Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations:
An Experimental Approach

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Abstract: What makes international threats credible? Recent theories point to *domestic audience costs*: the domestic price a leader would pay for making foreign threats and then backing down. This paper provides the first direct evidence of audience costs. The analysis, based on experiments embedded in public opinion surveys, shows that audience costs exist across a remarkably wide range of conditions and increase with the level of escalation. The costs are evident throughout the population, and especially among politically active citizens who have the greatest potential to shape government policy. The magnitude of audience costs varies systematically with the demographic makeup of the population and with international factors such as power and interests. Finally, audience costs arise primarily because citizens care about the international *reputation* of the country or leader. These findings help identify how, and under what conditions, domestic audiences make commitments credible. At the same time, they demonstrate the promise of using experiments to answer previously intractable questions in the field of international relations.

Every day world leaders make threats and promises. They vow to take military action or inflict economic sanctions against countries that refuse to meet demands. They pledge to curtail pollution, uphold human rights, supply foreign aid, and lower barriers to international trade and capital. Without a world government that compels leaders to keep commitments, many of which would be costly to carry out, when and why should people take foreign leaders at their word?

The answer may lie at the intersection between foreign affairs and domestic politics. In a seminal article, James Fearon hypothesized that leaders would suffer "domestic audience costs" if they issued military threats and subsequently backed down.[1] Citizens, he contended, would think less of leaders who failed to follow through than of leaders who never threatened in the first place. In a world with audience costs, the prospect of losing domestic support—or even office—would give leaders a potentially powerful incentive to avoid making empty threats. The concept of domestic audience costs is now central to theories about military crises, and researchers have incorporated similar ideas into models of alliances, economic sanctions, foreign trade, foreign direct investment, monetary commitments, interstate bargaining, and international cooperation more generally.[2]

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[1] Fearon 1994.

[2] See Fearon 1994, Schultz 1998, 1999 and 2001a, and Smith 1998 on military crises; Gaubatz 1996 and Smith 1996 on alliances; Dorussen and Mo 2001 and Martin 1993 on economic sanctions; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2002 on trade; Jensen 2003 on foreign direct investment; Broz 2002 on monetary commitments; Leventoglu and Tarar 2005 on interstate bargaining; and Leeds 1999, Lipson 2003, and McGillivray and Smith 2000 on the role of audience costs in international cooperation in general.

Despite the prominence of audience costs in international relations theories, though, it remains unclear whether and when such costs exist in practice. Most empirical work on the topic is indirect. Fearon conjectured that audience costs tend to be higher in democracies than in autocracies, and he explained why this would lead the two regime types to behave differently in world affairs.[3] Researchers have, therefore, checked for correlations between democracy and foreign policy.[4] But such tests have ambiguous implications; they do not reveal whether the effects of democracy stem from audience costs or from other differences between political regimes.

Ideally one would study audience costs directly, perhaps by examining the historical fate of leaders who issued threats and then backed down.[5] The problem, which international relations scholars widely recognize, is strategic selection bias.[6] In theory, leaders take the prospect of audience costs into account when making foreign policy decisions. If the theory is correct, then exactly in situations when citizens would react harshly against backing down, leaders will tend to avoid that path, leaving us little opportunity to observe the public backlash. Audience costs will

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[3] Fearon 1994.

[4] See, e.g., Eyerman and Hart 1996; Gelpi and Griesdorf 2001; Partell and Palmer 1999; Prins 2003.

[5] Some researchers have quantified the effect of war on the tenure of leaders (e.g. Chiozza and Goemans 2004; Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Goemans 2000a and 2000b), or vice-versa (Gelpi and Grieco 2001). This research is central to a new wave of work about domestic-international interactions but does not settle the debate about audience costs because it does not show what would have happened if the leader had backed down or had conceded without a fight.

[6] For excellent discussions of the selection bias problem, see Baum 2004 and Schultz 2001b.

be largely invisible. It would seem, therefore, that a direct and unbiased measure of audience costs is beyond reach.

This paper aims to solve the empirical conundrum. The analysis, based on a series of experiments embedded in public opinion surveys, provides the first direct and endogeneity-free measures of audience costs. In each experiment, the interviewer describes a military crisis. Some participants are randomly assigned to a control group and told that the president does not get involved. Others are randomly placed in a treatment condition in which the president escalates the crisis but ultimately backs down. All participants are then asked whether they approve of the way the president handled the situation. By comparing approval ratings in the "stay out" and "back down" conditions, we can measure audience costs directly without strategic selection bias.

The remainder of the paper uses data from survey experiments to answer five questions. First, do audience costs exist at all? Second, to what extent do audience costs increase with the level of escalation, thereby making escalation a credible signal of intentions? Third, under what circumstances are audience costs likely to be largest?   Fourth, do leaders who back down lose support from all citizens, or does the erosion of support occur within identifiable subsets of the population? And finally, what is the micro-level mechanism behind domestic audience costs?

1. Do Audience Costs Exist?

The first issue requiring systematic investigation is whether audience costs exist at all. Figure 1 depicts a model of crisis bargaining with audience costs.[7] In the model, two leaders from different countries disagree about territory, policy, or something else they both value. The

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[7] The model is adapted from Schultz 1999.

interaction begins when Leader One (L_1) decides whether to challenge Leader Two (L_2) over the issue or good, which has a normalized value of 1. In armed crises the challenge typically takes the form of an ultimatum: meet certain demands or face military action.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

If L_1 chooses not to challenge, he receives nothing and leaves his opponent with a payoff of 1. If L_1 challenges, on the other hand, his opponent has two options: concede or resist. In the event of resistance, L_1 can carry out the ultimatum, resulting in war with payoffs war_1 and war_2 for the opposing sides, or L_1 can back down, in which case he incurs a domestic audience cost, a, for having challenged before yielding the prize.

The literature offers three conjectures about the value of a, but it supplies almost no evidence to settle the debate. Some analysts conjecture that a is *positive*—that citizens would disapprove if their leader made international commitments and then reneged.[8] Analysts offer various reasons for this kind of public response. Perhaps citizens recognize the value of a good reputation and fear that hollow threats and promises would undermine the country's credibility, thereby making it harder to bargain and cooperate with other countries in the future. Or perhaps they perceive empty commitments as dishonorable and deeply embarrassing. Or perhaps citizens view inconsistency in foreign policy as evidence that the leader lacks competence. Applying any of these logics, citizens would disparage leaders who make foreign commitments and then reverse course.

The second conjecture says that a is approximately *zero*: citizens would not punish leaders for breaking foreign commitments. Scholars who have advanced this hypothesis point out that many citizens pay little attention to foreign policy, and others judge leaders primarily on

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[8] e.g. Fearon 1994; Guisinger and Smith 2002; Smith 1998.

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whether the job gets done. According to Richard Brody, "the public seems to respond to [foreign] policy outcomes, not to the means of achieving them."[9] If citizens focus mainly on final outcomes, rather than the sequence of threats and promises *in medias res*, we would not anticipate audience costs. Domestic approval ratings would simply reflect the fact that the leader lost the territory, policy, or other item under dispute. It would hardly matter whether the leader made international threats before conceding the prize.

Moreover, even citizens who pay careful attention to every jab and parry may forgive leaders for making false commitments. After all, anyone who has played poker understands that bluffing can be an optimal strategy.[10] By exaggerating their resources or resolve, successful bluffers can achieve higher payoffs than would be possible with complete sincerity. At the same time, skilled bluffers understand the need for flexibility, the need to fold under certain circumstances. "Why, then, would constituents punish leaders whose bluffs are sometimes called?"[11]

Finally, the parameter *a* might be *negative*. According to this third conjecture, citizens think more favorably of leaders who try before conceding than of leaders who forfeit at the outset. Stephen Walt, for example, points out that citizens may "reward a leader who overreaches at first and then manages to retreat short of war. Thus the British and French governments did not suffer domestic audience costs when they backed down during the Rhineland crisis of 1936 or the Munich crisis of 1938, because public opinion did not support

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[9] Brody 1994, 210.

[10] e.g. Gowa 1999; Ramsay 2004; Schultz 1999, 237; Slantchev 2006.

[11] Gowa 1999, 26. For further skepticism about audience costs, see Desch 2002, 29-32.

going to war."[12] Walt's historical examples raise an interesting possibility: maybe leaders can gain points by escalating before giving up, instead of giving way immediately.

The political windfall from moving toward war could be especially large when important issues are at stake or power imbalances exist. In Walt's example, voters did not favor war with Germany. If British and French citizens had been more alarmed about German expansion, they might have commended leaders who (at least) tried to stop the Germans with threats or shows of force, whereas they would have censured leaders who stayed out completely. Power disparities could have a similar effect: "leaders of small states may be *rewarded* for escalating crises with big states and then backing down, where they would be castigated for simply backing down. Standing up to a 'bully' may be praised even if one ultimately retreats."[13]

Do citizens typically respond with scorn, indifference, or praise when their leaders commit without following through? Until we know, we cannot truly understand the effects of publicly committing before a domestic audience. At present, the idea of domestic audience costs remains "an interesting and intuitively plausible conjecture about crisis bargaining, one well worth further exploration. Until it is rigorously tested, however, there is no way of knowing how significant the actual contribution really is."[14]

The theoretical and empirical stakes are high because evidence about audience costs could influence the direction of international relations research. If audience costs do exist under fairly general conditions, this discovery would provide—for the first time—empirical microfoundations for a broad class of models in international security and political economy.

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[12] Walt 1999, 34.

[13] Fearon 1994, 580.

[14] Walt 1999, 35.

The discovery would also suggest profitable avenues for new research, especially if the domestic price of flip-flopping varies systematically with characteristics of the situation and the audience. If, on the other hand, citizens show no stronger preference for leaders who avoid commitments than for leaders who commit and subsequently renege, we will need to rethink how leaders send signals and tie hands in world affairs.

2. Methods

To study audience costs directly while avoiding the common problem of selection bias, I designed and carried out a series of experiments.[15] The first experiment was administered to a random sample of 1,127 U.S. adults in 2004. All participants in the internet-based survey received an introductory script: "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." (The full text of all experiments appears in Appendix 1).

Participants then read about a foreign military crisis in which "A country sent its military to take over a neighboring country." Military situations vary along many dimensions that could affect public opinion. Was the invading country democratic? Why did it attack? How strong was the invading army? Would the invasion affect U.S. interests? To help participants reach an informed judgment, I supplied answers to these background questions.

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[15] The surveys were funded by Time Sharing Experiments in the Social Sciences, NSF-funded infrastructure project described at http://www.experimentcentral.org, and administered by Knowledge Networks, an internet-based polling firm.

Rather than hold the background information constant, though, I randomly manipulated four contextual variables: regime, motive, power, and interests.[16] The country was led by a "dictator" in half the interviews and a "democratically elected government" in the other half. The attacker sometimes had aggressive motives—it invaded "to get more power and resources"—and sometimes invaded "because of a longstanding historical feud." To vary power, I informed half the participants that the attacker had a "strong military," such that "it would have taken a major effort for the United States to help push them out." In the remaining cases, the attacker had a "weak military" that the United States could repel without major effort. Finally, a victory by the attacking country would either "hurt" or "not affect" the safety and economy of the United States.

By crossing these four contextual variables, each with two possible values, I generated a 2x2x2x2 factorial design. In essence, each respondent was randomly assigned to one of 16 background situations. There are two distinct advantages to including such a wide range of situations. First, the diversity of scenarios makes the findings more general by reducing the risk that idiosyncratic features of particular crises drive the results. Second, the variation introduces opportunities to analyze how external conditions affect the magnitude of audience costs.

After reading the background information, participants learned how the U.S. president handled the situation. Half the respondents were randomly assigned to a control group, in which the president traveled down the "no action" branch of the game tree in Figure 1. Respondents did not see the game tree; they were simply told: "The U.S. president said the United States

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[16] Some of these contextual variables appear in the pioneering experiments of Herrmann and Shannon 2001 and Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999.

would stay out of the conflict. The attacking country continued to invade. In the end, the U.S. president did not send troops, and the attacking country took over its neighbor."

Remaining respondents were put in the treatment condition, in which the president issued a military threat but failed to carry it out. In terms of Figure 1, Leader 1 challenged, Leader 2 resisted, and Leader 1 backed down. I conveyed this sequence by stating: "The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. The attacking country continued to invade. In the end, the U.S. president did not send troops, and the attacking country took over its neighbor." The language in the experiment was purposefully neutral: it objectively reported the president's actions, rather than using interpretive phrases like "backed down" or "wimped out" or "contradicted himself," which might have biased the research in favor of finding audience costs.[17]

Finally, respondents received a set of bullet points that recapitulated the entire scenario. The bullet points summarized the invader's political regime (democracy *versus* dictatorship), military power (strong *versus* weak), and motive (more power *versus* historical feud), and the likely effect of the invasion on the safety and economy of the United States.   The bullets also reminded citizens of the path the president took: "The U.S. president said the United States would stay out of the conflict" OR "The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders." The final three bullet points were common to all

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[17] The experiment also avoided language that might have reduced audience costs, either by criticizing the president who stayed out or by praising the leader who escalated the crisis. Future research could explore the effects of rhetoric by the president and the opposition. Here, I aim to measure audience costs with as little rhetorical bias as possible.

participants: the attacking country continued to invade, the U.S. president did not send troops, and the attacking country took over its neighbor.

I then asked: "Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way the U.S. president handled the situation?" Respondents who approved or disapproved were asked whether they held their view very strongly, or only somewhat strongly. Those who answered "neither" where prompted: "Do you lean toward approving of the way the U.S. president handled the situation, lean toward disapproving, or don't you lean either way?" The answers to these questions implied seven levels of presidential approval, ranging from very strong disapproval to very strong approval.

The experiment made it possible to measure audience costs cleanly and directly. By design, the experimental groups differed in only one respect: whether the U.S. president escalated the crisis before letting the attacker take over its neighbor. For this reason, any systematic difference in presidential approval was <u>entirely</u> due to the path the president took, not to variation in background conditions or the outcome of the crisis.

3. Findings: Direct Evidence of Audience Costs

The experiment provided a straightforward way to test competing conjectures in the literature. If audience costs exist ($a>0$ in Figure 1), respondents who received the vignette in which the president stayed out should have approved more pervasively than respondents who read that the president threatened and yielded. If, on the other hand, presidents do not pay domestic political costs for getting caught in a bluff (if $a=0$), levels of approval should be approximately the same in the two experimental groups. Finally, if presidents score points at

home by showing at least some effort abroad (if $a<0$), popularity should be higher in the "empty threat" scenario than in the "stay out" scenario.

Which of these conjectures about the value of a best fits the data? Before answering that question, I confirmed that the treatment and control groups were balanced on baseline covariates that could affect presidential approval. Specifically, I used logistic regression to estimate whether any demographic or contextual variables predicted membership in the treatment group. Not one of the many variables in the model—gender, age, education, income, urban residence, political party identification, a history of military service, attitudes toward internationalism and the use of force, stakes for the United States, and the motive, power, and interests of the invader—had a statistically significant effect on the probability of receiving the "empty threat" vignette. Based on a likelihood ratio test, we cannot reject the hypothesis that the relationship between the treatment and *all* baseline variables was zero.[18] Having established that the treatment was random, I examined how the public responded to each path the president traveled.

The results appear in Table 1 and provide unambiguous evidence of audience costs. For each presidential strategy, the table gives the percentage of respondents who disapproved, approved, or expressed an intermediate view. As the table shows, the president who issued an empty threat by pledging to stop the invasion and not following through (column 1) was significantly less popular than the president who never got involved (column 2). Empty threats caused *both* strong and moderate disapproval to grow, and they led *both* moderate and strong

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[18] The likelihood ratio test statistic, 10.18, was distributed chi-squared with 16 degrees of freedom. If all coefficients were zero, we would observe a test statistic that large with probability .86.

approval to shrink. Evidently, backtracking on a verbal threat evoked an adverse public reaction, implying that *a*>0.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

How large were the costs? The final two columns of Table 1 summarize the magnitude of the effects. Compared to a baseline condition in which the president stayed out, the decision to threaten and not follow through caused disapproval to swell by 16 points, with a 95 percent confidence interval ranging from 10 to 22.[19] At the same time, the percentage of fence-sitters (citizens who neither approved nor disapproved) fell by 4 points, and the share of approvers dropped by 12 points, with an associated confidence interval from 8 to 17. Thus, a mere threat, without any military deployment or use of force, exposed the president to potentially large domestic penalties.

Other analytical methods led to the same conclusion. To summarize the entire table with a single statistic I computed tau-b. Among nonparametric measures of association, tau-b has several attractive properties: it does not assume a linear relationship, its absolute value stays the same when the investigator inverts the ranking of one or both variables, and it remains stable even when the investigator "recodes" the data by merging or splitting categories.[20] The tau-b statistic for a cross-tabulation of presidential approval (seven levels) and presidential behavior

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[19] I obtained confidence intervals by modeling each proportion as a beta distribution with a uniform prior, and then using random draws from each beta distribution to simulate the posterior of each proportion (and differences between proportions, and ratios of proportions). For a discussion, see Johnson and Albert 1999, ch. 1.

[20] Agresti 1976.

(two levels) was .17, more than six times its asymptotic standard error. Clearly, we can reject

the hypothesis that empty threats have no adverse effect on presidential approval.

I also estimated a logit regression with an extensive set of demographic, political and

contextual control variables (see Appendix 2). According to the model, empty threats increased

the typical respondent's probability of disapproval by .17, with a 95-percent confidence interval

from .11 to .23. The close match between Table 1 and the logit predictions should come as no

surprise, because the experimental manipulations (presidential behavior, power, interests,

motive, and regime) were assigned completely at random, without respect to each other or the

demographic attributes of respondents. Due to randomization, there is little for elaborate

statistical models with batteries of control variables.[21] One can obtain unbiased estimates of the

treatment effect via straightforward cross-tabulations. I present the remaining results in the same

intuitive form as Table 1, by computing the percentage of respondents who disapproved of each

presidential strategy. A full multivariate logit model appears in the appendix.

Table 1 documents that empty threats reduce presidential approval. Changes in approval,

in turn, can have serious political consequences. Research has shown that approval ratings in

general and opinions about foreign policy in particular shape election outcomes. Aldrich,

Sullivan, and Borgida, for example, find that foreign policy issues were just as important as

economic ones in predicting how Americans voted in 1980 and 1984.[22] Gelpi, Reifler, and

Feaver offer similarly compelling evidence about the role of foreign policy in the 2004 U.S.

election.[23] Moreover, citizens consistently list foreign issues among the top problems facing the

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[21] Green and Gerber 2002.

[22] Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida 1989.

[23] Gelpi, Reifler and Feaver 2005

country, and leaders regularly campaign and speak about foreign policy, presumably because they regard the topic as politically important. Of course we cannot say exactly how the fall in popularity would affect the political clout of leaders or their ability to retain office. At a minimum, though, the experiment documents a necessary and heretofore unproven condition for audience costs: citizens disapprove of empty threats. Judging from the first experiment, leaders who issue ultimatums and fail to follow through will suffer a significant drop in popularity at home.

This finding has important implications for international conflict. Precisely because it would be costly to make threats and not carry them out, threats can be credible signals of resolve. Thus, data from the experiment provide empirical foundations for signaling models of international relations.

4. Do Audience Costs Increase with the Level of Escalation?

The previous experiment established that even mild acts of escalation—making verbal threats—expose leaders to substantial audience costs. I now investigate whether audience costs increase with the level of hostility. If so, leaders can send progressively stronger signals by ratcheting crises to higher levels. If not, leaders will need other ways to convey resolve after issuing a stern verbal warning.

The literature on militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) distinguishes three levels of escalation prior to war.[24] *Threats*, which are verbal indications of hostile intent, typically take the form of ultimatums. The first experiment contained a simple threat: the U.S. president vowed that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. According to

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[24] Jones, Bremer and Singer 1996.

data collected by Jones, Bremer, and Singer, approximately 5 percent of militarized interstate disputes did not progress beyond a threat to use force.

The next rung on the escalatory ladder is a *display* of force, defined as a military demonstration without combat. Many government actions fall into this category: putting forces on alert, mobilizing previously inactive forces, conducting military maneuvers, deploying ships to a foreign region, violating foreign airspace, etc. Approximately 22 percent of known MIDs have ended with this level of escalation.

Finally, the *use* of force is defined as an active military operation against the foreign target. In most historical examples, a country fires upon the armed forces, population, or territory of another state. Force has also been used short of war to blockade countries, occupy territory, seize materials and take prisoners. Most MIDs since 1816 have involved some use of force, and a relatively small share—around 2 percent—have led to a full-blown interstate war.

Do leaders expose themselves to higher audience costs when they display or use force? I investigated this question by extending the previous experiment. The setup was exactly the same as before. A country invaded its neighbor, and background information varied randomly along four dimensions: regime, motive, power, and interests. The main innovation was to expand the set of presidential responses. In the previous experiment, the president either stayed out or issued an empty threat. The follow-up experiment included three additional presidential approaches.

In one of the new scenarios, the president displayed force before backing down. Specifically, "The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. He sent troops to the region and prepared them for war. The attacking country

continued to invade. In the end, the U.S. president did not send our troops into battle, and the attacking country took over its neighbor."

In another scenario, the president not only threatened and deployed force, but also "ordered U.S. troops to destroy one of the invader's military bases. U.S. troops destroyed the base, and no Americans died in the operation. The invasion still continued. In the end, the U.S. president did not order more military action, and the attacking country took over its neighbor." The final scenario involved the use of force with limited U.S. casualties: "20 Americans died in the operation. The invasion still continued. In the end, the U.S. president did not order more military action, and the attacking country took over its neighbor."[25]

Two features made these scenarios appropriate for testing the hypothesis that audience costs increase with the level of hostility. First, the new scenarios differed only in the approach the president took. In all other respects, including background circumstances and the outcome of the crisis, the extra scenarios were identical to each other and to the "stay out" and "verbal threat" vignettes discussed earlier. Second, the more hostile scenarios nested the less hostile ones. In particular, the vignette about the display of force included a threat to use force, and vignettes about the use of force mentioned previous attempts to threaten and display power. Any extra audience costs should, therefore, be due to layering-on higher levels of escalation.

Table 2 summarizes the audience costs associated with each level of escalation. As before, I calculated the percentage of respondents who disapproved either strongly or somewhat when the president escalated and backed down, and subtracted the percentage who disapproved

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[25] I administered the extra scenarios to 1,036 adults. By design, approximately 40 percent received the "display of force" vignette and the remaining 60 percent were split evenly between the two "use of force" scenarios.

either strongly or somewhat when the president stayed out altogether. This calculation gives the surge in disapproval, or "absolute audience cost," of committing and not following through. Table 2 also presents the "relative risk of disapproval," which I define as disapproval in the escalation condition, divided by disapproval in the stay-out condition.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The estimates in Table 2 show three clear patterns. First, audience costs unambiguously existed in all four scenarios. When the president escalated and did not follow through, disapproval swelled by between 16 and 32 percentage points. The estimates were not only substantively large but also highly precise. In all four cases, the 95 percent confidence intervals around the estimated effects were well to the right of zero. Moreover, disapproval was at least 1.5 times as pervasive, and sometimes twice as common, when the president escalated instead of staying out (see the column of relative risks). We can be nearly certain that, in all four scenarios, citizens preferred the leader who conceded immediately to the one who conceded after upping the ante.

Second, audience costs did not increase smoothly with the level of escalation. Based on existing models of audience costs, the president who displayed force should have paid a higher price than the president who merely threatened to use it. In our data, though, the costs in these two scenarios were similar: disapproval grew in both scenarios by 16 percentage points with a confidence interval ranging from 10 to 22. The experiment, therefore, provides no evidence that audience costs increase as the president moves from threatening to displaying force. This surprising finding, if replicable, would have significant implications for empirical and theoretical work on military crises.

Third, although audience costs did not rise with each level of escalation, they did exhibit a monotonic trend. Disapproval jumped by 16 percentage points when the president either threatened or displayed force, by 23 percentage points when the president used force without U.S. casualties, and by 32 percentage points when Americans died in the operation. Moreover, each level of audience costs was distinguishable from the previous with probability .95 or better. Overall, the experiments suggested thresholds for the accumulation of audience costs. The use of arms exposed the president to higher audience costs than either threatening or displaying force, and the loss of lives further raised the price of escalating and then backing down.

5. How Do Audience Costs Vary with International Circumstances?

Having established that audience costs trend higher as crises intensify, I next considered the effect of international conditions. The invading countries differed in power, motive, and political regime, and U.S. interests were at risk in some scenarios but not in others. I used this variation to test specific hypotheses about the effects of context, and to assess whether audience costs arise in many situations, not just in isolated cases.

The first hypothesis concerned the material interests of the escalating state. By definition, audience costs depend not only on how the public views empty threats, but also on what the public thinks when the president remains completely aloof. Citizens are, of course, more likely to demand military action when they fear for their security and livelihood. It follows that staying out should be less popular in the "hurt" condition than in the "not affect" condition. Moreover, if much of the public disapproves when the president stays out, there may be less potential for disapproval to grow when the president escalates before backing down. Audience costs should, therefore, be smaller when inaction would threaten the national interest.

Evidence from the experiments supported this hypothesis (see Table 3).[26] Facing an invasion that posed no danger to the United States, only 26 percent denounced the president who stayed out, whereas 51 percent denounced the president who escalated and backed down (see "not affect U.S." in Table 3). Contrast an invasion that would have jeopardized America's safety and economy. In that situation, fully 39 percent of citizens objected even when the president stayed out (see "hurt U.S." in Table 3). As expected, the price of committing and backing down was smaller—approximately 9 percentage points less—when the national interest was not at stake.[27]

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The same logic suggested a second hypothesis: audience costs should be smaller in crises with offense-oriented opponents. Previous research found Americans more willing to repel invaders with offensive motives than ones with ambiguous or potentially defensive goals.[28] If

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[26] To increase statistical power I pooled the data from all four levels of escalation, but the main findings hold at each step of the escalation ladder.

[27] The 9-point difference in audience costs between the two scenarios was statistically significant at the .02 level in a one-sided test. The same conclusion held, albeit less precisely, at each level of escalation. The absolute audience costs in the "not affect" and "hurt" scenarios, respectively, were 23 points versus 9 points when the president threatened to use force, 19 points versus 14 points when the president displayed force, 29 points versus 17 points when the president used force without U.S. casualties, and 36 points versus 30 points when Americans died in the operation.

[28] Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999. For a similar finding in an elite sample, see Herrmann and Shannon 2001.

citizens behaved the same way in our study, dissatisfaction with the "stay out" scenario would have been more common when the adversary wanted "more power and resources" than when it invaded because of a "longstanding historical feud." With many citizens already disapproving of the president who remained idle in the face of aggression, there would be less potential for audience costs in either absolute or relative terms.

The experiments provided some support for this hypothesis, as well. More respondents criticized the "stay out" strategy when the invader sought power and resources than when it attacked because of a historical feud.[29] The invader's motive affected public opinion in the "back down" condition, as well, but to a lesser degree. As a result, absolute audience costs were smaller in crises with aggressive opponents (19 percentage points) than in scenarios with less revisionist adversaries (23 points). With a sample of this size, we cannot affirm the difference with complete confidence, but odds are at least 8 in 10 that the hypothesis is correct.[30]

One might have expected the adversary's political regime to affect audience costs in a similar way. After all, a large literature points out that democracies wage war against dictatorships but do not fight other democracies.[31] To the extent that public opinion reflects this pattern, respondents should have been more reluctant to take military action against democracies,

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[29] The difference in disapproval—36 percent versus 29 percent—was statistically significant at the .02 level and consistent with previous research about mass public decisions to use force.

[30] The probability that audience costs in the "historical feud" condition exceeded audience costs when the adversary wanted "more power and resources" was .81 in our data. The difference existed when the president threatened or displayed force, but was not apparent when the president used force before backing down.

[31] One of the seminal works is Russett 1994.

and should have complained less about "staying out" in scenarios involving a democratic opponent. Thus, democracy should have increased the potential for audience costs by shrinking the subtrahend in the audience costs equation.

Although the data pointed in this direction, the effect of regime type was relatively weak. Disapproval in the "stay out" scenario was only 3 points smaller (p-value .16 in a one-sided test) with a democratic opponent than with a dictatorship, and the public response to presidential escalation hardly varied with the opponent's political regime. Overall, the price of escalating and backing down was higher when the U.S. confronted a democracy, but the difference was small and not estimated with much precision.

The final hypothesis concerned the power of the adversary. As previous researchers have speculated, leaders may be able to score points at home by standing up to a bully, whereas there should be less domestic upside to confronting an international weakling.[32] Moreover, leaders might find it particularly embarrassing to back down after challenging a weak country, whereas they would have a natural excuse for retreating from a strong adversary. For these reasons, one might anticipate a negative relationship between audience costs and the military capability of the potential opponent.

Contra expectations, though, audience costs actually increased with the military power of the adversary. Given a strong opponent, 57 percent of respondents criticized the president who aggravated the crisis and then backed down, versus only 31 percent when the president did not get involved. In scenarios with a weak adversary, citizens did not perceive as sharp a distinction between the two presidential paths. Audience costs were, therefore, substantially larger (26

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[32] See the references in Section 2.

points versus 16 points) against a well-armed adversary.[33] It is not clear whether this finding

about power would generalize to other countries and historical periods, though. At the time of

the survey (second half of 2004), the United States was unambiguously the strongest country in

the world, and it had recently waged a costly war against Iraq, which President Bush had billed

as a formidable adversary. The effect of power on audience costs might be reversed in other

time periods, or in smaller countries where leaders could more readily win approval by

escalating against bullies, and where backing down against a strong country might be seen as

"excusable" capitulation.[34]

       As an extension of this analysis, one could check for higher-order interaction effects,

rather than taking each contextual variable in isolation. Such an effort would demand a lot from

the data by shrinking cell sizes and making estimates less precise. Nevertheless, preliminary

tests show that audience costs are smallest (around 8 percentage points) when the United States

confronts an aggressive dictator whose behavior could harm the United States. If this profile

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[33] This surprising pattern appeared not only in the pooled data, but also at each level of

escalation. The absolute audience costs in the "strong" and "weak" scenarios respectively were

22 points versus 10 points for threat of force, 22 points versus 10 points for display of force, 25

points versus 21 points for use of force without U.S. casualties, and 39 points versus 26 points

when Americans died in the operation.

[34] It is not possible to test this conjecture with a survey of U.S. citizens, but I found support for it

in a separate study of audience costs in Argentina. In that research, the Argentine president

incurred enormous costs for backing down against Paraguay, but paid a much smaller domestic

price for backing down against Britain.

describes Iraq under Saddam Hussein, we may have one reason why U.S. escalation did not convince Hussein to back down in the first and second Gulf Wars.

In summary, audience costs vary systematically with interests, motive, regime, and power. These findings help identify the conditions under which domestic audiences make commitments credible. The experiments suggest, for example, that threats convey more information when issued by leaders who could remain on the sidelines with little risk to their own country. Likewise, threats against democracies and status-quo states might be more informative than threats against autocratic and revisionist ones. Finally, although more research is needed about the effects of power, threats by a superpower like the United States may be more revealing when the target is militarily strong than when it is weak.

Although audience costs change in size with standard international relations variables, the costs themselves exist across a remarkably wide range of circumstances. Perhaps the most striking lesson from Table 3 is that, in *every* scenario, citizens preferred the president who stayed out to the president who escalated and then backed down. The estimated audience costs were at least 16 points and sometimes as high as 26 points, with confidence intervals far to the right of zero. Domestic audiences can, therefore, lend credibility to threats against all types of regimes, with varying motivations and military power, whether or not the national interest is at stake.

6. How Are Audience Costs Distributed across the Population?

When the president makes an international commitment and does not follow through, does approval fall uniformly across the entire population, or only within certain demographic groups? This question is important because some groups participate more actively in politics than others. If the drop in approval were confined to politically inert citizens, the ultimate

political repercussions of escalating and backing down could be trivial. Moreover, different leaders have different constituencies. If the distribution of audience costs is lumpy, identical behavior may have distinct political consequences depending on the support base of the leader in office. I explore these possibilities by slicing the data along political and demographic lines.

Most audience cost theories assume that, in democracies, citizens use elections to discipline leaders. These theories have power to the extent that backtracking on international commitments triggers a negative reaction in the *voting* population. Table 4 strongly supports this assumption.[35] Among respondents who had registered to vote, audience costs averaged 22 percentage points, with a confidence interval from 17 to 27. The analogous effect in the unregistered population was 16 percentage points, which had a wider confidence interval but was still greater than zero with probability .996. Table 4 also distinguishes between nonvoters and active voters: people who recently cast a ballot in a presidential election.[36] Audience costs among active voters averaged 22 percentage points, versus 15 points for those who had not been to the polls in some time. We can, therefore, be certain of audience costs throughout the population, and especially in the group best positioned to apply the electoral penalty.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Of course, citizens could exert pressure in many ways other than voting. Is there any evidence of audience costs among citizens who participate more actively in the politics? To investigate this possibility, I followed Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie in classifying someone as a political activist if he or she had recently worked for a political campaign, donated money to

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[35] Again, I obtain statistical power by averaging across international circumstances and levels of escalation.

[36] Citizens qualified if they voted in either 2000 or 2004.

a campaign, served on a community board, collaborated to solve a community problem, contacted a government official, or attended a political protest or rally.[37] Approximately 29 percent of respondents performed at least one of these activities in the previous twelve months. Audience costs among these activists averaged 34 percentage points, more than double the level among citizens who were not so politically involved. Apparently, the most politically active (and possibly most influential) segments of the population would disapprove strongly if the executive made threats and did not see them through.

I next investigated whether audience costs vary by political constituency. This question, too, has potentially important implications for international relations theory. If some domestic groups are especially sensitive to empty commitments, leaders who rely on these "high audience cost" constituencies should have a signaling advantage in international relations. If, on the other hand, domestic groups have similar views about making commitments and not carrying them out, then (holding political institutions constant) the ability to signal via escalation may be similar across countries and over time.

I began with political parties, perhaps the most important groups in modern democracies. Previous research has found partisan cleavages on many foreign policy questions, including military action against foreign nations.[38] Do parties in the electorate also disagree about the relative value of conceding immediately versus escalating first? In the United States, the answer appears to be "no." As Table 5 shows, members of the two parties expressed nearly identical views not only when the president stayed out (37 percent complained) but also when the president heightened the crisis before caving in (56 percent disapproved). For both groups,

[37] Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993.

[38] For a review, see Holsti 1996, 131-50.

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absolute audience costs hovered around 20 points, approximately the same level exhibited by citizens who felt no attachment to either party.[39] To further explore the effects of partisanship, one could design experiments that included the name or political affiliation of the president. When citizens focus on the president's behavior, though, rather than his or her political brand name, party has no clear effect on audience costs.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

If audience costs vary little by party, do they depend on the international ideology of citizens? Eugene Wittkopf and others have argued that citizens view foreign policy through two broad interpretative frameworks: hawk versus dove and interventionism versus isolationism.[40] To gauge the effects of these outlooks, I coded respondents as doves if they agreed that "the use of military force only makes problems worse" and hawks if they disagreed with the statement. People who "neither agreed nor disagreed" were placed in an intermediate category. Likewise, I classified respondents as interventionists, isolationists, or neither based on their reaction to the

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[39] Audience costs did vary with the strength of party ID, but not according to a discernible pattern. Strong democrats registered higher audience costs than strong republicans (22 points versus 16 points), but weak republicans outstripped weak democrats on the same scale (25 points versus 16 points). "Pure" independents and democrat-leaning independents behaved about the same; both penalized the president less than independents who favored the republican side. Table 5 treats leaners as members of the "Independent" category, but reclassifing them as partisans would yield the same null finding. In that case, audience costs would be approximately 20 percentage points among Democrats (including leaners), 21 points among pure independents, and 22 points among Republicans (including leaners).

[40] e.g. Holsti 1996; Wittkopf 1990.

statement that "the United States needs to play an active role in solving conflicts around the world."

Table 5 shows that audience costs transcend the conventional hawk-dove divide. Doves docked the president by approximately 18 percentage points for escalating and backing down. The penalty among hawks was only slightly larger (21 points versus 18 points), and the three-point gap was statistically insignificant. These findings in no way imply that hawks and doves perceive the world identically. On the contrary, hawks disapproved more often than doves *both* when the president stayed out and when the president threatened, displayed, or used force before letting the invaders succeed. Nonetheless, hawks, doves, and citizens in-between preferred (to a roughly equal degree) leaders who stayed out to leaders who committed and failed to follow through.[41] The same conclusion holds for interventionists and isolationists.

Audience costs, therefore, cut across the main political parties and foreign policy outlooks in the United States. Could they nonetheless vary by demographic group, such as gender? On a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues, women tend to have different preferences then men.[42] Yet Table 6 shows that gender had no effect on audience costs. Among

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[41] Analysis of the strength of hawkishness versus dovishness did not overturn this conclusion. Audience costs among strong hawks almost exactly matched the costs among weak hawks and respondents who "neither agreed nor disagreed" that the use of force only makes problems worse. I found more heterogeneity among doves: strong doves had the largest audience costs in the sample; weak doves had the smallest. It is not clear how one could explain this difference theoretically, and in any case there were too few strong doves (only 144, spread across 80 experimental conditions) to draw reliable conclusions about that subcategory.

[42] See., e.g., Burgoon and Hiscox 2004.

males, the average price of escalating and backing down was around 22 points. The price among females was only 2 points smaller, a difference statistically and substantively indistinguishable from zero.[43] Rural and urban residents also responded similarly to the presidential strategies, as did people in the lower and upper halves of the sample's income distribution.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

On three demographic dimensions, though, I found systematic variation in audience costs. First, costs were larger among citizens who have served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Military Reserves, or National Guard. As Gelpi and Feaver point out, civilians and the military often express different views about the use of military force, and this opinion gap shapes American foreign policy.[44] I, too, find evidence of an opinion gap. Both groups offered similar appraisals when the president stayed out, but respondents with military experience disapproved at a substantially higher rate than civilians when the president escalated and backed down. The estimates are necessarily imprecise, given that 84 percent of the sample had no military experience, but the finding, if replicated with more data, could imply that audience costs grow with the share of veterans in the policymaking elite and the population at large.

A second demographic dimension, age, also played a role. In the younger half of the age distribution, the absolute penalty for escalating and backing down was 16 percentage points,

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[43] Men and women responded similarly not just in the aggregate, but also at each level of escalation considered separately. Audience costs for males and females, respectively were 16 and 16 when the president threatened force, 17 and 14 when the president displayed force, 27 and 19 when the president used force without U.S. casualties, and 32 and 33 when Americans died in the operation.

[44] Gelpi and Feaver 2002.

compared with 25 points for the older half of the sample. Further analysis suggested a curvilinear relationship: citizens in their 50s, 60s, and early 70s penalized the president by around 31 points, approximately twice as much as respondents in other age brackets. A follow-up survey could explore whether this pattern arises because different generations have lived through different formative periods and drawn distinct lesson from history, or because people in different age categories have different interests and evaluative criteria.

Finally, audience costs increased with education. A large body of literature shows that the most sophisticated members of the electorate think and behave differently from those with less knowledge of public affairs. And in international affairs, studies have found that highly educated citizens are especially sensitive to the reputational consequences of foreign policy.[45] I expected the same pattern in the audience costs experiments. Highly educated citizens should be in the best position to recognize how escalating and backing down could undermine national credibility, with potentially adverse consequences for future interactions with countries. For this reason, audience costs should be larger among more educated segments of the population. Table 6 confirms this hypothesis. Audience costs were approximately 32 percentage points among citizens who had completed college, nearly double the value for citizens without a college degree. The difference, 15 percentage points, was substantively large and significant at the .001 level.[46] By implication, leaders with highly educated domestic audiences may have a signaling advantage over leaders with less sophisticated constituencies.

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[45] Author.

[46] Similar patterns held for each type of escalation. The difference in audience costs between the two educational groups was 19-16=3 points when the president issued only a verbal threat, 26-

7. Why Do Citizens Disapprove?

Although the previous experiments provided direct evidence of audience costs, the mechanisms remain unclear. *Why*, exactly, do citizens disapprove of leaders who escalate crises and then back down? Do they disparage the president for wasting time and money on military mobilizations that ultimately lead to naught? Do they worry that reneging on commitments damages the international reputation of the leader or country?[47] Do they interpret flip-flopping in a particular crisis as proof that the leader lacks competence as a foreign policymaker—that he is not especially skilled at extracting bargains or fails to look before he leaps?[48] Or do they disapprove because the president never should have gotten involved in the first place?

I designed a separate survey of 347 citizens to investigate the micro-mechanisms behind audience costs. In many respects this additional survey resembled the larger one discussed so far. Citizens were told about a situation in which a country invaded its neighbor. Some read that the president stayed out; others learned that the president escalated the crisis but did not follow through. In all cases, the vignette ended with the attacking country taking over its neighbor. Unlike the main instrument, though, this extra survey asked citizens to explain the opinions they expressed. After voicing approval or disapproval, participants received a followup: "Could you please type a few sentences telling us why you approve/disapprove of the way the U.S. president

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12=14 points when the president displayed force, 39-17=22 points when the president used force without casualties, and 52-26=26 points when American soldiers died.

[47] Fearon 1994; Guisinger and Smith 2002.

[48] Smith 1998.

handled the situation?" Participants entered their answers directly into a text box, making it possible to analyze each respondent's account in his or her own words.

For manageability, the study of motivations contained fewer experimental manipulations than the main instrument. In the category of foreign policy strategy, the president either stayed out or displayed force before backing down. The survey did not contain cases in which the president issued a mere verbal threat, or when the president used force to destroy an enemy base. The survey also presented a smaller set of background conditions: the invasion would either *hurt* or *not affect* the safety and economy of the United States, but the attacking country was always described as having a strong military, and citizens did not receive information about the motives or political regime of the invader.

This study, like the larger experiment, found strong evidence of audience costs. The president who stayed out received a disapproval score 32 points, while the president who escalated and backed down got negative ratings from 58 percent of the public. The latter president therefore incurred an absolute audience cost of 58-32=26 percentage points.[49] This estimate was approximately five times its standard error and had an associated confidence interval from 15 to 35. Thus, the experiment corroborated one of our main findings, that citizens think more highly of leaders who do nothing than of leaders to commit but do not follow through.

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[49] This estimate exceeds the value for display of force in Table 2. Why the difference? The text was a bit shorter, so backing down might have appeared starker. Moreover, the adversary in this study always had a strong military. As noted above, audience costs increase with the military strength of the adversary.

At the same time, the survey revealed *why* audience costs exist. In the study, 185 citizens considered a scenario in which the president escalated and backed down. Of these, 105 disapproved either strongly or somewhat of the way the president handled the situation. Why did they view the president's behavior negatively? Some did not say, and a few misunderstood the follow-up question or provided an unclassifiable answer, but 87 of the 105 clearly articulated why they had assigned a negative rating.

I grouped the 87 open-ended responses into three categories. The first category included people who thought the president should have pushed out the invaders, not because the president had made a prior commitment, but simply because it was the right thing to do. Some said the United States had a moral obligation to protect the victims of aggression; others pointed out that the safety and economy of the United States would suffer if the invader took over its neighbor. Fourteen of the 87 participants (approximately 16 percent) answered this way. These citizens probably would have objected as much, and for the same reasons, if the president had stayed out. In fact, citizens in the control group (in which the president neither threatened nor showed force) justified their disapproval in precisely the same terms. Because the reasons apply equally to all scenarios in which the president let the invasion continue, they cannot be the source of audience costs.

The next category contained citizens who disliked the fact that the president *escalated in the first place*. Some contended that it was not America's responsibility to solve other countries' problems ("I do not feel that the U.S.A. should be the police for the world. We should not have sent troops in this situation.") Others argued the U.S. government should have focused on its own citizens ("The U.S. has enough problems of our own at this time. We have people that are homeless and hungry. We should take care of our own first."). Roughly 12 percent of

respondents offered these dovish or isolationist responses, which demonstrate an often overlooked reason for audience costs.

The vast majority of respondents (72 percent) gave a third reason for disapproving: the president behaved *inconsistently* by saying one thing and doing another. Why did they view inconsistency as problematic? Most complained that waffling would hurt the reputation and credibility of the country. As one citizen explained, "if you say that you are going to do something, you need to do it or else you lose your credibility. It would have been better to ignore the situation completely than to make a public commitment and then not carry it out." Another respondent wrote: "When a President says something, in this case that he will push back the invading country, he must follow through or lose credibility in the world community. He sent troops and when the threat didn't work, he allowed the invasion to continue. That is a terrible precedent to set."

A few respondents disliked inconsistency for non-reputational reasons. Two people complained that the president had wasted money by deploying troops but not using them, and eight said the president behaved in a puzzling manner ("Why would he have troops there to help and not do anything to help?") or had not shown sufficient foresight ("United States President must not have truly thought things through"). But 61 percent of all disapprovers, and 84 percent of those who complained about inconsistency, denounced the president for breaking his word. By not upholding his commitment to repel the invaders, the president suggested that he and his country could not be trusted in world affairs.

Overall, the responses support a reputation-based theory of audience costs. In the model by Guisinger and Smith, citizens disapprove of—and perhaps even remove—leaders who get a

reputation for dishonesty by making commitments and not following through.[50] The

experiments reported here confirm that logic. Domestic audiences give leaders a reason to care

about their international reputation, and thus an incentive to avoid making commitments they

have little intention of carrying out.

8. Conclusions

This paper has offered the first direct analysis of audience costs in a way that avoids

problems of strategic selection. The research, based on a set of experiments embedded in public

opinion surveys, shows that audience costs exist across a remarkably wide range of conditions

and increase with the level of escalation. The adverse reaction to empty commitments is evident

throughout the population, and especially among politically active citizens who have the greatest

potential to shape government policy. Moreover, the magnitude of the public backlash varies

systematically with the demographic makeup of the country and with international factors such

as power and interests. Finally, it appears that audience costs arise primarily from concerns

about the international reputation of the country and its leaders.

These findings have both substantive and methodological implications for the study of

international relations. Substantively, they confirm that domestic audiences can enhance the

credibility of international commitments by punishing leaders who say one thing but do another.

This discovery was far from preordained. If citizens had focused on foreign policy outcomes

rather than processes, or regarded bluffing as a reasonable strategy, or rewarded leaders for

trying before conceding, or cared little about their country's reputation, audience costs would not

have emerged. The fact that audience costs arose consistently, across a wide range of conditions,

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[50] Guissinger and Smith 2002.

counts as strong evidence that domestic actors can contribute to foreign credibility. Consequently, the paper supplies behavioral microfoundations for many leading theories of international security and political economy.

This study also contributes to our understanding of reputation in world affairs. What motivates leaders to protect their international reputations, even at great cost to themselves and others? I find that concerns about international reputation have domestic political roots. Right or wrong, citizens internalize the international cost of making commitments and not following through. They worry that leaders who break commitments will undermine the nation's credibility, and they translate such concerns into strong disapproval when the executive adopts a reputation-damaging strategy. These findings help explain why many leaders strive to protect the national image, and why concerns about reputation shape the way countries behave.[51]

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[51] Walter 2006.

All respondents received the following introduction:

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.

A country sent its military to take over a neighboring country. The attacking country was led by a [dictator, who invaded OR democratically elected government, which invaded] [to get more power and resources OR because of a longstanding historical feud.] The attacking country had a [strong military, so it would OR weak military, so it would not] have taken a major effort for the United States to help push them out. A victory by the attacking country would [hurt OR not affect] the safety and economy of the United States.

Each respondent was randomly assigned to receive P1, P2, P3, P4, OR P5.

P1: The U.S. president said the United States would stay out of the conflict. The attacking country continued to invade. In the end, the U.S. president did not send troops, and the attacking country took over its neighbor.

P2: The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. The attacking country continued to invade. In the end, the U.S. president did not send troops, and the attacking country took over its neighbor.

P3: The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. He sent troops to the region and prepared them for war. The attacking country continued to invade. In the end, the U.S. president did not send our troops into battle, and the attacking country took over its neighbor.

P4: The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. He sent troops to the region and prepared them for war. The attacking country continued to invade. The president then ordered U.S. troops to destroy one of the invader's military bases. U.S. troops destroyed the base, and no Americans died in the operation. The invasion still continued. In the end, the U.S. president did not order more military action, and the attacking country took over its neighbor.

P5: The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. He sent troops to the region and prepared them for war. The attacking country continued to invade. The president then ordered U.S. troops to destroy one of the invader's military bases. U.S. troops destroyed the base, and 20 Americans died in the operation. The invasion still continued. In the end, the U.S. president did not order more military action, and the attacking country took over its neighbor.

All respondents got the next two bullet points:

To summarize,

- The attacking country had a [strong OR weak] military, was led by a [dictator OR democratically elected government], and invaded [to get more power and resources OR because of a longstanding historical feud].

- A successful invasion would [hurt OR not affect] the safety and economy of the United States.

Respondents received additional bullet points, depending on whether they had been assigned to P1, P2, P3, P4, or P5.

[If P1, include these additional bullet points]

- The U.S. president said the United States would stay out of the conflict.

- The attacking country continued to invade.

- The U.S. president did not send troops.

[If P2, include these additional bullet points]

- The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders.

- The attacking country continued to invade.

- The U.S. president did not send troops.

[If P3, include these additional bullet points]

- The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. He sent troops to the region and prepared them for war.

- The attacking country continued to invade.

- The U.S. president did not send our troops into battle.

[If P4, include these additional bullet points]

- The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. He sent troops to the region and prepared them for war.

- The attacking country continued to invade.

- The president then ordered U.S. troops to destroy a military base.

- U.S. troops destroyed the base, and no Americans died.

- The invasion still continued.

- The U.S. president did not order more military action.

[If P5, include these additional bullet points]

- The U.S. president said that if the attack continued, the U.S. military would push out the invaders. He sent troops to the region and prepared them for war.

- The attacking country continued to invade.

- The president then ordered U.S. troops to destroy a military base.

- U.S. troops destroyed the base, and 20 Americans died.

- The invasion still continued.

- The U.S. president did not order more military action.

All respondents received the final bullet point and the approval question:

[Final bullet point for all conditions]

- The attacking country took over its neighbor.

Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way the U.S. president handled the situation? [If approve]: Do you approve very strongly, or only somewhat? [If dispprove]: Do you disapprove very strongly, or only somewhat? [If neither]: Do you lean toward approving of the way the U.S. president handled the situation, lean toward disapproving, or don't you lean either way?

APPENDIX 2: LOGIT MODEL OF AUDIENCE COSTS

In the paper I estimated audience costs by computing the percentage of respondents who disapproved when the president escalated and backed down, and subtracting the percentage who disapproved when the president stayed out entirely. This simple method led to unbiased estimates because, by design, the experimental manipulations were uncorrelated with each other and with demographic influences on presidential approval. This appendix draws the same conclusions as the main paper, while explicitly controlling for a host of variables.

The dependent variable in Table 1A is "disapproval," which took a value of 1 when respondents disapproved of the way the president handled the situation and 0 otherwise. I modeled the probability of disapproval for each respondent i according to the logistic form $1/[1+\exp(-x_i\beta)]$, where x_i and β are vectors of explanatory variables and effect parameters, respectively. The vector x_i included dummy variables for various strategies the president pursued, as well as interactions between the president's strategy and contextual or demographic factors. (The variable BD in the model indicated that the president had escalated the crisis and backed down, instead of staying out entirely). Beyond the interactions listed in Table 1A, the model included a constant term and main effects for all four international contextual variables (interests, motive, regime, and power), all six demographic variables (gender, rural residence, income, military service, age, and education), and all six measures of political group or outlook (Democrat, Republican, hawk, dove, interventionist, and isolationist).

Holding these factors constant, citizens were far more likely to disapprove when the president made an empty commitment than when the president stayed out altogether. The parameter estimates imply that, for a typical citizen, the probability of disapproval increased by .17 (confidence interval .11 to .23) when the president threatened force and backed down, by an

equal amount when the president displayed force, by .26 (.19 to .33) when he used force without

U.S. casualties, and by .36 (.29 to .42) when Americans died in the operation. These estimates

closely resemble the raw percentages in Table 2.[52]

[TABLE A1 ABOUT HERE]

The model also confirmed the paper's principal conclusions about international context:

audience costs were significantly larger when the national interest was not at stake (.26 versus

.19) and when the adversary was militarily strong (.28 versus .18), and were somewhat higher in

confrontations with democracies (.25 versus .20) and nations not seeking more power and

resources (.24 versus .21). Most conclusions regarding political and demographic groups proved

robust, as well. Party identification, hawkishness, internationalism, region, and income

continued to have no bearing on audience costs. With statistical controls, the gender variable

became more powerful but remained statistically indistinguishable from zero, while the effects of

military service faded in size and statistical significance. Older citizens still exhibited greater

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[52] I approximated the typical citizen by holding other explanatory variables at their means.

Alternatively, one could use the parameter estimates to predict (A) how each citizen in the

sample would have responded if, contrary to fact, all had been told that the president escalated

and backed down and (B) how each would have responded if all had been told that the president

stayed out. The quantity A-B, an individual-level measure of audience costs, could then be

averaged across all respondents to give the expected audience cost for the population as a whole.

Using this method, I calculated audience costs of .15 (.9 to .20) when the president threatened

force, .15 (.09 to .21) when the president showed force, .23 (.16 to .30) when the president used

force without loss of American lives, and .32 (.26 to .38) in the aftermath of American casualties.

audience costs (.27 versus .17), as did respondents with college degrees (.34 versus .19).

Overall, the logit model confirmed the paper's key substantive findings.

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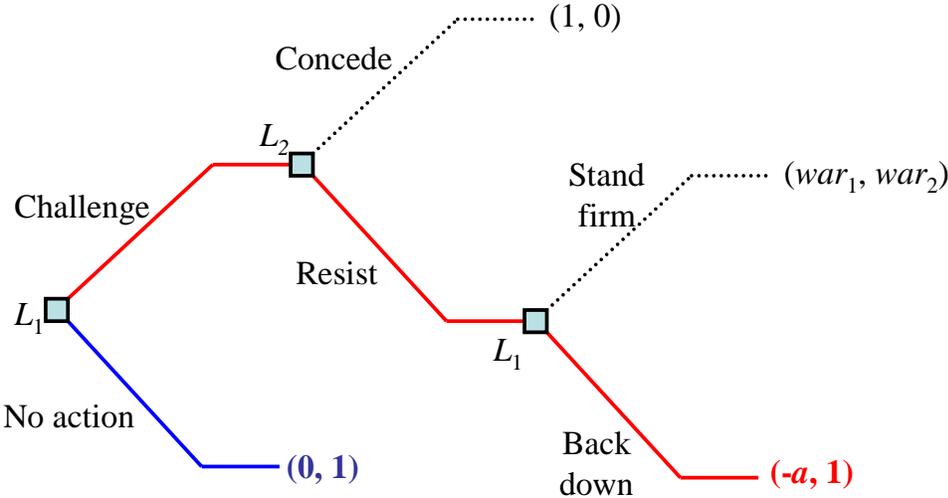**FIGURE 1.** *A Crisis Bargaining Model with Audience Costs*

L_2

Concede ·········· $(1, 0)$

Challenge

Stand firm ·········· (war_1, war_2)

Resist

L_1

L_1

No action

$(0, 1)$

Back down

$(-a, 1)$

TABLE 1. *The domestic political cost of making empty threats*

	Public reaction to empty threat	*Public reaction to staying out*	*Difference in opinion*	*Summary of differences*
Disapprove				
Disapprove very strongly	31 (27 to 36)	20 (17 to 23)	12 (6 to 17)	16 (10 to 22)
Disapprove somewhat	18 (14 to 21)	13 (10 to 16)	5 (1 to 9)	
Neither				
Lean toward disapproving	8 (6 to 11)	9 (7 to 11)	0 (-4 to 3)	-4 (-10 to 2)
Don't lean either way	21 (17 to 25)	21 (18 to 25)	0 (-5 to 4)	
Lean toward approving	8 (6 to 11)	11 (9 to 14)	-3 (-6 to 1)	
Approve				
Approve somewhat	8 (5 to 10)	13 (11 to 16)	-6 (-9 to -2)	-12 (-17 to -8)
Approve very strongly	6 (4 to 9)	13 (10 to 16)	-7 (-10 to -3)	

Note: The table gives the percentage of respondents who expressed each opinion. 95-percent confidence intervals appear in parentheses. Sample size was 477 in the "empty threat" scenario and 650 in the "stay out" scenario. The empty threat scenario involved only a verbal threat; the president did not display or use military force.

50

TABLE 2. *Domestic audience costs at four levels of escalation*

Level of escalation	*Absolute audience cost*	*Relative risk of disapproval*
Threat of Force	16 (10 to 22)	1.5 (1.3 to 1.7)
Display of Force	16 (10 to 22)	1.5 (1.3 to 1.7)
Use without U.S. casualties	23 (16 to 29)	1.7 (1.5 to 2.0)
Use with U.S. casualties	32 (26 to 39)	2.0 (1.7 to 2.3)

Note: The absolute audience cost is the surge in disapproval, expressed in percentage points. The relative risk is the level of disapproval when the president escalated and backed down, divided by the level of disapproval when the president stayed out. 95-percent confidence intervals appear in parentheses. The sample size was 650 for stay out (the reference category), 477 for threat of force, 420 for display of force, 306 for use without U.S. casualties, and 310 for use with U.S. casualties.

TABLE 3. *Audience costs as a function of international context*

International context	*Disapproval if escalate & BD* -	*Disapproval if stay out* =	*Absolute audience cost*
Interests			
Not affect U.S.	51 (48 to 55)	26 (21 to 31)	26 (19 to 31)
Hurt U.S.	56 (52 to 59)	39 (34 to 45)	16 (10 to 23)
Motive			
Historical feud	52 (48 to 55)	29 (24 to 34)	23 (17 to 29)
More power	55 (52 to 59)	36 (31 to 42)	19 (13 to 25)
Regime			
Democracy	53 (50 to 57)	31 (26 to 36)	22 (16 to 28)
Dictatorship	54 (50 to 57)	34 (29 to 40)	19 (13 to 25)
Power			
Strong military	57 (53 to 60)	31 (26 to 36)	26 (20 to 32)
Weak military	50 (47 to 54)	35 (29 to 40)	16 (9 to 22)

Note: The table gives the percentage of respondents who disapproved in each experimental condition. 95-percent confidence intervals appear in parentheses. Sample sizes for the escalation and stay-out conditions, respectively, were 746 and 317 for *not affect the U.S.*; 769 and 313 for *historical feud*; 744 and 337 for *more power*; 740 and 328 for *democracy*, and 733 and 322 for *dictatorship*; 767 and 333 for *would hurt the U.S.*; 728 and 330 for *strong military*; and 785 and 320 for *weak military*.

TABLE 4. *Audience costs by level of political participation*

Level of participation	Disapproval if escalate & BD	−	Disapproval if stay out	=	Absolute audience cost
Registered	56 (53 to 59)		34 (30 to 38)		22 (17 to 27)
Not registered	42 (36 to 49)		26 (17 to 37)		16 (4 to 27)
Voter	57 (54 to 60)		34 (30 to 39)		22 (17 to 28)
Non-voter	44 (38 to 50)		29 (21 to 37)		15 (5 to 24)
Activist	63 (58 to 68)		29 (23 to 36)		34 (26 to 42)
Non-activist	50 (47 to 53)		34 (30 to 39)		16 (11 to 21)

Note: The table gives the percentage of respondents who disapproved in each scenario. 95-percent confidence intervals appear in parentheses. Sample sizes for the escalation and stay-out conditions, respectively, were 1120 and 476 for citizens who were *registered* to vote, 227 and 88 for citizens who were *not registered*, 1026 and 432 for *voters*, 302 and 126 for *non-voters*, 427 and 190 for *activists*, 1031 and 440 for *non-activists*.

TABLE 5. *Audience costs by political group or outlook*

Political group or outlook	*Disapproval if escalate & BD*	**-**	*Disapproval if stay out*	**=**	*Absolute audience cost*
Party affiliation					
Democrat	56 (52 to 61)		37 (30 to 44)		20 (12 to 27)
Independent	49 (45 to 53)		27 (22 to 33)		22 (15 to 28)
Republican	56 (51 to 61)		37 (30 to 45)		19 (10 to 28)
Use of force					
Hawk	60 (56 to 64)		39 (33 to 45)		21 (14 to 28)
Neither	46 (41 to 50)		23 (17 to 30)		22 (15 to 29)
Dove	52 (47 to 57)		34 (27 to 41)		18 (10 to 26)
Role in world					
Interventionist	60 (56 to 64)		40 (34 to 46)		20 (13 to 27)
Neither	40 (34 to 46)		17 (10 to 25)		23 (14 to 32)
Isolationist	53 (49 to 57)		32 (27 to 38)		21 (14 to 28)

Note: The table gives the percentage of respondents who disapproved in each scenario. 95-percent confidence intervals appear in parentheses. Sample sizes for the escalation and stay-out conditions, respectively, were 512 and 202 for *democrats*, 592 and 281 for *independents*, 409 and 165 for *republicans*, 629 and 251 for *hawks*, 457 and 199 when *neither hawk nor dove*, 425 and 197 for *doves*, 634 and 263 for *interventionist*, 283 and 115 when *neither interventionist nor isolationist*, and 590 and 270 when *isolationist*.

TABLE 6. *Audience costs by demographic group*

Demographic group	Disapproval if escalate & BD	–	Disapproval if stay out	=	Absolute audience cost
Gender					
Male	56 (52 to 60)		34 (29 to 40)		22 (15 to 28)
Female	51 (48 to 55)		31 (27 to 37)		20 (14 to 26)
Region					
Rural area	53 (46 to 59)		30 (22 to 39)		23 (12 to 32)
Urban area	54 (51 to 56)		33 (29 to 37)		21 (16 to 25)
Income					
Less than $40K	49 (46 to 53)		31 (26 to 36)		19 (12 to 25)
At least $40K	57 (54 to 61)		35 (29 to 40)		23 (16 to 29)
Military service					
Has served	63 (56 to 69)		34 (24 to 44)		29 (17 to 39)
Has not served	52 (49 to 55)		33 (29 to 37)		19 (14 to 24)
Age					
Up to 45 years	50 (45 to 54)		34 (29 to 40)		16 (9 to 22)
Over 45 years	57 (53 to 60)		31 (26 to 37)		25 (19 to 31)
Education					
College degree	65 (60 to 70)		32 (25 to 41)		32 (23 to 41)
No college degree	50 (47 to 53)		33 (29 to 37)		17 (12 to 22)

Note: The table gives the percentage of respondents who disapproved in each scenario. 95-percent confidence intervals appear in parentheses. Sample sizes for the escalation and stay-out conditions, respectively, were 732 and 303 for *males*, 781 and 347 for *females*, 268 and 110 for *rural*, 1245 and 540 for *urban*, 720 and 323 for *income below $40K*, 793 and 327 for *income of at least $40K*, 249 and 98 for citizens who *had served* in the military, 1239 and 544 for citizens who *had not served* in the military, 715 and 312 for respondents *up to 45 years*, 798 and 338 for respondents *over 45 years*, 369 and 142 for citizens with a *college degree*, and 1144 and 508 for citizens with *no college degree*.

APPENDIX TABLE 1A. *Determinants of Audience Costs (Logit Model)*

	Model 1		
Regressor	*Estimate*	*S.E.*	*p-value*
Effect of escalation level			
BD x threat of force	1.08	.49	.03
BD x display of force	1.08	.49	.03
BD x use without casualties	1.42	.50	.00
BD x use with casualties	1.86	.50	.00
Effect of international context			
BD x not affect U.S.	.38	.21	.07
BD x historical feud	.18	.21	.39
BD x democracy	.22	.21	.29
BD x strong military	.43	.21	.04
Effect of demographic variables			
BD x male	.23	.23	.33
BD x rural	.03	.29	.92
BD x income at least $40k	.03	.21	.88
BD x served in military	.09	.33	.79
BD x age over 45 years	.43	.22	.05
BD x college degree	.62	.26	.02
Effect of political group/outlook			
BD x Democrat	-.18	.25	.48
BD x Republican	-.21	.27	.44
BD x Hawk	.02	.27	.94
BD x Dove	-.31	.29	.28
BD x Internventionist	-.39	.33	.24
BD x Isolationist	-.22	.34	.52

Note: These are estimates of a binary logit regression with 2130 observations. The dependent variable is disapproval (1 if the respondent disapproved, 0 otherwise). *BD*=escalate and back down. *S.E.*=standard.error. In addition to the variables shown, the model included a constant term and main effects for all four international contextual variables, all six demographic variables, and all six measures of political group or outlook.