Pass the Buck or the Buck Stops Here?

The Public Costs of Claiming and Deflecting Blame in Managing Crises*

David Miller† Andrew Reeves‡

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Abstract

When things go wrong, and the government may be to blame, the public support enjoyed by elected executives is vulnerable. Because attribution of responsibility is often not straightforward, elected executives can influence citizens' evaluations of their performance through presentational strategies, or explanatory frames which describe their roles in the management of the crisis. We examine the effectiveness of two presentational strategies: blame claiming, where the executive accepts responsibility, and blame deflecting, where the executive shifts blame to others. Using survey experiments incorporating stylized and real-world stimuli, we find that blame claiming is more effective than blame deflecting at managing public support in the aftermath of crises. In investigating the underlying mechanism, we find that blame claiming creates more favorable views of an executive's leadership valence. While elected executives are better off avoiding crises, we find that when they occur, "stopping the buck" is a superior strategy to deflecting blame.

Keywords: Governmental crises, elected executives, responsibility attribution, blame games, survey experiments

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†Postdoctoral Research Scholar, Center for the Study Of Democratic Institutions, Vanderbilt University, PMB 505, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203, https://sites.wustl.edu/drmiller/, drmiller@wustl.edu.

‡Associate Professor, Department of Political Science Washington University in St. Louis, Campus Box 1063, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis MO 63130, http://www.andrewreeves.org, reeves@wustl.edu, (314) 935-8427.

In late January 2014, a minor storm producing less than three inches of snow left the Atlanta metro area in chaos. The snow stranded motorists for hours on interstate highways, forced students to spend the night at school and shoppers to sleep in supermarkets, and saw babies delivered on roadsides (AP 2014). One state legislator described the scene as a "zombie apocalypse" (ibid). This chaos occurred even though the National Weather Service had accurately predicted the inclement weather and began issuing warnings at noon the day before the storm. Blame quickly focused on the poor preparations made by Georgia Governor Nathan Deal and Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed. Even TV weatherman Al Roker criticized the response as "poor planning on the mayor's part and the governor's part, pure and simple" (Chappell 2014).

While Deal and Reed were both blamed for the governmental response to the storm, their reactions were markedly different. While both acknowledged that the government failed to prepare for or respond to the storm adequately, Deal publicly accepted full responsibility while Reed did not. In a press conference, the governor declared, "I accept responsibility for the fact that we did not make preparation early enough to avoid these consequences... I'm not going to look for a scapegoat. I am the governor. The buck stops with me" (Mascaro and Zucchino 2014). In contrast, Reed deflected blame to others. In one interview, the mayor argued that the traffic problems during the storm were not his fault but were caused by the "independent decisions" of the Atlanta public school system and local businesses to close around the same time and congest roads (CNN 2014). Given the same negative event and comparable claims of fault, how did the different responses of Deal and Reed influence the public reaction to each elected official? Headlines and sporadic polls aside, we have a sparse understanding of how politicians' public responses to adverse outcomes influence the public's evaluations of their performance.[1]

When a negative outcome occurs, citizens turn their gaze to their mayor, governor, or president—the elected executives at the pinnacle of the institutional hierarchy who manage the resources and personnel of government that may have led to the failure and often play a critical role in redressing the failure (Boin, McConnell, and T'Hart 2008; Schneider 2008). While other studies explore how adverse outcomes influence the public's appraisal of elected executives and other political actors (Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008), we focus instead on the effect of the types

of public responses, or *presentational strategies*, elected executives offer in the wake of crises to manage these appraisals (Hood 2011).

President Harry Truman placed a sign on his desk in the Oval Office that read, "the buck stops here," a play on the idiom "passing the buck."[2] When elected executives are implicated in the wake of governmental crises, they often adopt the presentational strategy suggested by either of these slogans to try to influence public appraisals of their performance (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009). Because policy formulation and implementation involve myriad political actors, elected executives can attempt to evade responsibility by "passing the buck" to other actors or entities associated with the policy. We refer to this as *blame deflecting*. Previous studies posit that blame deflecting is useful because it reduces the blameworthiness of an elected official, thereby shielding her from public disdain (Weaver 1986). Alternatively, elected executives embroiled in crises can "stop the buck" by accepting responsibility for the calamity. We refer to this strategy as *blame claiming*. Here, the mechanism operates by improving the public's perceptions of their leadership valence (Stone 2017; Stone and Simas 2010), informed by qualities such as honesty and competence, which subsequently enhances their reputations as a quality leaders (Busuioc and Lodge 2016; Coombs 1995).

In this paper, we use survey experiments to evaluate how elected executives' use of presentational strategies in the aftermath of crises influences public opinion. Our study joins an emerging trend in political science, public administration, public policy scholarship to leverage experiments to study the micro-foundations of broader theories (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007; James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017a, 2017b; Jilke, Van de Walle, and Kim 2016). In this article, we use the attitudes that elites elicit from respondents to learn about how the public evaluates elected executives during crises and how executives' presentational strategies informs those evaluations (see also Cohen 2017, 417-418). This approach also follows other studies that use surveys to uncover the public costs that politicians may anticipate as they calculate strategies, policies, and actions (Reeves and Rogowski 2015, 2016; Kriner and Reeves 2014, 2015; Reeves and Rogowski, Forthcoming). The flexibility afforded by experimental design allows us to isolate the causal effect of the two presentational strategies on which we focus—blame claiming and blame deflecting—by constructing scenarios

that differ only with respect to the presentational strategy employed. To our knowledge, this is the first such study in these disciplines using experimental methods to gain insights into elected executives' use of presentational strategies during crises.

Despite a scholarly focus on the mitigation or minimization of blame to maximize public support (Weaver 1986; Fiorina 1977; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Marvel 2014; Gasper and Reeves 2011), we argue and present evidence across five different experimental contexts that blame claiming is a far more effective strategy for elected executives to manage public evaluations in the aftermath of a governmental crisis. We also demonstrate that the leadership valence mechanism accounts for a substantial share of the blame claiming effect.

Our findings challenge conventional wisdom concerning the efficacy of blame deflecting. Motivated by political goals, such as electoral success and policy achievement, and a desire "to be well thought of" (Hood 2011, 7-8), elected executives facing a governmental crisis often default to blame deflecting behavior (see also Boin, Hart, McConnell, and Preston 2010; Weaver 1986). However, our findings suggest that this is a suboptimal presentational strategy. Executives can best maintain public support through building reputations as quality leaders by taking responsibility when crises strike.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we describe how blame claiming and blame deflecting strategies influence public opinion. Second, we present five survey experiments. The first four feature an elected executive employing different presentational strategies in the context of several governmental crises. A fifth leverages Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's use of different presentational strategies in his response to the real-world Flint water crisis. Across these experiments, we find that respondents evaluate elected executives more positively when they claim blame, but that blame deflecting induces a null or negative effect on respondents' evaluations. In additional analyses, we find that these results persist after accounting for other informational cues, such as crisis severity and partisanship. Third, we use causal mediation analysis to demonstrate that a substantial share of the positive effect of blame claiming is mediated by respondents' evaluations of the executive's leadership valence. We conclude by discussing the importance of these findings and considering further research.

Blame Deflecting, Blame Claiming, and Public Opinion

Mayors, governors, and presidents seek the esteem of the public for many reasons. Most directly, public support translates into reelection (Brown and Jacobson 2008; Campbell 2008; King 2001). Elected executives can also brandish public support to enact their legislative agendas (Canes-Wrone and De Marchi 2002) mobilize citizens to vote for co-partisan candidates (Herrnson and Morris 2007), and pass preferred initiatives and referenda (Lubbock 2012). Public support for incumbents is based, at least in part, on retrospective evaluations of officials' past performance on a vast array of phenomena including the state of the economy (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Fiorina 1981), public service provision (Boyne, James, John, and Petrovsky 2009; Burnett and Kogan 2017), crime rates (Arnold and Carnes 2012), and natural disasters (Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008). As a result, incumbents strategically portray their performance to their constituents to maximize their public support (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Grimmer 2013; Fenno 1978). While executives often cultivate support by claiming credit for positive outcomes, they must also manage the public's attitudes towards deleterious events in order to preserve or build support. We focus here on the latter task executives face. We examine how elected executives' choice of presentational strategies—the explanatory frames through which a political actor seeks to shape citizens' perceptions of an event and the actor's role in it—in the aftermath of a governmental crisis influences public evaluations of the executive.

We define *governmental crises* as adverse outcomes resulting from the action or inaction of the government which attract public attention.[3] A governmental crisis, such as an economic downturn, crime wave, failure to provide quality public services, or inadequate response to a natural disaster triggers a "blame game" (Boin, McConnell, and T'Hart 2008; Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011; Weaver 1986) as citizens seek to understand the cause of the crisis and to attribute blame for it (Kelley and Michela 1980; Weiner 1985). Governmental crises and the consequent blame games are dangerous for elected officials because their public support may suffer if they are deemed culpable.

While any political actor can be held responsible for a governmental crisis, we focus on elected executives because they are especially vulnerable to blame.[4] Governors, mayors, and presidents

are unitary in their role and function and are typically at the apex of the executive hierarchy of their respective jurisdictions, thus providing them with ultimate authority over and responsibility for the apparatus of government (Bovens 2007, 458). While the collective nature of Congress, state legislatures, or city councils helps shield their members from individual blame, elected executives are "held accountable for the broad performance of their agencies," and "an executive decision is the decision of the individual politician" (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002, 315).[5] As the leaders of the part of government responsible for implementation, executives are more proximate to the actions associated with the adverse outcome and are likely to be held more responsible than the legislature (Arnold 1990). Voters' expectations of executives and legislators also differ substantially. Governors must "meet the common challenge of facing nearly unlimited responsibility for governing their states (at least in the eyes of voters)" (Kousser and Phillips 2012, 251). At the national and state levels, voters are more likely to know the name of their elected executive than that of their legislators (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). When voters draw on "top of the head" considerations to make responsibility attributions for government crises (Taylor and Fiske 1978), they are more likely to think of elected executives than of legislators.

Knowing that governmental crises are inevitable, elected executives often structure and implement policies to avoid being implicated when crises stemming from their (in)action manifest in the future (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011). Executives may design policies to front load benefits and delay costs, thus reaping the policies' rewards and postponing any adverse effects to the future (Arnold 1990; Vis 2016; Weaver 1986). Differently, executives can use institutional mechanisms to shift formal responsibility for implementation to other actors in hopes that they will absorb the negative consequences arising from subsequent crises. One such mechanism for shifting responsibility is delegating authority to bureaucrats or other subordinate officials; should a governmental crisis arise, elected executives can use these subordinate officials as "lightning rods" to which they can deflect blame (Ellis 1994; James, Jilke, Petersen, and Van de Walle 2016; Vis 2016). Similarly, executives may draw officials from other levels of government into the implementation process to create a sense of collective responsibility and diminish the public's perception of their role (Mortensen 2013; Thompson 1980). Finally, with the rise of third-party governance, executives

can delegate implementation to private contractors to insulate themselves and the government more generally from blame (Marvel and Girth 2016; Piatak, Mohr, and Leland 2017).

However, such blame avoidance behaviors are imperfect, and when they fail to shield elected executives from the blame games surrounding crises, executives must engage in the framing contests associated with these blame games to preserve their reputations (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Resodihardjo 2020). While executives can sometimes lean on institutional mechanisms, such as investigatory bodies, to manage blame games (Resodihardjo 2020; Stark 2019; Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2006, 2010), they must primarily rely on presentational strategies to influence the public's perception of their culpability and evaluation of their performance (Benoit 2015; Hearit 2006; Hinterleitner 2018; Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011).

Though elected executives can employ many different presentational strategies, we focus on two ubiquitous types. First, we consider the public's response to an executive who deflects blame. Executives' belief that their public esteem will suffer if the public deems them responsible and blameworthy for a crisis motivates them to avoid blame (Kelley and Michela 1980; Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, and Doherty 1994). Given this belief, executives' optimal strategy to maintain public support when blame games manifest is to minimize the degree to which the public deems them culpable for the crisis. A conventional means by which to effect this strategy is to deflect blame to others. Executives may implicate bureaucrats, a legislature, or Mother Nature to shift public blame away from themselves (Ellis 1994; Hinterleitner 2018; Hood 2011; Weaver 1986). Contemporary examples of such blame deflection abound. For instance, when asked in March 2020 if he took responsibility for the United States' lag in testing for COVID-19, President Donald Trump responded, "I don't take responsibility at all, because we were given a set of circumstances and... rules, regulations, and specifications from a different time" (Trump 2020). Again, facing criticism for a high number of murders in late 2019, Baltimore Mayor Jack Young told reporters, "It's not any lack of leadership on my part... I'm not committing the murders. The police commissioner is not committing (sic) it. The council is not committing (sic) it. So how can you fault leadership?" (Hellgren 2019). Thus, we expect that elected executives facing a governmental crisis can increase their levels of public support when they deflect blame to others. The mechanism underlying this

expectation is that blame deflecting redirects the public's attributions of blame to other actors, thereby reducing the share of blame ascribed to the executive.

Second, we consider how the public responds to blame claiming.[6] Instead of deflecting blame, a politician may embrace responsibility for a negative outcome. One potential consequence of this strategy is for voters to more strongly punish executives because it strengthens the linkage between the executive and the crisis, thereby enabling the public to sanction the executive more confidently. Despite this danger, elected executives not infrequently opt to blame claim in the real world. For example, responding to reports that much of the intelligence he used to justify his decision to invade Iraq was flawed, President George W. Bush said, "[I]t is true that much of the intelligence turned out to be wrong. As President, I'm responsible for the decision to go into Iraq, and I'm also responsible for fixing what went wrong by reforming our intelligence capabilities" (Bush 2005). Again, addressing complaints concerning his closure of bars and restaurants early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo told citizens, "The buck stops on my desk. Your local mayor did not close your restaurants, your bars, your gyms or your schools. I did. I did. I assume full responsibility" (Cuomo 2020). We argue that elected executives claim blame to manage their public support because it allows them an opportunity to bolster their leadership valence (Stone 2017; Stone and Simas 2010), thus improving their reputations as quality leaders (Busuioc and Lodge 2016; Busuioc and Lodge 2017).

While voters hold elected executives accountable for the outcomes that occur during their tenure, they also draw on their perceptions of executives' characteristics, such as trustworthiness or competence, to inform their evaluations of their leadership abilities (Bartels 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; McGraw 2011; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Popkin 1994). Stone (2017) refers to the dimension of evaluation that considers whether candidates or officeholders "meet fundamental standards of competence to do the jobs to which they aspire and who have the traits and characteristics associated with personal integrity and dedication to public service" as "leadership valence," which informs citizens' opinions of candidates or officeholders' "personal suitability to hold office" (2017, 5-6, 18; see also Stone and Simas 2010). Even in an era characterized by high polarization, Stone (2017) finds that candidates' leadership valence exerts a positive effect

on voters' evaluations independent of ideology (see also Besley 2005; Buttice and Stone 2012). This same reasoning extends to incumbents' leadership valence in governing outside of an electoral context. As incumbents govern, they reveal their leadership valence to voters both directly through their actions and behavior and indirectly through outcomes observed under their watch (Stokes 1992). Through cultivating positive leadership valence, elected executives can enhance their public standing by establishing reputations as high-quality leaders (Busuioc and Lodge 2016; Busuioc and Lodge 2017; Moynihan 2012).

Blame claiming, we argue, enables elected executives to improve citizens' perception of their leadership valence. Hood (2011, 55) suggests that public officials who accept responsibility for problems "can present themselves as honest and sincere," and make themselves look like "they are made of different metal from the stereotype of those slippery politicians and bureaucrats who will go on with denials and evasions. . . ." Similarly, Thompson (1980, 907) asserts that elected officials often participate in the "ritual taking of responsibility" because it "strengthens [their] own political standing—by reassuring the public that someone is in charge and by projecting an image of a courageous leader who does not pass the buck." Again, Busuioc and Lodge (2016, 252-253) posit that "being (seen to be) accountable might be said to carry considerable reputational benefits... as accountability has become a prevailing norm of good governance..." Given that citizens expect their mayors, governors, and presidents to have strong leadership abilities, particularly in comparison to legislators (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993), elected executives are motivated to leverage opportunities to cultivate reputations as high-quality leaders. Voters may view an incumbent as a stronger leader or more honest and trustworthy as a result of their accepting blame and stopping the buck. Thus, blame claiming enables elected executives to fortify their reputations by improving citizens' perceptions of their leadership valence, which underlies citizens' evaluations of those executives.

Despite frequent pronouncements of "the buck stops here" in American politics and theoretical speculation of the effectiveness of blame claiming, there is scant empirical evidence on the matter. One exception is Brändström, Kuipers, and Daléus (2008), which examines how the governments of Finland, Norway, and Sweden aided their affected citizens and defended those responses in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, a popular tourist destination for Scandinavian

travelers. The study finds that whether the governments decided to apologize and accept responsibility for their own responses influenced their political fates. The governments of Finland and Norway apologized for their post-tsunami responses and were spared lasting political harm. However, the government of Sweden, which tried to deflect blame, incurred intense public criticism, faced lengthy government investigations, and lost in the next election due in part to its handling of the tsunami (2008, 136-143). Though not a study of individual behavior, this evidence suggests blame claiming is an effective method for maintaining political power. Outside of political science and public administration, experimental studies in communications and psychology have found that when leaders apologize for adverse outcomes, they minimize reputational damage and strengthen positive evaluations of themselves and their organizations (Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke 2010; Coombs 1995; Coombs and Holladay 2008; Pace, Fediuk, and Botero 2010). Other studies suggest that blame claiming yields more positive evaluations because they improve perceptions of an individual or organization's credibility (Lyon and Cameron 2004), trustworthiness (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, and Dirks 2004), or ability to provide transformational leadership (Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, and Elving 2006). We hypothesize that these same mechanisms influence assessments of elected executives who claim blame in the aftermath of governmental crises.

To summarize our theoretical expectations, the classic blame deflection hypothesis is that elected executives in the midst of a crisis will enjoy higher levels of public support when they deflect blame to others. Our blame claim hypothesis is that elected executives embroiled in a crisis can increase their public support by accepting responsibility for the crisis relative to other presentational strategies. We expect the effects of blame deflecting and blame claiming to emerge from their ability to influences respondents' perceptions of the executives' blameworthiness for the crisis and leadership valence, respectively.

Empirical Analysis

Investigating public attitudes toward real world elite actions presents several challenges (see Miller and Reeves 2017; Reeves and Rogowski 2018). Ideally, we could observe a single elected executive utilize different presentational strategies in otherwise identical contexts where polling data is abun-

dant, but this combination of observed elite behavior and data availability is rare. In light of these challenges, we utilize survey experiments (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007; James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017a, 2017b), which allow us to construct realistic governmental crises and then systematically vary the elected executive's response across different conditions while holding all other facets of the crisis constant. Random assignment of survey respondents to different conditions allows us to isolate effects attributable to the executive's responses.

Our research design leverages survey experiments to make causal claims and address concerns about the external validity. First, we present results from four experiments which demonstrate the relative benefit of blame claiming in managing public support after a stylized crisis. Second, we enhance the validity of our findings with three additional experiments that embed elected executives' presentational strategies in more complex information environments accounting for partisanship and crisis severity. We also present an experiment drawing on the real-world Flint, Michigan water crisis and Governor Rick Snyder's use of blame claiming and blame deflecting strategies during the crisis. This experiment subjects our theories to a hard test because respondents are likely pre-treated by their knowledge of and prior opinions concerning the crisis and thus could be less responsive to our treatments (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007, 15-16).

Evidence from Four Governmental Crises

Our first set of survey experiments uses stylized scenarios in which an elected executive responds to a governmental crisis. Each study examines an elected executive dealing with the aftermath of one of four crises—a flood, a bridge collapse, a budget shortfall, and a heat wave. A feature of these crises is the ambiguity of responsibility. Blame is often contentious and not directly observable, creating space for political actors to influence the public's perceptions of an executive's responsibility (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Brändström and Kuipers 2003). For example, while a politician is unlikely to be responsible for the weather, the mitigation and response are well within her purview (Gasper and Reeves 2011; Reeves 2011) such that citizens may blame them for a crisis stemming from an adverse weather event. We fielded the flood study in January 2018 on The American Panel Survey (TAPS), a nationally representative monthly panel survey of approximately 2,000

U.S. adults administered by GfK Knowledge Networks. We fielded our remaining bridge collapse, budget deficit, and heat wave studies in October 2017 on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) with approximately 870 respondents for each study.[7,8]

The vignettes we present to respondents in each of these four studies, presented in Table 1, adhere to a common format. In each study, we first present all respondents with a paragraph that describes the crisis, mentions a report that the government is at fault, and notes that critics argue that the elected executive is to blame. Then, we present each respondent with a short second paragraph corresponding with their assigned treatment condition. In the control condition, the elected executive does not comment on fault.[9] In the blame claim condition, the elected executive takes "ultimate responsibility" for the failure. Finally, in the blame deflection condition, the executive denies responsibility and casts blame onto another actor. Because all treatment conditions provide a response from the elected executive, the key point of comparison among the conditions is how the elected executive addresses blame.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

After each vignette, we ask respondents questions to assess their support for the elected executive. First, we ask, "Do you approve or disapprove of the [mayor's/governor's] handling of the [flood/bridge collapse/budget shortfall/heat wave]?" Responses range along a four-point scale from "strongly approve" to "strongly disapprove." Second, we ask, "How likely would you be to vote for the [mayor/governor] in the next election?" Responses range along a four-point scale from "very likely" to "very unlikely." Third, we gauge respondents' views of the elected executives' leadership valence by asking respondents to indicate how well each of five character traits—"intelligent," "provides strong leadership," "honest," "competent," and "trustworthy"—describes the executive on a five-point scale ranging from "extremely well" to "not well at all."

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

We first consider how the different presentational strategies affect public support for elected executives in the midst of governmental crises. Our results for all four studies are presented in Figure 1. The figure presents percentage point differences in average treatment effects using binary

indicators of our outcome measures.[10] Along the x-axis, we present treatment effects relative to the control for the blame claim and blame deflect conditions for approval of the executive's handling of the crisis (left panel) and likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election (right panel). Turning first to the left panel, we observe that for all four studies, approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis is between 18 and 23 percentage points higher among respondents in the blame claim condition relative to respondents in the control condition. In contrast, approval is between 6 and 22 percentage points lower among respondents in the blame deflect condition relative to respondents in the control condition. The results in the right panel convey a similar pattern. Relative to respondents in the control condition, respondents in the blame claim condition are between 15 and 21 percentage points more likely to vote for the elected executive in the next election. Respondents in the blame deflect condition are between 4 and 15 percentage points less likely to vote for the executive. Thus, consistent with our blame claiming hypothesis, our results suggest that the public evaluates elected executives embroiled in governmental crises more favorably when those executives engage in blame claiming rather than offer perfunctory responses (as in the control condition) or deflect blame. Contrary to the blame deflection hypothesis, we find evidence that the public punishes elected executives who deflect blame to others, though the differences in evaluations between the control condition and the blame deflect condition in some of our experiments are not statistically distinguishable.

The preceding four studies provide consistent and substantial evidence of blame claiming in a basic information environment. Reports about governmental crises typically include additional contextual information such as the severity of the crisis and the elected executive's partisan affiliation, which could subsume or condition the effect of blame claiming on respondents' evaluations. Though partisanship may be less salient for evaluations of governors and mayors, it may also diminish or eliminate the relative benefits of blame claiming. The power of the partisan heuristic may dilute any other information about an elected official's behavior (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Mondak 1993). Alternatively, heterogeneous responses may drive the overall effects across copartisan and non-copartisan respondents (Bisgaard 2015; Lyons and Jaeger 2014). Similarly, blame claiming may be less effective when the crisis is more severe (Claeys, Cauberghe,

and Vyncke 2010; Coombs 1995). As the cost of a crisis, as measured by financial losses, human life, or otherwise, grows, executives may confront limited opportunity to influence public appraisals (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011).

To ascertain whether the positive effect of blame claiming persists in more complex information environments, we refielded our bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies as factorial experiments. For each, we independently randomized the severity of the crisis, the executive's partisan affiliation, and the executive's presentational strategy. Whereas our previous studies varied the executive's presentational strategy leaving all else constant, a factorial framework allows us to assess whether the blame claiming effect holds as we add complexity to the information environment. For each of the three studies, we investigate whether the blame claiming effect holds across low, moderate, and high levels of crisis severity, and for respondents who are copartisans and non-copartisans of the elected executive.

We present a full analysis of these factorial experiments in the Supplemental Information, but we briefly discuss the results here. When looking at the marginal effect of blame claiming without conditioning on crisis severity and partisanship, the positive effect of blame claiming persists at magnitudes similar to those reported in Figure 1. Further, we find no consistent evidence that crisis severity or partisanship condition the effect of blame claiming.[11] In the case of crisis severity, we observe that blame claiming induces positive effects across all levels of severity for all three studies, though the relative magnitude of the effect varies across severity and does not follow a consistent pattern. Similarly, we find that blame claiming exerts a positive effect for respondents who are both copartisans and non-copartisans of the executive, but that the relative magnitude of the effect among these groups of respondents varies across the three studies. Thus, our treatment effects persist in the presence of additional relevant information, and we find no consistent evidence that heterogeneous effects drive them.

Evidence from the Flint Water Crisis

The preceding studies demonstrate consistent positive effects of blame claiming, even when respondents confront complex information environments. One limitation of these studies is that, while

they are composites of real-world events, they are constructed. To promote the generalizability of the effects of blame claiming, we conduct an additional study based on the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Survey experiments based on real-world events and utilizing the actual presentational strategies employed by politicians bolster external validity because they incorporate the broader political context in which respondents live. Further, survey experiments based on real-world events often provide a hard test of a posited treatment effect if respondents enter into the experiment with knowledge of or opinions about the event or relevant actors (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007, 15-16). For example, if respondents have pre-existing knowledge about or opinions of a political actor featured in a survey experiment, the observed treatment effects may be smaller than had the respondents lacked previous knowledge or opinions.

Our Flint study concerns Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's use of blame claiming and blame deflecting presentational strategies during the Flint water crisis. The crisis, whose effects are still being felt, stemmed from decisions by several state and local officials that contaminated the water in Flint, Michigan, with lead, *Legionella*, and other harmful bacteria and chemicals (Hanna-Attisha, LaChance, Sadler, and Champney Schnepp 2016).[12] Governor Snyder personally appointed several of the key government officials who had caused the crisis, and his administration reacted slowly after warning signs emerged. Because of this, Governor Snyder was a primary target in the initial blame game. Importantly for our study, the governor employed both blame claiming and blame deflecting strategies as he navigated a firestorm of criticism (Snyder 2016; *Morning Joe* 2016). Therefore, we were able to construct a survey experiment where we vary the type of presentational strategy Governor Snyder employed without using deception. Additionally, because the crisis featured prominently on the national agenda in much of 2015 and 2016 through media coverage, congressional hearings, and presidential debates, Americans outside of Flint were both aware of the crisis and held opinions about the culpability of relevant actors at the time we implemented of our survey experiment. For example, a YouGov survey of American adults fielded in January 2016 indicated that 58% of respondents were following the Flint water crisis "very closely" or "somewhat closely," and that 52% of respondents "strongly disapproved" or "somewhat disapproved" of Governor Snyder's handling of the crisis.[13] Thus, many of our respondents were exposed to coverage of the crisis

prior to our survey, making their evaluations of the governor resistant to our treatments (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007).

[Insert Table 2 Here]

We fielded our Flint experiment on MTurk in March 2016 with 851 respondents.[14] The structure of our survey experiment resembles that of our previous studies, with a few minor differences. First, the experiment included four conditions: a control condition, a blame claiming condition, and two different blame deflecting conditions (see Table 2 for vignette wording). Each of these blame deflecting conditions implicate other government officials with clear lines of culpability for the crisis; in one condition, blame is deflected to one of the governor's political appointees, and in the second, blame is deflected to an expert bureaucrat. Second, Governor Snyder does not offer a response in the control condition. Third, blame deflection is attributed to third parties rather than to Governor Snyder himself.[15] Fourth, we measured respondents' evaluations of Governor Snyder by asking them to rate the job that the governor had done in handling the Flint water crisis and to indicate whether the governor should resign from or remain in office.[16]

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

We present the results from our Flint experiment in Figure 2.[17] Each panel presents the treatment effects for the blame claim condition, the blame appointee condition, and the blame expert condition. The left panel presents the results for a binary indicator for whether respondents' approved of Snyder's handling of the crisis. We observe that approval of the governor's handling of the crisis is about 23 percentage points higher among respondents in the blame claim condition than respondents in the control condition. Conversely, deflecting blame to an appointee or an expert results in substantively small and statistically indistinguishable increases in approval.[18] The right panel presents the results for a binary indicator of whether the governor should remain in rather than resign from office. Compared to the control condition, respondents in the blame claim condition are about 9 percentage points more likely to believe the governor should remain in office. We again see that the effects of blaming appointees or experts are substantively small and statistically indistinguishable.[19] As in our previous studies, we find that elected executives

can better manage their public support in the aftermath of governmental crises through blame claiming than through blame deflecting, even when studied in a contextually rich and salient real-world political environment.

Testing the Blame Claiming Mechanism

In the previous sections, we presented evidence from five studies, all of which found consistently positive blame claiming effects. In this section, we examine the mechanism by which blame claiming improves citizens' evaluations of elected executives. Specifically, we examine the extent to which blame claiming improves respondents' evaluations of elected executives through bolstering perceptions of their leadership valence, as we earlier hypothesized. To do so, we further interrogate the findings from our earlier flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies.[20]

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

We first consider how elected executives' presentational strategies influence respondents' perceptions of their leadership valance, which we define as their assessments of how well five character traits—intelligence, honesty, competency, strong leadership, and trustworthiness—describe the executive along a five-point scale. We construct our measure by scaling these responses.[21] Figure 3 presents differences in mean levels of the five point leadership valence scale between respondents in each of the treatments and those in the control. Across all four studies, respondents in the blame claiming condition express more positive perceptions of the executive's character compared to those in the control condition. Respondents in the blame deflecting condition, meanwhile, have more negative perceptions, though these effects are statistically distinguishable from zero in only two of the four studies. For example, in the bridge collapse study, the mean value of the executive's leadership valence for respondents in the control condition is 2.46 on a five-point scale, and the mean value for respondents in the blame claim condition is 2.99—an increase of 0.53 points, or 21.5 percent. The mean value for respondents in the blame deflect condition is 2.23—a decrease of 0.23 points, or 9 percent compared to the control. Thus, we find that respondents perceive elected executives to have more favorable leadership valence when they claim blame for a crisis.

To test our fully specified mechanism—that blame claiming induces more favorable evaluations of an elected executive by increasing citizens' positive perceptions of the executive's leadership valence—we employ causal mediation analysis (Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2011), which allows us to recover both the direct and mediated effects of blame claiming on public support.[22] Each treatment effect we estimate in our earlier analyses is itself composed of an average direct effect (ADE), or the effect of the treatment itself on the outcome, and an average causal mediation effect (ACME), or the effect of the treatment on the outcome through a hypothesized mediator. Under the assumption of sequential ignorability, causal mediation analysis recovers unbiased estimates of the ACME, ADE, and the average total effect, which allow us to assess whether a hypothesized mediator does, in fact, mediate the effect of the treatment on the outcome, and the proportion of the total effect that is mediated (Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2011, 770).[23]

[Insert Figure 4 Here]

Figure 4 presents our estimates for the mediated (ACME) and direct (ADE) effects of blame claiming on respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the crisis (left panel) and likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election (right panel) for each of our four experiments.[24] In both panels, we observe that leadership valence mediates substantial portions of the blame claiming effects for approval and vote choice. For example, in the heat wave study the average total effect of blame claiming on respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the crisis is an increase in approval of 18 percentage points, and approximately 78 percent of that total effect (14 out of 18 percentage points) is mediated through respondents' perceptions of the executive's leadership valence. For the bridge collapse and budget shortfall, the effects are comparable with leadership valance accounting for 75 percent (15 out of 20 percentage points) and 80 percent (16 out of 20 percentage points) of the overall effect, respectively. For our flood study, the mediation effect accounts for a smaller though still sizable 39 percent share of the total effect (9 out 23 percentage points). For vote choice, the results are even starker. The mediated effect accounts for nearly all of the total effect in the flood, bridge collapse, and budget shortfall study. For the heat wave study, it accounts for 67 percent of the total effect. As we hypothesized, blame claiming improves evaluations by bolstering individuals' perceptions of elected executives' leadership valence.

Discussion

Our research provides consistent evidence that elected executives can effectively manage their public support during governmental crises through blame claiming. In contexts ranging from floods, bridge collapses, budget shortfalls, and heat waves, to the real-world Flint, Michigan water crisis, the public prefers leaders who stop the buck and accept blame to those who pass the buck and deflect blame or offer perfunctory responses. We also demonstrate in our mediation analysis that improved views of leadership valence account for the beneficial effects of blame claiming. When executives claim blame for a governmental crisis, respondents have improved views of their leadership abilities, which in turn induces more favorable evaluations of the executive. While recent research has postulated that leadership valence plays a substantial role in voting, we find evidence that it also mediates how voters hold elected officials accountable. Though our studies focus on mayors and governors, our findings may generalizable to other institutional contexts including presidents, business leaders, and any other executives accountable to a constituency.

While our survey experiments offer evidence of the public costs of elite action, our approach also comes with many limitations. Some of these shortcomings reflect opportunities for future research, while others represent constraints from our methodological approach.

One limitation of our study is that we cannot account for the political environment that precedes the crisis, which dramatically shapes what a leader can do and how citizens perceive those actions. The factors that we do not or can not consider may make blame deflecting a preferable strategy at times. Leaders have established reputations determined by personal characteristics as well as broader structural factors that may inform their choice of presentational strategy (Bennister, Hart, and Worthy 2017, 2015). Relatedly, our surveys present a single interaction between the respondent and the elected official. In reality, these interactions persist for years. If an executive has repeatedly claimed blame in the past, the approach may have diminishing returns. Strategic leaders may anticipate only a limited number of opportunities to claim blame. While our study focuses on public responsiveness at the time of a crisis, we do not consider the long-term consequences of blame claiming. From a structural perspective, the sequence in "political time" in which a leader holds office may determine a leader's ability to address a crisis (Skowronek 1997). These political

forces are difficult to approximate using survey experiments and represent a limitation of our approach.

A second limitation from the simplification that comes with our survey experiments is that we do not explore how the behavior of other actors, such as bureaucrats or political opponents, conditions the effectiveness of blame claiming. We focus on one moment in the blame game—when elected executives respond to criticism for their role in the crisis. Other actors also try to influence the public's perception of who is at fault for an adverse outcome (Boin, McConnell, and T'Hart 2008; Brändström and Kuipers 2003), and their actions may moderate the effect of blame claiming on public evaluations of executives. For example, political opponents could exploit an executive's decision to blame claim by brandishing it as proof of the executive's culpability, such that executives suffer, rather than benefit from, claiming blame. Conversely, claiming blame may enable executives to reap its rewards by "tak[ing] the wind out of critics' sails," forcing critics to either "go on pressing charges, as it were (with the risk that they will be made to look negative and vindictive, thereby unintentionally increasing public sympathy rather than blame for the officeholder), or to accept the apology, drop the charges, and move onto other ground" (Hood 2011, 54). While this is a limitation in our study, further work could explore how the interplay between elected executives' blame claiming and the responses of other actors affects public opinion.

A third limitation of our survey experimental approach is that we cannot gauge how the direct costs of mishandling a crisis affect attitudes. When a citizen experiences costs, such as emotional tolls or property damage, they may be less accepting of blame claiming. Our survey respondents did not incur direct costs from governmental crises. In the first four studies, we describe the damages in the context of generic crises. In our Flint survey experiment, the respondents were from across the United States, and so the water crisis was unlikely to have directly affected them. For most citizens whose communities are in the midst of a governmental crisis, the direct costs are likely low and diffuse; however, some crises impose severe and salient costs. In these latter cases, the intensity of citizens' anger may diminish the benefits of blame claiming for embattled elected executives (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011). Further research should consider the effectiveness of presentational strategies as these costs are born directly.

In addition to limitations, our findings suggest further avenues of research. First, we test only a limited number of aspects of crises. Just as leaders' reputations are variable, so are the nature of crises that a leader may face (see Ang, Noble, and Reeves, Forthcoming, for an overview). Crises may be sudden or lingering, and their effects may be dispersed or concentrated. The context in which a leader exercises power conditions the public response (Reeves and Rogowski 2018; Reeves, Rogowski, Seo, and Stone 2017; Reeves and Rogowski 2016), and further research should explore these additional circumstances.

Second, rather than employing a single presentational strategy, political officials sometimes utilize mixed strategies. They may simultaneously claim blame and diminish culpability by appealing to extenuating circumstances or blaming others. Might the benefits of blame claiming be reduced when politicians simultaneously shift blame to others? Or can political officials enhance their auras of leadership by claiming blame while also deflecting that blame to others? Political officials sometimes employ different presentational strategies during a single blame game (Hood 2011; Hood, Jennings, Dixon, Hogwood, and Beeston 2009; Hood, Jennings, and Copeland 2016), and the placement of blame claiming in executives' sequence of actions may impact its effectiveness. For instance, when executives claim blame only after exhausting all other options, the public may deem the action insincere and not reward or even punish them for doing so. Further work should disentangle these phenomena.

Third, future studies should explore the effectiveness of presentational strategies employed by unelected governmental actors embroiled in crises, such as agency heads and street-level bureaucrats. Governmental crises can ensnare non-elected actors, and harm to their public reputations can threaten their career prospects and standing among their peers (Busuioc and Lodge 2016; Hinterleitner and Sager 2019; Moynihan 2012). These unelected actors occupy a distinct position in blame games stemming from governmental crises because they are directly responsible for the government's response to a crisis (Arnold 1990). They are also vulnerable to blame by their bosses, elected executives, who often craft institutions and policies ex ante to leave them vulnerable to blame and deflect blame for adverse outcomes onto them ex post (Ellis 1994; Hood 2011; Mortensen 2013; Nielsen and Moynihan 2017; Gilad, Maor, and Bloom 2015). Further research

should consider how unelected governmental actors approach blame games and whether they also benefit from claiming blame.

Despite our findings, it seems that blame claiming is far less prevalent than blame deflecting (e.g., Boin, Hart, McConnell, and Preston 2010; Weaver 1986). As President Kennedy noted after the Bay of Pigs, "victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."[25] When politicians decide to admit fault, they consider how the public will respond to their admission, which is the focus of this paper. They also consider the long-term consequences of their decisions, such as their electoral implications, and grapple with psychological biases that every human faces when deciding to admit blame (Hastorf, Schneider, and Polefka 1970; Zuckerman 1979). Our findings suggest that in the face of a crisis, elected executives may be better served by resisting these biases and claiming blame. Compared to blame deflecting, blame claiming enhances citizens' perceptions of their leadership abilities and, consequently, maximizes public support.

In the Cherry Tree Myth, George Washington, a young boy, is said to have chopped down his father's cherry tree with his new hatchet. When Washington's angry father confronts him, the boy declares, "I cannot tell a lie... I did cut it with my hatchet" (Richardson, n.d.). He eschews the natural temptation to blame someone else or feign ignorance and instead claims blame for the act. This national fable evokes admiration towards the first president because of his honesty and willingness to take responsibility for his peccadillo. It also encapsulates the findings of this research. Though there are costs for accepting blame and "stopping the buck," there are also reputational benefits. Just as Washington's father was likely pleased with his son, we find evidence that the public appreciates when elected executives claim blame for their actions.

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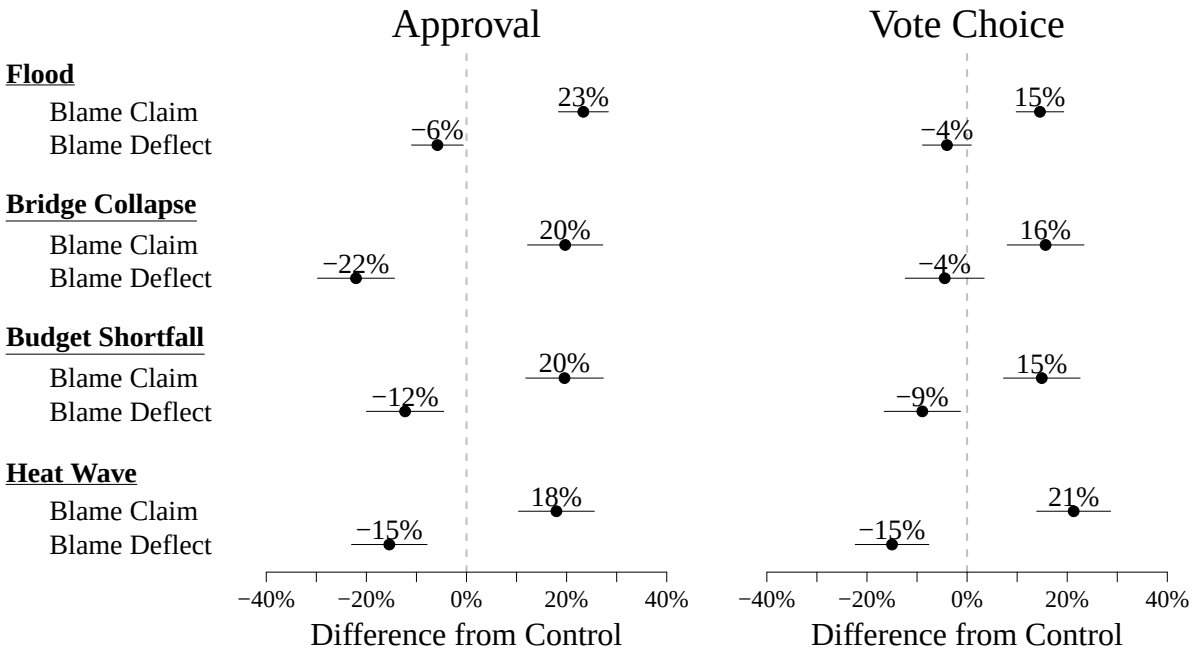

Figure 1: **Effect of Elected Executives' Presentational Strategies on Evaluations.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting on approval of the executive's handling of the crisis (left panel) and likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election (right panel) relative to the control condition in each of our four experiments. Positive (negative) values along $x-$axis reflect more (less) favorable evaluations relative to the control condition. When elected executives claim blame, respondents express higher levels of approval for their handling of the crisis and are more likely to vote for the executive in the next election compared to respondents in the other conditions. For example, when the mayor claims blame for the flood, approval of his handling of the crisis is 23 percentage points higher than when respondents are informed that the mayor merely pledges to address the crisis (control condition), and 29 percentage points higher than when respondents are informed that the mayor deflects blame to the city's emergency management agency. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Table 1: Vignette Question Wording (Four Governmental Crises)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Common Base	Earlier this year, a community experienced major flooding as a result of a severe rainstorm that dumped several feet of water on the area. After the storm, roads remained flooded and citizens were trapped in homes, schools, and businesses for over twenty four hours. A recent report concluded that the city failed to activate resources to prepare the region for the storm. Some critics argue that the city's mayor is to blame for the poor handling of the flood.	Earlier this year, a highway bridge running through a large American city collapsed during rush hour. The collapse sent many cars into the water below and caused several deaths and injuries. A report prepared by federal investigators revealed that state officials identified the bridge as being in poor condition several years ago but had not taken any action to fix it. Critics have argued that the state's governor is to blame for the bridge collapse.	Earlier this year, it was announced that a U.S. state faces a major budget deficit for the coming fiscal year. A nonpartisan report finds that the deficit is a result of changes made last year to the state's tax policies. The report argues that these policies have generated less revenue than expected. Critics argue that the state's governor is to blame for the budget deficit.	This summer, a major American city experienced a severe heat wave, with temperatures exceeding 100°F for five consecutive days. This excessive heat caused many residents to experience heat related illness and led to many deaths and several hospitalizations. A recent report concluded that the city's handling of the heat wave was inadequate, and that the city should have opened cooling centers and conducted wellness checks on the elderly. Critics argue that the city's mayor is to blame for the inadequate handling of the heat wave.
Control	In a statement, the mayor pledged to review the city's procedures for responding to severe weather events.	In a statement, the governor pledged to review the condition of the state's bridges and to make all necessary repairs to prevent future bridge collapses.	In a statement, the governor said that he is committed to working to balance the state's budget.	In a statement, the mayor pledged to review the city's response plan for future heat waves.
Blame Claim	In a statement, the mayor said that he is ultimately responsible for the safety of the city's residents and accepted blame for his role in failing to anticipate the flood. The mayor pledged to review the city's procedures for responding to severe weather events.	In a statement, the governor said that he is ultimately responsible for the safety of the state's roadways and accepted blame for his role in the bridge collapse. The governor pledged to review the condition of the state's bridges and to make all necessary repairs to prevent future bridge collapses.	In a statement, the governor said that he is ultimately responsible for the fiscal health of the state and has accepted blame for his role in crafting the tax policies which caused the budget deficit. The governor said that he is committed to working to balance the state's budget.	In a statement, the mayor said that he is ultimately responsible for the safety of the city's residents and accepted blame for his role in the casualties caused by the heat wave. The mayor pledged to review the city's response plan for future heat waves.
Blame Deflect	In a statement, the mayor denied responsibility and blamed the city's emergency management agency for its role in failing to anticipate the flood. The mayor pledged to review the city's procedures for responding to severe weather events.	In a statement, the governor denied responsibility and blamed the state's department of transportation for its role in the bridge collapse. The governor pledged to review the condition of the state's bridges and to make all necessary repairs to prevent future bridge collapses.	In a statement, the governor has denied responsibility and blamed the state legislature for their role in crafting the tax policies which caused the budget deficit. The governor said that he is committed to working to balance the state's budget.	In a statement, the mayor denied responsibility and blamed the city's emergency management agency for its role in the casualties caused by the heat wave. The mayor pledged to review the city's response plan for future heat waves.

All subjects in each experimental context are presented with the common base text, followed by the additional text corresponding to their treatment condition.

Table 2: Vignette Question Wording (Flint)

Common Base	One year after the city of Flint, Michigan switched the source of its drinking water, investigators discovered that the city's water had become contaminated with unsafe levels of lead. Many argue that Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is ultimately responsible for the lead contamination crisis because this disaster occurred on his watch.
Control	[No additional information]
Blame Claim	In a recent speech, Governor Snyder stated that "the buck stops here with me," and took "full responsibility to fix the problem."
Blame Appointee	Others point to a task force that found that Dan Wyant, the director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), held "primary responsibility" for the crisis. Governor Snyder appointed Wyant as director of MDEQ in 2011.
Blame Expert	Others point to a task force that found that Dan Wyant, the director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), held "primary responsibility" for the crisis. Prior to leading the MDEQ, Wyant had over 20 years of experience in state government, including 9 years as the director of the state's Department of Agriculture under both Republican and Democratic governors.

All subjects in the Flint study are presented with the common base text, followed by the additional text corresponding to their treatment condition.

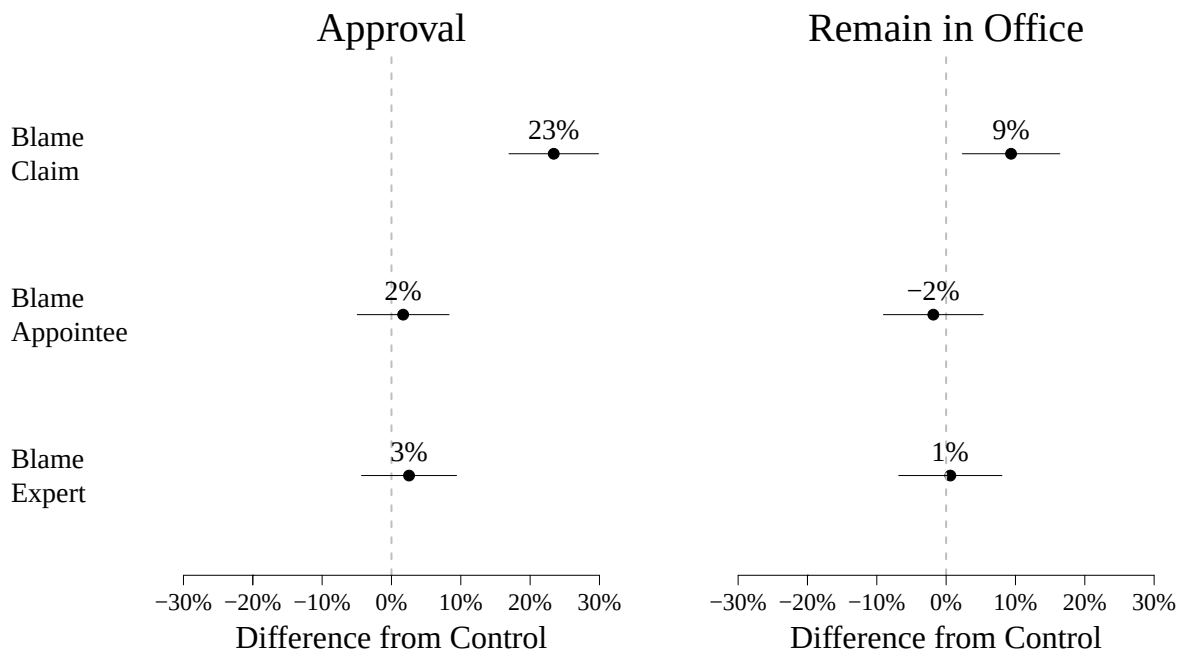

Figure 2: **Public Responses to Governor Snyder's Flint Water Crisis Presentational Strategies.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting conditions relative to control condition. In the left panel, positive (negative) values along the x-axis reflect higher (lower) levels of support relative to the control condition. In the right panel, positive (negative) values along the x-axis reflect higher (lower) levels of agreement that the governor should remain in office (rather than resign from office). When Governor Snyder claims blame, respondents are significantly more likely to approve of his handling of the crisis (left panel) than are respondents in the control and blame deflecting conditions. Respondents in the blame claiming condition are also more likely to agree that Governor Snyder should remain in office (right panel) than are respondents in the no response condition and blame deflection conditions. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

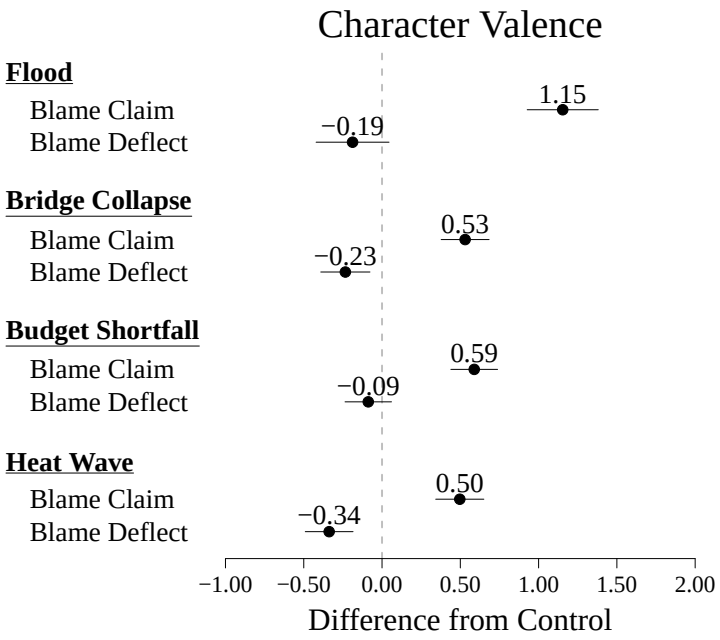

Figure 3: **Public Evaluations of Elected Executives' Leadership Valence.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting on the elected executive's leadership valence relative to the control condition in each of our four experiments. Positive (negative) values along the x-axis reflect more positive (negative) perceptions of leadership valence relative to the control condition. When elected executives claim blame, respondents express more positive perceptions of the elected executives' leadership valence compared to respondents in the other conditions. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

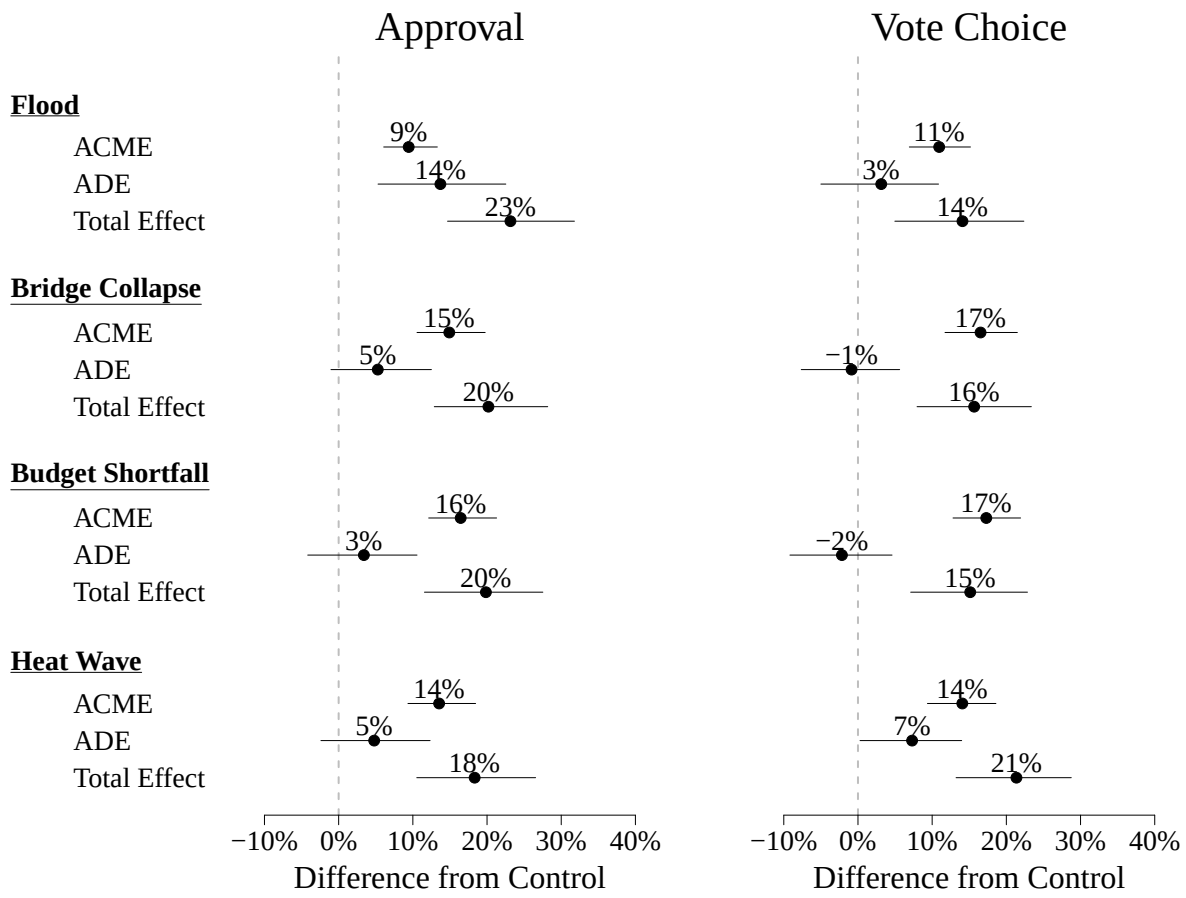

Figure 4: **Causal Mediation Analysis (Mediated Effect of Leadership Valence).** Estimated average causal mediation effects (ACME), average direct effects (ADE), and average total effects for respondents in the blame claiming condition relative to respondents in the control condition across each of our four experiments. Estimates in the left and right panels correspond to the mediated and direct effects of blame claiming for approval of the executive's handling of the crisis and likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, respectively. Positive (negative) values along $x-$axis reflect more favorable (less) evaluations relative to the control condition. Across all four experiments, leadership valence, our hypothesized mediator, mediates over 40 percent of the total effect of blame claiming, and in all but one case mediates over half of the total effect. Note that in a few cases, the ADE and ACME for a given experiment and outcome do not sum to the corresponding total effect due to rounding. Bars around point estimates represent 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstraping (percentile method). For details on our estimation procedure, please see Footnote **??** and the Supplemental Information.

Supplemental Information

The Supplemental Information contains two key sections. In the first section, entitled "Study Descriptions and Question Wordings," we present the vignettes and questions used in the studies we describe in the main paper. In the second section, entitled "Supplemental Analyses," we present the models underlying each of the figures we present in the main paper as well as alternative specifications and sensitivity analyses, where appropriate. Each subsection of the "Supplemental Analyses" section is preceded by an explanation of our analytical procedures and the contents presented therein.

List of Tables

List of Figures

Study Descriptions and Question Wordings

In this section, we provide descriptions of how we fielded the surveys in which our experiments were embedded and the vignette and question wordings for each of our experiments.

In Footnote **??**, we briefly discuss the formulation of our control conditions. We elaborate on that discussion here. Including control conditions in survey experiments is important so that researchers can assess not only the relative effects of the treatment conditions, but also the effects of each treatment relative to the absence of any treatment (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). One of two general types of control conditions could be suitable for setting: a condition in which the elected executive offers a public statement, or a condition in which the executive does not make a statement. Each type of control condition describes a plausible real-world scenario to which the effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting could be compared. In the former case, the control focuses on the point at which an executive offers a public response to a crisis, such that our treatment effects indicate the effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting conditional on the executive offering a public response. In the latter case, the control represents the period between the crisis occurring and the elected executive offering a public response, such that our treatment effects indicate the effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting when compared to the executive's lack of response.

In our four governmental crisis studies, we use the former control condition in which the elected executive offers a public statement. This type of control condition offers two advantages. First, by having the executive make a statement, our control condition differs from each treatment only with respect to the executive's comments concerning blame, enabling us to attribute the observed effects to the executive's claiming or deflecting blame. Second, because citizens have a bias for action versus inaction in the face of policy problems or crises (Miller and Reeves 2017; Olsen 2017), our control facilitates a hard test for our theory because it establishes higher baseline favorability of the executive among respondents in the control condition than would a control condition in which the executive did not offer a response, making it more difficult to recover positive effects of blame claiming or blame deflecting.

In our Flint study, we use the latter type of control condition in which the elected executive does not offer a response. This control condition reflects how elected executives sometimes respond to blame by "keeping a low profile" and hoping that public attention to the crisis will dissipate (Hood 2011, 43-47). Thus, while this control makes it more difficult to determine whether the treatment effects we observe, since the treatments differ from the control both in terms of offering a response and the content of that response, it represents a common, real-world scenario in which executives avoid offering public comments—sometimes only for a short length of time after the crisis, but other times for extended periods.

We consistently find that blame claiming is an effective presentational strategy in the face of a governmental crisis irrespective of which control condition we use as a baseline, suggesting that the public responds more favorably to blame claiming than to offering perfunctory responses or avoiding making a public statement.

Flood Study

Study Description

We fielded our flood study on the January 2018 wave of The American Panel Survey, a nationally representative panel survey administered monthly by GfK/Knowledge Networks on behalf of the Weidenbaum Center at Washington University in St. Louis. The January 2018 wave included 1963 respondents, 1945 of which provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures. Vignette wording is displayed in Table 1, and post-treatment question wording is provided below.

Question Wording

- Do you approve or disapprove of the mayor's handling of the flood?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
  - Don't know
- How likely would you be to vote for the mayor in the next election?
  - Very likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Somewhat unlikely
  - Very unlikely
  - Don't know
- How would you assign blame for the flood mentioned above? The total cannot exceed 100.
  - President
  - US Congress
  - Federal Emergency Management Agency
  - State governor
  - Mayor
  - City council
  - City's emergency management agency
  - Other
- Thinking about the mayor mentioned above, how well do you think the following traits describe him? intelligent; provides strong leadership; honest; competent; trustworthy.
  - Not well at all (1)
  - Slightly well (2)
  - Moderately well (3)

- Very well (4)
- Extremely well (5)
- Not sure

Bridge Collapse Study

Study Description

We fielded our bridge collapse study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) on October 18, 2017. We recruited 1006 respondents, 878 of which passed our attention check and provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures.[26] Vignette wording is displayed in Table 1, and post-treatment question wording is provided below.

Question Wording

- Do you approve or disapprove of the governor's handling of the bridge collapse?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- How likely would you be to vote for the governor in the next election?
  - Very likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Somewhat unlikely
  - Very unlikely
- How would you assign blame for the bridge collapse mentioned above? The total cannot exceed 100.
  - President
  - US Congress
  - US Department of Transportation
  - State governor
  - State legislature
  - State department of transportation
  - Other
- Thinking about the governor mentioned above, how well do you think the following traits describe him? intelligent; provides strong leadership; honest; competent; trustworthy.
  - Not well at all (1)
  - Slightly well (2)
  - Moderately well (3)
  - Very well (4)
  - Extremely well (5)

Budget Shortfall Study

Study Description

We fielded our budget shortfall study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) on October 18, 2017. We recruited 1006 respondents, 879 of which passed our attention check and provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures. Vignette wording is displayed in Table 1, and post-treatment question wording is provided below.

Question Wording

- Do you approve or disapprove of the governor's handling of the budget shortfall?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- How likely would you be to vote for the governor in the next election?
  - Very likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Somewhat unlikely
  - Very unlikely
- How would you assign blame for the budget shortfall mentioned above? The total cannot exceed 100.
  - President
  - US Congress
  - State governor
  - State treasurer
  - State legislature
  - Other
- Thinking about the governor mentioned above, how well do you think the following traits describe him? intelligent; provides strong leadership; honest; competent; trustworthy.
  - Not well at all (1)
  - Slightly well (2)
  - Moderately well (3)
  - Very well (4)
  - Extremely well (5)

Heat Wave Study

Study Description

We fielded our heat wave study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) on October 18, 2017. We recruited 1006 respondents, 879 of which passed our attention check and provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures. Vignette wording is displayed in Table 1, and post-treatment question wording is provided below.

Question Wording

- Do you approve or disapprove of the mayor's handling of the heat wave?
  - Strongly approve
  - Somewhat approve
  - Somewhat disapprove
  - Strongly disapprove
- How likely would you be to vote for the mayor in the next election?
  - Very likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Somewhat unlikely
  - Very unlikely
- How would you assign blame for the heat wave mentioned above? The total cannot exceed 100.
  - President
  - US Congress
  - Federal Emergency Management Agency
  - State governor
  - Mayor
  - City council
  - City's emergency management agency
  - Other
- Thinking about the mayor mentioned above, how well do you think the following traits describe him? intelligent; provides strong leadership; honest; competent; trustworthy.
  - Not well at all (1)
  - Slightly well (2)
  - Moderately well (3)
  - Very well (4)
  - Extremely well (5)

Bridge Collapse Study (Factorial)

Study Description

We fielded our bridge collapse factorial study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) from October 20, 2017 to October 21, 2017. We recruited 1060 respondents, 871 of which passed our attention check and provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures. Vignette wording and post-treatment question wording are provided below.

Vignette Wording

All respondents are presented with the following vignette, which contains three independently randomized factors with the levels specified below:

Earlier this year, a highway bridge running through a large American city collapsed during rush hour. The collapse sent [crisis severity]. A report prepared by federal investigators revealed that state officials identified the bridge as being in poor condition several years ago but had not taken any action to fix it. Critics have argued that the state's [governor's party affiliation] governor is to blame for the bridge collapse.

[Governor's response]

Attributes and *Levels*:

- **Crisis Severity**
  - *Control/Low*: many cars into the water below and caused several injuries
  - *Moderate*: many cars into the water below and caused 5 deaths and several more injuries
  - *High*: many cars into the water below and caused 20 deaths and several more injuries
- **Governor's Party Affiliation**
  - *Control*: (blank)
  - *Democratic*: Democratic
  - *Republican*: Republican
- **Governor's Response**
  - *Control*: In a statement, the governor pledged to review the condition of the state's bridges and to make all necessary repairs to prevent future bridge collapses.
  - *Blame claim*: In a statement, the governor said that he is ultimately responsible for the safety of the state's roadways and accepted blame for his role in the bridge collapse. The governor pledged to review the condition of the state's bridges and to make all necessary repairs to prevent future bridge collapses.
  - *Blame deflect*: In a statement, the governor denied responsibility and blamed the state's department of transportation for its role in the bridge collapse. The governor pledged to review the condition of the state's bridges and to make all necessary repairs to prevent future bridge collapses.

Question Wording

- Do you approve or disapprove of the governor's handling of the bridge collapse?
  - strongly approve
  - somewhat approve
  - somewhat disapprove
  - strongly disapprove
- How likely would you be to vote for the governor in the next election?
  - very likely
  - somewhat likely
  - somewhat unlikely
  - very unlikely
- How would you assign blame for the bridge collapse mentioned above? The total cannot exceed 100.
  - President
  - US Congress
  - US Department of Transportation
  - State governor
  - State legislature
  - State department of transportation
  - Other
- Thinking about the governor mentioned above, how well do you think the following traits describe him? intelligent; provides strong leadership; honest; competent; trustworthy.
  - Not well at all (1)
  - Slightly well (2)
  - Moderately well (3)
  - Very well (4)
  - Extremely well (5)

Budget Shortfall Study (Factorial)

Study Description

We fielded our budget shortfall factorial study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) from October 20, 2017 to October 21, 2017. We recruited 1060 respondents, 872 of which passed our attention check and provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures. Vignette wording and post-treatment question wording are provided below.

Vignette Wording

All respondents are presented with the following vignette, which contains three independently randomized factors with the levels specified below:

Earlier this year, it was announced that a U.S. state faces a [crisis severity] budget deficit for the coming fiscal year. A non-partisan report finds that the deficit is a result of changes made last year to the state's tax policies. The report argues that these policies have generated less revenue than expected. Critics argue that the state's [governor's party affiliation] governor is to blame for the budget deficit.

[Governor's response]

Attributes and *Levels*:

- **Crisis Severity**
  - *Control/Low*: $5 million
  - *Moderate*: $50 million
  - *High*: $ 500 million
- **Governor's Party Affiliation**
  - *Control*: (blank)
  - *Democratic*: Democratic
  - *Republican*: Republican
- **Governor's Response**
  - *Control*: In a statement, the governor said that he is committed to working to balance the state's budget.
  - *Blame claim*: In a statement, the governor said that he is ultimately responsible for the fiscal health of the state and has accepted blame for his role in crafting the tax policies which caused the budget deficit. The governor said that he is committed to working to balance the state's budget.
  - *Blame deflect*: In a statement, the governor has denied responsibility and blamed the state legislature for their role in crafting the tax policies which caused the budget deficit. The governor said that he is committed to working to balance the state's budget.

Question Wording

- Do you approve or disapprove of the governor's handling of the budget shortfall?
  - strongly approve
  - somewhat approve
  - somewhat disapprove
  - strongly disapprove
- How likely would you be to vote for the governor in the next election?
  - very likely
  - somewhat likely
  - somewhat unlikely
  - very unlikely
- How would you assign blame for the budget shortfall mentioned above? The total cannot exceed 100.
  - President
  - US Congress
  - State governor
  - State treasurer
  - State legislature
  - Other
- Thinking about the governor mentioned above, how well do you think the following traits describe him? intelligent; provides strong leadership; honest; competent; trustworthy.
  - Not well at all (1)
  - Slightly well (2)
  - Moderately well (3)
  - Very well (4)
  - Extremely well (5)

Heat Wave Study (Factorial)

Study Description

We fielded our heat wave factorial study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) from October 20, 2017 to October 21, 2017. We recruited 1060 respondents, 872 of which passed our attention check and provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures. Vignette wording and post-treatment question wording are provided below.

Vignette Wording

All respondents are presented with the following vignette, which contains three independently randomized factors with the levels specified below:

This summer, a major American city experienced a severe heat wave, with temperatures exceeding 100°F for five consecutive days. This excessive heat caused many residents to experience heat related illness and led to [crisis severity]. A recent report concluded that the city's handling of the heat wave was inadequate, and that the city should have opened cooling centers and conducted wellness checks on the elderly. Critics argue that the city's [mayor's party affiliation] mayor is to blame for the inadequate handling of the heat wave.
[Mayor's response]

Attributes and *Levels*:

- **Crisis Severity**
  - *Control/Low*: several hospitalizations
  - *Moderate*: 1 death and several hospitalizations
  - *High*: 20 deaths and several hospitalizations
- **Mayor's Party Affiliation**
  - *Control*: (blank)
  - *Democratic*: Democratic
  - *Republican*: Republican
- **Mayor's Response**
  - *Control*: In a statement, the mayor pledged to review the city's response plan for future heat waves.
  - *Blame claim*: In a statement, the mayor said that he is ultimately responsible for the safety of the city's residents and accepted blame for his role in the casualties caused by the heat wave. The mayor pledged to review the city's response plan for future heat waves.
  - *Blame deflect*: In a statement, the mayor denied responsibility and blamed the city's emergency management agency for its role in the casualties caused by the heat wave. The mayor pledged to review the city's response plan for future heat waves.

Question Wording

- Do you approve or disapprove of the mayor's handling of the heat wave?
  - strongly approve
  - somewhat approve
  - somewhat disapprove
  - strongly disapprove
- How likely would you be to vote for the mayor in the next election?
  - very likely
  - somewhat likely
  - somewhat unlikely
  - very unlikely
- How would you assign blame for the heat wave mentioned above? The total cannot exceed 100.
  - President
  - US Congress
  - Federal Emergency Management Agency
  - State governor
  - Mayor
  - City council
  - City's emergency management agency
  - Other
- Thinking about the mayor mentioned above, how well do you think the following traits describe him? intelligent; provides strong leadership; honest; competent; trustworthy.
  - Not well at all (1)
  - Slightly well (2)
  - Moderately well (3)
  - Very well (4)
  - Extremely well (5)

Flint Water Crisis Study

Study Description

We fielded our Flint water crisis study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) on March 30, 2016. We recruited 1010 respondents, 851 of which passed our attention check and provided responses to at least one of our key outcome measures. Vignette wording and post-treatment question wording are provided below.

Vignette Wording

All respondents are presented with one of the following vignettes:

Control: One year after the city of Flint, Michigan switched the source of its drinking water, investigators discovered that the city's water had become contaminated with unsafe levels of lead. Many argue that Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is ultimately responsible for the lead contamination crisis because this disaster occurred on his watch.

Blame claim: One year after the city of Flint, Michigan switched the source of its drinking water, investigators discovered that the city's water had become contaminated with unsafe levels of lead. Many argue that Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is ultimately responsible for the lead contamination crisis because this disaster occurred on his watch.

In a recent speech, Governor Snyder stated that "the buck stops here with me," and took "full responsibility to fix the problem."

Blame Appointee: One year after the city of Flint, Michigan switched the source of its drinking water, investigators discovered that the city's water had become contaminated with unsafe levels of lead. Many argue that Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is ultimately responsible for the lead contamination crisis because this disaster occurred on his watch.

Others point to a task force that found that Dan Wyant, the director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), held "primary responsibility" for the crisis. Governor Snyder appointed Wyant as director of MDEQ in 2011.

Blame Bureaucrat: One year after the city of Flint, Michigan switched the source of its drinking water, investigators discovered that the city's water had become contaminated with unsafe levels of lead. Many argue that Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is ultimately responsible for the lead contamination crisis because this disaster occurred on his watch.

Others point to a task force that found that Dan Wyant, the director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), held "primary responsibility" for the crisis. Prior to leading the MDEQ, Wyant had over 20 years of experience in state government, including 9 years as the director of the state's Department of Agriculture under both Republican and Democratic governors.

Question Wording

- How would you rate the job that Governor Snyder has done handling the Flint water crisis?
  - Very positive
  - Somewhat positive
  - Somewhat negative
  - Very negative
- Based on how you think Governor Snyder has handled the Flint water crises, do you think he should resign from or remain in office?
  - Resign from office
  - Remain in office
  - Not sure

Supplemental Analyses

Governmental Crises Studies

In this section of the Supplemental Information, we present the data and models used to create the figures in the main paper for our flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies, which we refer to collectively here as our "governmental crises studies," as well as supplemental analyses for each of our experiments to demonstrate the robustness of our results to alternative specifications. Here, we provide an overview of our data and modeling strategies and discussion of how we coded our our outcome measures.

We present the distributions of our approval and vote choice outcome measures, both of which are four-point ordinal scales, in Figure SI.1. All models in the main paper used to estimate overall treatment effects are linear regression models which use dichotomized versions of our outcome variables (i.e., 1 if the respondent approves of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis or is likely to vote for the executive in the next election, and 0 otherwise). To account for the dichotomous nature of our outcome variables, we refit our models using logistic regressions. We also utilize the original ordinal forms of our outcome variables, some of which are ordered and others of which are unordered, to refit out models using ordinal logistic regression and multinomial logistic regression, respectively. Across each of these alternative model specifications, we consistently find that respondents evaluate elected executives more positively when the executives claim blame, as compared to when they blame deflect or offer a perfunctory response (as in the control condition).

One key difference between our flood study and our bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies is the form of our outcome measures. While our flood study offered respondents unordered five-point scales which also included a "don't know" option, our other studies offered respondents ordered four-point scales. For example, when asked to indicate their approval for the executive's handling of the crisis, respondents in our bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies were able to select among strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove, while respondents in our flood study were also able to select "don't know." In the main paper, we make our analyses consistent across our studies by coding the outcome measures in all of our studies as 1 if they evaluate the executive favorably (e.g., 1 if strongly or somewhat approve of the executive's handling of the crisis), and 0 otherwise. In this coding scheme, respondents in the flood study offering "don't know" responses are coded as "not evaluating the executive favorably." As several scholars have indicated, "don't know" responses are qualitatively different from other response choices, such as positive or negative evaluations of an elected official, such that collapsing "don't know" responses with negative evaluations may lead to bias in our observed treatment effects (e.g., Mondak 2001).[27] As a result, we reestimate our models for our flood study using multinomial logistic regression, which allows us to estimate the effect of treatment on respondents' propensity to offer positive evaluations, negative evaluations, or "don't know" responses. The results from these models are substantively similar to those presented in the main paper, suggesting that our observed treatment effects are not contingent on how we account for "don't know" responses.

Finally, the three studies we fielded on mTurk (bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave) were completed by a single sample of respondents in the same survey, with the order of the studies and the presentational strategies used by the featured executives randomized across respondents. While including multiple experiments in the same survey is logistically efficient, respondents' answers in experimental modules later in the survey can sometimes be influenced by

the experimental modules they completed earlier (i.e. ordering effects) (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). For instance, a treatment a respondent received in the first study they completed might affect how they respond to a treatment in a later study. Again, by completing the same type of study multiple times, respondents might intuit the purpose of the survey over the course of multiple studies and offer responses in later studies that satisfy the researchers' aims. We investigate the potential for ordering effects by estimating our treatment effects for the first, second, and third studies that respondents completed, pooling across the substantive contexts of those studies. These results, presented in Table SI.12 SI.13, suggest that our results are not an artifact of ordering effects. First, the treatment effects among respondents in their first study are substantively similar to those presented in the main paper; thus, before having completed any other studies, respondents express more positive (negative) evaluations for executives who claim (deflect) blame. Second, the treatment effects are substantively similar across studies given their temporal order, suggesting that respondents' treatment assignments in previous studies did not affect the treatment effects observed in subsequent studies.

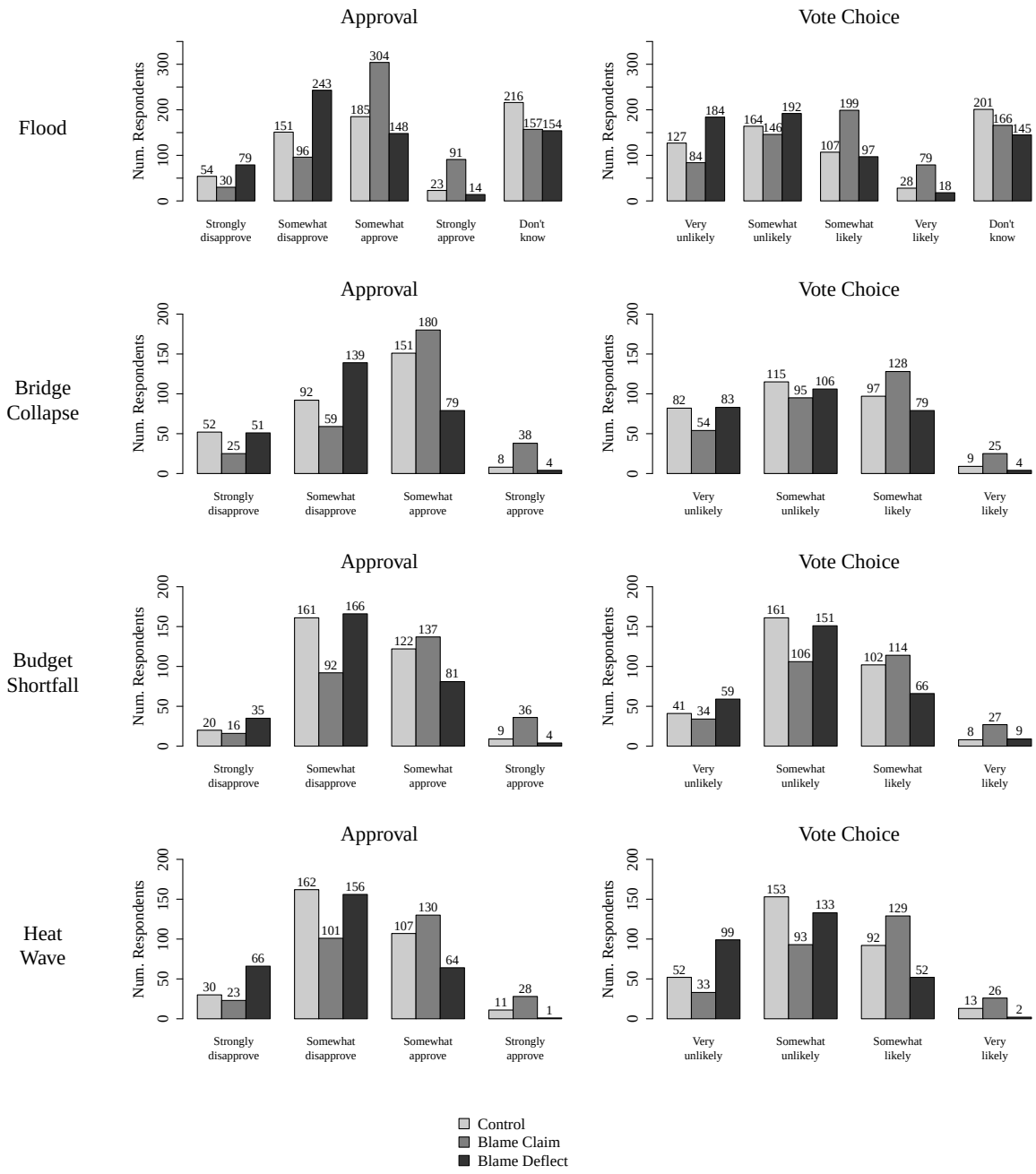

Figure SI.1: **Distributions of Outcome Measures for Studies of Four Governmental Crises.** Each plot in this figure presents the number of respondents in each experiment (indicated by the row labels) offering each of the unique response options for each outcome measure (indicated by the column headings). The legend at the bottom indicates which treatment conditions correspond to the bars of which color.

Table SI.1: Governmental Crises Models—Handling (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.29*	0.52*	0.42*	0.38*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Blame Claim	0.23*	0.20*	0.20*	0.18*
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Deflect	−0.06*	−0.22*	−0.12*	−0.15*
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
R^2	0.07	0.11	0.07	0.08
Num. obs.	1945	878	879	879

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the linear regression models we used to construct the plots for the results of our flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies displayed in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis, is coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if strongly approve or approve, 0 otherwise). The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.2: Governmental Crises Models—Vote (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.23*	0.35*	0.35*	0.34*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Blame Claim	0.15*	0.16*	0.15*	0.21*
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Deflect	−0.04	−0.04	−0.09*	−0.15*
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
R^2	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.09
Num. obs.	1937	877	878	877

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the linear regression models we used to construct the plots for the results of our flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies displayed in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, is coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if very likely or likely, 0 otherwise). The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.3: Governmental Crises Models —95% Confidence Intervals (OLS with Binary Outcomes)

Outcome	Context	Treatment	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Handling	Flood	Blame Claim	0.23	[0.18, 0.28]
Handling	Flood	Blame Deflect	-0.06	[-0.11, -0.01]
Handling	Bridge Collapse	Blame Claim	0.20	[0.12, 0.27]
Handling	Bridge Collapse	Blame Deflect	-0.22	[-0.30, -0.14]
Handling	Budget Shortfall	Blame Claim	0.20	[0.12, 0.27]
Handling	Budget Shortfall	Blame Deflect	-0.12	[-0.20, -0.05]
Handling	Heat Wave	Blame Claim	0.18	[0.10, 0.26]
Handling	Heat Wave	Blame Deflect	-0.15	[-0.23, -0.08]
Vote	Flood	Blame Claim	0.15	[0.10, 0.19]
Vote	Flood	Blame Deflect	-0.04	[-0.09, 0.01]
Vote	Bridge Collapse	Blame Claim	0.16	[0.08, 0.23]
Vote	Bridge Collapse	Blame Deflect	-0.04	[-0.12, 0.03]
Vote	Budget Shortfall	Blame Claim	0.15	[0.07, 0.23]
Vote	Budget Shortfall	Blame Deflect	-0.09	[-0.17, -0.01]
Vote	Heat Wave	Blame Claim	0.21	[0.14, 0.29]
Vote	Heat Wave	Blame Deflect	-0.15	[-0.22, -0.08]

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the estimated treatment effects and 95% confidence intervals we used to construct the plots for the results of our flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies displayed in the main analysis of the paper. These values are obtained from the linear regression models presented in Tables SI.1 and SI.2.

Table SI.4: Governmental Crises Models—Handling (OLS with Ordinal Outcome)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	2.39*	2.38*	2.38*	2.32*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Claim	0.42*	0.39*	0.30*	0.26*
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Blame Deflect	−0.20*	−0.25*	−0.20*	−0.32*
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
R^2	0.10	0.10	0.08	0.10
Num. obs.	1418	878	879	879

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the linear regression models we used to construct the plots for the results of our flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies displayed in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis, is coded as a four-point an ordinal variable. Because "don't know" outcome responses do not fit into an ordinal framework, these responses in the flood study are recoded as NAs for these models only. The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.5: Governmental Crises Models—Vote (OLS with Ordinal Outcome)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	2.11*	2.11*	2.25*	2.21*
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Claim	0.37*	0.30*	0.23*	0.31*
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Blame Deflect	−0.18*	−0.09	−0.16*	−0.36*
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)
R^2	0.06	0.04	0.04	0.11
Num. obs.	1425	877	878	877

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the linear regression models we used to construct the plots for the results of our flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies displayed in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, respondents' likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, is coded as a four-point an ordinal variable. Because "don't know" outcome responses do not fit into an ordinal framework, these responses in the flood study are recoded as NAs for these models only. The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.6: Governmental Crises Models—Handling (Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	−0.88*	0.10	−0.32*	−0.49*
	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.12)
Blame Claim	0.99*	0.85*	0.79*	0.73*
	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.17)
Blame Deflect	−0.30*	−0.93*	−0.54*	−0.74*
	(0.13)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.18)
Log Likelihood	-1120.19	-555.88	-573.45	-552.91
Num. obs.	1945	878	879	879

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the logistic regression models that are analogous to the linear regression models we used to estimate the results presented in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis, is coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if strongly approve or approve, 0 otherwise). The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.7: Governmental Crises Models—Vote (Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	−1.18*	−0.62*	−0.61*	−0.67*
	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Blame Claim	0.69*	0.65*	0.61*	0.88*
	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.17)
Blame Deflect	−0.24	−0.20	−0.42*	−0.79*
	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.19)
Log Likelihood	-1052.71	-572.77	-561.52	-530.30
Num. obs.	1937	877	878	877

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the logistic regression models that are analogous to the linear regression models we used to estimate the results presented in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, is coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if very likely or likely, 0 otherwise). The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.8: Governmental Crises Models—Handling (Ordinal Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Blame Claim	1.02*	1.01*	0.84*	0.69*
	(0.13)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Blame Deflect	−0.50*	−0.63*	−0.54*	−0.82*
	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Strongly disapprove—Disapprove	−1.93*	−1.79*	−2.47*	−2.04*
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.14)
Disapprove—Approve	0.16	0.01	0.32*	0.44*
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Approve—Strongly approve	2.64*	3.15*	3.05*	3.15*
	(0.13)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.19)
Log Likelihood	-1560.81	-971.70	-918.00	-951.91
Num. obs.	1418	878	879	879

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the ordinal logistic regression models that are analogous to the linear regression models we used to estimate the results presented in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis, is coded as a four-point an ordinal variable. Because "don't know" outcome responses do not fit into an ordinal framework, these responses in the flood study are recoded as NAs for these models only. The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.9: Governmental Crises Models—Vote (Ordinal Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Blame Claim	0.73*	0.65*	0.56*	0.78*
	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Blame Deflect	−0.37*	−0.19	−0.42*	−0.86*
	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.16)
Very unlikely—Somewhat unlikely	−0.80*	−0.97*	−1.73*	−1.49*
	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.12)
Somewhat unlikely—Somewhat likely	0.65*	0.62*	0.58*	0.60*
	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Somewhat likely—Very likely	2.51*	3.32*	3.05*	3.17*
	(0.12)	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.19)
Log Likelihood	-1770.01	-1051.21	-995.47	-998.39
Num. obs.	1425	877	878	877

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the ordinal logistic regression models that are analogous to the linear regression models we used to estimate the results presented in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable, likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, is coded as a four-point an ordinal variable. Because "don't know" outcome responses do not fit into an ordinal framework, these responses in the flood study are recoded as NAs for these models only. The control condition is the baseline condition. Flood model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.10: Flood Study Models—Handling (Multinomial Logistic Regression)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Intercept	−1.49*	−0.43*	−0.38*	−2.33*
	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.22)
Blame Claim	−0.18	0.06	0.85*	1.65*
	(0.24)	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.26)
Blame Deflect	0.72*	0.73*	0.10	0.15
	(0.21)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.33)
Log Likelihood	-2715.42	-2715.42	-2715.42	-2715.42
Num. obs.	1945	1945	1945	1945

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the a multinomial logistic regression model for approval of the mayor's handling of the flood. Our outcome variable is coded to account for responses of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, and dont́ know (which is the baseline response choice). The control condition is the baseline condition. Model includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.11: Flood Study Models—Vote (Multinomial Logistic Regression)

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely
Intercept	−0.43*	−0.36*	−0.57*	−1.85*
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.19)
Blame Claim	−0.35*	0.11	0.60*	0.79*
	(0.17)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.24)
Blame Deflect	0.63*	0.44*	0.06	0.27
	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.18)	(0.27)
Log Likelihood	-2915.60	-2915.60	-2915.60	-2915.60
Num. obs.	1937	1937	1937	1937

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the the multinomial logistic regression models for likelihood of voting for the mayor in the next election. Our outcome variable is coded to account for responses of very unlikely, unlikely, likely, very likely, and dont́ know (which is the baseline response choice). The control condition is the baseline condition. Models include survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.12: MTurk Sample Ordering Effects—Handling (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	First Module	Second Module	Third Module
Intercept	0.41*	0.46*	0.45*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Blame Claim	0.21*	0.19*	0.18*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Deflect	−0.18*	−0.20*	−0.13*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
R^2	0.10	0.10	0.06
Num. obs.	879	879	878

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models we use to investigate whether the results from our studies which use our MTurk sample are artifacts of ordering effects. Our outcome variable, approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis, is coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if strongly approve or approve, 0 otherwise). The control condition is the baseline condition. To investigate ordering effects, we estimate the treatment effects for blame claiming and blame deflecting among respondents in each study (i.e., the first, second, and third studies they completed in the survey); if ordering effects are problematic, we would expect to see instability in the treatment effects given the temporal ordering of the studies. However, we see that the treatment effects for blame claiming and blame deflecting are substantively similar across temporal ordering of studies and in comparison to those presented in the main paper, which pool across each respondents' ordering for each study. This suggests that our results are not an artifact of ordering effects.

Table SI.13: MTurk Sample Ordering Effects—Vote (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	First Module	Second Module	Third Module
Intercept	0.30*	0.37*	0.38*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Blame Claim	0.17*	0.18*	0.16*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Deflect	−0.07	−0.14*	−0.08*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
R^2	0.05	0.07	0.04
Num. obs.	877	879	876

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models we use to investigate whether the results from our studies which use our MTurk sample are artifacts of ordering effects. Our outcome variable, likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, is coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if very likely or likely, 0 otherwise). The control condition is the baseline condition. To investigate ordering effects, we estimate the treatment effects for blame claiming and blame deflecting among respondents in each study (i.e., the first, second, and third studies they completed in the survey); if ordering effects are problematic, we would expect to see instability in the treatment effects given the temporal ordering of the studies. However, we see that the treatment effects for blame claiming and blame deflecting are substantively similar across temporal ordering of studies and in comparison to those presented in the main paper, which pool across each respondents' ordering for each study. This suggests that our results are not an artifact of ordering effects.

Factorial Analyses

We use our factorial analyses to examine whether our blame claiming effects persist in more complex information environments. One way to assess this is to estimate the marginal effect for each unique level of each unique factor (except for the baseline factor-levels), and observe whether the blame claiming effect still manifests; if so, then we can conclude that introducing other salient information cues into the vignette, such as the crisis' severity and the partisan affiliation of the governor, does not obviate the effect of blame claiming. The first, third and fifth columns of Tables SI.14 and SI.15 conduct these analyses, and demonstrate that the blame claiming effect persists in the presence of other salient information cues.

Another way to assess the effect of blame claiming in more complex information environments is to examine whether the overall treatment effects we observe are conditioned by other aspects of the government crisis (i.e., whether the overall treatment effects are driven by conditional treatment effects in some crisis contexts or some respondent subgroups). Particularly, we investigate whether the effect of blame claiming is conditioned by the severity of the crisis and by the correspondence between the partisanship of the elected executive and the partisanship of the respondent. We can examine the first such conditional effect with an factor by factor interaction (the three levels of the response factor by the three levels of the severity factor), but the second such conditional effect requires additional data coding. In each of our factorial studies, we ask our respondents to identify their partisan affiliation in our pre-treatment question battery. We use these responses together with our indicators for the partisan affiliation of the executive presented to the respondent in the vignette to assess how their partisan affiliations correspond: partisan correspondence is coded as "copartisan" if the respondent and the executive share the same partisan affiliation (i.e., if they are both Democrats or Republicans); "noncopartisan" if the respondent and the executive have different partisan affiliations (i.e., if the executive is a Democrat and the respondent is a Republican, or vice versa); and "no match" if the elected executive is not assigned a partisan affiliation or the respondent identifies as an independent.

As examining these conditional effects in easier to do graphically than in a regression table, we present in Figures SI.2 through SI.5 the effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting under each unique factor-level for crisis severity and partisan correspondence as compared to the control condition. In each pairwise comparison, the crisis severity or partisan correspondence remains constant, while the presentational strategy used by the elected executive "changes" from the control response to the blame claiming or blame deflecting responses. As an example, in the upper left panel of Figure SI.2, we observe the effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting on respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis relative to the the control across each level of the severity factor. For each point estimate, we compare respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis when the control response is offered as compared to when the blame claiming or blame deflecting responses are offered while fixing the severity factor-level. Thus, the upper-most point in this plot compares respondents' approval when the elected executive claims blame in a low severity crisis to when the elected executive offers the control response in a low severity crisis.

As in the main paper, we use linear regressions with dichotomous forms of our outcome variables in each of our models. We alternatively refit each of our models using logistic and ordinal logistic regression models where appropriate; though not presented here, the results of our factorial analyses remain consistent across these alternative specifications.

Table SI.14: Factorial Experiments Models—Handling (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	Bridge Collapse	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.45***	0.45***	0.34***	0.34***	0.36***	0.31***
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.06)
Blame Claim	0.26***	0.35***	0.28***	0.29***	0.18***	0.27**
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.08)
Blame Deflect	−0.13**	−0.19*	0.04	−0.01	−0.09*	−0.05
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.09)
Moderate Severity	−0.01	−0.02	0.00	−0.04	−0.04	−0.00
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)
High Severity	−0.02	−0.11	−0.08*	−0.18**	0.01	0.04
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)
Blame Claim x Moderate Severity		−0.01		0.06		−0.03
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Claim x High Severity		0.05		0.18		−0.11
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Deflect x Moderate Severity		0.02		0.13		−0.08
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Deflect x High Severity		0.21*		0.13		0.04
		(0.09)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Copartisan	0.02	0.10	0.06	0.09	0.04	0.10
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)
Noncopartisan	0.00	0.05	−0.02	0.07	−0.02	0.02
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)
Blame Claim x Copartisan		−0.16		−0.09		−0.10
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Claim x Noncopartisan		−0.23*		−0.19		−0.04
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Deflect x Copartisan		−0.09		−0.01		−0.06
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Deflect x Noncopartisan		0.05		−0.11		−0.04
		(0.09)		(0.10)		(0.10)
R^2	0.10	0.12	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.07
Num. obs.	844	844	845	845	845	845

$^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression analyses of our three factorial experiments. For each experimental context (bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave) we regress dichotomous indicators of respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis on dichotomous indicators for the levels of each factor (executive response, severity, and the correspondence between the party identifications of the respondent and the executive) presented to the respondents.

Table SI.15: Factorial Experiments Models—Vote (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	Bridge Collapse	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.34***	0.30***	0.29***	0.29***	0.32***	0.32***
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.06)
Blame Claim	0.26***	0.40***	0.20***	0.25**	0.18***	0.21*
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.08)
Blame Deflect	−0.06	−0.03	0.03	−0.01	−0.09*	−0.11
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.08)
Moderate Severity	−0.01	0.00	−0.01	−0.03	−0.02	−0.04
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)
High Severity	−0.03	−0.04	−0.03	−0.08	−0.01	0.05
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)
Blame Claim x Moderate Severity		−0.06		−0.02		0.06
		(0.10)		(0.09)		(0.09)
Blame Claim x High Severity		−0.02		0.18		−0.20*
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Deflect x Moderate Severity		−0.03		0.14		−0.03
		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.09)
Blame Deflect x High Severity		0.02		0.01		0.01
		(0.09)		(0.09)		(0.10)
Copartisan	0.08*	0.17**	0.13**	0.14*	0.12**	0.17*
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)
Noncopartisan	−0.10*	−0.03	−0.07	0.01	−0.05	−0.13
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.06)
Blame Claim x Copartisan		−0.16		−0.08		−0.12
		(0.09)		(0.10)		(0.10)
Blame Claim x Noncopartisan		−0.27**		−0.22*		0.15
		(0.10)		(0.09)		(0.10)
Blame Deflect x Copartisan		−0.12		0.03		−0.03
		(0.09)		(0.10)		(0.09)
Blame Deflect x Noncopartisan		0.04		−0.04		0.12
		(0.09)		(0.09)		(0.09)
R^2	0.10	0.11	0.06	0.08	0.07	0.09
Num. obs.	841	841	845	845	844	844

***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression analyses of our three factorial experiments. For each experimental context (bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave) we regress dichotomous indicators of respondents' likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election on dichotomous indicators for the levels of each factor (executive response, severity, and the correspondence between the party identifications of the respondent and the executive) presented to the respondents.

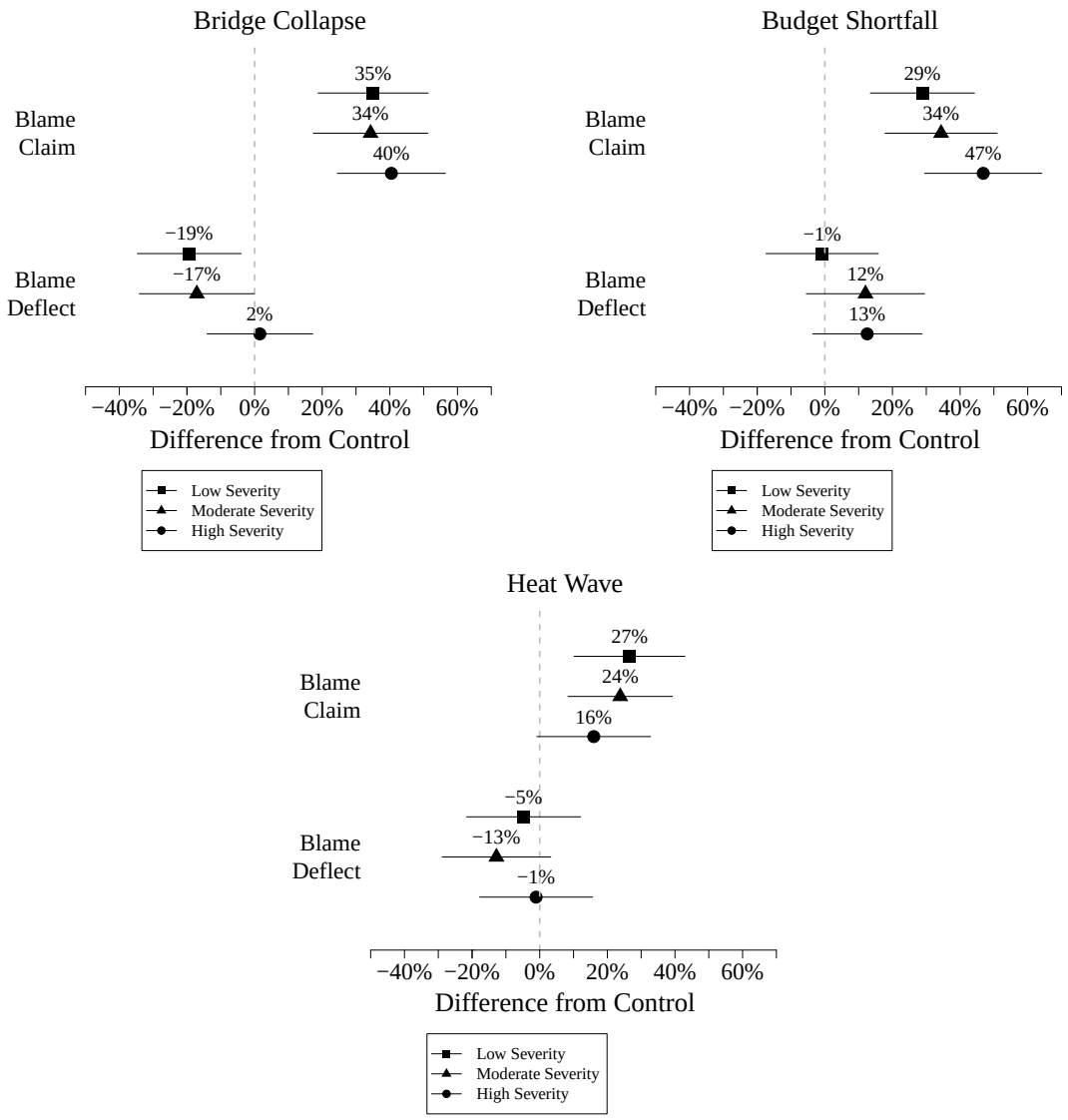

Figure SI.2: **Approval of Elected Executives' Handling of Crises (Response and Severity).** Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on approval of the elected executive's handling of the crisis conditional on the severity of the crisis. Positive (negative) values along $x-$axis reflect more (less) favorable evaluations relative to the control condition. Each conditional AMCE compares the effect of blame claiming or blame deflecting relative to the control condition while fixing the level of the severity of the crisis; for example, in the bridge collapse plot (top left), when crisis severity is low, the treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting relative to the control condition are 35% and -19%, respectively. We generally observe that the positive effect of blame claiming persists across levels of crisis severity, though blame deflecting does not induce any consistent treatment effects. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

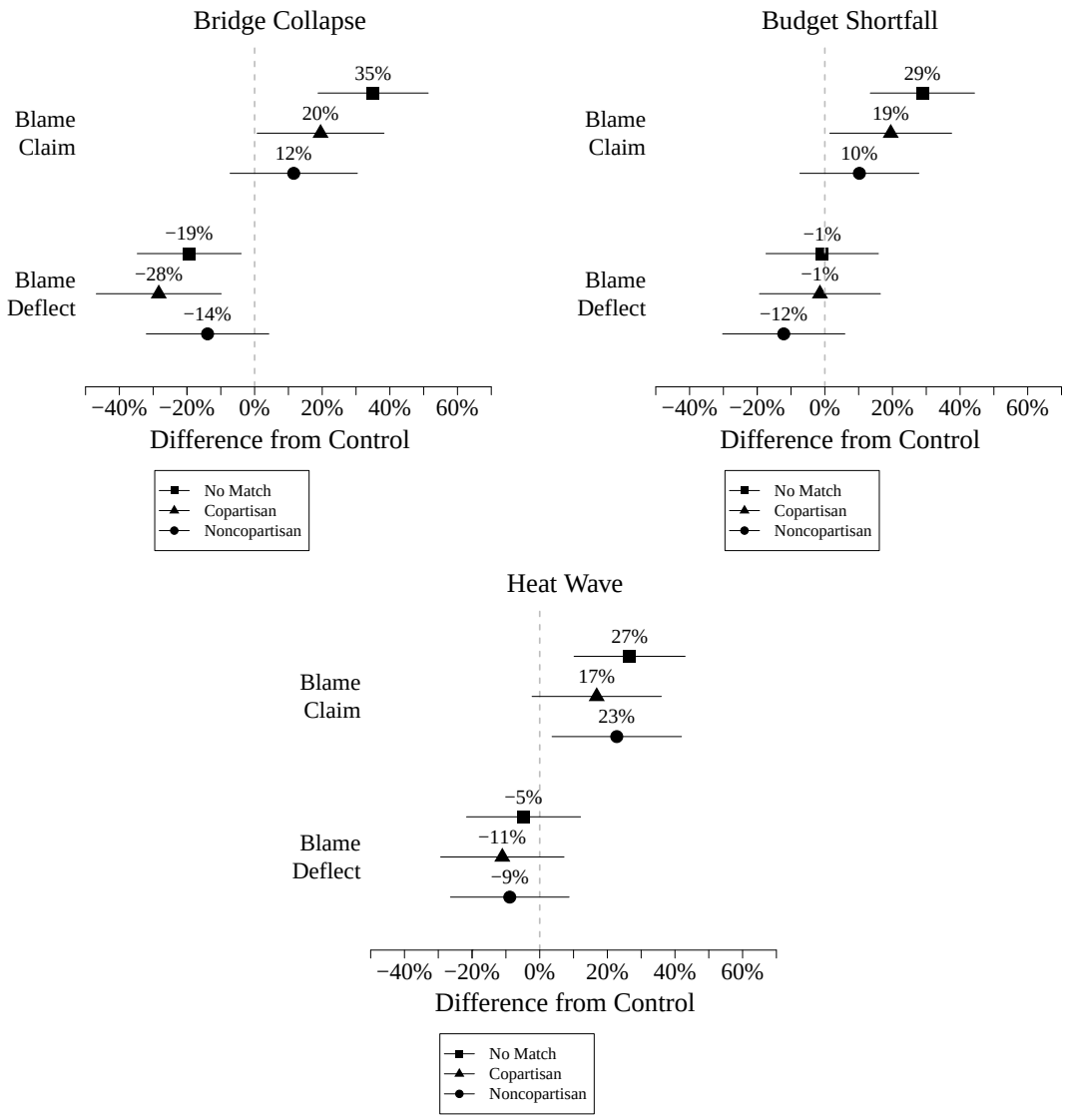

Figure SI.3: **Approval of Elected Executives' Handling of Crises (Response and Partisanship).** Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on approval of the elected executive's handling of the crisis conditional on the correspondence between the partisanship of the respondent and the elected executive. Positive (negative) values along $x-$axis reflect more (less) favorable evaluations relative to the control condition. Each conditional AMCE compares the effect of blame claiming or blame deflecting relative to the control condition while fixing the correspondence between the partisanship of the respondent and the elected executive; for example, in the bridge collapse plot (top left), when both the respondent and the elected executive are of the same party, the treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting relative to the control condition are 20% and -28%, respectively. We generally observe that the positive effect of blame claiming persists across levels of crisis severity, though blame deflecting does not induce any consistent treatment effects. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

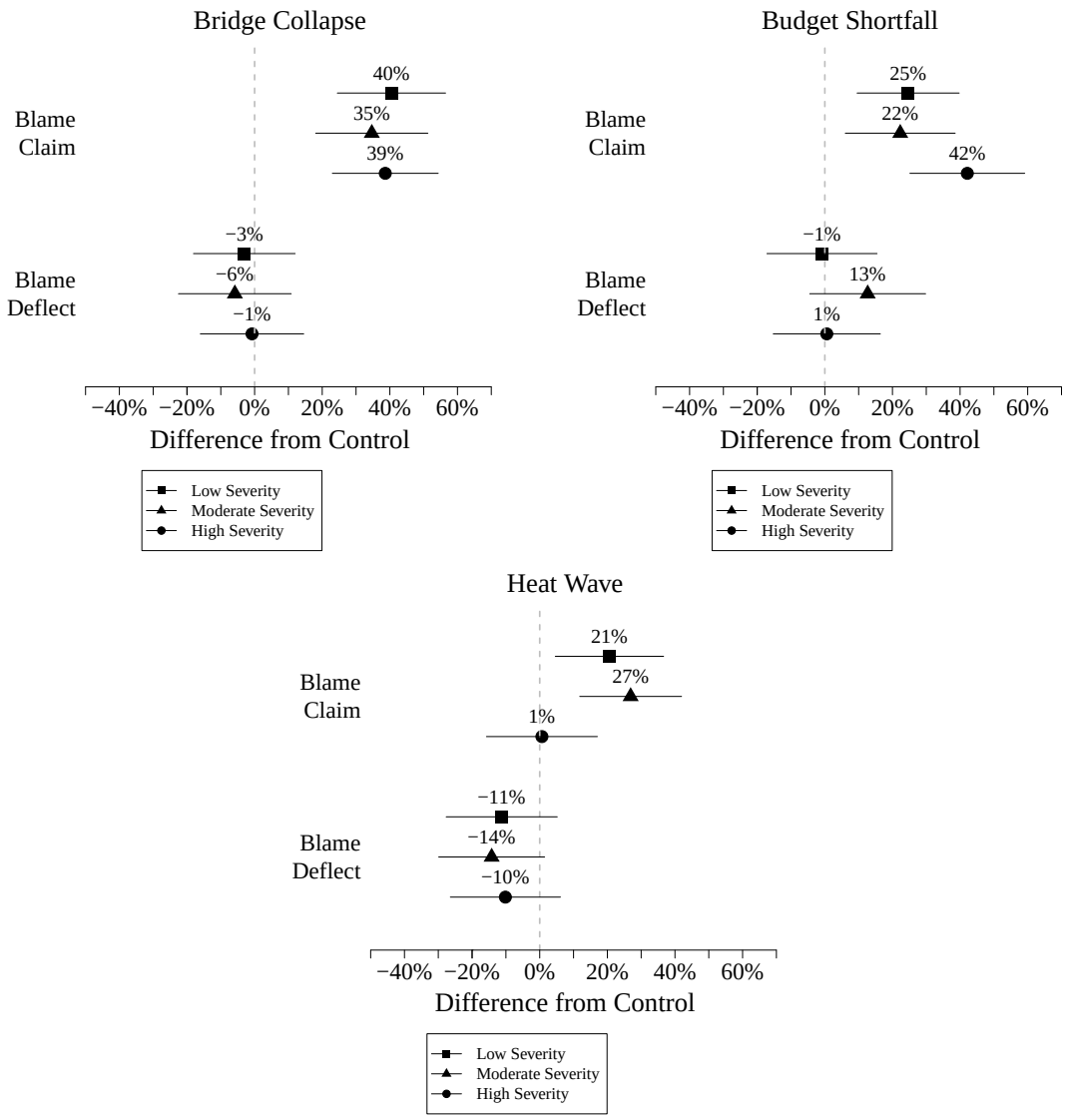

Figure SI.4: **Likelihood of Voting for Elected Executives (Response and Severity).** Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on likelihood of voting for the elected executive in the next election conditional on the severity of the crisis. Positive (negative) values along $x-$axis reflect more (less) favorable evaluations relative to the control condition. Each conditional AMCE compares the effect of blame claiming or blame deflecting relative to the control condition while fixing the level of the severity of the crisis; for example, in the bridge collapse plot (top left), when crisis severity is low, the treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting relative to the control condition are 40% and -3%, respectively. We generally observe that the positive effect of blame claiming persists across levels of crisis severity, though blame deflecting does not induce any consistent treatment effects. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

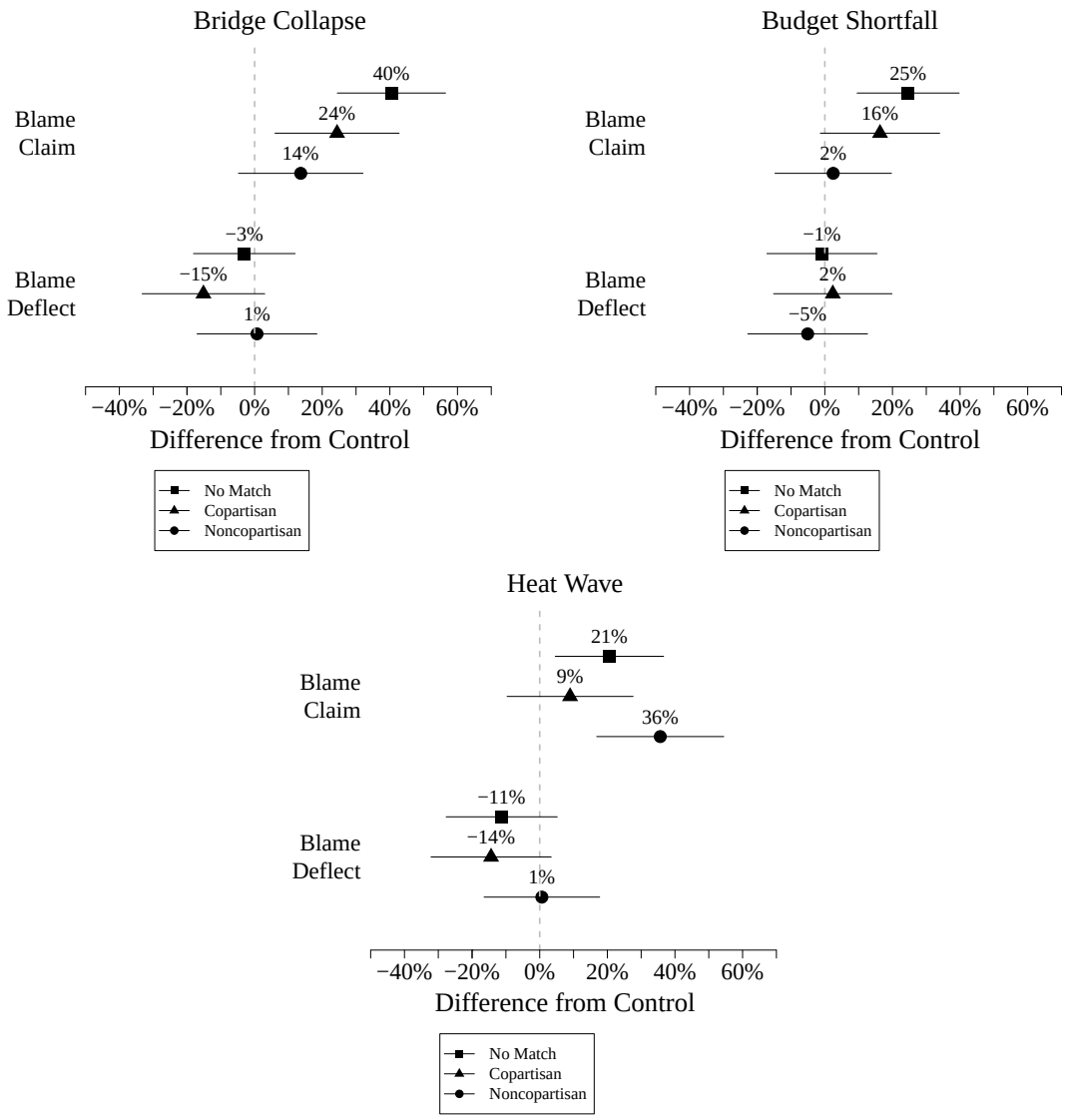

Figure SI.5: **Likelihood of Voting for Elected Executives (Response and Partisanship).** Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on likelihood of voting for the elected executive in the next election conditional on the correspondence between the partisanship of the respondent and the elected executive. Positive (negative) values along $x-$axis reflect more (less) favorable evaluations relative to the control condition. Each conditional AMCE compares the effect of blame claiming or blame deflecting relative to the control condition while fixing the correspondence between the partisanship of the respondent and the elected executive; for example, in the bridge collapse plot (top left), when both the respondent and the elected executive are of the same party, the treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting relative to the control condition are 24% and -15%, respectively. We generally observe that the positive effect of blame claiming persists across levels of crisis severity, though blame deflecting does not induce any consistent treatment effects. Bars around point estimates represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Flint Study

In this section of the Supplemental Information, we present the data and models used to create the figures for our Flint water crisis experiment presented in the main paper, as well as supplemental analyses to demonstrate the robustness of our results to alternative model specifications. Here, we provide a general overview of our data and modeling strategies and a discussion of how we coded our outcome measures.

We present the distributions of our outcome measures in Figure SI.6. The models used to estimate the overall treatment effects are linear regression models which use dichotomized versions of our outcome variables (i.e., 1 if the respondent approves of Governor Snyder's handling of the Flint water crisis, and 0 otherwise). To account for the dichotomous nature of our outcome variables, we refit our models using logistic regressions. We also utilize the original ordinal forms of our outcome variables, one of which is ordered (approval) and the other of which is unordered (whether Governor Snyder should resign), to refit out models using ordinal logistic regression and multinomial logistic regression, respectively. Across each of these alternative model specifications, we consistently find that respondents evaluate Governor Snyder more positively when he claims blame for the Flint water crisis, as compared to when he deflects blame or offers no response (as in the control condition).

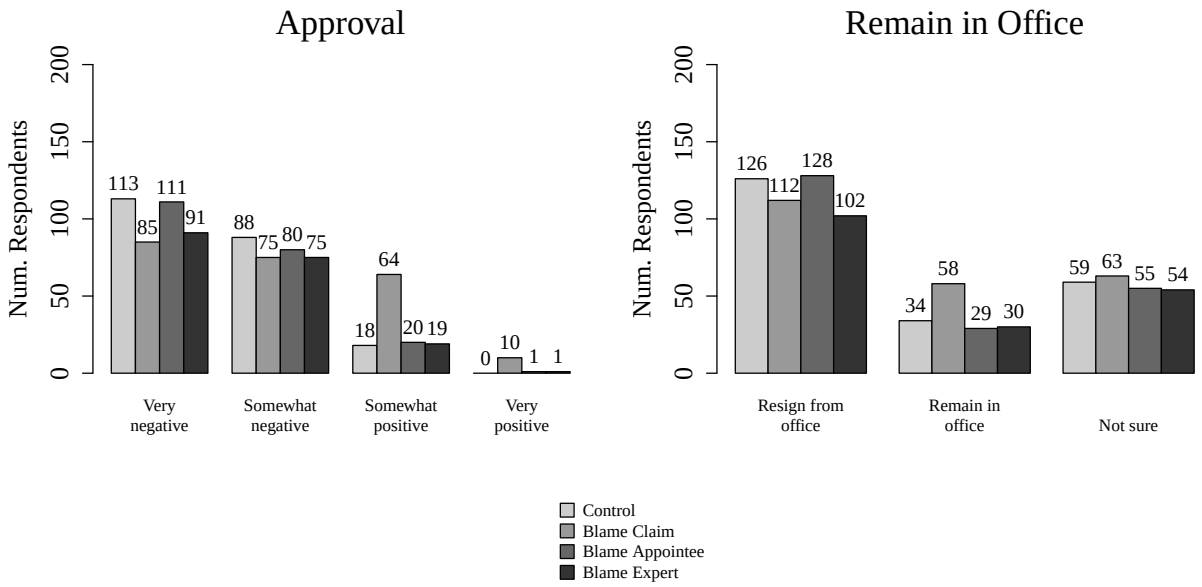

Figure SI.6: **Distributions of Outcome Measures for the Flint Study.** Each plot in this figure presents the number of respondents in our Flint study offering each of the unique response options for each outcome measure (indicated by the column headings). The legend at the bottom indicates which treatment conditions correspond to the bars of which color.

Table SI.16: Flint Study Models—Approval and Vote (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	Approval	Remain
Intercept	0.08*	0.16*
	(0.02)	(0.03)
Blame Claim	0.23*	0.09*
	(0.03)	(0.04)
Blame Appointee	0.02	−0.02
	(0.03)	(0.04)
Blame Expert	0.03	0.01
	(0.03)	(0.04)
R^2	0.07	0.01
Num. obs.	851	850

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the linear regression models we used to construct the plots for the results of our Flint study displayed in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variables, approval of Governor Rick Snyder's handling of the Flint water crisis and whether the respondent thinks the governor should remain in office (as opposed to resign), are coded as dichotomous variables, and our covariates are dichotomous indicators of the respondents' treatment conditions. The control condition is the baseline condition.

Table SI.17: Flint Study Models —95% Confidence Intervals (OLS with Binary Outcomes)

Outcome	Treatment	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Handling	Blame Claim	0.23	[0.17, 0.30]
Handling	Blame Appointee	0.02	[-0.05, 0.08]
Handling	Blame Expert	0.03	[-0.04, 0.09]
Remain	Blame Claim	0.09	[0.02, 0.16]
Remain	Blame Appointee	-0.02	[-0.09, 0.05]
Remain	Blame Expert	0.01	[-0.07, 0.08]

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the estimated treatment effects and 95% confidence intervals we used to construct the plots for the results of our Flint study displayed in the main analysis of the paper. These values are obtained from the linear regression models presented in Table SI.16.

Table SI.18: Flint Study Models—Approval and Vote (Logistic Regression)

	Approval	Remain
Intercept	−2.41*	−1.69*
	(0.25)	(0.19)
Blame Claim	1.64*	0.59*
	(0.28)	(0.24)
Blame Appointee	0.21	−0.15
	(0.34)	(0.27)
Blame Expert	0.30	0.05
	(0.34)	(0.27)
Log Likelihood	-340.19	-392.08
Num. obs.	851	850

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents the logistic regression models that are analogous to the linear regression models we used to estimate the results presented in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variables, approval of Governor Rick Snyder's handling of the Flint water crisis and whether the respondent thinks the governor should remain in office (as opposed to resign), are coded as dichotomous variables, and our covariates are dichotomous indicators of the respondents' treatment conditions. The control condition is the baseline condition.

Table SI.19: Flint Study Models—Approval (OLS with Ordinal Outcome)

	Approval
Intercept	1.08*
	(0.02)
Blame Claim	0.23*
	(0.03)
Blame Appointee	0.02
	(0.03)
Blame Expert	0.03
	(0.03)
R^2	0.07
Num. obs.	851

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents a linear regression model that uses a four-point scale of respondents' approval of Governor Rick Snyder as the outcome variable rather than the dichotomous measure of approval used in the main analysis presented in the paper. Our covariates are dichotomous indicators of the respondents' treatment conditions. The control condition is the baseline condition.

Table SI.20: Flint Study Models—Approval (Ordinal Logistic Regression)

	Approval
Blame Claim	0.96*
	(0.18)
Blame Appointee	0.01
	(0.18)
Blame Expert	0.13
	(0.19)
Very negative—Somewhat negative	0.14
	(0.13)
Somewhat negative—Somewhat positive	2.01*
	(0.15)
Somewhat positive—Very positive	4.63*
	(0.32)
Log Likelihood	-882.75
Num. obs.	851

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents an ordinal logistic regression model of approval for Governor Snyder's handling of the Flint water crisis that is analogous to the linear regression model we used to estimate the results presented in the main analysis of the paper. Our covariates are dichotomous indicators of the respondents' treatment conditions. The control condition is the baseline condition.

Table SI.21: Flint Study Models—Vote (Multinomial Logistic Regression)

	Remain in office	Not sure
Intercept	−1.31*	−0.76*
	(0.19)	(0.16)
Blame Claim	0.65*	0.18
	(0.25)	(0.22)
Blame Appointee	−0.17	−0.09
	(0.28)	(0.23)
Blame Expert	0.09	0.12
	(0.28)	(0.23)
Log Likelihood	-834.74	-834.74
Num. obs.	850	850

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents a multinomial logistic regression model of whether respondents think that Governor Snyder should remain in office (as opposed to resign) that is analogous to the linear regression model we used to estimate the results presented in the main analysis of the paper. Our outcome variable is trichotomous, with respondents indicating that the governor should resign from office (the baseline outcome), remain in office, or that they are not sure what the governor should do. Our covariates are dichotomous indicators of the respondents' treatment conditions. The control condition is the baseline condition.

Causal Mediation Analyses

In this section of the Supplemental Information, we describe and present models used to create the figures for the causal mediation analyses in the main paper. Here, we provide a general overview of our modeling strategy and discussion of how we coded our outcome and mediator measures.

All models in the main body of the paper used to conduct our causal mediation analyses are linear regression models. When regressing the mediator (either leadership valence or blameworthiness) on treatment, we use continuous measures of the mediator as our outcome variable. When regressing the outcome measures (either respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis or likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election) on treatment and the mediator, we use dichotomous measures of the outcome measures as our outcome variable. We alternatively conducted each of our causal mediation analyses using logistic and ordinal logistic regression models for the second model (i.e., regressing our outcome measures on treatment and the mediator); though not presented here, the results of our causal mediation analyses remain consistent across these alternative specifications.

We also present sensitivity analyses for the causal mediation analyses presented in the main paper which assess how leadership valence mediates the effect of blame claiming. These sensitivity analyses assess the irrefutable sequential ignorability assumption, which requires that treatment assignment is independent of potential outcomes and potential mediators, and the mediator value is independent of potential outcomes conditional on treatment assignment. The former component of the sequential ignorability assumption is identical to the ignorability assumption required to obtain an average treatment effect in a standard experiment, and the latter component further requires the absence of any pre-treatment or post-treatment variables that are correlated with both the mediator and the outcome of interest. In a standard experimental setting, this assumption is most commonly violated if any confounder exists for the relationship between the mediator and the outcome of interest. If no such confounder exists, then the correlation between the error terms in the mediator and outcome models, denoted as ρ, is 0. However, if the sequential ignorability assumption is violated, then ρ will be some non-zero value and our estimate of the ACME will be biased. However, because we cannot observe all potential confounders, either pre-treatment or post-treatment, this assumption is "irrefutable," as we cannot use the data we observe to substantiate the assumption (Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2011, 770-771). In order to assess the robustness of the ACME, the sensitivity analysis proposed by Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto (2011) varies the value of ρ from -1 to 1 to identify the values of ρ at which the ACME would equal 0 or change its sign, which allows us to make a qualitative assessment as to how robust the ACME is to violations of the sequential ignorability assumption. When using leadership valence to mediate the effect of blame claiming, our estimated ACMEs maintain statistical significance for $\rho \in [-1, 0.4]$ for both outcome measures across all four experiments, suggesting that, unless there is a confounder in the relationship between the mediator of leadership valence and the outcomes that induces a correlation in the error terms of $\rho \geq 0.4$, which is substantively large, then our ACMEs maintain their statisticaly significance.

Our mediators are both continuous variables, and are constructed as follows. First, our blameworthiness variable is the number of "blame points" (out of 100) each respondent assigns to the elected executive who is the subject of the vignette. Second, to construct our leadership valence variable, we use respondents' evaluations of five of the elected executives' character traits—intelligence, honesty, trustworthiness, strong leadership, and competence—to construct a single continuous scale. In our TAPS study, respondents are able to assess each of the character traits using a six-point

unordered scale—extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, not well at all, or not sure—, whereas respondents in our MTurk studies are provided with a five-point ordered scale which excludes the "not sure" option. To account for the different versions of our leadership valence outcome measures, we construct our scale slightly differently for our TAPS study and our MTurk studies. For our TAPS study, we transform each of the five character trait evaluations as dichotomous variables, where responses are coded as 1 if a respondent indicated that the character trait described the elected executive extremely well, very well, or moderately well, and 0 otherwise. Then, we used these dichotomous variables to create an additive scale of respondents' character traits, ranging from 0 to 5 (Cronbach's α =0.93). For our MTurk studies, we calculated the average of the respondents' trait evaluations across the five traits, such that the final scale ranged from 1 to 5 (Cronbach's α between 0.93 and 0.94 across each of the three MTurk studies).

Table SI.22: Causal Mediation Regressions (Leadership Valence on Treatment)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	1.44*	2.46*	2.46*	2.46*
	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Blame Claim	1.15*	0.53*	0.59*	0.50*
	(0.12)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Blame Deflect	−0.19	−0.23*	−0.09	−0.34*
	(0.12)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
R^2	0.08	0.10	0.09	0.11
Num. obs.	1916	875	875	871

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models of respondents' perceptions of the executives' leadership valence regressed on their treatment conditions, which were then used in the causal mediation analysis presented in the paper. The model in the first column uses an additive scale of respondents' perceptions of the executive's character traits (scaled from 0 to 5, where a value of 1 is added to the scale for every trait the respondent evaluates as describing the executive at least moderately well; Cronbach's α for this scale is 0.93) as the dependent variable, and dichotomous indicators of treatment assignment as the covariates (with the control condition as the baseline condition). The models in the other columns use an average of the respondents' perceptions of the executive's character traits (each trait is scaled from 1 to 5, as is the averaged scale; Cronbach's α exceeds 0.90 for each of these scales) as the dependent variable, and dichotomous indicators of treatment assignment as the covariates (with the control condition as the baseline condition). The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.23: Causal Mediation Regressions (Approval on Treatment and Leadership Valence)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.18*	−0.17*	−0.27*	−0.29*
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Claim	0.14*	0.05	0.03	0.05
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Blame Deflect	−0.05	−0.15*	−0.10*	−0.06
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Leadership Valence	0.08*	0.28*	0.28*	0.27*
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
R^2	0.19	0.40	0.34	0.36
Num. obs.	1907	875	875	871

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models of respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the government crisis regressed on their treatment conditions, which were then used in the causal mediation analysis presented in the paper. All models use a dichomotous indicator of approval, coded as 1 if the respondent strongly approves or approves of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis, and coded as 0 otherwise. Covariates include dichotomous indicators of treatment assignment and scales of respondents' perceptions of the executive's leadership valence; see the notes in Table SI.22 for details on the coding of leadership valence. The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.24: Causal Mediation Regressions (Vote on Treatment and Leadership Valence)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.11*	−0.17*	−0.27*	−0.29*
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Claim	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Blame Deflect	−0.03	−0.15*	−0.10*	−0.06
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Leadership Valence	0.09*	0.28*	0.28*	0.27*
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
R^2	0.22	0.40	0.34	0.36
Num. obs.	1899	875	875	871

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models of respondents' likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election regressed on their treatment conditions, which were then used in the causal mediation analysis presented in the paper. All models use a dichomotous indicator of likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, coded as 1 if the respondent is very likely or somewhat likely to vote for the executive, and coded as 0 otherwise. Covariates include dichotomous indicators of treatment assignment and scales of respondents' perceptions of the executive's leadership valence; see the notes in Table SI.22 for details on the coding of leadership valence. The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.25: Causal Mediation Analysis—Leadership Valence and Approval

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood	ACME	0.09	[0.06, 0.13]
(N=1907)	ADE	0.14	[0.05, 0.23]
	Total Effect	0.23	[0.15, 0.32]
	Prop. Mediated	0.41	[0.25, 0.66]
Bridge Collapse	ACME	0.15	[0.10, 0.19]
(N=875)	ADE	0.05	[-0.01, 0.12]
	Total Effect	0.20	[0.12, 0.28]
	Prop. Mediated	0.74	[0.51, 1.10]
Budget Shortfall	ACME	0.16	[0.12, 0.21]
(N=875)	ADE	0.03	[-0.04, 0.10]
	Total Effect	0.20	[0.13, 0.28]
	Prop. Mediated	0.83	[0.59, 1.27]
Heat Wave	ACME	0.14	[0.09, 0.18]
(N=871)	ADE	0.05	[-0.02, 0.12]
	Total Effect	0.18	[0.10, 0.26]
	Prop. Mediated	0.74	[0.50, 1.22]

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis outcome which are displayed in the main analysis of the paper. This causal mediation analysis uses the regression models in Tables SI.22 and SI.23. Only respondents for whom we have outcome measures for approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis and all five of the executive's character traits are included (i.e., respondents with missing outcomes are excluded). We conducted this analysis with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.26: Causal Mediation Analysis—Leadership Valence and Vote

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood	ACME	0.11	[0.07, 0.15]
(N=1899)	ADE	0.03	[-0.05, 0.11]
	Total Effect	0.14	[0.06, 0.22]
	Prop. Mediated	0.78	[0.45, 1.83]
Bridge Collapse	ACME	0.17	[0.12, 0.21]
(N=874)	ADE	-0.01	[-0.07, 0.05]
	Total Effect	0.16	[0.08, 0.23]
	Prop. Mediated	1.06	[0.75, 1.84]
Budget Shortfall	ACME	0.17	[0.13, 0.22]
(N=874)	ADE	-0.02	[-0.09, 0.05]
	Total Effect	0.15	[0.07, 0.23]
	Prop. Mediated	1.14	[0.79, 2.06]
Heat Wave	ACME	0.14	[0.10, 0.19]
(N=869)	ADE	0.07	[0.01, 0.15]
	Total Effect	0.21	[0.13, 0.29]
	Prop. Mediated	0.66	[0.46, 0.97]

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the likelihood of voting for the executive outcome which are displayed in the main analysis of the paper. This causal mediation analysis uses the regression models in Tables SI.22 and SI.24. Only respondents for whom we have outcome measures for approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis and all five of the executive's character traits are included (i.e., respondents with missing outcomes are excluded). We conducted this analysis with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through non-parametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

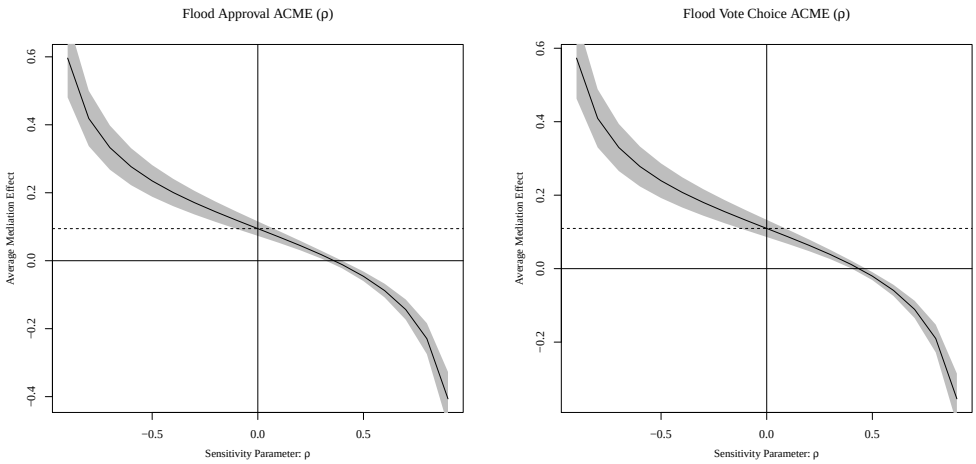

Figure SI.7: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Flood Experiment (Mediated Effect of Leadership Valence).** Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval [-1,1]. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right panels present sensitivity analyses for approval and vote choice outcomes, respectively. The plots suggest that only under substantively high levels of correlation exceeding 0.4 would our estimated ACME lose statistical significance or change direction.

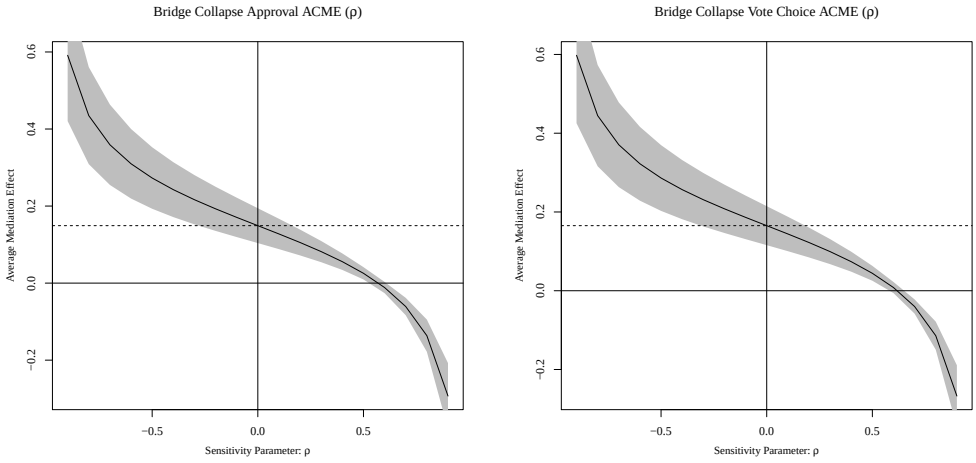

Figure SI.8: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Bridge Collapse Experiment (Mediated Effect of Leadership Valence).** Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval [-1,1]. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right panels present sensitivity analyses for approval and vote choice outcomes, respectively. The plots suggest that only under substantively high levels of correlation exceeding 0.6 would our estimated ACME lose statistical significance or change direction.

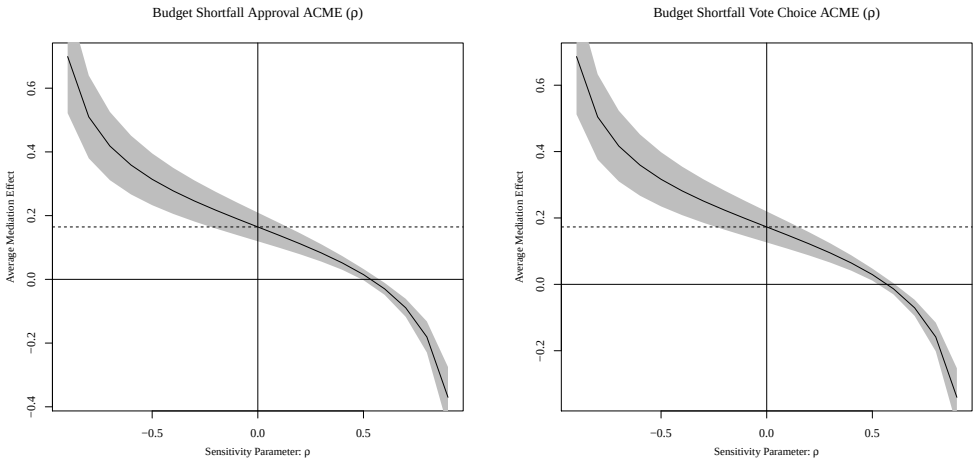

Figure SI.9: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Budget Shortfall Experiment (Mediated Effect of Leadership Valence).** Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval [-1,1]. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right panels present sensitivity analyses for approval and vote choice outcomes, respectively. The plots suggest that only under substantively high levels of correlation exceeding 0.5 for our approval outcome or 0.6 for our vote choice outcome would our estimated ACME lose statistical significance or change direction.

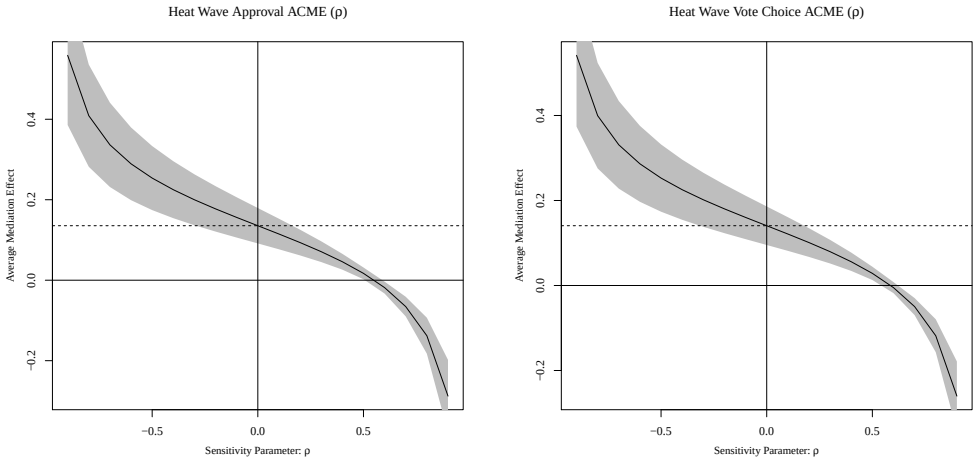

Figure SI.10: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Heat Wave Experiment (Mediated Effect of Leadership Valence).** Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval [-1,1]. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right panels present sensitivity analyses for approval and vote choice outcomes, respectively. The plots suggest that only under substantively high levels of correlation exceeding 0.5 for our approval outcome or 0.6 for our vote choice outcome would our estimated ACME lose statistical significance or change direction.

Table SI.27: Causal Mediation Regressions (Blameworthiness on Treatment)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	18.89*	31.80*	46.77*	30.09*
	(0.75)	(1.52)	(1.48)	(1.50)
Blame Claim	−0.35	6.57*	4.73*	2.66
	(1.03)	(2.15)	(2.15)	(2.17)
Blame Deflect	4.69*	−0.94	−6.29*	4.36*
	(1.06)	(2.20)	(2.14)	(2.16)
R^2	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.00
Num. obs.	1938	879	879	879

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models of respondents' perceptions of the executives' blameworthiness regressed on their treatment conditions, which were then used in the causal mediation analysis presented in the paper. Each model uses the blame points respondents assigned to the executive (from 0 to 100) as the dependent variable, and dichotomous indicators of treatment assignment as the covariates (with the control condition as the baseline condition). The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.28: Causal Mediation Regressions (Approval on Treatment and Blameworthiness)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.33*	0.70*	0.64*	0.57*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Blame Claim	0.23*	0.23*	0.22*	0.20*
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Deflect	−0.05	−0.23*	−0.15*	−0.13*
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blameworthiness	−0.00*	−0.01*	−0.00*	−0.01*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
R^2	0.08	0.20	0.13	0.19
Num. obs.	1925	878	879	879

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models of respondents' approval of the executive's handling of the government crisis regressed on their treatment conditions, which were then used in the causal mediation analysis presented in the paper. All models use a dichomotous indicator of approval, coded as 1 if the respondent strongly approves or approves of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis, and coded as 0 otherwise. Covariates include dichotomous indicators of treatment assignment and a continuous measure of blame points respondents assigned to the executive. The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.29: Causal Mediation Regressions (Vote on Treatment and Blameworthiness)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.30*	0.54*	0.59*	0.53*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Blame Claim	0.15*	0.20*	0.17*	0.23*
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blame Deflect	−0.02	−0.05	−0.12*	−0.12*
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Blameworthiness	−0.00*	−0.01*	−0.00*	−0.01*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
R^2	0.05	0.13	0.11	0.21
Num. obs.	1918	877	878	877

*$p < 0.05$. This table presents linear regression models of respondents' likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election regressed on their treatment conditions, which were then used in the causal mediation analysis presented in the paper. All models use a dichomotous indicator of likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, coded as 1 if the respondent is very likely or somewhat likely to vote for the executive, and coded as 0 otherwise. Covariates include dichotomous indicators of treatment assignment and a continuous measure of blame points respondents assigned to the executive. The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.30: Causal Mediation Analysis—Blameworthiness and Approval

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood	ACME	-0.01	[-0.02, 0.00]
(N=1925)	ADE	-0.05	[-0.13, 0.04]
	Total Effect	-0.06	[-0.13, 0.03]
	Prop. Mediated	0.15	[-1.04, 1.18]
Bridge Collapse	ACME	0.01	[-0.02, 0.03]
(N=878)	ADE	-0.23	[-0.30, -0.15]
	Total Effect	-0.22	[-0.30, -0.14]
	Prop. Mediated	-0.03	[-0.15, 0.07]
Budget Shortfall	ACME	0.03	[0.01, 0.05]
(N=879)	ADE	-0.15	[-0.22, -0.08]
	Total Effect	-0.12	[-0.19, -0.05]
	Prop. Mediated	-0.25	[-0.81, -0.07]
Heat Wave	ACME	-0.03	[-0.05, -0.00]
(N=879)	ADE	-0.13	[-0.19, -0.06]
	Total Effect	-0.15	[-0.22, -0.08]
	Prop. Mediated	0.18	[0.01, 0.39]

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis outcome which are displayed in the main analysis of the paper. This causal mediation analysis uses the regression models in Tables SI.27 and SI.28. Only respondents for whom we have outcome measures for approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis and the executive's blameworthiness are included (i.e., respondents with missing outcomes are excluded). We conducted this analysis with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Table SI.31: Causal Mediation Analysis—Blameworthiness and Vote

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood	ACME	-0.01	[-0.03, -0.00]
(N=1918)	ADE	-0.02	[-0.10, 0.05]
	Total Effect	-0.04	[-0.12, 0.04]
	Prop. Mediated	0.38	[-3.12, 6.69]
Bridge Collapse	ACME	0.01	[-0.02, 0.03]
(N=877)	ADE	-0.05	[-0.12, 0.02]
	Total Effect	-0.04	[-0.12, 0.03]
	Prop. Mediated	-0.13	[-3.42, 2.03]
Budget Shortfall	ACME	0.03	[0.01, 0.05]
(N=878)	ADE	-0.12	[-0.19, -0.05]
	Total Effect	-0.09	[-0.16, -0.02]
	Prop. Mediated	-0.34	[-1.95, -0.07]
Heat Wave	ACME	-0.03	[-0.05, -0.00]
(N=877)	ADE	-0.12	[-0.18, -0.06]
	Total Effect	-0.15	[-0.22, -0.09]
	Prop. Mediated	0.18	[0.01, 0.37]

$^{*}p < 0.05$. This table presents the causal mediation analyses results for the likelihood of voting for the executive outcome which are displayed in the main analysis of the paper. This causal mediation analysis uses the regression models in Tables SI.27 and SI.29. Only respondents for whom we have outcome measures for approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis and the executive's blameworthiness are included (i.e., respondents with missing outcomes are excluded). We conducted this analysis with 1000 simulations. 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

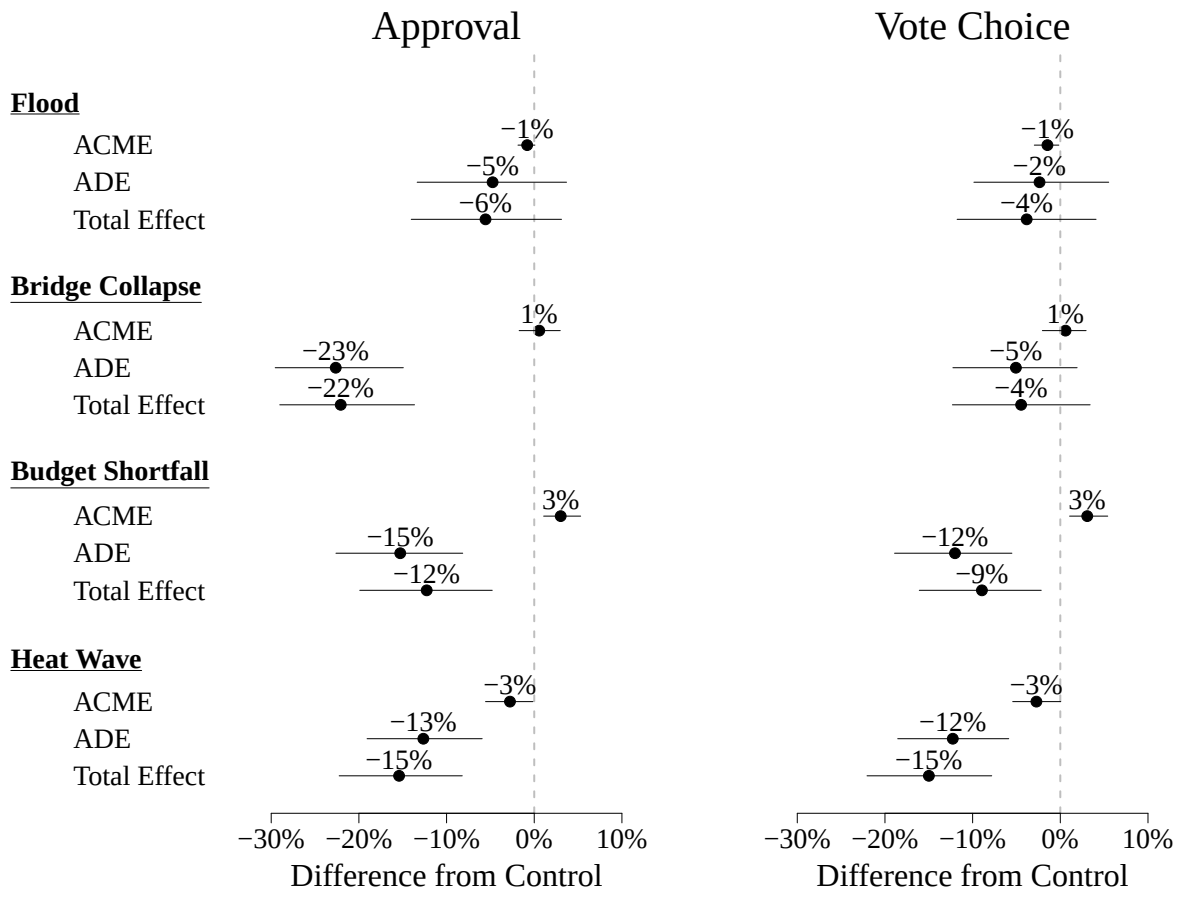

Figure SI.11: **Causal Mediation Analysis (Mediated Effect of Blameworthiness).** Estimated average causal mediation effects (ACME), average direct effects (ADE), and average total effects for respondents in the blame deflecting condition relative to respondents in the control condition across each of our four experiments. Estimates in the left and right panels correspond to the mediated and direct effects of blame deflecting for approval of the executive's handling of the crisis and likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election, respectively. Positive (negative) values along $x-$axis reflect more favorable evaluations relative to the control condition. Across all four experiments, blameworthiness, our hypothesized mediator, not only accounts for a substantively small share of the total effect, but also manifests as a significantly positive effect, a significantly negative effect, and an insignificant effect. Bars around point estimates represent 95% confidence intervals obtained through nonparametric bootstrap procedure (percentile method).

Respondent Descriptive Characteristics

In this section, we present information about the descriptive characteristics of each of our survey samples. Following suggested best practices in presenting results from experimental research (Gerber, Arceneaux, Boudreau, Dowling, Hillygus, Palfrey, Biggers, and Hendry 2014), we also conducted randomization checks for each experiment across all observed demographic characteristics. Because randomization checks are probabilistic, the presence of covariate imbalance for a small number of covariates across our experiments should be expected, and does not pose a problem for the estimation of treatment effects given that we employed a proper randomization mechanism (Gerber and Green 2012). While some scholars argue that covariate imbalance does not require any analytical adjustments (Mutz and Pemantle 2015), others suggest that we should account for imbalance in our observable demographic characteristics by including them as covariates in a regression model regressing the outcome on the treatment assignment (Gerber and Green 2012). As a conservative approach, we refit the models used in the main analysis of the paper to estimate the overall treatment effects for each experiment with all available pre-treatment covariates. These models, which are omitted here in the interest of space but are available upon request, yield substantively similar treatment effects as presented in the main body of the paper.

Table SI.32: Respondent Descriptive Characteristics

Characteristic	TAPS	MTurk (Main Analyses)	MTurk (Factorial Design)	MTurk (Flint)
Age				
18-29	7.8%	37.8%	27.4%	48.3%
30-49	26.7%	46.9%	50.2%	43.6%
50-64	31.6%	12.6%	17.3%	6.7%
65 and over	32.4%	2.6%	4.9%	1.3%
NA	1.5%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Gender				
Female	51.9%	42.7%	45.8%	38.2%
Male	48.0%	57.2%	54.2%	61.8%
NA	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Race/Ethnicity				
White	84.8%	75.0%	78.4%	73.5%
Black	7.7%	6.6%	6.9%	5.8%
Asian	3.1%	11.3%	7.5%	13.0%
Hispanic	10.0%	5.9%	5.3%	5.8%
Other	-	1.1%	1.8%	1.5%
NA	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%
Education				
High school degree or less	15.1%	11.1%	10.3%	10.0%
Some college, no 4-year degree	30.3%	32.8%	33.3%	32.7%
Bachelor's degree	27.8%	44.4%	40.8%	45.7%
Post-graduate degree	26.2%	11.6%	15.6%	11.4%
NA	0.5%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%
Income (TAPS)				
Less than $30,000	19.2%	-	-	-
$30,000-$60,000	27.5%	-	-	-
$60,000-$90,000	21.0%	-	-	-
$90,000-$125,000	16.0%	-	-	-
More than $125,000	12.6%	-	-	-
NA	3.7%			
Income (MTurk)				
Less than $25,000	-	16.7%	18.0%	22.4%
$25,000-$50,000	-	33.2%	33.6%	32.2%
$50,000-$75,000	-	24.5%	23.6%	22.9%
$75,000-$100,000	-	12.5%	13.6%	11.3%
$100,000-$200,000	-	11.6%	9.2%	9.9%
$200,000 or more	-	1.3%	1.8%	1.1%
NA	-	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%
Party Identification				

Characteristic	TAPS	MTurk (Main Analyses)	MTurk (Factorial Design)	MTurk (Flint)
Democrat	37.1%	46.9%	42.8%	44.3%
Independent	29.1%	30.5%	31.1%	34.4%
Republican	25.7%	19.6%	23.1%	18.4%
Other	5.7%	3.0%	3.1%	2.9%
NA	2.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Ideology				
Liberal	32.0%	50.9%	48.4%	53.0%
Moderate	23.7%	25.3%	24.3%	25.9%
Conservative	37.0%	23.8%	27.3%	21.2%
Other	7.0%	-	-	-
NA	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%

This table indicates the percentage of respondents in each sample (denoted by the column headings) who reported each demographic characteristic (denoted by the row labels). The TAPS and MTurk (Main Analyses) samples are those used for the set of experiments on four governmental crises in the main text. The MTurk (Factorial Design) sample is that used for the set of factorial experiments presented in the Supplemental Information that include information about the elected executives' partisanship and the crises' severity. The MTurk (Flint) sample is that used for the experiment featuring the Flint, Michigan water crisis in the main text.

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