BOOED OFF STAGE:

TOWARDS A BETTER TRIANGULATION OF DOMESTIC AUDIENCE COSTS

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ABSTRACT

Domestic audience costs have grown to comprise a key mechanism for explaining the democratic peace since they were introduced by Fearon in 1994. The empirical record for audience costs is checkered, but they persist nonetheless as a crucial piece of the democratic peace puzzle. Rather than joining a debate about “whether audience costs exist,” I seek to push the bounds of the theory through a crucial case analysis of the Obama administration’s policy crisis in summer and fall of 2013 concerning intervention in the Syrian civil war following the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. This case—including an explicit military threat made publically by an unconstrained democratic leader—represents a clear crucial test of audience costs theory. The events that played out in the Syria case provide clear evidence for a need to both expand and refine our notions of what conditions and state-society interactions comprise “audience costs.”
Domestic audience costs have grown to comprise a key mechanism for explaining the democratic peace since they were introduced by Fearon in 1994. The empirical record for audience costs is checkered, but they persist nonetheless as a crucial piece of the democratic peace puzzle. Rather than joining a debate about “whether audience costs exist,” I seek to push the bounds of the theory through a crucial case analysis of the Obama administration’s policy crisis in summer and fall of 2013 concerning intervention in the Syrian civil war following the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. This case—including an explicit military threat made publically by an unconstrained democratic leader—represents a clear crucial test of audience costs theory. The events that played out in the Syria case provide clear evidence for a need to both expand and refine our notions of what conditions and state-society interactions comprise “audience costs,” with particular scrutiny needed on what we assume about the audience.

For a brief overview of audience costs I turn to Fearon (1994), whose formulation of the generation of audience costs has proven central in any analysis of democratic crisis bargaining. Audience costs are an environmental factor in the escalation of crisis. Fearon bases his model on the “notion that troop movements and public demands or threats ‘engage the national honor.’” (Fearon 1994: 581) There are two audiences of concern: the domestic and the international. The domestic audience is concerned about the reputation and the honor of their nation before the rest of the world. The domestic audience perceives of its country as itself an actor before an international audience made up of other states and other domestic audiences. Audience costs “figure in a domestic system of incentives that encourages leaders to have a realist concern with their state's 'honor' and reputation before international audiences.” (Fearon 1994: 581) One expects, for example,
that the American audience is closely concerned with the seriousness with which other world powers perceive American threats of military intervention.

Democratically elected leaders always face potential sanctions: they can be voted out if they fail to uphold the national honor. “Foreign policy is made by an agent on behalf of principals (voters) who have the power to sanction the agent electorally or through the workings of public opinion.” (Fearon 1994: 581) Because decision-makers know this, it is held, they only escalate when they are serious about following through on their threats. Publicly broadcasted escalation of a dispute constitutes a “relatively informative and credible signal of willingness to fight over the issue.” (585)

Tomz (2007) identifies the same mechanism, “Citizens…believe that hollow threats and promises undermine the country's reputation; that empty commitments are dishonorable and embarrassing; or that inconsistency is evidence of incompetence.” (823) He implies an extension too, that leaders might theoretically be willing to make an empty threats if they do not face “the prospect of losing domestic support—or even office.” (821) Additionally, even as Tomz (2007) reports that 12 percent of his respondents disapprove of any act of US intervention (835), his study does not probe citizen preferences of foreign military intervention. Recently, others (Chaudoin 2014) have begun to account for the potential pre-established preferences of the audience.

“The hawk may disapprove because she preferred military action, irrespective of her preferences over commitment-policy consistency. A dove may strongly dislike both threats to use force and military action. If told that the president threatened and backed down, she may disapprove because of her dislike of threats.” (12)
This strikingly simple interpretation of disapproval of presidential actions taken in the crisis bargaining arena has not yet stuck.

It is upon this potential reinterpretation that I base my empirical test. Experimental tests of audience costs have been able to isolate key variables in the causal logic: the urgency of the foreign policy crisis (Tomz 2007); the ambiguity of the threat and party reputation (Trager and Vavreck 2011); and potential reasons for backing down (Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). However, experiments are often weak in external validity, especially when they lack pretests of respondent characteristics, as all of the reported studies have.

Observational studies have much more capacity to test the “real world” application of prominent theories. In their close test, Snyder and Borghard (2011) select on the independent variable, seeking cases with (1) a clear ultimatum from a democratic leader and (2) an engaged domestic audience. Of the four cases they delve into, only the case of British and French involvement in the Suez crisis of 1956 fulfills the preconditions of Fearon’s model. They find much weaker support for audience costs than have experimental tests.

Had they written on the subject a mere two years later, they would have witnessed the best match yet for a test of audience costs. The Obama administration’s threat to intervene in Syria and subsequent changes of heart in September 2013 serves as one of the strongest “crucial” cases possible. In this essay I demonstrate how the Syria threat fits the Fearonic model in terms of clarity of threat, engagement of audience, and lack of
external constraint; then, I show how the overall interaction between president and public followed the opposite course of action from what audience cost theory expects.

Over the course of this case description, I hope to gradually ease my readers from a conception of audience costs as a narrowly defined reaction to a specific foreign policy decision and move them to a broader notion that includes the strong constraints Barack Obama faces when his foreign policy decisions depart from the preferences of his public. That is to say, Obama faces a strong audience cost in the form of public disapproval, but it does not behave as Fearon or any the experimental tests have shown.

Before exhaustive description however, that this is a crucial case for domestic audience cost theory should be established. Table 1 outlines how audience cost theory adheres to Gerring’s (2007) requirements to make for a good crucial case test of the Syrian case. It also shows how the events that played out serve to highlight potential questions about audience cost theory’s tendency to oversimplify the way a domestic audience interact with the state leadership during an international crisis.
### Table 1:
Summary: The Syria crisis as a crucial case under audience cost theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gerring (2007) Crucial Case</th>
<th>Clear context</th>
<th>Clear conditions</th>
<th>Precise, determinate predictions</th>
<th>Predicts mechanism</th>
<th>Predicts outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Domestic Audience Cost Theory | · International Military Crisis | · Leader makes conditional threat  
· Threat observed by audience  
· Conditions of threat met by adversary | · Democratic leaders make only threats they intend to keep  
· Domestic audience pressures or expects leader to follow through on threat  
· Upon met conditions, leader escalates militarily with domestic support  
· If leader backs down from threat, domestic disapproval follows | · Democratic leaders are concerned with domestic support  
· Domestic concern for credibility greater than concern for military engagement  
· Thus, empty threat erodes domestic support | · Democratic leader will follow through on clear threat  
· If not, credibility will be questioned |

| Syria Crisis | · Crisis over international intervention in Syria over use of chemical weapons | · Pres. Obama threatens intervention if chemical weapons used  
· Threat is broadcasted nationally  
· Polled Americans support it  
· Syrian government found to have used chemical weapons | · Pres. Obama confirms intent to intervene several times  
· Pres. Obama sends several destroyers to Syrian coast after news of chemical weapons usage  
· Domestic audience opposes escalation; pressures president to back down  
· Disapproval rockets as president escalates | · Obama administration is concerned with domestic support  
· Concern for military engagement greater than concern for credibility  
· Thus, escalation erodes support | · President Obama backs down; resolves dispute through Russia  
· Credibility questioned by international actors and by media, but not by voter-base |

Note: **Black** denotes theoretical predictions fulfilled by case; **Blue** denotes unfulfilled predictions; **Red** denotes crucial case’s deviation from theory.
Eckstein (1975)\(^1\) establishes a crucial case as one “that must closely fit a theory if one is to have confidence in the theory’s validity…” (118) Gerring (2007) elaborates, “The key proviso is that the theory under investigation must take a consistent form, even if its predictions are not terrifically precise, well elaborated, or broad… A theory that is understood to be deterministic may be disconfirmed by a case study, properly chosen.” (120,121) Fortunately for my purposes, domestic audience cost theory does have very precise conditions, making it a straightforward candidate for a crucial case test. Taking the most common interpretations of audience costs (Fearon 1994; Tomz 2007; Snyder and Borghard 2011), we have a few ironclad conditions that must be present, and a few more that are implied. Two foreign policy decisions set the scene: the explicit conditional threat issued publicly by the democratic leader; and the adversary’s defiance of the threat’s conditions. The theory predicts that upon such an act of defiance the democratic leader will escalate with support of his public, especially if it supported him in his first threat, or the leader will backpedal on the threat, facing public disapproval and blame for disgracing national credibility. This general reaction is why democratic threats are understood to be more credible; publics hold their leaders to their military commitments and “bind their hands.” Democratically elected leaders can thus “generate” audience costs because of this consistent reaction of the public.

Perfect fulfillment of the establishing conditions makes the US-Syria crisis a solid crucial case. In an August 2012 press conference, President Obama takes a clear policy

\(^1\) Quoted in Gerring (2001)
stance, and at a White House press conference, issues what can only be called a threat concerning chemical weapons use in Syria:

“We have been very clear to the Assad regime…that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation…We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that’s a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. (2012)

The following day, the White House principal deputy press secretary reiterates:

“…We're watching very closely the stockpile of Syrian chemical weapons; that any use or proliferation efforts related to those chemical weapons is something that would be very serious and it would be a grave mistake. There are important international obligations that the Syrian regime must live up to in terms of the handling of their chemical weapons. And the officials who have that responsibility will be held accountable for their actions and will be held accountable for living up to those international obligations.” (Earnest 2012)

In April 2013, after significant escalation in the Syrian civil war, White House officials reiterate the administration’s position:

“We go on to reaffirm that the President has set a clear red line as it relates to the United States that the use of chemical weapons or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups is a red line that is not acceptable to us, nor should it be to the international community.” (2013)

These statements appealed both to the “national honor” and to international norms for justification. The administration was concerned with a domestic and an international audience.

To show that the American public observed, believed, and supported the president’s threat, I turn to trade data from Intrade, an online “prediction market” in which buyers and sellers bet on the probabilities of certain events. In late July 2012, an option opened up to traders entitled “Bashar al-Assad to no longer be President of Syria before midnight ET 30 Jun 2013.” If traders believed the threat delivered by the president
in August 2012 and believed that US intervention under Obama would have played the primary role in the removal of Assad, then we should see them holding off on trading on this stock until President Obama is reelected. Figure 1 shows the volume and value of trades made on this option through March 2013.

Source: Intrade exchange data (2012, 2013)

After Obama makes his initial threat in August, there is a slight uptick in trades, but the market holds off until Obama is reelected president in November. Once Obama’s position as president is secured, the number of trades escalates rapidly and the perceived probability that Assad will be ousted rises, and then begins descending again with the new year. This trade activity provides a useful insight into the way in which interested voters were watching the events in Syria play out as they relate to the Obama administration. They treated the “Assad to no longer be President” option as a bet on US intervention under President Obama; this is evident in the late activity on the option. Their confidence in the threat is evident in the rapid proliferation of activity.
Opinion polls, too, showed that Americans generally understood and supported the threat. In December 2012, an early poll showed that 63% of Americans supported American intervention as a response to chemical weapons usage in Syria (Post 2012). Soon after the April 2013 reiteration of the “red line,” Pew showed that US public opinion still supported the administration’s position by a 45% plurality, with 31% opposed to intervention (2013). Strikingly, this level of support matched closely support levels for American intervention in Libya in March 2011—47% for and 36% against. (Pew-Research 2011; Rasmussen 2011) This level of support for a Syrian intervention only concerned a possible US reaction to the regime’s use of chemical weapons. In fact, Pew reported in June 2013 that when asked if they supported arming rebel fighters, 68% of Americans thought the US military was already too overcommitted to intervention in Syria. (2013) Again for comparison, 69% of Americans opposed arming Libyan rebels. (Pew 2011) The overall salience of the issue for Americans was rather low though, and those same two reports on opinion concerning Syria show that only 12-18% of Americans actually pay any significant amount of attention to events there. (Pew 2013)

The first condition of audience cost theory is met in full. An American president makes and reiterates an explicit threat with a clear condition, the movement or use of chemical weapons. His public at large can be said to be ambivalent to the events in Syria, but believes the threat, receives it fairly well, and supports the administration’s position. The US should be considered “all in” at this point, with any consequences of the Syrian regime’s actions more or less determined.

On August 21, 2013, rockets containing the chemical agent sarin struck the opposition-controlled city of Ghouta, Syria. Estimates of the number dead ranged from
281 (The Daily Star 2013) to 1429 (White House 2013). Within three weeks the United Nations confirmed the use of sarin (UN 2013), and several prominent governments, NGOs, and independent investigations concluded the culpability of the Syrian government. (Gladstone and Chivers 2013; Reuters 2013)

As noted, under audience cost theory, a clear path forward should be outlined. This is what makes the US-Syrian crisis a crucial case: a relatively unconstrained US president makes an explicit threat hinged upon a condition that is conspicuously met by the adversary. The two crucial conditions are fulfilled, and a straightforward prediction springs out of the literature. The red line has been crossed, and the democratic public should refer its president back to his commitment to action; or else the public should support the president as he pushes military reprisal.

The Obama administration’s reaction to chemical weapons usage in Syria was cleanly predicted by audience cost theory. By August 30, six US Navy destroyers were stationed off the coast of Syria (Shalal-Esa 2013), and the Obama administration fast set to generating support for US military intervention in Syria. On August 31, the president broadcast a solemn speech to an attentive domestic audience:

“This attack is an assault on human dignity…a serious danger to our national security…a mockery of the global prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. It endangers our friends and our partners along Syria’s borders…In a world with many dangers, this menace must be confronted. Now, after careful deliberation, I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets…Our military has positioned assets in the region…we are prepared to strike…And I’m prepared to give that order.” (Obama 2013)

The president also announced that he would seek US congressional approval for military intervention, breaking with the precedent he set for himself in the Libyan intervention
(Geman 2013). However, he also urged congressional members to support military intervention, suggesting that US credibility was on the line,

“If we won’t enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what does it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental international rules?” (Obama 2013)

The president reiterated all of these ideas in another speech 10 days later (Obama 2013), all the while he and administration officials met with 85 senators and 165 congressmen, urging them to vote in favor of US air strikes on Syrian regime targets (Bellantoni and Burlij 2013). Despite some commentary claiming that the president sought congressional approval in order to block intervention, or for financial reasons (Fingleton 2013), the message broadcast to the public was consistently pro-US-intervention hinged on national and international security.

In this crucial case, a clear threat is made by an unmatched military power with support of its domestic audience, the acknowledged adversary breaches an international rule, and that democratic leader escalates conflict with military display and strong domestic rhetoric. US credibility is on the line. But the American public does not buy it. Where our theory expects support for the president and concern for US credibility, we see escalating opposition and a public urge to back down from the US commitment to intervention. Figure 2 illustrates the American public’s stark change of heart concerning a Syrian intervention, as well as the president’s receding popularity throughout the crisis.
Three days after the sarin attack in Ghouta and before either of Obama’s speeches or his decision to seek congressional approval, a Reuters poll reported that only 9% of Americans supported US military intervention in Syria and 60% opposed (Wroughton 2013). The president’s urgent public appearances did seem to convince some to support the intervention, but it did not serve to change the minds of those opposed; polls released on September 3 and September 13 American opposition to military intervention at levels of 60% and 62%, respectively. (Clement 2013; Debenedetti 2013) As American intervention seemed to loom, popular support for it stagnated, and opposition increased. We saw a total reversal of support: 63% supported intervention in December 2012,
following Obama’s first “red line” remark (*Post* 2012); 63% opposed it in September 2013, following Obama’s campaign for support in Congress and the Senate (Debenedetti 2013).

Throughout the month of September 2013, the president faced both increasing costs and constraints from the American public. Disapproval of Obama’s foreign policy climbed 11 points from 45% in November 2012 to 56% in September 2013 (*Pew* 2013); and by a 15-point margin, Americans believed Obama’s handling of the Syrian situation weakened rather than strengthened “US global leadership.” (Langer 2013) From the news of the Ghouta attack on August 21, 2013 to the end of September 2013, the president’s general job approval rating slid from 49% to 44%, and disapproval rose from 43% to 50% (*Gallup* 2013). During this time, alongside personal and administrations with senators and congressmen, Obama conducted a major media campaign for support of military intervention, making prime-time appearances on six major news networks (Logiuratto 2013), calling upon international norms and US credibility to generate support for follow-through on the “red line” threat. Obama’s defense secretary Chuck Hagel appeared before the Senate, making the same argument, “A refusal to act would undermine the credibility of America's other security commitments—including the president's commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon…The word of the United States must mean something.”2 (Hagel 2013)

As Congress prepared to meet in September, 58% of Americans wanted Congress to oppose military involvement (Vitali 2013). Voters began calling congressional

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2 Quoted in *Reuters* (2013) “U.S. credibility on Iran at stake in Syria decision: Hagel says”
representatives in large numbers, urging them to vote no on an American intervention limited to air strikes by a loose margin of up to 499:1 (Kant and Schilling 2013). Formerly undecided congressmen came out in opposition to military intervention (Davis 2013), and congressional approval looked highly unlikely with a 6:1 ratio of anticipated no votes (Page and Kelly 2013).

The Obama administration accrued some very clear costs with his pushing for approval of military intervention. His general approval ratings fell in the context of the crisis, and his foreign policy approval ratings fell faster. Opposition mounted within the public sphere, domestic and international, leading in part to opposition in the US legislature. Russia’s President Putin made the case for a diplomatic solution in a *New York Times* op-ed (Putin 2013), and Obama’s foreign policy path became increasingly and significantly constrained. His “hands were tied.” Naturally, the administration changed course, asking Congress to postpone its vote (Davis 2013), withdrawing its commitment to the “red line,” (*FactCheck* 2013) and reaching out to its Russian counterpart for a way out. Ultimately, the Russian government acted as an intermediary, brokering a deal that would avoid US intervention and would see Syria dismantle its chemical weapons stockpile (Irish and Nichols 2013). This plan witnessed 79% American support (*Post* 2013). Even though the president’s own public forced him to backpedal on an internationally witnessed commitment, it was still his administration’s credibility that was called into question. As Hagel predicted, leaders of other governments expressed doubt about the seriousness of any “red line” drawn by the Obama administration, explicitly naming the Syrian case as their evidence (Bremer 2013; Singh 2013).
AN EXPANDED MEANING OF COST

In light of the events surrounding the Obama administration’s actions, any theory of audience cost based on the reactions of a democratic public must be opened up to new causal factors. Most Fearonic predictions about the actions of democratic leader are accurate enough in this crucial case: the president pressed hard for support as he attempted to follow through on his threat, which was initially supported by his public. He and his administration feared international loss of credibility (Reuters 2013). Democratic leaders only make threats they think their publics support (Tomz 2007: 822), and Obama’s actions do not diverge from this expectation. The fallout of an empty threat is also what we might expect: US credibility was doubted internationally. What does not work here is the most crucial part of audience cost theory: a democratic public should hold its leaders’ feet to the fire, forcing them to follow through on foreign policy commitments, because such an audience is concerned with “the international loss of credibility, face, or honor.” (Fearon 1994: 581) What makes democratic threats more credible is the accountability of the electorate.

So what does this mean about the audience? A foundational insight from this case is that public preference matters. From there, we can see evidence for three qualities currently unattributed to democratic publics in audience cost theory: naiveté, change over time, and multi-preferentialism. The first quality would imply that the public did not know what it wanted and when polled, gave a false sense of support to the leadership. There is a clear contrast between opinion of a hypothetical situation and that of an urgent situation that a country really faces. The audience supported intervention when it was hypothetical (Pew 2012), but once the red line was crossed, it took a decidedly
oppositional stance (Wroughton 2013). If this difference between audiences’ expected and situational reactions is generalizable outside of this crucial case, then it may have grave implications for experimental tests. All of the leading audience cost experiments (Tomz 2007; Trager and Vavreck 2011; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Chaudoin 2014) have been built upon hypothetical situations put before the respondents. Tomz argues that the experimental test is a “direct and unbiased measure of audience costs” (822), but the Syrian evidence would seem to imply that any hypothetical has the potential to be biased in its sheer lack of context.

The Syrian case makes it very clear that audience preferences play an important role in determining the currents of public opinion. In this case, there may have been a latent preference to stay out of Syria, undetected in polls in 2012 indicating support. Once chemical weapons were found to have been used in Syria and the White House started drumming in the Navy, the true American preference materialized without qualms about US credibility of the “red line” threat. In hindsight, Americans’ concern about the US already being overly committed to intervention (Pew 2013) was probably a much better indicator of American preference than any hypothetical hinged upon chemical weapons usage.

So it may be that the public does not know what it wants, but another possibility is that it just changes its mind. It cannot be assumed to be constant in preference. A full year elapsed between the drawing and the crossing of Obama’s red line. Figure 2 shows that opinion on Obama’s foreign policy stance withered over that time, and the polling numbers show how much support for Syrian intervention had already decreased by the time Obama reiterated his threat in April. Deterioration in the Syrian situation and
distaste with other aspects of Obama’s foreign policy are both conceivable reasons for the public’s favor to swing away from involvement. Audience cost theory makes no such provisions, modeled on a turn by turn game. International crises are often drawn out and in flux, and the moments between decisions can have as much effect as the moment of decision.

Finally, the democratic audience may have multiple, perhaps even conflicting, preferences, none of which figure into most audience cost models. In this case, Americans were clearly much more concerned about military involvement than they were about international loss of credibility. Despite firm admonitions in popular press op-eds and government statements, 70% of polled Americans rejected the idea that eschewing military action would damage US credibility (Pew 2013). This does not mean that the public does not care about US credibility, per se, but rather that other preferences may override that concern.

In addition to these three insights into public preference during international crises, this case necessitates a reconceptualization of the “audience cost.” First of all, in light of the constraint citizens exercised on both the president and Congress, is “audience” really a fair characterization of the citizenry that faces this situation? Audiences, in the literal sense, are very passive bodies, attentive but rarely active. Here we see an active and engaged (though not unanimous) body of citizens pursuing the full gamut of non-electoral democratic expression to prevent military commitment in Syria, even if only for a mere 90 days. That said, audiences may hoot, heckle, and boo; and if we insist on characterizing a democratic body of citizens as an audience, then metaphorically this audience booed the actor until he changed his performance.
The next dilemma is that of characterizing the resistance the president faced from his audience. Did he not face a “cost” for attempting to stay on track towards military intervention? After all, his job and foreign policy approval ratings tumbled, both popular measures of audience cost. Likewise, he did lose international credibility, if only in the eyes of other world leaders and elite media commentators. It is tempting to ascribe the costs to Obama’s early decision to make a threat in the first place; he should have anticipated that his public would not support it, and chosen not to make an explicit threat. Within the bounds of audience cost theory, however, such an interpretation cannot hold water. First, the public appeared to support intervention, according to earlier polling numbers. Second and more importantly, accountability to commitments is the important feature that democratic publics provide, modeled in audience cost theory to occur for any commitment, regardless of public preference, since credibility is at stake.

**A REVISED AGENDA OF COST**

The failure of the “audience” part of the theory to hold up in the critical case of the Obama administration’s “red line” threat highlights significant need for a new theoretical developments. The expanded meaning of cost implicates changes in experimental, observational, and statistical efforts to delineate audience costs. Experimental work has been especially fruitful, but in light of this evidence, it also seems to have been more than a little misguided. There is the real disconnect between survey responses to hypothetical situations and real foreign policy crises. Experimental participants in the audience cost agenda have generally been prompted by vague, distant hypotheticals. For example, Trager and Vavreck prompt their subjects with 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.” (2011: 542)

This sort of hypothetical prompt is even more distant that the survey questions Americans responded to in December 2012, when respondents had information of important details like the party of the president, the identity of the adversarial country, the salience of the situation concerning US security, and the nature of the condition of the “red line” threat. Even so, support indicated by that survey miserably failed to anticipate the actual preference of Americans once the “red line” was crossed months later. How then can we expect the nebulous hypothetical situations put forth in experiments to tell us anything about actual public response to foreign policy decisions?

Future experiments testing domestic audience costs should attempt to add urgency and exigency, as well as temporal effects, to any hypothetical situation, perhaps even modeling its hypothetical on the Syrian situation. Perhaps a revised experimental introduction—a hypothetical hypothetical, if the reader will allow—would appear as follows:

“Last month (or one year ago), the president pledged ‘severe consequences’ as a response to any use of biological weapons by a dictatorial regime currently involved in a civil war. Three days ago, evidence came to light that confirmed the regime’s use of biological weapons. The president ordered several destroyers to be stationed along the country’s coast, and yesterday he gave a speech promising to enforce a no-fly zone within the next week…”

The hypothetical situation must strive to mirror real crises, balancing exigency with neutrality, because citizens may respond very differently between general situations and specific situations with nameable implications.
The public may hold latent preferences that may or may not coincide with their expected responses to foreign policy crises. Thus, the second implication for an audience cost research agenda is looking for the sources of those preferences. Why does the Libyan intervention go over well relative to a potential Syrian intervention? What is the rationale of the public when it supports or opposes military involvement anywhere? What role do concerns for economic interests, US hegemony, human rights, or other ideals play in determining support levels for intervention? Notice that these questions more or less disregard the threat that is so pivotal in domestic audience cost theory; this springs from my loose conclusion (and others’; see Kertzer and Brutger 2014) that audiences are only going to punish their leaders for backing down from threats if they saw them to be in the public interest in the first place. That is to say, the public preference is not so easily manipulable by government actors that the currents of opinion can be reversed by a strong threat and worries about military credibility.

Of course we know that public preference is sometimes manipulable—a decision maker can “generate audience costs,” so to speak—but public preference can also overtake government posturing. Take as an example Christensen’s analysis of public mobilization during the early stages of the Cold War (1996). Truman worked at scaring the American public into supporting large financial aid packages to Eastern European countries facing Soviet encroachment, despite already tough economic times resulting from WWII. He worked to instill a fear of communism, a “crusading spirit” to get them to support the long-term cause they could not recognize, the support of weak European powers resisting Soviet expansion. This had the unintentional result of public support of aid to China, something that went decidedly against Truman’s foreign policy strategy.
One might characterize this situation as Truman generating costs in one situation that constrained his policy choices in another. That is to say more generally, the concept of the generation of audience costs is not one that need be discarded; however, it must be expanded beyond mere accountability for a specific threat made in a narrowly defined situation. Public opinion is unwieldy and prone to inertia, so that the costs in one situation can spill over into another. In Truman’s case, support for aid in Europe led to support for aid to China. In the Syrian case, a latent aversion to war, probably gained as a result of two recent costly wars, was strong enough to harshly inhibit the president’s foreign policy options once he had made a strong “red line” threat. These sorts of self-perpetuating bouts of public opinion are costly to decision-makers, and as such, should be incorporated in our notions of audience cost.

All of this boils down to the need to account for the impact of time and its effect on audience preferences in crisis bargaining models. The time that passes between threat and met condition matters, and promises long past are considered differently from those made yesterday. When a democratic public is involved, commitments like this are not immune to changing circumstances. Incessant media coverage exposes people to strong, divisive opinions, presidential performance elsewhere interacts with opinion on crisis response, and time allows for significant momentum to build. In such circumstances, reversing opinion may be akin to stopping the tide from coming in. To account for these tendencies, our models should include measures for the effects of time elapsed between turns in the game. This is a plausible adjustment in observational, statistical, and experimental practice.
Fortunately, a revision of audience cost to account for latent or changed preferences opens up the universe of cases to test and tease out its boundaries. When a public declaration of threat is included as only one of several ways to “generate costs” in a domestic audience, the efficacy of such as part of grander strategies of mobilization makes for a vastly expanded universe of observationally sound cases. Christensen’s case study (1996) could be interpreted as generating audience costs that constrain Truman’s foreign policy later on. Other observations of momentum of public opinion that constrain foreign policy decision making are likewise amenable to audience cost interpretations.

**A Conclusion about Costs**

The question of “whether and when audience costs exist in practice” (Tomz 2007) has been the primary controversy driving the back-and-forth discussion in the literature for the last ten years. The underlying trend of interpretation has been that these costs may prove to exist in the vacuum of the experimental setting or as part of a greater current of general public preference, but that they are still yet to be observed as defined and predicted by Fearon (1994). This essay has investigated the crucial case of the American president’s 2013 foreign policy decisions concerning intervention in Syria’s civil war, in which an explicit threat was made, a red line was crossed, and a strong audience reaction was observed. Unfortunately for the theory, even as the democratic leader behaved as expected, the domestic audience responded contrary to the theory’s predictions. Its apparent preference shifted drastically over time, it prioritized its aversion to military involvement over the nation’s credibility, and it ultimately persuaded the president to back down from his threat.
I have not argued that we ought to conclude from this crucial case that audience costs do not exist, as others do (Slantchev 2006; Snyder and Borghard 2011). Instead, I have adopted an interpretation of the strong reaction of the American public as itself a cost. President Obama did not face a cost for backing down from a threat; rather, he faced a cost for making a threat in the first place. This cost forced him to back down from his very unpopular position, which in turn yielded further costs, loss of domestic approval and loss of international credibility. A cost exists here, but only if we augment the term to account for the general inertia public opinion on foreign policy might have.

Such an augmentation carries many implications for research, but it also makes for a more reasonable—if less specific—set of predictions about government-public relations during foreign policy crises. Additionally, the proven discrepancy between citizens’ support levels of hypothetical intervention and real intervention implies a tall order of revision for experimental approaches to tests of audience costs.

These changes will not only make for clearer and more externally valid empirical tests, but will also lend a level of face validity that audience cost theory has lacked, arguably since its inception. They will probably not make statistical or experimental tests of theory any simpler, but they will hopefully guide the controversy from driving an agenda primarily rooted in “do they exist?” to one more founded in “which costs operate when?” Yes-or-no questions do not make for as productive research agendas as questions that seek specified conditions, as a revised theory of audience cost should do.
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HYPOTHESES ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION IN INTERVENTION

H1: Democratic publics are more likely to support intervention in wars in which the adversary is a personalist dictator, rather than a bureaucratic, one-party system. They need a “bad guy.”

H2: Democratic publics are more likely to support intervention when US economic interests are implicated.

H3: Democratic publics get war-weary, and are more likely to support intervention if their military is not already engaged in another major conflict.

H4: Democratic publics are more likely to support intervention if other nations’ democratic publics also support it.

H5: If a democracy is involved in a conflict, foreign democratic publics will only support intervention on the side of the democratic combatant. They will not support intervention on the side of an authoritarian combatant.