War (E)).

In the model described in Fearon (1994), audience costs are an increasing function of the level of escalation prior to the initiation of hostilities. Several of the most interesting implications of that model only make sense in this context; for instance, once a crisis is underway, the ability to generate additional audience costs, and not relative power, predicts which side will make a concession. In fact, conflict only occurs as a result of “lock in”; both sides reach a level of escalation such that each knows that the other's audience costs are so high that both prefer fighting to backing down.⁹

For this model to provide insight into crises, two additional assumptions must reflect the reality of international crises: (1) presidents must have control over the magnitude of audience costs through preconflict escalation, and (2) it must be possible that audience costs can be made so large that states are certain to prefer fighting to incurring them. With reference to the first of these, Tomz (2007) finds evidence that audience costs for

messages have the largest systematic effects on voters, not whether foreign policy outcomes affect presidential approval or whether presidents, once elected, take voters' reactions into consideration.

⁹Some scholars take audience costs to refer to the reputational costs that result from the reaction of interstate audiences as well as the reaction of domestic constituencies. Our data can only address this second sort of cost. We shall therefore follow Fearon (1994) and Tomz (2007) in using the term only in the latter sense.

backing out are higher *once military engagement begins*, but no evidence that presidents have control over the magnitude of audience costs prior to conflict (for example, by adding a military demonstration to a verbal threat). In particular, Tomz tests whether a preconflict display of force in addition to a verbal statement of commitment increases audience costs and finds that it does not. If the magnitude of the audience cost is not under presidential control *prior* to the initiation of hostilities, however, the equilibrium signaling behavior of states in models like Fearon (1994) and Tarar and Leventoglu (2009) will be significantly affected in complex ways. (Full separation of types would of course generally be impossible, for instance, and ability to generate additional audience costs at each preconflict stage would not predict which side is the more likely to garner a concession from the other.) Our understanding of specific cases will also be very different if, following the initial public statement that precipitates the crisis, further escalatory actions signal increased resolve because of increased audience costs or if they do not. We test whether the rhetoric presidents use to establish commitments—*before the use of force*—can create different levels of audience costs.

We expect that the more precise a statement of U.S. commitment, the more the public will perceive U.S. credibility as damaged if the president backs down—and therefore, the larger the audience cost. If U.S. President George H. W. Bush had declined to use force to expel Iraq from Kuwait after declaring that Iraqi aggression against Kuwait “will not stand,” the president may have had to pay audience costs in public opinion. These costs likely would not have been as great, however, as those U.S. President John F. Kennedy would have paid if he had declined to enforce the blockade against Cuba during the Missile Crisis after his statement on national television that “all ships of any kind bound for Cuba . . . will, if found to contain cargo of offensive weapons, be turned back.”¹⁰ We summarize these expectations below in the Rhetoric Hypothesis.

Rhetoric Hypothesis: Stronger statements of commitment to use force result in higher audience costs.

We provide a comparison of the magnitudes of audience costs relative to the domestic political costs and

¹⁰On the role of vague threats in international relations, see Schelling (1966). For an analysis of the role of vagueness in another domain, see Staton and Vanberg (2008). In real-world cases, we expect that the manner in which information is presented to the electorate (e.g., elite disagreement or consensus, media framing) to influence the degree of presidential control of audience costs. Nevertheless, we still expect more precise statements of commitment to engender *increased* audience costs.

benefits of war.¹¹ This is a key comparison in the analysis of international crisis bargaining, since it gets to the heart of how much uncertainty about intentions remains after democratic countries make statements of commitment. Further, while this question is fundamental to all models that include an audience cost term, it is of particular note in the case of two. In the context of Fearon (1994), if audience costs can be made so large that states would always prefer fighting to incurring them, no matter what their probability of victory in conflict, this implies that audience costs can be made so large that presidents would rather fight a war they are certain to lose than back down. As noted above, this dynamic is the source of conflict in the model and is necessary for the assumptions to hold for any probability of victory of the sides. In Fearon (1997), a celebrated result is that states never bluff or, put differently, states always send signals such that the receiver of the signal knows for sure whether the signaling state will fight over the issue in question.¹² If the magnitudes of audience costs relative to expected values from conflict are not high, however, so long as the state receiving the signal is itself believed to be relatively highly resolved, this result will not hold. That is, in such cases, states will sometimes bluff and the state receiving the signal will not know for sure what the signaler will do following a statement of commitment. As in Fearon (1994), for the model’s logic to hold for any probability of victory, it must be that audience costs can be made so large that the president would prefer fighting a war that he or she knows will be lost (although the public may not be aware of this) to

¹¹Note that many studies have analyzed public opinion on the eve of war to assess support for the war compared to various alternatives (e.g., Mueller’s 1994 analysis of opinion prior to, during, and after the First Gulf War), but these questions are different from the ones we ask here. To appreciate the difference, consider a president who threatens another state with war. On the eve of conflict, many survey respondents may say they prefer that the president not take the nation to war (in other words, they prefer “peace”). This does not mean, however, that these same respondents would have a higher opinion of the president if he backed down from a threat in order to achieve “peace” than if the president declared war after issuing the threat to fight. Thus, even if the public preferred peace to war on the eve of the First Gulf War, it does not follow that U.S. President George H. W. Bush’s approval rating would have been higher if he had chosen to back down from his threat to prosecute the war. In other words, after a threat has been made, it is possible, and perhaps even likely, that a president will have an incentive to go to war *even when the public would have preferred another outcome*. We evaluate the difference in presidential approval at the Back Down and War outcomes rather than public preferences over peace and war, which is one of the ways this study is unique. Using this approach, we get closer to evaluating the incentives of the decision makers as they decide between crisis options.

¹²For further consideration of the possibility of bluffing, see Slantchev (2005). Consistent with Fearon (1997), this article does not demonstrate that states bluff in equilibrium under two-sided incomplete information.

backing down. We state this explicitly in hypothesis three below.

Audience Cost vs. War Hypothesis: Presidential approval is lower following a decision to Back Down (C) than it is following an Unsuccessful War (E).

Context and Cues: Partisanship in International Crises

When voters go to the polls, they bring only a paucity of information about particular issues and policies with them (Achen and Bartels 2004; Converse 1964; Campbell et al. 1960; Fiorina 1981; Popkin 1991). Instead of gathering large amounts of issue-related data to make sense of the complicated political world before them, voters use shortcuts or cues to fill in the blanks about what they do not know.¹³ Instead of evaluating particular policies, they evaluate leaders in terms of party identification (Campbell et al. 1960), characteristics like experience and trustworthiness among other candidate attributes (Kelley 1983), and retrospective evaluations of performance in office (Fiorina 1981). In the foreign policy arena, there is a lot that voters do not know and cannot know.¹⁴ For example, voters may wonder whether a president's decision to stay out of a conflict was a sign of weakness, the result of skillful diplomacy, or a judgment on the part of military experts that the use of force would not achieve U.S. objectives. In such situations, as Groeling and Baum (2008) and Baum and Groeling (2009) show in the context of popular support for the use of force, cues play a particularly important role.¹⁵

Party brand is one of the most accessible and information-rich political cues available to voters. Voters' partisanship is the single best predictor of vote choice in national elections (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), and it likely works as a filter through which newly

acquired information may be sifted (Zaller 1992). Party signals deliver vast amounts of information to voters. Additionally, the national political parties have developed reputations for being better at different bundles of issues (Petrocik 1980).

We hypothesize, therefore, that the positions and reputations of the two main political parties will be a salient cue to voters in evaluating the outcomes of international crises. For example, relative to Republicans, Petrocik (1980) argues that Democrats have a more "dovish" reputation. In other words, they are perceived to be less likely to employ military force than Republicans. Therefore, when a Democratic president chooses peace, it may be difficult for voters to ascertain whether the choice was motivated by partisanship or by objective conditions. Voters with dovish preferences may approve, but centrist voters and those with more hawkish preferences may express dissatisfaction or doubt. In contrast, when a Republican president chooses peace, voters are more likely to approve, since a Republican president is deemed less likely to have dovish preferences due to partisanship. In this case, centrist and hawkish voters may conclude that peace was the only reasonable choice (and dovish voters approve on principal). This is similar to the thesis that peace treaties are more likely to be signed by hawks, or as is sometimes said, "it took a Nixon to go to China."¹⁶

By the same reasoning, we expect a Democratic president who chooses conflict to have a higher approval rating than a Republican president making the same choice. Here, centrist and dovish voters are more likely to conclude that war was necessary when the president is a Democrat. We expect this dynamic to be particularly pronounced if the war goes badly. If a Republican president elects to fight a war that results in substantial national cost and in which objectives are not achieved, many voters will conclude (because of the party reputations) that the president was too eager to bring the nation into war when it was not absolutely necessary. If a war is successful, on the other hand, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2009) show that other factors that might have influenced opinion, such as the level of war casualties, are of lesser importance. Nevertheless, following the logic described here, and holding war costs (which are likely to be collinear with success in observational data) constant, we expect a successful war initiated by a Republican president to be less popular than one initiated by a Democratic president because more voters will question whether the war was worth the cost and whether other methods might have achieved the same end. Thus, while it may take a hawk to offer the olive

¹³In fact, some scholars argue that this cue-taking is efficient and thus rational in its own right (Popkin 1991).

¹⁴Although see Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida (1989), who argue that ideas about foreign policy are chronically accessible to voters and important to vote choice, but so stable as to rarely change due to electioneering.

¹⁵In particular, Groeling and Baum (2008) show that criticism from within the president's own party will have a more substantial effect on approval than criticism from the opposition party in Congress. Baum and Groeling (2009) demonstrate that voters use the media source (CNN vs. Fox, for example) as a cue in evaluating the credibility of messages. Voter response is heightened when media outlets give messages that run contrary to the perceived bias of the media outlet. Chapman and Reiter (2004) also show that voters are responsive to cues in the foreign policy context, in this case the endorsement of the United Nations Security Council.

¹⁶See Schultz (2005) and Cukierman and Tommasi (1998).

branch, it may take a dove to fight a war.¹⁷ We state these ideas in the Party Brand Hypothesis.

Party Brand Hypothesis: Republican presidents, relative to their Democratic counterparts, will be rewarded for staying out of conflicts (A) and penalized for going to war (D and E). This Republican war penalty will be most pronounced at the Unsuccessful War outcome (E).¹⁸

A similar logic should apply to the reactions of opposition parties in Congress to government policies.¹⁹ On the one hand, in line with studies that have found that the absence of elite debate in the early stages of a war results in a rally-round-the-flag effect (Bennett and Paletz 1994; Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996; Zaller and Chiu 2000), we expect opposition support to increase the popularity of government policies. On the other hand, however, we expect the effects of support from the two parties to be different at the War and Stay Out outcomes. Endorsements that run contrary to the perceived biases of the parties will be more informative to voters.²⁰ At the Stay Out outcome,

¹⁷This argument about voter inferences can be easily formalized using Bayes' rule. Consider the following simple formalization sketch. Suppose the president is a hawk with probability p , and there are three states of the world, one in which hawkish and dovish voters would choose war if they had all the information, one in which only hawks would go to war, and one in which both types of voter would choose peace. Presidents receive a signal that lets them know the true state of the world. Voters do not know the true state, but believe the likelihood is q that the last state is the case, where both types would choose peace. Assume that before the president receives the signal, voters and the president share a common prior, $q > 0$, and that individual voter approval increases in the probability that the president took the action the voter would have taken. Bayes' rule then implies that when the president chooses peace (war), aggregate approval increases (decreases) in both the probability that the president is a hawk (p) and the likelihood that the third state of the world obtains (q).

¹⁸This argument partly relies on a relative balance of hawks and doves in the population of interest. In a sample that is skewed toward dovishness, however, we expect that markers of dovishness will increase presidential approval at War outcomes *more* than at the Stay Out outcome.

¹⁹Zaller (1992) describes two very different kinds of informational settings, each producing unique patterns of opinion change over time. With a one-sided flow of information (for example, when the president and the opposition party agree on an approach during crisis), Zaller argues that most voters will update their opinions to this dominant position. But, when the information environment is characterized with a two-sided flow of messages (when the president and the opposing party disagree on a course of action), attitude change looks very different. In this case, updating occurs mainly for people with median levels of political awareness, but for few others.

²⁰Similarly, Groeling and Baum (2008) find evidence that politicians' statements that run contrary to their perceived political incentives have a larger impact on voter approval than statements that comport with voter expectations.

we expect the endorsement of a Democratic president by the Republican opposition to have a more substantial impact on approval than a Democratic endorsement of a Republican president at this same place. Reciprocally, at the War outcomes (D and E), we expect Democratic opposition support of a Republican president who goes to war to result in a larger increase in approval than Republican opposition support of a Democratic president who chooses to fight.

Opposition Support Hypothesis: Opposition-party support of the president's decision increases presidential approval relative to criticism by the opposition.

Differential Opposition Support Hypothesis: Republican opposition support of Democratic presidents increases approval more at Stay Out (A) than at the War outcomes (D and E). Democratic opposition support of Republican presidents increases approval more at the War outcomes than at the Stay Out position.

Data and Experimental Design

Modeling presidential preferences over outcomes in a strategic environment using observational data is challenging. Although there may be sufficient historical cases to draw upon, inferential problems derive from what is likely *not* observed. How do we estimate, using observables, the magnitude of audience costs when presidents choose not to back down? Presumably, presidents are only backing down, as Schultz (2001b) argues, in situations where they think the costs will be minimal. If this is the case, any estimate of audience costs must be conditioned on presidential expectations about the magnitude of the damage. These expectations are very difficult to measure. If we persist in using observational data, we are likely to leave important measures like this out of our models, and as a result, obtain biased estimates.²¹ Additionally, the decisions at game tree nodes only provide information about presidential preferences over expected utilities of node outcomes, which are themselves conditioned on actors' expectations of each others' preferences. Available data may not meet the demands of models that attempt to account for these factors (see Lewis and Schultz 2003).

We avoid these difficulties by conducting two large-scale randomized survey experiments on representative samples of U.S. citizens (and a third follow-up experiment done by students using student subjects) in which we randomly assign a set of respondents to treatment and

²¹This is due to the likely correlation between the omitted variables and our explanatory variables.

control groups. Following Tomz (2007), we conduct our experiments online. The first experiment (Experiment I) investigates the factors that determine presidential approval at the Stay Out (B) and Back Down (C) outcomes of Figure 1. Respondents are told that they are about to “read about a situation our country has faced many times in the past and will probably face again.” Each group receives one of a series of vignettes, all of which begin with the following sentence: “A foreign government massed troops on the border of a smaller neighboring country.” A number of specific elements of the crisis are then described. The complete text of sample vignettes from both experiments can be found in Appendix A.²²

An important element of the design is that each respondent receives only one vignette—including those in the control group. In Experiment I, the control group receives a vignette in which the president decides to stay out of the international crisis. Treatment groups receive vignettes in which the president makes some kind of public threat to use force and subsequently backs down. In all vignettes of this first experiment, the foreign government eventually invades the neighboring country and the United States does not use military force. In other words, in the first experiment, the United States never actually uses force and the foreign government never concedes. At the end of each vignette, participants are asked a series of questions about their evaluation of the president’s handling of the foreign policy crisis.²³

Having demonstrated that the experimental manipulations worked in the first experiment, we conducted the second experiment (Experiment II) similarly, but this time we investigate approval levels at all nodes of the game tree in Figure 1. To represent the Concession (D) outcome, some participants are told, “The president said the military would protect the smaller country. One week later, the foreign government withdrew its forces from the border and did not invade the smaller country.” Two War outcome treatments are included—one where the military action by the U.S. president successfully forces the invading country’s army back across its own border and one in which U.S. intervention does not achieve this objective. In both cases, study participants are told that 4,000 U.S. troops died in the conflict.

All of the experimental manipulations are presented in Table 1. Table 2 lists the Experiment II treatment differences representing each node of the Figure 1 game tree.

²²The on-screen design of our experiments mimics closely the layout used by Tomz (2007) in a similar online experiment.

²³Following Tomz (2007), we leverage the Internet’s unique capabilities to show details of the vignette in bullet-list form at the top of each page on which evaluative questions about the president’s actions are asked. This minimizes the chances that respondents have forgotten facts about the situation.

TABLE 1 Randomly Assigned Conditions of Experiments I and II

Category	Treatment
Party of President	Democrat Republican
Language of President	U.S. will stay out of the conflict U.S. will not tolerate this invasion (Exp I only) U.S. military will protect the smaller country
Opposition in Congress	Supported Sharply criticized
Outcome	Stay Out Concession of foreign government (Exp II only) Back Down Successful War (Exp II only) Unsuccessful War (Exp II only)

Relatively small differences in the framing of the situation in the two experiments mean that the results of similar treatments are not directly comparable across the experiments, although the results of Experiment I are fully confirmed by Experiment II. Because of the differences in the framing, however, we do not pool or compare the data from the two experiments.²⁴

The experimental method is not without its drawbacks and, while they are pro forma, they are worth consideration. Although we conduct the experiment in a survey that respondents complete in their own homes, using their own computers, doubts about external validity are reasonable given the topic at hand. The lack of a real political context limits the generalizability of our findings, although as an initial investigation into the factors that affect presidential approval during and after international crises, the sterility of the design helps to clarify the mechanisms at work in a way that observational methods cannot. Where observational methods are generally weak (nonrandom assignment to conditions of real conflict in the world), experimental methods are strong, but as is often the case, the opposite is also true. The manner in which information is packaged and acquired in the real world may condition the way respondents evaluate information in a way that is different from how they evaluate the same information presented in the experiment,

²⁴As a result, the percent of respondents who approved of a president at the Stay Out (A) and Back Down (C) nodes will be different in separate analyses when the data come from different experiments.

TABLE 2 Randomly Assigned Outcome Treatments (Experiment II)

Outcome	Treatment
Stay Out	“The president said the U.S. would stay out of the conflict. One week later, the foreign government invaded the smaller country. The U.S. President did not send troops and the attacking country took over its neighbor.”
Concession	“The president said the military would protect the smaller country. One week later, the foreign government withdrew its forces from the border and did not invade the smaller country.”
Back Down	“The president said the military would protect the smaller country. One week later, the foreign government invaded the smaller country. The U.S. President did not send troops and the attacking country took over its neighbor.”
Unsuccessful War	“The president said the military would protect the smaller country. One week later, the foreign government invaded the smaller country. The U.S. President engaged the U.S. military. After a 12-month campaign, U.S. forces failed to drive the larger country’s army back across its own border. Over 4,000 U.S. troops died in the effort.”
Successful War	“The president said the military would protect the smaller country. One week later, the foreign government invaded the smaller country. The U.S. President engaged the U.S. military. After a 12-month campaign, U.S. forces succeeded in driving the larger country’s army back across its own border. Over 4,000 U.S. troops died in the effort.”

which could result in biased inferences. Thus, while we argue that presidents have a measure of control over the magnitude of audience costs, for instance, it is likely that uncertainties related to the way information is presented to the public in the real world, such as how the opposition party and other political and media actors respond to the president’s actions, make the president’s control of audience costs less precise than we find in this experiment.²⁵

Experiment I was conducted as part of the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a survey of 38,443 Americans conducted during October and November of 2006 (Ansolabehere 2006). As such, it was carried out midway through George Bush’s second term as president when the United States was actively engaged in two wars. Our experiments ran on the postelection survey and on a portion of cases as part of a coordinated effort across several CCES teams.²⁶ All totaled, we had 10,400 people in our first experiment. Experiment II was conducted as part of the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), which surveyed a panel of 20,000 registered voters six times leading up to the 2008 presidential election (Jackman and Vavreck 2009). Our CCAP experiment was run on a subset of the 20,000

CCAP cases that were reserved specifically for our experimentation. The total number of cases in the second experiment is 2,500. Experiment II was conducted during the 2008 presidential campaign in October, when George Bush’s actual approval ratings were at their lowest observed levels and support for the wars begun during his presidency was diminishing.²⁷ The changing context of the real political world did not alter the pattern of results we observed between the two experiments. We also conducted a third follow-up experiment after Barack Obama was elected as a robustness check—and to demonstrate that the results from the first two experiments were not dependent on the party of the current U.S. president (interacted with wars he started). This follow-up test used student interviewers and was conducted via paper and pencil, but the results were very similar to those from the first two Bush-era experiments. We describe this follow-up test of 664 students in online Appendix B and briefly below.

In the first two experiments, we randomly assigned our representative samples to experimental treatments to make inferences about how public opinion changes under different conditions that we control. We are less interested in making inferences about population parameters and more interested in the patterns and movements among our respondents as we reveal different sets of information to them. It is, therefore, less critical that our samples reflect population characteristics with extremely high fidelity. We point out, however, that the samples

²⁵The model in Schultz (2001), for instance, implies that audience costs, as they are defined here, increase when the president does not receive support from the opposition party (holding opposition behavior at the Stay Out node constant). For discussion of the external validity of survey experiments, see, for instance, Barabas and Jerit (2010), Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk (2007), and Kinder and Palfrey (1993).

²⁶For details on the CCES project, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008) and the online supporting information (Appendix E) for this article.

²⁷Further information on the conduct of both experiments is available in online Appendix E.

do in fact represent the target populations quite well.²⁸ The 2008 online sample represents the population well and in many cases comes closer to hitting the census target than do other probability samples of the national electorate. More importantly for our purposes, randomization and manipulation checks indicate that across the treatment and control groups for both of our experiments, our samples are balanced on potentially relevant demographic observables.

Results

Bargaining Model Assumptions

The expectations of the *Objective Outcome Hypotheses* relating to common assumptions made in the theoretical literature are born out with one exception. Consistent with the theoretical literature, the Concession outcome (D) elicits the highest level of approval, which is statistically distinguishable from all other approval levels except Successful War (at the .0001 level). Also as expected, successful wars are more popular than unsuccessful wars and staying out of a conflict altogether is preferred to backing down (both differences are statistically significant). Thus, as Tomz (2007) also finds, audience costs exist.²⁹

Contrary to expectations and the models' assumptions, however, we find no evidence that Staying Out (A) results in a higher approval level than fighting an Unsuccessful War (E). The differences in approval between these two outcomes are not significant, but our best estimate is that approval is higher at the latter (E). To be clear, our data suggest (with admitted imprecision) that when significant foreign policy interests are at stake, presidents may be better off in terms of approval if they fight unsuccessful wars than if they stay out of military conflicts. Further, as we explain below, there is stronger evidence that approval of Democratic presidents in particular is higher when they fight wars that achieve nothing than when they simply remain out of conflicts. Approval levels and confidence intervals for these crisis outcomes are presented in Figure 2.

²⁸As an example of this, we present a table of marginals on demographics comparing the CCAP sample to other national election studies in the field during the same time and to the U.S. Census. This table is available in online Appendix F.

²⁹We also tested whether presidents could use rhetoric to reduce audience costs *after* the fact. Adding the following explanation to the treatment at the Back Down node did not mitigate the size of the audience cost: "The president stated the use of military forces was not in U.S. interests at this time, and said the U.S. will use diplomatic leverage to force a withdrawal of the occupation."

We find clear evidence that the magnitude of audience costs *prior* to the initiation of hostilities is under presidential control (supporting the *Rhetoric Hypothesis*). What the president says when he declares support for the smaller country in our vignette has an effect on how people react when he backs down from his promise. These findings are illustrated in Table 3. In this case, specificity hurts presidents who do not follow through.³⁰

In Experiment I, the average level of presidential approval for a president who decides not to get involved in a conflict is 40% (even though the larger country always invades the smaller one in the end). Presidents who say the "U.S. military will protect the smaller country" and then decline to involve the United States when the smaller country is invaded get approval ratings of 16%, a 24-point drop from the ratings of presidents who say they will stay out. On the other hand, if all aspects of the situation are the same but the president says instead that "the U.S. will not tolerate the invasion and occupation" of the smaller country, presidential approval is 25%, a drop of 15 percentage points compared to the Stay Out outcome (A). Thus, the fall in approval is significantly greater when the president uses language that more specifically commits the United States to a course of action.³¹ Making a vague statement of support for the smaller country and then doing nothing to stop its invasion will cause a substantial drop in approval, but is not as costly to presidents as making specific commitments to use force and then backing down.³²

Our second experiment allows us to examine the relative political costs of backing down from a commitment and going to war—even an unsuccessful war.³³ As Figure 2 shows, when a president has made a specific commitment to use the U.S. military, backing down is by far his or her worst option. Even if the United States is *certain* not to achieve its objective and to lose 4,000 U.S.

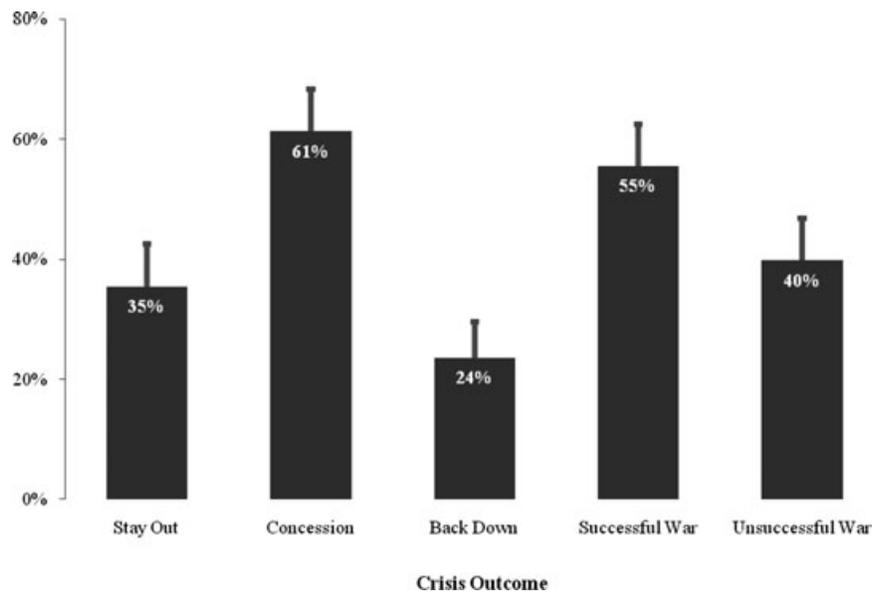
³⁰We present results for both approval and disapproval because they are *not* merely complements of one another in our design. There is a third category, a neutral category representing "neither approve nor disapprove," that we do not discuss here, but that makes movement into and out of both the polar categories compelling.

³¹Each of these differences is statistically significant. That is, the 15% audience cost can be distinguished from the 24% audience cost at a 5% error level using a two-tailed difference of means test. All of the statistical results discussed in the remainder of the article are significant at least at this error level, unless noted otherwise.

³²Whether the opposition supported or opposed the president had no measurable effect on the impact of presidential rhetoric on the magnitude of audience costs.

³³For the sake of clarity, we point out that the approval rating for a president who opts to Stay Out of the conflict in this experiment is slightly lower than in Experiment I described above—here, likely as a result of small differences in the scenarios, the president has a 35% approval rating if he stays out.

FIGURE 2 Percent of Respondents Approving of President’s Handling of the Crisis by Outcome (Experiment II)



Note: 95% confidence intervals are shown above each column.

TABLE 3 Presidential Evaluation and Audience Costs as Rhetoric Changes (Experiment I)

	STAY OUT	–	BACK DOWN	=	AUDIENCE COST
Back Down Rhetoric: “the U.S. will not tolerate the invasion”					
Approve	40%		25%		16%
	(37 to 44)		(22 to 28)		(11 to 20)
Neither	34%		29%		6%
	(32 to 38)		(26 to 33)		(1 to 10)
Disapprove	25%		46%		–21%
	(22 to 28)		(42 to 50)		(–26 to –17)
N	818		774		1,592
Back Down Rhetoric: “the U.S. military will prevent the invasion”					
Approve	40%		16%		24%
	(37 to 44)		(13 to 18)		(20 to 29)
Neither	34%		23%		12%
	(32 to 38)		(20 to 26)		(8 to 16)
Disapprove	25%		61%		–36%
	(22 to 28)		(58 to 65)		(–41 to –32)
N	818		744		1,562

Note: Cell entries in the first two columns are presidential ratings. In the Audience Cost column, cell entries are the difference between columns 1 and 2. The “back down” column consists of figures for presidents who committed to use force to prevent an invasion and then chose not to act. Confidence intervals (95%) are in parentheses.

troops in the process, the better option from the point of view of public approval is for the president to fight the war rather than back down. The approval rating of a president who declares support for the smaller coun-

try and then backs out is a mere 24%. A president who goes to war and loses American lives without achieving the objective actually has a much higher approval rating in the end—40%. Even higher is the approval rating for

TABLE 4 Levels of Presidential Approval at Stay Out and War Outcomes by President's Party

APPROVAL	STAY OUT	LOSE WAR	WIN WAR	WAR	STAY OUT – WAR
<i>President is a . . .</i>					
REPUBLICAN	34%	34%	58%	45%	
DEMOCRAT	37	47	53	50	
<i>Difference</i>	-4	-12	4	-5	2
DISAPPROVAL	STAY OUT	LOSE WAR	WIN WAR	WAR	STAY OUT – WAR
<i>President is a . . .</i>					
REPUBLICAN	46%	53%	31%	42%	
DEMOCRAT	48	34	23	28	
<i>Difference</i>	-2	19**	8	15***	-17*
Total Column N	186	176	173	349	535

Note: The War column is the average of the two war treatments. The “Stay Out-War” column is the difference between the Stay Out and War averages.

***Significant difference at $p \leq .01$ using two-tailed difference of means test.

**Significant difference at $p \leq .05$ using two-tailed difference of means test.

*Significant difference at $p \leq .10$ using two-tailed difference of means test.

presidents who go to war and win—55%.³⁴ Thus, even when the chances of achieving U.S. objectives are low, presidents who have made commitments have a strong incentive to follow through on them, supporting the *Audience Cost vs. War Hypothesis*. Having made a specific threat, the president's hands are firmly tied.

Partisanship in International Crises

In the overall population, the *Party Brand Hypothesis* receives little support. Table 4 shows the effects of the president's party in the population as a whole. As predicted, Republican presidents suffer a 15-point higher disapproval rating than Democratic presidents at the War outcomes, driven mainly by the large costs they bear for fighting an unsuccessful war.³⁵ Contrary to our expectations, we find

³⁴The 95% confidence interval around approval for presidents who Back Down is 17–30%, while for presidents who fight an Unsuccessful War, it is 33–47%, and for presidents who fight a Successful War, it is 48–63%.

³⁵This difference is significant at the .01 level. All significance tests and p-values refer to a two-tailed difference of means test. In order to test whether the negative effect of the Republican brand at the Unsuccessful War node resulted from the electorate's particular reaction to actors and events in the news when the survey was fielded (George W. Bush and the Iraq War), we ran a follow-up experiment (N = 664) after the 2008 elections using [our university] students. Here, we varied whether the president, who was always identified as a Democrat, had a reputation for hawkishness or dovishness. Our results on the hawk/dove dimension closely match the Republican/Democratic effects described here. This follow-up experiment is described in online Appendix B.

no statistically significant effect of party at the Stay Out outcome. The reason appears to be that survey respondents, and particularly Democrats, were so much more likely to approve of presidents of their own parties that effects of the president's party, conditioned on the game tree node, are difficult to detect.³⁶ Among independent voters, however, the effects are quite different.

Independent voters, however, react exactly as the *Party Brand Hypothesis* predicts. These survey respondents are not constrained by partisan loyalty and thus the conditional effect of the party cue at the Stay Out and War outcomes impacts them all the more strongly. We present these results for independent voters in Table 5. Independent voters view Democratic presidents who stay out of conflicts harshly, penalizing them with a 65% disapproval rating (and a 29% approval rating). Republican presidents, on the other hand, receive a 23% disapproval rating and a 43% approval rating. The 42-point difference in disapproval is highly statistically significant. In other words, independent voters penalize Democratic presidents who appear weak in times of conflict.

Once a president decides to enter a conflict, however, independents' evaluations of presidents from the

³⁶The statistically insignificant higher approval of the Democratic president at the Stay Out node, for instance, is driven entirely by Democratic survey respondents. Of these, 17% approved (69% disapproved) of a Republican president while 56% approved (34% disapproved) of a Democratic president. Tables showing the effect of the president's party by Democratic and Republican survey respondents can be found in online Appendix C.

TABLE 5 Levels of Presidential Approval at Stay Out and War Outcomes by President's Party, Independent (Nonpartisan) Voters Only

APPROVAL	STAY OUT	LOSE WAR	WIN WAR	WAR	STAY OUT – WAR
<i>President is a . . .</i>					
REPUBLICAN	43%	26%	61%	40%	
DEMOCRAT	29	37	56	46	
<i>Difference</i>	14	-11	5	-6	20
DISAPPROVAL	STAY OUT	LOSE WAR	WIN WAR	WAR	STAY OUT – WAR
<i>President is a . . .</i>					
REPUBLICAN	23%	63%	28%	49%	
DEMOCRAT	65	37	19	29	
<i>Difference</i>	-41***	26*	9	20*	-62***
Total Column N	47	46	34	80	127

Note: The War column is the average of the two war treatments. The "Stay Out-War" column is the difference between the Stay Out and War averages.

***Significant difference at $p \leq .01$ using two tailed difference of means test

**Significant difference at $p \leq .05$ using two tailed difference of means test

*Significant difference at $p \leq .10$ using two tailed difference of means test

two parties follow a different logic. At the Unsuccessful War outcome, these voters penalize Republican presidents who choose to fight unsuccessful wars: 63% of independents disapprove of Republican presidents in this situation, while only 37% disapprove of the Democratic presidents, a 26-point difference. Overall, the difference between the effects of being a Republican president versus a Democratic president at peace (-41 points in disapproval) and at war (+20 points in disapproval) is highly statistically significant. Thus, the need to win the approval of these voters—the most likely to base their votes on presidential actions while in office rather than on party loyalty—provides presidents with an incentive to act against type.³⁷

Turning to the role of the opposition party, we see that the *Differential Opposition Support Hypothesis* is strongly supported in the data. In Experiment I, we varied whether the opposition party in Congress (the party opposite to the president's party) supported or criticized the president's decision. We find that Republican support in Congress leads to a 9-point increase in presidential approval for Democratic presidents who decide to stay out of conflicts, while Democratic support for Republican presidents who decide to stay out leads only to a 2-point increase. This difference between the magnitude

of Republican and Democratic support is highly statistically significant given the high power of the first experiment. This suggests that either Republican congressional support is more important in foreign policy, as Petrocik (1980) argues, or that the benefit of Republican support in Congress is specific to decisions made by Democratic presidents who avoid conflict, as we argue above. In Experiment II, we tested whether the increased benefit of Republican opposition support compared to Democratic opposition support that we found in the first experiment would be felt only at the Stay Out outcome, as we suspected, while Democratic opposition support (compared to Republican opposition support) would be more decisive at War outcomes. We present these results in Table 6.

In Experiment II, at the Stay Out outcome, Republican congressional support of a Democratic president has a more positive effect than Democratic support of a Republican president. At the War outcomes, support of a Democratic opposition has a more positive effect than support of a Republican opposition.³⁸ These differences in differences are significant at the .1 level. The most direct

³⁷Note that the difference in the effects on disapproval of having a Republican president at the Stay Out and Unsuccessful War nodes is significant at the .001 level and the difference in these effects between the Stay Out and Successful War nodes is significant at the .05 level.

³⁸At particular nodes, our sample size does not allow us to distinguish effects of support or criticism of Republican or Democratic oppositions at conventional levels of significance, and thus we are reluctant to say much about these shifts. We note, however, that at some outcomes, fewer respondents approved of presidents with opposition support than of presidents who were unsupported by the opposition. These effects occur when presidents act contrary to type and seem to be driven by the president's own partisans in the electorate (see online Appendix D if interested). One possible explanation for this is that in scenarios like these (Republicans

TABLE 6 Presidential Approval by Behavior of Opposition Party in Congress

APPROVAL	STAY OUT	LOSE WAR	WIN WAR	WAR	STAY OUT – WAR
<i>DEM. Pres. & REP. Opposition. . .</i>					
SUPPORT	43%	43%	53%	48%	
CRITICISM	33	51	54	53	
<i>Difference</i>	10	–9	0	–4	15
<i>REP. Pres. & DEM. Opposition. . .</i>					
SUPPORT	27	39	64	51	
CRITICISM	41	30	51	40	
<i>Difference</i>	–14	9	12	11	–25**
<i>Difference in</i>	24*	–18	–13	–15	40**
<i>Effect of Opposition Stance by Party (difference in differences)</i>					
DISAPPROVAL	STAY OUT	LOSE WAR	WIN WAR	WAR	STAY OUT – WAR
<i>DEM. Pres. & REP. Opposition. . .</i>					
SUPPORT	40%	38%	30%	33%	
CRITICISM	54	30	15	22	
<i>Difference</i>	–13	8	15*	12*	–25**
<i>REP. Pres & DEM. Opposition. . .</i>					
SUPPORT	52	51	25	39	
CRITICISM	39	54	37	46	
<i>Difference</i>	13	–3	–12	–7	21*
<i>Difference in</i>	–27*	11	27**	19*	–46***
<i>Effect of Opposition Stance by Party (difference in differences)</i>					
Total Column N	186	176	173	349	535

Note: Columns are as defined in Tables 4 and 5. Stars by numbers indicate levels of significance as in previous tables.

tests of the hypothesis are (1) the difference between the effects of Republican congressional support of a Democratic president at the Stay Out and War outcomes and (2) the difference in the effects of Democratic congressional support of a Republican president at the Stay Out and War outcomes. As predicted, Republican support is more beneficial at the Stay Out outcome than at the War outcomes, while Democratic support is more beneficial in the case of conflict than when conflict is avoided. Both effects are significant at the .05 level, providing strong support for the *Differential Opposition Support Hypothesis*.³⁹

choosing to stay out of war and Democrats opting to enter the war) presidential-party partisans are displeased with their president even before the opposition gets involved, and when the opposition party announces support of a policy that presidential partisans already believe the president should not have adopted, the president's co-partisans like the policy—and their president—even less. But again, we stress that this is merely conjecture on our part, that these differences cannot be distinguished from zero, and that we did not find these surprising effects in the larger sample of Experiment I.

³⁹We show this in Table 6 via the difference of means hypothesis tests in the far right-hand column. Specifically, the differences in

We find no overall effect of opposition signaling, contrary to the *Opposition Support Hypothesis*. Opposition party support or criticism appears not to be a large independent signal to voters. Its effects are conflated with the effects of the president's party, the voters' partisanship, and the international outcome.

Discussion

Taken together, the results provide support for many approaches to the study of crisis bargaining, but also indicate that voter approval of presidential actions during crises

the effects of Democratic opposition support at the Stay Out and War outcomes on approval (–25 points) and in the effects of Republican opposition support at the Stay Out and War outcomes on disapproval (–25 points). The difference in effects (1) and (2) is also a test of the *Differential Opposition Support Hypothesis*. This difference in differences (–46 points in disapproval) is significant at the .01 level.

TABLE 7 Summary of Findings

Hypothesis	Supported?	Effect
<i>Tests of Crisis-Bargaining Model Assumptions</i>		
Objective Outcome Hypothesis		
(a) Highest approval at concession outcome	Yes	Concession approval statistically distinguishable from approval at all other outcomes except Successful War
(b) Successful War higher approval than Unsuccessful War	Yes	
(c) Audience costs exist	Yes	
(d) Stay Out approval higher than Unsuccessful War	No	Unsuccessful War approval is higher, particularly for a Democratic president
Rhetoric Hypothesis	Yes	Audience costs are larger following a more specific rhetorical commitment
Audience Cost vs. War Hypothesis	Yes	Unsuccessful War approval higher than Back Down approval
<i>Party in International Crises</i>		
Party Brand Hypothesis	Partly	Republican presidents punished more for Unsuccessful War; independent voters favor Republicans at peace, Democrats at war
Opposition Support Hypothesis	No	At all outcomes, no statistically significant effect of opposition support
Differential Opposition Support Hypothesis	Yes	Republican opposition party support increases approval at Stay Out outcome; Democratic support increases approval at War outcomes

varies widely depending on attributes of and choices made by the president and the domestic political context. Such attributes and contexts therefore structure presidential incentives and can be expected to have sizable impacts on decisions for war and peace. The many results presented above are summarized in Table 7.

In support of current approaches to crisis bargaining, we demonstrate that presidential approval tracks objective outcomes in the international bargaining space fairly closely, but not entirely—particularly for Democratic presidents. Consonant with nearly all formal models in the field, we find that voter approval is in fact highest following a concession, relative to other outcomes in the crisis-bargaining game tree. Since in our vignettes, the concession outcome means that all U.S. objectives were achieved without material costs to the United States, this result indicates that voter reactions are more favor-

able when the objective outcome is more favorable to the United States. Even the approbation that accompanies presidents who fight successful wars does not outweigh voter approval levels following the Concession (B) outcome.

Also in support of several important models in the field, we find that audience costs exist, that their magnitude is under presidential control through the use of rhetoric, and importantly, that audience costs can be made so large that no president concerned about reelection would ever incur them. Interestingly, the magnitude of audience costs was not affected by the party treatments. These results indicate that when presidents make the most specific threats, it is reasonable to assume that foreign governments believe the United States to be fully committed to carrying out the policy. As Fearon (1997) argues, this may indicate that less specific threats convey

no information at all and at least implies that the existence of less than full commitments in international politics is a puzzle to be explained. Either way, our results demonstrate that taking a strong public stand is not just a signal; doing so also ties the president's hands.⁴⁰

The effects of partisanship and party cues also have implications for presidential incentives during crises. As we discussed above, Republicans who lose wars are punished more harshly than Democrats in similar situations. Perhaps surprisingly, even Republican criticism of a Democratic president who fights a losing war has little effect. The result is that, in the situation described in the vignette, *Democrats always have an incentive to fight a war, even if the United States is sure to lose it*. The incentives of Republicans, meanwhile, are mixed and depend on the probability of victory.

The relative incentives of Republicans and Democrats to engage in and stay out of conflicts can be seen in Table 4. Recall that having made a specific threat, no president would ever back down from it (outcome C)—this holds for Republicans and Democrats as party has little effect on audience costs⁴¹—and so the relative merits of the Stay Out (A), Concession (B), and War (D and E) outcomes are what is at issue in evaluating presidential incentives. Our results indicate that Republicans may have somewhat higher approval at the Concession outcome (B), but given our design, we lack the power to determine this at conventional levels of confidence. We are also unable to evaluate the effect of the party signal on foreign governments, and therefore we are unable to show whether Republicans or Democrats are more likely to *garner* a concession.

Turning then to a comparison of the Stay Out and War outcomes, if we consider *approval*, both Republicans and Democrats would prefer to fight even a losing war than remain out of the crisis. This is unexpected based on the objective material outcomes. The risks of war for Republicans come from the effects on voter *disapproval* of Republicans who fight wars, particularly unsuccessful ones. While Democratic presidential disapproval decreases by 14 points when a Democrat fights an unsuccessful war over when a Democratic president remains out of the conflict, Republican presidential disapproval increases by 7 points. The decrease in Democratic presidential disapproval at the Unsuccessful War outcome (E) over the Stay Out outcome (A) is on the margin of statistical significance ($p = .06$) and is highly significant when Republicans in Congress are critical of the president's policies ($p = .02$). This result is particularly surprising when we re-

member that in terms of final material outcome, the only differences between the Stay Out (A) and Unsuccessful War (E) outcomes are the resources spent prosecuting the war and the loss of life. Thus, for Democratic presidents, the objective material outcome does not track presidential incentives defined as approval of the electorate. Here, political cues and context overwhelm material circumstances.

The experimental results are consistent with the thesis that Republicans and hawks can more easily "offer the olive branch,"⁴² but we find stronger evidence that Democrats have an easier time choosing war, principally because they are less punished if the war should go poorly. We also find, however, that the support of a Republican opposition party is much more beneficial to Democrats at the Stay Out outcome (A) than it is at the War outcomes (D and E). Thus, in Petrocik's (1980) sense, we might say that Democrats in Congress "own" the War outcomes while Republicans in Congress "own" the Stay Out outcome (in terms of the power of party signals).

Since Republican opposition support of Democratic presidents at the Stay Out outcome and Democratic opposition support of Republican presidents at War outcomes are so helpful to the president, we can expect the behavior of oppositions to be strongly influenced by these dynamics. Once parties are branded, they have an incentive to play to type when out of the Oval Office, and probably an incentive to act against type when in the White House. Thus, Democrats in Congress will rarely support Republican wars and Republicans in Congress will rarely support Democratic efforts at peace.⁴³

These partisan dynamics suggest two cases when war will be most likely: (1) when the domestic political situation is such that a Democratic president will be criticized by congressional Republicans, no matter what crisis actions the president takes, and (2) when any action by a Republican president will be supported by congressional Democrats. In the first scenario, when Republicans in Congress oppose any action taken by a Democratic president in the international arena, approval of the Democratic president is 33% at the Stay Out outcome, 51% at the Unsuccessful War outcome, and 54% at the Successful War outcome. When Republicans in Congress will criticize any action, the Democratic president gains nearly 20 points in approval by fighting the war compared to staying out of the conflict. This dynamic may have been a factor in the Obama administration's recent decision

⁴⁰On the relationship between signaling and tying hands, see Fearon (1997) and Tarar and Leventoglu (2009).

⁴¹Horowitz and Levendusky (2009) find this as well.

⁴²See Schultz (2005) and Cukierman and Tommasi (1998).

⁴³Interesting questions for future research involve the effect of the opposition being in the minority or the majority in Congress on the impact of the opposition party's stance.

to send more troops to the war in Afghanistan. Had the president declined to send additional troops, the majority of Republicans would likely have been critical of the policy, and the perception of Democratic presidents too unwilling to use force might have significantly hurt the president's overall approval ratings. Now that troops have been sent, some Republicans, though by no means all, have criticized the president for that decision as well.

In the second scenario, when Democrats in Congress support a Republican president's crisis decisions, approval of a Republican president is 27% at the Stay Out outcome, 39% at the Unsuccessful War outcome, and 64% at the Successful War outcome. A Republican president gains between 10 and almost 40 points in approval from fighting the war. This dynamic is a plausible contributing cause of the 2003 Iraq war. Leading congressional Democrats argued in favor of supporting the Republican administration—whatever course it chose in Iraq—on the grounds that differentiating themselves from Republicans only in select other issue areas would better advantage Democratic candidates in the 2002 midterm elections.⁴⁴

Of course, these findings on the domestic political contexts in which war is most likely may not apply when the international context is much different from the one described in the vignettes. Future work should examine whether varying the magnitude of the conflict or potential conflict affects these results as well as how the U.S. public responds differently in crises in which the United States may be perceived as an aggressor, for instance.⁴⁵ It may be that approval dynamics in a World War II context operate differently from approval dynamics in a Gulf War context.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Nearly all formal models of international relations assume either implicitly or explicitly that voters are retrospective and form judgments that correspond to objective bargaining outcomes. We provide the first experimental analysis of an entire crisis-bargaining game, and our data show that these assumption approximate public opinion dynamics relatively well, except when it comes to the

⁴⁴For a related model and a discussion of this case, see Trager (2007, chap. 4).

⁴⁵Support for war is related to whether the war is perceived as defensive or aggressive. See Jentleson (1992) and Baum (2003).

⁴⁶Another useful experimental extension will be to analyze treatment effects using vignettes that are more closely tied to actual U.S. foreign policy contexts, such as U.S. attempts preventing Iran and North Korea from producing nuclear weapons.

relationship between unsuccessful wars and staying out of conflicts. Presidents experience high approval ratings when they win concessions from foreign leaders relative to other crisis outcomes. Consonant with the assumptions of some models of crisis bargaining, we find that the magnitude of audience costs is under presidential control through the use of rhetoric, and that audience costs can be made large enough that—in the sort of crisis described in the vignettes—no president would ever incur them. U.S. presidents can use rhetoric to fully tie their hands in crisis bargaining, prior to military mobilization and the initiation of hostilities.

We also find, however, that the attributes of elites who take particular actions, and the political contexts in which they do so, structure public reactions in ways that have little or nothing to do with the objective state of affairs. Democratic and Republican presidents and congressional leaders have somewhat different incentives in international crises because the same actions by leaders with different attributes and in different contexts lead to different public reactions. When significant U.S. national security interests are at stake, Democratic presidents have an incentive to defend those interests even when failure is certain. By contrast, Republican presidents have an incentive to avoid military engagements that may not achieve their objectives. Both parties have an incentive to act according to type when out of presidential power, and given the strong reactions of the independent voters in the center of the political spectrum, probably an incentive to act against type when in control of the presidency. *The swings in voter approval that turn on such cues are large and sometimes even more significant than the effects of objective changes, including whether the war is prosecuted successfully.* These findings have implications both for scholars and analysts modeling this complex strategic context, and for diplomats, policy makers, and presidents as they consider how to interpret the threats of other nations and whether to threaten or employ military force themselves.

Appendix A: Sample Vignettes

Experiment I

The following questions are about U.S. relations with other countries around the world. You will read about a situation our country has faced many times in the past and will probably face again. Different leaders have handled the situation in different ways. We will describe one approach U.S. leaders have taken and ask whether you approve or disapprove of that approach.

The Situation. A foreign government massed troops on the border of a smaller neighboring country. The Republican U.S. president said the United States will not tolerate the invasion and occupation of the smaller country.

One week later, the foreign government invaded the smaller country. The Republican U.S. President did not send troops and the attacking country took over its neighbor.

Democratic party leaders sharply criticized the president's conduct of foreign policy.

The Background. The crisis occurred midway through the Republican U.S. President's first term in office. Throughout his long political career, the president has been known for his conciliatory approach to foreign policy. He has opposed the use of military force in the past when many of his colleagues have not.

Summary

- The U.S. president is a Republican.
- He declared the United States will not tolerate the invasion and occupation of the smaller country.
- After the invasion, the president did not send troops and the attacking country took over its neighbor.
- Democratic party leaders sharply criticized the president.
- The president is known for his conciliatory approach to foreign policy.

Experiment II

The following questions are about U.S. relations with other countries around the world. You will read about a situation our country has faced many times in the past and will probably face again. Different leaders have handled the situation in different ways. We will describe one approach U.S. leaders have taken and ask whether you approve or disapprove of that approach.

The Situation. A foreign government massed troops on the border of a smaller neighboring country. The United States had a significant national security interest in preserving the regional balance of power. Experts expected the United States to suffer 2,000–5,000 casualties as a result of a full-scale war to protect the smaller country.

The Democratic U.S. President said the U.S. military would protect the smaller country.

One week later, the foreign government invaded the smaller country. The U.S. President engaged the U.S. mil-

itary. After a 12-month campaign, U.S. forces succeeded in driving the larger country's army back across its own border. Over 4,000 U.S. troops died in the effort.

Republican party leaders supported the President's conduct of foreign policy.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix B: Classroom Experiment; Table 1a. Explicit Hawk-Dove Reputation

Appendix C: Table 2a. Levels of Presidential Approval at Bargaining Outcomes by President's Party, Republican Voters Only; Table 3a. Levels of Presidential Approval at Bargaining Outcomes by President's Party, Democratic Voters Only

Appendix D: Table 4a. Presidential Approval in Peace and War by Behavior of Opposition Party in Congress and Voter Party ID

Appendix E: Conduct of Online Experiments

Appendix F: Table 5a. Weighted Marginals across Six Recent Election Studies

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