AUDIENCE COSTS AMONG SWING VOTERS

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Working Paper: Please do not cite.

ABSTRACT

This is an experimental design aimed at testing audience costs among voters who switch from election to the next. This project will approach predicting the electoral consequences of presidential empty threats by blocking for “swing voters,” who actually hold the potential to inflict costs by voting for candidates of different parties from one election to the next. Additionally, it will test whether “backing down” is in fact the source of disapproval; it will do so by testing voters’ reactions to a president who indicates that he will stay out, but then gets involved anyway.
How much constraint does the public exercise over the foreign policy decisions of its leaders? American Politics scholars hold foreign policy to be of relatively little importance to American voters, unless the issue in question is US peace and security (Meernik and Ault 2001), or the voter in question is involved in international business (Jacobs and Page 2005). Still, International Relations scholars of the last decade have worked at identifying and explicating the intricacies of “domestic audience costs,” (Fearon 1994) which are imposed by a democratic public when its leader makes a military threat and then backs down therefrom.

In theory, the sanction is imposed through both electoral consequences and “the workings of public opinion” (Fearon 1994) following the empty threat. It has only been on the latter mechanism that IR scholars have worked to build an empirical body of evidence for domestic audience costs. Models have been developed and tested observationally to bolster (Schultz 2001) and weaken (Snyder and Borghard 2011) the case for audience costs. Uncharacteristically, the field has also witnessed several experimental studies to identify the directions and bounds of audience costs. Tomz (2007) provides the initial experimental evidence for audience costs, Trager and Vavreck (2011) demonstrate the strong effect of political party of the president on approval ratings earned by decisions involving American intervention, and Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) show that a president justifying a decision to back down by claiming new information sees significantly weaker costs than do the presidents in Tomz’s or Trager and Vavreck’s designs. They also find that Trager and Vavreck’s strongest result, president’s party, has a weak effect when the president supports his change of mind by claiming to have new information. Finally, Chaudoin (2014) broadens the application beyond military crises to trade policy issues, finding that audiences only disapprove in large numbers when they have no policy
preference beforehand. They even tend to disapprove of presidential follow-through on agreements or promises if it goes against their preferences.

In all of these experiments, the dependent variable is a tally of values of a binary approve/disapprove measure reported by the respondents following a brief foreign policy account. This dichotomous instrumentalization leaves no room for a response of indifference, which is in fact rather common in public political environment. In the experimental environment, this has the potential to inflate weak responses to make them look much stronger. Still, these experiments provide compelling support for the existence of audience costs, but their inconsistent results preclude anything conclusive. A bigger problem, though, is the fact that the field still lacks an experimental agenda that reaches towards understanding Fearon’s prime theoretical mode of audience cost: electoral loss.

Following the example set by these studies, I propose an experimental project to set these conflicting results up against one another. More crucially, this project will approach predicting the electoral consequences of presidential empty threats by blocking for “swing voters,” who actually hold the potential to inflict costs by voting for candidates of different parties from one election to the next. Additionally, it will test whether “backing down” is in fact the source of disapproval; it will do so by testing voters’ reactions to a president who indicates that he will stay out, but then gets involved anyway. This project will entail one survey set-up testing multiple orthogonal hypotheses to be evaluated independently.
**THEORY, DEFINITIONS, AND HYPOTHESES**

My analysis will rest on the evaluation of these approval ratings, the dependent variable in this experiment. The key questions I test:

- Do the “workings of public opinion” in the nation’s entire electorate reflect those of the voters who have no strong party or ideological loyalty?
- Do only voters who witness a presidential empty threat punish, or does any failure to follow a committed course of action result in this reaction? Do partisan voters behave differently from swing voters in this regard?

The exact extent to which audience costs effect political outcomes in the real world is still debated; the more experimenters pull them out of the foreign policy vacuum and contextualize them for survey respondents, the more dependent on isolation from information they seem to be. Still, for the purposes of this experimental project, I build upon the present findings and accept that audience costs play some role in presidential foreign policy decisions, even if the field still seeks to establish the size of that role. Currently, there are no empirical contributions in the body of domestic audience cost theory that differentiate between the modes of behavior of partisan and swing voters. This represents a somewhat imperceptible, though not insignificant gap, in the empirical establishment of the theory, since of Fearon’s two consequences, electoral outcome represents the more salient cost a leader might pay. Though Trager and Vavreck (2011) do pay attention to independent voters as a group, to use their measure as conclusive would be suspect for two reasons. It would conflate independent voters with swing voters; as many as one fourth of self-labeled independent voters are in practice partisan, i.e., they vote a straight party ticket
(Mayer 2007). Furthermore, Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) show that updated information on a foreign policy situation can drastically affect levels of approval, something missing from Trager and Vavreck’s test. Trager and Vavreck find that independent voters are more likely to punish or reward the president for respectively going respectively with and against the grain of their party’s reputation. If the hypothetical president has new information, might middle voters not also give the president more leeway in pursuing his interpretation of the national interest?

In pursuing answers to these questions, this experiment adopts the following definitions. Rather than using independent voters, I utilize the concept of “swing voters.” For Mayer (2007), swing voters are “those whose final allegiance is in some doubt all the way up until election day” (359). I would add to his definition that swing voters are those who actually (or are quite likely to) vote for candidates from both major parties from one election to the next, or even within the same election. At least, that is the group I hope to capture in this experimental design. To operationalize, Mayer compares American National Election Studies (ANES) survey responses about favorability of presidential candidates with actual voting behavior of approximately 10000 voters in the presidential elections from 1972 to 2004. The ANES surveys ask respondents to rate candidates and party members on a “feelings thermometer” ranging form 0 to 100, where 0 is extremely coldness and unfavorability and 100 is warmth and favorability. Utilizing the aggregation of these measures, Mayer finds that those between -15 and +15 (rescaled to range from -100 to 100) are those with greater than a 5% chance of voting against the direction they leaned according to the instrument. For example, people scoring between 0 and -15 (leaning democratic) have in fact voted for Republican candidates more than 15% of the time in the nine elections in question (Mayer 2007: 363). Previous instruments for marginal, undecided, and independent voters have failed to predict voting behavior as well. Mayer also finds that 84% of
swing voters place themselves from points 3-5 on a 7-point Likert scale from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative.” In this experiment, I will use this ideological scale to categorize the “swing-ness” of the each participant, as well as the usual independent self-label. In addition, I will replicate the “feelings thermometer” of the ANES surveys, applying them to party favorability rather than to that of individual candidates. These measures will be expounded more fully later.

The term “approval” in these studies has also been problematic. Overall presidential approval ratings are important because they correlate with electoral success in both elected branches of government, as well as with party success in the legislature (Tomz 2007). However, none of the three experiments discussed have measured an overall rating, and have instead taken the participants’ approval of a singular presidential decision to reflect the overall rating. This ignores other, arguably stronger, theoretical influences on approval ratings, such as domestic policy. This experiment lets “approval” mean only that of the one presidential decision tested. Exactly how much such a narrow approval rating actually influences voters in the “real world” would depend on many other factors voters consider when deciding their rate of approval, much less on when they vote. Still, by analyzing the responses of swing voters separately from more loyal voters, this experiment will reach closer towards weighing the effect of disapproval on actual electoral outcomes.

Finally, the terms “indifference” and “apathy” need their own definitions for this experiment. These concepts are included because I want to mend the exaggerated measurement of voter disapproval in these experiments. For this experiment, these terms simply allow respondents with no strong opinion to categorize themselves as such. The universally utilized dichotomous answer to the “do you approve or disapprove” question forces some respondents to
express a sentiment that they may not actually feel. In terms of audience cost, the difference between apathy and approval is not worth seeking; they are basically equivalent. However, those ambivalent respondents who lean slightly towards disapproval are made to report disapproval, potentially exaggerating the sentiment of disapproving voters and so making the results appear stronger than they actually are. Respondents have the opportunity to report ambivalence if that is their initial reaction.

Through this experiment I test several hypotheses. The first one follows from Trager and Vavreck’s findings about independent voters.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Voters will disapprove of presidential decisions that seem to follow the reputation of the president’s party more harshly than decisions that seem to go against that reputation. The Democratic president will face higher disapproval ratings for backing down, and the Republican for going to militarily intervening.

- **Hypothesis 1A:** The gap between swing voters’ rates of approval and disapproval for presidential decisions will be more drastic than those of partisan voters. We should see a wider gap between the swing voter approval ratings for the same decision of a democratic and republican president. In other words, partisan voters will be more likely than swing voters to disapprove based on party affiliation alone.

The second comes from Levendusky and Horowitz’s findings about new information:

- **Hypothesis 2:** When a president presents or claims to have new information justifying a decision, swing voters will be more amenable to the president’s change of mind. Swing voters’ rate of disapproval will be lower than those of opposite party participants.

Finally, a third hypothesis, yet untested experimentally, follows directly from Fearon (1994), who characterizes this cost as the “domestic and international price for conceding”
If it is a concession that matters to a democratic public, then the direction of disapproval of a false course of action should only run one way:

- **Hypothesis 3:** Voters of all sorts will disapprove of a president who backs down from a threat at higher rates than they will a president who breaks a commitment to stay out. This set of hypotheses captures questions left over by all experimental research on audience cost so far. Where and when does party matter? Do swing voters respond in a similar manner to partisan voters, both to the empty threat and to the presence of new information? Is the effect only seen when a leader makes a concession, not with other changes of mind? It should be noted that although this data will all be gathered at once, the results will likely be reported in multiple articles.

**Experimental Design**

Following the example set by the three discussed experimental set-ups, I will run a national survey experiment. The sampling strategy I will use is purposive. Swing voters have, on average, made up 23% of the electorate in the presidential elections from 1972-2004 (Mayer 2007). This segment of the population consists of the only people who have had a greater than 5% chance of voting against the party they lean towards. Thus, in order to test hypotheses 1 and 2, this experiment will gather an over-representative sample of swing voters.

The sample will consist of three equal categories: those strongly or leaning Democratic, Swing voters, and those strongly or leaning Republican. There is no easy parsimonious way to establish participants as swing voters. Thus, I will aggregate three separate measures to establish partisanship. First, I will ask the participants to place themselves on a seven-point scale from
liberal (1) to conservative (7). Then I will ask them to answer several questions modeled after the ANES feelings thermometer questions. They will be asked to rate their feelings from 0 (cold, unfavorable) to 100 (warm, favorable) concerning party approaches to several topics: healthcare, unemployment insurance, social security, environmental policy, military policy, and other potentially salient topics. For example, one question will read:

We would now like you to rate your feelings towards certain party approaches towards specific issues. Rate that party’s stance on a thermometer that runs from 0 to 100 degrees. Rating above 50 means that you feel positively about the party’s approach. Rating below 50 means that you feel negatively about the party’s approach. Rating right at the 50 degree mark means you feel neither positive nor negative. You may use any number from 0 to 100 to explain how positive or negative your feelings are. The first (next) topic is: Social Security. Where on that thermometer would you rate the democratic (republican) party’s position on the US social security system?

Finally, I will ask the respondents if they have an affiliation with either party. Those who claim independent status will be asked if they lean slightly one way or the other. Participants found to slightly lean one way or the other will be asked if they voted for any candidate of the other party in the presidential, congressional, and senate elections of the last eight years. If they have or cannot remember, then the other two measures will be used to classify them. If they both lean one way and have not voted counter-party within the last eight years, then they will be classified as partisan. I take this approach because self-proclaimed independents—who make up 40% of the American electorate (Jones 2012)—have been observed to vote straight party tickets at rates of up to 25% (Mayer 2007). In order for a participant to be established as a swing voter, he or she must score between 3 and 5 on the ideology scale, between 35 and 65 on the feelings thermometer, and self identify as an independent or a weak partisan with a counter-partisan voting record.
The participants will be randomly assigned to one of 12 treatment groups. If I seek 30 participants of each ideological category in each treatment group, my sampling strategy requires 1080 respondents. I will use an Internet platform to administer the surveys. The default platform is Knowledge Networks, which is widely used in political science experiments. However, given the purposive sampling strategy proposed here, a combination of Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) system and Facebook recruitment strategies seems more appropriate. Both platforms allow me to randomly populate each of the treatment groups until I have the sample I need. Particularly, they allow for a much more fluid process of gaining the desired sample since it can be programmed to decline continuing the survey with respondents of certain ideological persuasions once those groups are properly represented. MTurk slightly over-represents liberals among US users (Berinsky, Huber et al. 2011), but this automatic population of experimental groups constitutes a strategy for avoiding over-representation of liberal voters. I utilize both platforms to ensure that I have fair, representative samples.

After they answer a few preliminary demographic questions, each participant will be randomly assigned to one of 12 groups made up of three treatment categories. All respondents will receive the same introductory hypothetical scenario, in which the president is forced to respond to the foreign policy crisis of a larger country planning to invade a smaller country. The first treatment category is the party of the president, democrat or republican. The second is the hypothetical pair of decisions made by the president. There are four groups in this category: the president vows to stay out and does so; the president vows to stay out, but then changes his mind and deploys US troops to the region; the president vows to protect smaller country and deploys US troops to the region; and the president vows to protect smaller country, but then changes his mind and declines to deploy troops. Finally, both categories in which the president
does not follow his original word will branch again into two categories, one in which the
president takes no public action to justify his decision and one in which the president claims in a
press release to have gained confidential new information about the crisis. Table 1 illustrates the
experimental breakdown.

**Table 1: Randomly Assigned Conditions of Experiment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Primary Treatment</th>
<th>Auxiliary Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party of President</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Course of Action</td>
<td>Vows to keep U.S. out of conflict; sends no troops.</td>
<td>President makes no attempt to justify deploying troops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vows to keep U.S. out of conflict; sends troops.</td>
<td>President justifies deployment by claiming to have new confidential information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vows to have U.S. forces protect smaller country; sends troops.</td>
<td>President makes no attempt to justify reneging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vows to have U.S. forces protect smaller country; sends no troops.</td>
<td>President justifies reneging by claiming to have new confidential information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the participants’ assignment and participation in their respective treatment
groups, each will be asked to place their feelings towards the president’s course of action on a
scale of 1 (strong approval), 2 (no opinion) or 3 (strong disapproval). Note that this constitutes a change in measurement from the designs of Tomz (2007), Trager and Vavreck (2011), and Levendusky and Horowitz (2012), who all have the respondents place themselves on a binary measure of approval and disapproval. I am testing Fearon’s electoral loss mechanism only indirectly, through the opinions of swing voters rather than through their voting patterns; an observation of no opinion would simply mean no effect of the treatment, rather than forcing a positive or negative effect. The deck thus far has been stacked, at least somewhat, by forcing some indifferent respondents to display an effect. Since apathy and ambivalence are possible real world responses to the country’s foreign policy decisions—according to some American Politics scholars (Meernik and Ault 2001; Jacobs and Page 2005) the most common responses—they ought to be included as possible responses to the hypothetical actions. With this modified way of measuring approval, I hope to “unstack” the deck, which I hypothesize has, by virtue of its binary makeup, been configured in such a way to show effects reflected in approval ratings to be much stronger than they would be in the real world.

**SUMMARY**

The proposed experiment to answer these questions is far from perfect. It still must be shown, for example, for the sake of all the mentioned studies, that the disapproval ratings of one presidential decision constitute an accurate portrayal of the “workings of public opinions,” and this is a low bar. The higher bar would be to show, experimentally or otherwise, that democratic leaders who back down from military threats face real risk of costing either themselves or their parties in times of election. By measuring the effects of presidential concession on the opinions of swing
voters, so categorized by ideological persuasion, and weighing them against those of more ideologically extreme voters, I will be able to see whether the overall trends found by Tomz (2007), Trager and Vavreck (2011), and Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) can be seen to translate to the opinions of those voters likely to vote opposite parties from one election to the next. Likewise, I will find whether empty threats are, in practice, prone to expose a democratic leader to higher costs than are other overturned commitments to certain foreign policy directions. Answers to these questions will move us closer to understanding the extent of the constraint the public exercises over its elected leaders.

**EXAMPLE PROTOCOL**

The following is an example of one of the 12 protocols respondents will encounter:

[Questions about demographic and partisan background of respondent]

This survey is about your opinion on U.S. relations with other countries. You will read about a situation the U.S. has faced and will likely face again in the future. Different elected leaders have responded to this situation in different ways. You will read about one possible response and asked whether you approve, disapprove, or have no opinion about their response.

**The Situation**
A foreign government assembled troops on the border of a smaller, neighboring country. The Democratic (or Republican) president declared publicly that the United States would stay uninvolved in the foreign conflict (or protect the smaller country). One week later, the president sent troops to the region to stop the invasion of the larger country (or the invasion continued with no intervention from US military forces). The president’s administration announced that it had received new confidential information and that the change in course was best for American interests in the region. (or no new information)

Please select one of the following to represent your opinion of the president’s actions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disapprove</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Approve</th>
</tr>
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</table>

References


