

PERCEPTIONS OF CREDIBILITY: A SURVEY EXPERIMENT IN CHINA

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I. Introduction and Literature Review. Can a state's domestic politics provide it with an advantage in crisis bargaining? According to the theory of audience cost, a leader vulnerable to replacement is unlikely to make empty threats because he/she will be punished for backing down (Fearon 1994). For this reason, scholars have suggested that democratic leaders make more credible threats than autocratic leaders since voters can punish the former type by not re-electing them. Observational studies produced mixed results. Early studies suggest democracies were more likely to make threats that were not reciprocated by their receivers (Gelpi & Griesdorf 2001, Schultz 2001). In contrast, recent works argue that democracies are no better than autocracies in coercing their opponents to concede (Downes & Sechser 2012, Snyder & Borghard 2011).

Because analyses of large datasets or case studies might suffer from endogeneity or selection bias, scholars have begun to use survey experiments to study international crises. These experiments have demonstrated that Americans disapprove of their president backing down after making a threat (Tomz 2007, Trager & Vavreck 2011). Studies also suggest the U.S. president can "explain away" audience cost by justifying why he backed down (Levendusky & Horowitz 2012). While experimental IR scholars have sought to prove the existence of audience cost, I seek to evaluate the implications of this theory for crisis bargaining.

Though a survey experiment in China, I plan to test whether a foreign leader's vulnerability causes his/her threats to be perceived as more credible. China is an ideal country to conduct my study because it currently engages in territorial disputes with both democracies (Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines) and non-democracies (Vietnam, Brunei). Furthermore, understanding how the Chinese public and elites react to challenges from its neighbors could help policymakers shape U.S. diplomatic and defense strategy.

II. Survey Experiment Design. In the survey experiment, I test whether Chinese subjects perceive threats from foreign leaders to be more credible if those leaders are susceptible to punishment by voters, party elites, the military, or other "audiences." In addition, I study whether the credibility of a threat influences subjects' support for military action against the sender of the threat. My survey subjects will include the mass public and proxy political elites. First, I will field my experiment as part of a public opinion survey Prof. Allan Dafoe and Prof. Jessica Weiss (Yale University) are conducting in China. Second, using connections I have built while studying in Beijing, I plan to survey students and professors at Peking, Tsinghua, and Renmin Universities. These elite universities are recognized for producing future Chinese Communist Party leaders.

For external validity, I will construct three different types of vignettes as instruments for the foreign leader's vulnerability. (Each subject will be randomly assigned to read only one vignette.) In the first two types of vignettes, a foreign leader threatens to claim a contested territory, not unlike current island disputes in the East or South China Sea. In the first type of vignettes, I vary the regime type of the threatening country ("a democracy"/"an autocracy") while holding constant the country's military capabilities and alliances. If audience cost theory holds true, survey respondents will perceive the democratic leader's threat to be the more credible one. In the second type of vignettes, the hypothetical threat comes from one of five countries: Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, or Brunei. Half of the subjects will be primed about the vulnerability of the foreign leader's position. The other half will be primed about the security of the foreign leader's position. This design allows me to estimate the effect of audience cost on the credibility of threats for each specific country.

In the third vignette type, I use the foreign leader's time in office as an exogenous instrument for his vulnerability, as proposed in Hayes (2012). In these vignettes, subjects read a hypothetical future crisis in which the U.S. president threatens to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression. I vary when this crisis occurs: during the U.S. president's reelection campaign or towards the end of his second term. During the reelection campaign, the president is unlikely to make empty threats since he fears punishment from voters for backing down. During the "lame duck" period, however, the president may appear less credible since he can no longer generate audience cost.

After reading the vignette randomly assigned to him/her, each subject will be asked to rate the credibility of the opponent country's threat. In addition, I will ask the respondents whether they support the use of military force against the opponent. Existing literature on audience cost assumes that reciprocation of a threat means the threat was not credible; in this survey experiment, I will determine if this assumption is correct.

III. Implications and Broader Impacts. My proposed project advances the audience cost debate by testing whether masses and elites implicitly understand the logic of the theory. Specifically, I will determine if Chinese subjects perceive threats from foreign leaders to be more credible when these leaders could be punished by some domestic audience. If the vulnerability of national leaders does not affect the credibility of their threats, then audience cost play a minute role in crisis bargaining. For external validity, I plan to conduct a similar study about audience cost in the U.S.

My project has broader impacts for the social sciences and for U.S. national security. After completing my project, I will share my experience and expertise with American researchers interested in survey research in China. Furthermore, by working with universities in Beijing, I hope to foster future collaborations between Chinese and American social scientists. Results from my survey experiment will provide U.S. policymakers with insight into the Chinese public and future elites' attitudes and preferences concerning key security issues in the Pacific region.

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