Media Framing and Audience Costs

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Abstract

Work in international relations often assumes that a domestic audience is able to constrain and punish the actions of their leader. This work assumes that the audience perceives and understands the actions that their leaders take, and will hold them accountable. Implicitly, these works also assume that the audience receives an unbiased assessment of the leader's actions. Using an experiment, we show that the framing of information about a leader's actions has an impact on an individual's ability to punish their leader. When news of a leader's broken promise is framed negatively, the logic of audience costs holds and citizens punish the leader. When a broken promise is framed positively, however, citizens are less willing to constrain their leader, resulting in a breakdown in the logic of audience costs.

Keywords: Audience Costs Theory, Framing, Signaling, Public Opinion

While they often have access to direct lines of communication, leaders tend to make use of other means to communicate with one another. An example of this is the public speech: while it is not necessarily direct, leaders often use public speeches to send messages to one another. For example, President Obama's "red line" regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria came about not as the result of official communication between the Obama administration and the Syrian government/rebels, but a response to a question from a reporter (Landler 2012; Baker et al. 2013; Chollet 2016).

The international relations literature suggests that these public forums help leaders communicate with one another by assuaging concerns about credibility. Fearon (1994; 1997) explains that these public addresses are ways for leader to invoke "audience costs;" by making their statements public, leaders are opening themselves up to punishment if they back down from their statements. Under this logic, the public "red line" comment should make it so that if President Obama were to back down from punishing Syria for the use of chemical weapons, he would be punished by his audience.

Implicitly, this argument assumes that in order for claims invoking audience costs to be credible, audiences must actually be *willing to punish.* It assumes that audiences perfectly learn about the promise, perfectly learn about the breaking of the promise, are dissatisfied with the decision to break the promise, and translate this dissatisfaction into punishment. Our work finds that this may not be the case. Using an experiment, we frame information about a broken promise in a positive or negative way, reflective of how information about leaders is communicated to the general public, and measure subsequent attitudes and willingness to punish. Framing the broken promise as a positive decision leads to less dissatisfaction with the decision, less dissatisfaction with the leader, and less willingness to punish the leader.

These results suggest that when audiences do not perfectly learn about a broken promise, there is a breakdown in the logic of Audience Costs Theory. How information is framed is

influential in whether people are willing to punish a leader suggesting that the media, the main vessel in which people learn about political goings on, is crucial component in whether public signaling is a sign of credibility. Future work should consider the role of the media since how information is framed influences whether people are willing to punish a leader for breaking a promise.

Audience Costs

The idea of an 'audience cost' was first proposed by Fearon (1994a). Fearon wanted to know what some signals sent by leaders needed to be taken seriously while others could be safely ignored. This is particularly important in the context of international conflict, where ignoring a credible signal can result in a costly war, and respecting 'cheap talk' can leave a player suckered. Fearon focused on the nature of the statement: it gains credibility if made publicly. A leader runs the risk of being punished for backing down if they make a statement publicly and then change their minds, and opposing leaders know this, giving the threat credibility. This has proven to be an influential theory in the international relations literature, one with much macro-level empirical support[1]. This literature suggests that audience costs exists for all types of countries and regimes, but democracies are likely to be particularly sensitive to them because they are popularly elected. Thus, the original

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[1]See, for example, C. R. Conrad, J. Conrad, and Young (2014), Davies and Johns (2013), Eyerman and Hart (1996), Fearon (1994b), Gibler and Hutchison (2013), Kurizaki and Whang (2015), Partell and Palmer (1999), Potter and Baum (2010), Potter and Baum (2014), Prins (2003), Schultz (2001), Smith (1998), Tarar and Leventoğlu (2009), Tarar and Leventoğlu (2012), Uzonyi, Souva, and Golder (2012), and Weeks (2008). Much of this work has been at the observational level: observing when a leader makes a public statement and noting the outcome. There have also been some studies looking at the microfoundations of audience costs. See, for example, Tomz (2007), which finds that respondents are sensitive to the act of breaking a promise. There is a nascent literature, which we add to, that suggests that there are limitations to audience costs. Kertzer and Brutger (2016), for example, find that audiences are less sensitive to the inconsistency of a leader breaking their promise and more sensitive to the belligerence of using force in the first place. Downes and Sechser (2012) suggest that their are flaws in the data that has been used up until this point, and their own observational data states that threats from democracies, which audience costs theory predicts should be more credible, are no more effective than threats from autocracies. These works, and ones like, point to major issues in both the microfoundations and macro-implications of audience cost theory.

consensus was that audience costs only existed in democracies; this claim was later contested. Weeks (2008) suggests that audience costs can exist in autocracies, too, where members of the leader's selectorate serve as the audience. Autocracies can thus also use public statements as a signal of resolve.

While not as extensively studied, there is also considerable interest in whether there is micro-level support for audience costs. These authors examine the base assumptions that audience cost theory makes; namely, that the domestic audience is aware enough to impose costs on the leader. See Hoffman et al. (2009), Levy et al. (2015), Tingley and Walter (2011), Tomz (2007), and Trager and Vavreck (2011). This literature tends to look at how the audience thinks and how it responds to leaders reneging on promises. The general finding is that the audience values consistency in their leaders, and they punish for the inconsistency that backing down brings. They also value the national honor, and take steps to punish the leader for impugning on it.

Audience Costs and Framing

Slantchev (2012) describes five key factors that have to be true in order for signals to be informative. First, backing down from the statement has to cause costs to increase. Second, the costs need to increase as the crisis escalates. Third, costs must be able to become large enough that further escalation is preferable to concession. Fourth, there must not be any other mechanism of coercion available to the escalating actor. Finally, attempting to coerce cannot increase the opponent's cost of conceding. If all five of these conditions are satisfied, two things are true. First, escalation can commit the escalating actor to fighting because the cost of backing down becomes too great. Second, the risk of war discourages bluffing on the part of the escalating actor. These two factors allow the act of escalating a conflict to be informative to the opponent.

In less formal terms, the audience cost theory states that leaders can send informative signals about their level of resolve by making public threats. If the audience that observes the threat is willing and able to punish the leader for backing down, the legitimate possibility of punishment makes the threat credible.[2] Figure 1 outlines this basic logic.

Figure 1: Basic Audience Cost Sequence
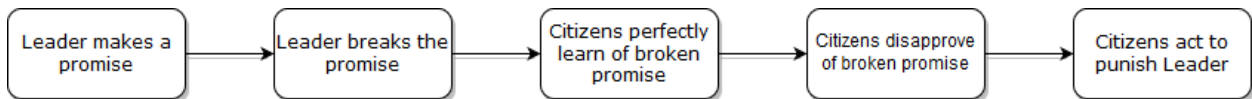
The first three of Slantchev's criteria are of particular interest to us: does making a promise publicly actually lead to increased costs? The logic of audience costs assumes a neutral transfer of information: the (homogeneous[3]) audience finds out about the promise and its breaking through a perfect, neutral transfer of information. This then results perfectly in disapproval and punishment. We believe these to be particularly strong assumptions, requiring further exploration (Kertzer 2017). The public likely learns about both the leader's statement and subsequent back down through biased media sources[4], and even if they did get the news from a truly neutral source, there are social and cultural factors at play that make reneging on a promise an inherently negative act. As such, we expect the message itself to shape how audiences react to the leader backing down.

The way information is framed is very influential in how individuals perceive information and form attitudes based on the information (Chong and Druckman 2007; Tversky and Kahneman 1981). For example, framing a similar choice as riskier influences risk-taking behavior

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[2]Note that we are following the canonical logic of audience costs. This need not be the case, as Kertzer and Brutger (2016) point out there are multiple logics of audience costs. Our results, however, are robust to their alternative explanation, the belligerence cost. If our results were being driven by people reacting negatively towards the initial threat of conflict, we would expect framing to irrelevant: respondents should be less supportive regardless of how the information is delivered. We find that this is not the case.

[3]See Tomz (2007), Brutger and Kertzer (2018), and Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer, and Renshon (2018) for discussion of this assumption.

[4]See Slantchev (2006) for a formal discussion of how the media can influence audience costs.

(Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Framing can be altered by secondary actors, changing how actors perceive information (Kanner 2004). One of the secondary actors especially important in an audience finding out about a leader backing down is the media, which has agenda-setting effects and can influence how people think about information (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). We expect the effects of framing to hold in the context of Audience Costs Theory such that how information is framed is going to impact the likelihood that a person is willing to punish their leader. When information is framed in a positive light, people should be less willing to punish their leader for a broken promise than if the information was framed in a negative way.

Hypotheses: Positive frames make the public more forgiving, with more people approving of the decision and the leader and being less willing to punish the leader, relative to a neutral frame. Negative frames result in higher disapproval of the decision and the leader, and an increased willingness to punish, relative to a neutral frame. Figure 2 outlines these expectations more explicitly.

Figure 2: Audience Cost Sequence with Framing

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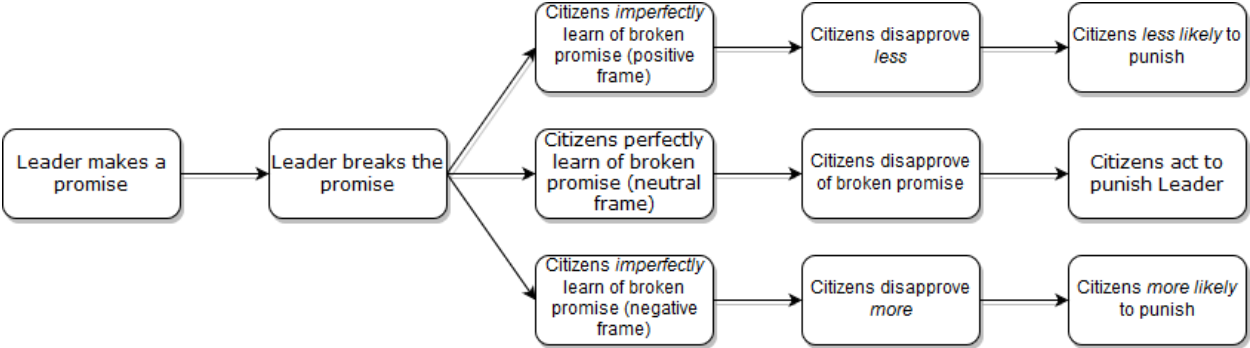
Study

To test our predictions, we designed an experiment where respondents read a short vignette about a broken presidential promise. In the vignette, respondents were told that the president threatened military action against a country if that country did not cease some activity. The respondents were then told that the country *did not* cease the activity, and the president *did not* follow through on the threat. Respondents were randomly assigned to get one of three versions of this vignette. In the neutral frame condition, this is all the information they were given - the president made a threat, the opposing leader did not back down, and the president did not follow through. In the positive frame condition, they were told that the president received new information that led to the decision to back down, which framed the decision as a thoughtful and positive decision. In the negative frame condition, respondents were told that the president backed down because he "flip-flopped," which framed the decision as negative and not thoughtful. The frames also varied the party identification of the president to account for the role of partisanship in evaluations of a president.

After reading the vignettes, participants indicated their approval of the decision to back down by the president, their approval of the president, and whether or not they would vote for the president in a future election. These measures can be found in full in the Appendix. The approval measures show whether attitudes about the decision and the president change as a result of how information is framed. The willingness to vote measure shows whether people are actually willing to punish a leader for a broken promise.

Our respondents were drawn from a population of college students at an American University. We had a total of 490 students participate in our experiment. 344 of these students identified themselves as Democrats, 41 identified themselves as Republicans, and 76 identified themselves as Independents. Given the partisan nature of the frames, we dropped 29 participants who did not identify with a political party and the 76 Independents. After

dropping these individuals we had 385 participants for analyses.

Results

After reading the vignette, respondents were first asked whether they approved of the president's decision to back down. 44 respondents did not answer this question, and were subsequently dropped. As the results in Table 1 show, those that received a positive frame were more likely to approve of the president's decision, relative to those who received a neutral frame. Note that those who received a negative frame were no more or less likely to approve of the decision than those in the neutral frame, and having an in-group versus an out-group president had no effect.

Next, respondents were asked how much they approved of the president. They were given a feeling thermometer, and asked to rate the president. 39 respondents did not answer this question, and were subsequently dropped. We can again see that those who received a positive frame rated the president more highly than those who were in the neutral condition. We do observe some outgroup effects here, as having an outgroup president did temper the positive respondent's responses somewhat. Again, the negative condition is not significantly different from the neutral condition.

Finally, respondents were asked about their willingness to vote for the president. This question was meant to gauge the respondents' willingness to actually punish the president electorally. 26 respondents did not answer this question, and were subsequently dropped. As expected, having an outgroup president caused respondents to be less likely to vote for them regardless of condition, but those who received a positive frame were more likely to vote for the president relative to those in the neutral frame. Once again, the negative condition was not significantly different from the neutral condition; these respondents were no more or less likely to punish the president.

Table 1: Effects of Framing on Decision Approval, Presidential Approval, and Vote

	Dependent variable:		
	Decision Approval	President Approval	Vote Choice
	Logit	*OLS*	*Logit*
Positive Frame	0.967***	8.900***	0.815**
	(0.366)	(3.422)	(0.372)
Negative Frame	0.324	4.059	0.272
	(0.378)	(3.537)	(0.392)
Outgroup President	−0.617	2.356	−1.064**
	(0.437)	(3.706)	(0.520)
Positive Frame x Outgroup	−0.461	−8.372*	−0.468
	(0.575)	(5.044)	(0.675)
Negative Frame x Outgroup	0.534	−2.563	0.057
	(0.570)	(5.113)	(0.685)
Constant	−0.769***	35.033***	−1.056***
	(0.278)	(2.551)	(0.290)
Observations	370	375	385
R^2		0.020	
Log Likelihood	−232.639		−199.097
Akaike Inf. Crit.	477.278		410.194
Residual Std. Error		19.758 (df = 369)	
F Statistic		1.527 (df = 5; 369)	

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conclusion

When discussing audience costs, we often avoid discussing the political context around them. Our research suggests that doing so misses important details that could mean the difference between a credible signal and cheap talk. The way the news of a broken promise is framed matters, even if it is assumed away in traditional audience cost theory. Having the

news framed in a positive way makes people more forgiving, even of an outgroup president. This positivity undercuts the usefulness of an audience costs signal, making audiences *less* likely to punish the leader who invoked them.

Our results suggest that the media can be very influential in whether or not a leader will be held accountable. The media is typically how people are given information about a leader's actions so framing decisions by the media can be the difference between the general public forgiving a broken promise, generally disapproving of a broken promise, or disapproving enough to want to vote the leader out of office.

Finally, our research shows the understanding the microfoundations of broader findings are important. By assuming away framing, we create a situation where using audience costs might appear more useful than it actually is. Understanding these microfoundations allows us to refine current theory, and leads to new and interesting questions.

Discussion

The nature of this study leaves room for more questions to be answered. We find that framing influences how people view an action by a leader, but we do not know how this effect may hold up in a truer information environment. Typically, the media is a constant stream of information framed in all sorts of ways. It is unclear whether the effects of positive or negative frames on decision approval, approval of the president, and future vote choice will hold up in a more saturated information environment. Future work may wish to test this using an experiment that simulates a realistic information environment, such as a social media feed. Future work may also consider the effects of source cues. Our study is ambivalent to information source and based on previous work (Nicholson 2011; Nicholson 2012), we should expect the source of the information to influence attitudes.

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