Media Framing and Audience Costs

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Abstract

A leader's ability to generate costs associated with deviating from a commitment is key to crisis bargaining. One of the most often-cited ways for leaders to generate costs is to make statements to their domestic audiences. By making threats publicly, a leader is sending a signal that they intend to follow through and are willing to be punished politically if they renege. Within the logic of audience costs, however, lies a series of implicit assumptions about how the information about a threat gets from leaders to the audience and how the audience translates information about a promise and subsequent reneging into political action. Empirically, a leader's statements often reach the audience by way of the media, instead of directly from the leader. In most scholarship, the media is implicitly assumed to be neutral – transferring basic facts about the promises made and reneging, relying on the audience's distaste for backing down to generate costs. This is often not the case: media organizations are independent actors with their own preferences and will report information accordingly. Using experimental evidence, we show that the way news of a broken promise is framed has a significant effect on how members of the intended audience will react to it. If news of the promise is framed in a negative way, the basic logic of audience costs holds – members of the audience feel negatively about their leader backing down and express a decreased desire to vote for them in subsequent elections. Framing the news in a positive way, however, mitigates these potential costs. Respondents express much less negativity towards the leader and a lower likelihood of punishing them at the polls, relative to a neutral or negative frame. These results demonstrate how critical it is to understand the role of the media as an active player in elite bargaining - the outlet's choice of framing and the market it serves can be the difference between a meaningful signal and cheap talk.

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Introduction

Following the Arab Spring protests, political unrest in Syria grew into an outright civil war. At first, the United States tried to resolve things without resorting to the use of force: President Barack Obama expressed a desire for contested Syrian President Bashir al-Assad to step down but resisted calls to use American military power to aid the rebellion. In the summer of 2012, however, reports began surfacing that the Syrian army was preparing to use biological and/or chemical weapons against the rebellion. In response to a question posed by a reporter at a White House press conference, President Obama said:

> We cannot have a situation in which chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people. We have been very clear to the Assad regime but also to other players on the ground that a *red line* for us is, we start seeing a whole bunch of weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation. (Barack Obama, quoted in Landler (2012), emphasis added)

The implication was clear: the use of chemical weapons would prompt a military response from the US. This became known as Obama's "Red Line" on Syria, with multiple US politicians and new organizations invoking this language when discussing the US's response to the escalating situation in Syria.

President Obama's rhetoric lead the public to believe that the US was willing to take a hardline stance on the use of chemical weapons (Baker et al. 2013). When evidence of their use was eventually uncovered, however, President Obama softened his language – shifting away from unilateral executive action and towards a bipartisan congressional solution (Chollet 2016). The administration also tried to shift responsibility for the "red line" statement, claiming that "[t]he world set a red line" (Kessler 2013).

In international relations, the act of making a public declaration is a way to signal a

commitment to other elites. By "going public" (Kernell 2006), an elite creates expectations among their citizens that they will follow through on a policy action. Stating that the use of chemical weapons was a "red line," President Obama created the expectation in the American public that the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict would be met with an immediate US military response. This mechanism serves to tie the elite's hands (Fearon 1994), inviting punishment if the leader reneges on their policy. These "audience costs" make signals like these credible to other elites – without the threat of costs later on, the signals would be nothing more than cheap talk (Fearon 1994; Fearon 1997). In theory, then, President Obama should have suffered some negative consequences from backing down from his hardline policy. By reneging and going with a less extreme version of his initial policy, he demonstrated inconsistency (Kertzer and Brutger 2016), appeared belligerent by using military force (ibid.), impugned the national honor (Fearon 1994) – in short, no matter what mechanism audience costs work through, President Obama should have incurred *some* cost. However, that's not what we observe – there was some consternation for a while, but then the American public moved on. How can we explain this apparent lack of audience costs?

While audience cost theory is mainly a story about political elites and the general public, there is an implicit third set of actors involved: the media. Media outlets are responsible for taking elite public statements and disseminating them throughout the citizenry, but not all media outlets report on the same story the same way. We can observe this in the differential coverage of Syria and the "red line." Fox News, traditionally considered a more conservative outlet, ran headlines calling Obama's policy change one of "500 broken promises" (*'Red Line' Just One of Roughly 500 Obama Promises That Have Come and Gone* 2013), and gave a platform to prominent conservatives like former Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), who remarked that the red line was "written in disappearing ink" (Sullivan 2013). CNN, on the other hand, was much less critical of the administration. The traditionally left-leaning outlet ran matter-of-fact headlines simply discussing "[h]ow Obama came to launch strikes" (Liptak 2014) and

parroting the administration's assertion that the "red line" was actually the world's red line (Cohen 2013).

These differences illustrate how much leeway individual outlets have in framing news. Despite the content of the articles being roughly the same (i.e., the President presented a hardline stance and then backed down), the way this material is presented is very different. Fox News is decidedly more negative towards the Obama administration, while CNN is more neutral or perhaps even positive, as they repeated the administration's claims. The way these stories are framed has a tangible impact on how the content of the article is internalized: all else equal, someone reading the Fox News articles will cultivate a much more negative view on the policy than someone reading the CNN articles. It is possible that President Obama was able to avoid audience costs specifically because the articles about the change in policy were not universally framed in a negative way.[1]

We argue that media outlets are a critical and overlooked actor in elite bargaining interactions. Rather than serving as a bullhorn for the elite, media outlets have their own agendas and audiences. This gives them an incentive to cover changes in elite policies in different ways. At times, media outlets and elites are at odds with one another, leading to more critical coverage and resulting in higher potential audience costs. When media and elite interests align, the result is more positive coverage. These moments of alignment can undercut the ability of the elite to use audience costs as a signal to other elites: by framing stories in a positive light, media will cause opposing elites to interpret these public statements as cheap talk.

[1]While we will expand on this idea in subsequent sections, it is important to note how polarization in American politics likely fed into this cycle. Through a largely endogenous process, Fox News caters to a heavily conservative audience, while CNN's audience leans more liberal. As such, even though Fox News framed their stories in an extremely negative manner it was unlikely to impact any audience costs incurred by Obama: the type of people receiving these frames were already extremely unlikely to support the President. CNN's more positive coverage, on the other hand, was likely critical in saving Obama from the full force of audience costs – by presenting the information in a positive light, CNN likely persuaded more moderate viewers to avoid punishing the administration for the policy change.

In the next section, we present a theory of audience costs that includes media outlets as distinct, strategic actors. We argue that the addition of these actors significantly changes the dynamics of audience costs and an elite's ability to generate them. To demonstrate that the microfoundations of our theory are sound, we present the results of an experiment demonstrating that framing can shift individual feelings about a policy change, even when we take partisanship into account. We conclude by discussing the implications this has on the role of costly signals in elite bargaining, specifically on how and when audience costs can still be useful signals.

The "Costs" In Audience Costs

To fully understand the implications of having strategic media actors in the audience cost model, it helps to start from the most basic version of the theory. There are three distinct sets of actors: elites, the domestic audience, and opposing foreign leaders. For the sake of clarity, we will assume that there is one elite and one foreign leader, but there are N members of the population. The elite and the foreign leader are bargaining over some policy – generally, we consider this to be a military policy, though it does not need to be – and the elite wants to send a credible signal to the foreign leader about their intended course of action. As Fearon (1997) states, the elite cannot simply send a costless message, as there would be no reason for the opposing leader to believe it to be anything other than cheap talk. If the elite can attach some costs to the message, the signal is more likely to be seen as credible. By going public, the elite signals to the population about their intended policy and implicitly encourages sanctioning if the leader were to deviate.

For simplicity, we assume that all the actors have complete information; that is, the foreign leader knows exactly how much "audience cost" the elite will incur should they deviate from the policy. The decision calculus for the elite-level actors is straightforward – if

the elite can generate enough audience costs to make reneging on the policy irrational, the opposing leader considers the signal to be credible and acts accordingly. If we assume the population is homogenous and only has preferences for policy consistency, we can safely say that any threat will be believed by the opposing leader.

The first assumption that we need to address relates to the individual population member's utility function and how the mechanism of audience costs works. Traditionally, scholars assume there is some sort of reputational cost for backing down (Fearon 1994) or costs imposed by the very nature of policy inconsistency (Kernell 2006). As such, audience costs should be automatic: once the elite reneged and the public learned about it, they should be upset enough about policy inconsistencies or damage to the nation's reputation that they would be willing to sanction the offending leader. Over time, this mechanism has been called into question, with authors proposing alternative mechanisms. For example, Kertzer and Brutger (2016) state that while there are some base "inconsistency" costs that leaders pay, there are also costs associated with belligerency. These authors assert that the public is not homogenous; rather, they have differing preferences over policy inconsistency and the state's use of violence. Those that value consistency over not being belligerent will sanction a leader for backing down from a hawkish policy, while those who value dovish policy will not be as willing to punish a leader that backs down (Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Brutger and Kertzer 2018). Other work suggests that the public is less concerned with the process of policy than they are with the outcome: they do not care if the leader backs down as long as the policy that eventually is put into place benefits them (Debs and Weiss 2016).

While we are agnostic regarding the mechanism underlying audience costs, this debate highlights two important points. First, the audience population is not homogenous – each individual member has their own preference. Second, the audience members have preferences over multiple dimensions – not just about policy consistency, but about belligerence and policy outcomes as well. We relax the uniform population assumption in our theory. Instead,

we propose that the audience varies on their ideological alignment with the elite, and this influences their willingness to punish. The population can be broken down into three broad groups: those who will always go against the elite, those who will always support the elite, and those who can be swayed (McDonald, Croco, and Turitto 2019).

Returning to the Syria example for a moment, we can apply this broadly to the US public. Those on the far-right end of the ideological spectrum were unlikely to support President Obama's policy decision, regardless of whether he was consistent. Similarly, those on the far-left of the spectrum were likely to support President Obama regardless of the final policy. Those in the middle, however, are the ones that generate the costs behind audience costs. Since we are operating in the American context, we can assume that those in the middle either lean right or lean left. Those who lean to the right would be unlikely to support President Obama's policies but could be swayed given the right information. Similarly, those that lean left would be unlikely to punish President Obama, but could also be persuaded to defect (Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). The size of the audience costs the President can invoke, then, depends on how large this segment of the population is (relative to those whose preferences are static) and their probability of defecting from their current status quo decision. If this segment of the population is large enough to be electorally relevant, then an elite can, in theory, invoke audience costs as a signal.

Media Markets Matter

We now have a theory of audience costs that accounts for variation in the public. The next step, then, is to consider the media as an actor. The canonical audience cost model is agnostic about how the information goes from the elite to the public: as long as some transfer of information takes place and reaches an electorally relevant percentage of the population, the leader can invoke audience costs. Empirically, we rarely see direct communiques from

political elites to the population – there is usually some form of intermediary, like a news outlet.[2] Some scholars have argued that media outlets based their coverage off the elite discourse – the indexing hypothesis suggests that elites set the bounds of the debate, and the media operates within those bounds (Allen and Binder 2018; Mulherin and Isakhan 2019). Further research found that media outlets are able to deviate substantially from the elite discourse, suggesting that there's more to the media than being a "conveyor belt that passively transports elite views" (Baum and Potter 2008, p. 40). As the authors point out, media outlets need to carefully consider their reporting both because they rely on elites for access and on consumers for financial support. The media is responsible for bridging the "information gap" between elites and the public – at the beginning of an event, elites generally know more than the public does, and the public relies on the media for clear information about what is happening (Baum and Potter 2008; Baum and Groeling 2010). This often leads to the media allowing elites to control the narrative – they are the ones in the know, and their audience wants to hear what they have to say. As events unfold, and opposition elites begin pushing back on the ruling administration's narrative, competing narrative arise. Media outlets are at this point faced with a choice – continue reporting the administration's narrative and run the risk of alienating opposition elites and audience members or deviate from the administration and risk losing them as a source (Baum and Potter 2008; Baum and Groeling 2010; Glazier and Boydstun 2012).

Thinking about the media in this way requires some important underlying assumptions that we adopt here. First, we need to consider "the media" as an independent strategic actor.[3] They operate independently, have their own preferences, and act in a rational way with

[2]This need not be the case – sometimes leaders are able to broadcast their messages directly to the public; see, for example, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fireside chats." Elites are making a strategic choice when they decide to go through an intermediary. Our argument assumes that elites have no choice – they must go through an intermediary news outlet. While this limits our scope to only those announcements that are made through the media, this is a large and politically relevant universe of cases.

[3]Technically, each individual media outlet should be considered a distinct strategic actor, but for the purpose of simplicity we will be discussing the media as a single actor

respect to those preferences. This does *not* mean that the media necessarily has diverging preferences from elites – in fact, there are often times where the preferences of elites and the media align. This does mean that the preferences of elites and the media *can* deviate. This dynamic is illustrated by Baum and Potter's (2008) "information gap" and Glazier and Boydstun's (2012) discussion of agendas – the media and elites begin in alignment, but differing preferences cause the media to diverge from the elite's preferred course of action.[4]

Second, we assume that media outlets are the public's primary source of information on foreign policy news. The media serves as the link between the public and elites, and there is no way for elites to message the public directly. We also assume that the public pays attention to the media's messaging – they either passively or actively encounter and listen to the media's coverage of events. This does not mean they necessarily agree with the media's coverage, but the public has (relatively) equal access to the media and pays attention to its coverage.[5] While this may seem like a strong assumption, there is evidence to suggest that (at least the voting segments of) the public care about foreign policy – both the media and elites seem to take cues from public sentiment when making foreign policy decisions and announcements, suggesting that elite decisions, media framing, and public response are all endogenous to one another (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017).

The way the media disseminates content to the public is strategic, designed to maximize the number of consumers they get while maintaining their access to political elites. The

[4]We could liken this dynamic to a principal-agent relationship between elites and the media where elites are the principal and the media is the agent. Elites delegate the responsibility of informing the public to the media, which can then either deliver news in line with elite preferences or "shirk" and deviate. Elites retain the ability to remove access to information, which serves as an imperfect accountability mechanism.

[5]This is one of the areas where the assumption of a single media actor may become problematic. For the sake of parsimony, we're assuming a single media outlet that every member of the public has to go to for information, but this is not the case. The public itself is not a monolithic bloc – there is a large amount of political diversity that influences the type of media that an individual member of the public will want to consume. This gives different media outlets an incentive to "specialize" (i.e., cater to certain segments of the population as to not compete for viewers) and leads members of the public to gravitate to some media outlets over others. This leads to differences in how the same stories are covered – outlets hostile to the incumbent regime may frame even positive developments in a negative light, while a friendly outlet is willing to be forgiving of major gaffes.

combination of these two incentives means that the media is at least nominally constrained by the truth: they cannot outright lie, otherwise they will lose viewers or access.[6] However, they do have leeway in how they package, or frame, the truth. Depending on the outlet's view, their expectations about their consumers' views, and their beliefs about how likely the incumbent regime is to rescind access, they may frame things in a more positive or negative light. Returning to Obama's Red Line example, we can see this framing being carried out by both Fox News and CNN in the United States. We can assume that Fox had the (reasonable) expectation that its more conservative viewers would prefer a hostile discussion of Obama's foreign policy and that the administration would be unlikely to take any harsh action against them. CNN, on the other hand, appeals to a more liberal audience, and thus has to be careful about how they cover a Democrat president. While they may not believe the administration is willing to cut off their access, they may be worried about how their audience would react to negative coverage (especially given the context of a war-weary population coming off a recession). As a result, CNN maintained a more neutral tone – not outright criticizing the President, but not praising him either. Despite the factual content of their articles being relatively similar, Fox and CNN framed the information in completely different ways.

Adding a strategic media player to the audience cost model, then, changes the decision calculus for every actor in the interaction. First, the media's relationship with the domestic elite and audience affects how the elite is covered. If the media outlet is hostile towards the

[6]This depends heavily on the nature of the relationships between the media outlets, elites, and their audience. As we saw during the Trump and early Biden administration, some media outlets are able to get away with gross distortions of the truth by marketing them as "opinions" and "alternative facts." While this is problematic normatively, it comports with the theory on the whole – these media outlets are giving their publics and the elites they wish to appease the content they desire. This can be best summarized by how Fox News covered the coronavirus pandemic. During the final days of the Trump administration, pundits on Fox News repeatedly courted the President by downplaying the pandemic and questioning the efficacy of the vaccine. At the time this was a viable strategy – in line with both the administration and the views of their audience. During the Biden administration there has been a shift in tactics, with pundits now encouraging viewers to get vaccinated. While the exact reason for this shift in tone is unknown, it is likely due to pressure from the administration combined with the rising number of deaths amongst the unvaccinated, leading to a potential loss of access and viewership respectively (Collins and Stelter 2021).

domestic elite and believes their audience is as well, they have an incentive to cover news in a much more negative light. If they are hostile towards the elite but believe their audience is more neutral, or if they are friendly towards the elite but believe their audience might be hostile, they have an incentive to try to frame the story neutrally. Finally, if they are supportive of the elite and believe they are popular with their main audience, they have an incentive to give the story more positive coverage.

Media Framing as a Function of Elite Relationship and Beliefs about Audience		
Beliefs about Audience	Friendly with Elite	Hostile with Elite
Pro-Elite Audience	Positive Framing	Neutral Framing
Anti-Elite Audience	Neutral Framing	Negative Framing

Figure 1: Expectations of Media Framing as a Function of Elite Relationship and Beliefs about Audience

Going a level further, this relationship has implications for elite bargaining. Recall that audience costs are a means for elites to credibly signal to one another: by invoking these costs, they prove that their threats are not cheap talk. The expectation of punishment makes the signal credible – the opposing elite must believe that the punishment will actually be carried out if the threatening elite reneges. As we can see from Figure 1, the addition of even a single media actor complicates this relationship. The receiving elite cannot know if the audience will punish without first knowing how the media is going to present the information, which involves knowing about the preferences of the public and the relationship between the elite and the outlet. This relationship is complicated further by the existence of multiple media outlets, as receiving elites must navigate complex media environments and try to figure out which message the relevant population is going to receive.

Microfoundations of Audience Costs

All of these expectations rest on whether citizens respond to framing in the way we expect. While there is evidence that framing can have a profound effect on individual beliefs (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Kellstedt 2000; Delshad and Raymond 2013; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013), we cannot know exactly what effect different frames will have on individuals. We assume for the sake of our theory that the framing around a broken promise has both immediate and long-term effects – that it will influence an individual's immediate feelings towards the elite and their willingness to punish them electorally when the time comes.

To establish the microfoundations of our theory, we develop several hypotheses to test experimentally. First, our theory suggests that compared to neutral frames, positive frames of reneging on a commitment should result in a higher level of support for the elite and their decision and a decreased probability of individuals taking action against the elite in subsequent elections.

> Hypothesis 1: Relative to neutral frames, receiving news of a broken promise with a positive frame will result in more support for the elite and their decision and a lower probability of electoral punishment.

A negative frame, on the other hand, should cause individuals to be more critical of the elite and their decision and increase the probability that these individuals will take action against the elite to punish the broken foreign policy promises.

> Hypothesis 2: Relative to neutral frames, receiving news of a broken promise with a negative frame will result in less support for the elite and their decision and a higher probability of electoral punishment.

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.

Each of the frames also varied the party identification of the president (Democrat or Republican). Varying the party identification allowed us to account for the role of partisanship in evaluations of the president; with the existence of both an ingroup (same party identification) and outgroup (different party identification) president in the vignettes, we can make inferences about attitudes about what the actions of the president instead of respondents making their judgments based on ingroup or outgroup status based on their group attachments (Tajfel 1974).

Positive frame: "A President of the United States (Democrat/Republican) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through because he learned new information, no military force was taken against them."

Negative frame: "A President of the United States (Democrat/Republican) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through because he flip-flopped, no military force was taken against them."

Neutral frame: "A President of the United States (Democrat) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through, no military force was taken against them."

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. At the end, participants answered demographic questions about their age, political ideology, political party, and language. We used the party identification measure to recode the vignettes as ingroup (i.e. president in the vignette and the participant have the same political party) or outgroup (i.e. president in the vignette and the participate have opposing political parties).

Results

Our respondents were drawn from a population of college students at a university in the United States. 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. We ran two sets of models; one looking at the main effects for each of our three dependent variables and one looking at the group-level effects for each of our three dependent variables.

Given the partisan nature of the frames, we dropped 29 participants who did not identify with a political party and the 76 Independents. This left 385 participants for the group-level analyses.

After reading the vignette, respondents were first asked whether they approved of the president's decision to back down. This survey question was a dichotomous yes or no response and can be found in the Appendix. 44 respondents did not answer this question, and were subsequently dropped. We run a logit regression model to test our hypotheses that a negative frame will decrease support of the president's decision and positive framing will increase support of the president's decision. As the results in Table 1 show, respondents who received a positive or negative framing of the president's decision were less likely to approve of the decision compared to respondents who received the information with a neutral framing. In our group-level model, we control for respondent political ideology. As the results in Table 2 show, those who 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 on a scale from 0 (completely disapprove) to 100 (completely approve). This measure can be found in the Appendix. We run an OLS regression model to test our hypotheses that negative framing will decrease approval of the president and positive framing will increase approval of the president. In our main effects model, we find that respondents who received a positive frame rated the

president more favorably than those who were in the neutral condition. In our group-level model, we control for respondent political ideology. 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, 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 a dichotomous yes or no question and can be found in the Appendix. This question was meant to gauge the respondents' willingness to actually punish the president electorally. We run a logit regression model to test our hypotheses that negative framing will decrease willingness to vote for the president and positive framing will increase willingness to vote for the president. In our main effects model, we find that respondents who received information about the president's decision using a positive or a negative frame were less likely to vote for the president compared to the respondents who received this information using a neutral frame. In our group-level model, we control for respondent political ideology in our model. 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: Main Effects of Framing on Decision Approval, Presidential Approval, and Vote

	Dependent variable:		
	Decision Approval	President Approval	Vote Choice
	Logit	*OLS*	*Logit*
Positive Frame	-0.190^{***}	5.147^{**}	-0.190^{***}
	(0.056)	(2.308)	(0.056)
Negative Frame	-0.127^{**}	2.935	-0.127^{**}
	(0.056)	(2.308)	(0.056)
Constant	1.752^{***}	36.084^{***}	1.752^{***}
	(0.041)	(1.711)	(0.041)
Observations	446	451	446
R^2		0.011	
Log Likelihood	−300.366		−300.366
Akaike Inf. Crit.	606.733		606.733
Residual Std. Error		19.588 (df = 448)	
F Statistic		2.488^{*} (df = 2; 448)	
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1: This table shows the effects of information framing on attitudes about the leader and the leader's decision. The media framing information about a broken promise in a positive way increased support of the decision, approval of the leader, and willingness to vote for the leader in an upcoming election.

Table 2: Group-Level 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

Table 2: This table shows the effects of information framing on attitudes about the leader and the leader's decision, accounting for whether the leader and the respondent were of similar political orientation (ingroup) or not (outgroup). The media framing information about a broken promise in a positive way increased support of the decision, approval of the leader, and willingness to vote for the leader in an upcoming election.

Discussion

As our results demonstrate, media framing has a significant impact on how members of the public understand and react to leaders reneging on their agreements. The neutral and negative frames act as expected: respondents who receive these frames express heightened disapproval of the leader, their decision, and indicate a willingness to punish these leaders at the polls. By comparison, those respondents who received a positive frame were much less likely to disapprove of the leader and their decision to back down and were much more likely to indicate that they would support the leader at the poll. Applying these findings to audience cost theory, we can highlight some potential issues for leaders who are trying to use this sort of costly signal. Most importantly, it shows that the media can undermine the public's usefulness as a punishment mechanism. Simply by changing how the story is framed, the media can sway how the public will understand and internalize the information. This leads to changes in how they react to it, pushing the public away from punishment.

If governments want to send signals using audience costs, then, they need to have an understanding of how the media is going to frame a story – if they know backing down will be covered in a positive light, they also know that the costs they suffer might not be enough to make the signal believable. They also need to be aware of the signal receiver's beliefs about the media environment. Depending on their beliefs, the signal might be more or less useful: if the receiver believes the media environment is harsher than it is, they will give signals more weight than they deserve. This allows the sender to make larger claims than they might have otherwise – since they won't get punished later (or the punishment will be severely reduced relative to what the receiver expects), the sender can make bold statements without worrying about backing them up. This creates a situation where the receiver is likely to be a sucker – backing down from a threat that the sender was unlikely to follow through on. On the other hand, the receiver might believe the media environment is friendlier than

it actually is. In this situation, the receiver would give less weight to any signals the sender tries to produce. In this situation, there's the potential for the receiver to ignore the signal of a highly resolved sender and, possibly, spark a war. Leaving out the media when we're considering audience costs, then, can have potentially devastating consequences.

This finding also adds to our academic understanding of elite bargaining. Audience costs are still widely represented in the literature today, with a number of studies published in the past several years featuring them as central mechanisms for theories. Most of these studies propose refinements to the logic of audience cost theory – they decompose audience costs (Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Nomikos and Sambanis 2019), test previously unstated implications that fall from the theory (Chiozza 2015), or expand the theory by relaxing the assumptions associated with it (Brutger and Kertzer 2018; Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer, and Renshon 2018; Lin-Greenberg 2019). We believe our findings fit solidly in this last camp – our study provides a refinement for audience cost theories, showing that scholars need to take media environments into account when considering how countries bargain with each other. Without this understanding, there is the possibility that we may be over- or underestimating the effects of audience costs; as we have explained, beliefs that both sides hold about the sender's media environment can influence the utility of audience costs. Without understanding what these beliefs are, however, we cannot know the direction of bias – depending on the nature of the dyad, beliefs about domestic media can make audience costs more or less effective, influencing the likelihood of us observing leaders invoking them. This may also explain why past attempts at using observational data to find empirical evidence for audience costs produced mixed results: bias introduced by the media interferes with analyses conducted on audience responses to elite practices without independent frames.

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 media frames a broken promise matters, even if it is often 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.

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. Our theory, however, suggests that different audiences should have different reactions depending on the source, with ideologically congruent sources potentially holding more sway than incongruent ones.

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Appendix

Framing Vignettes

Positive Democrat: A President of the United States (Democrat) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through because he learned new information, no military force was taken against them.

Positive Republican: A President of the United States (Republican) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through because he learned new information, no military force was taken against them.

Negative Democrat: A President of the United States (Democrat) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through because he flip-flopped, no military force was taken against them.

Negative Republican: A President of the United States (Republican) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through because he flip-flopped, no military force was taken against them.

Neutral Democrat: A President of the United States (Democrat) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through, no military force was taken against them.

Neutral Republican: A President of the United States (Republican) previously threatened military force against another country if the country does not cease an action the United States deems inappropriate. The country did not stop but the president did not follow through, no military force was taken against them.

Survey Items

Decision Approval: Do you approve of the president's decision?

Answer: Yes (1)/No (2)

Presidential Disapproval: How much do you approve or disapprove of the President in the previous text?

Answer: Completely disapprove (0) - Neutral (50) - Completely approve (100)

Vote: Would you vote for this president in a future election?

Answer: Yes (1)/No (2)