

Pass the Buck or the Buck Stops Here?

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

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Abstract

When things go wrong and the government may be to blame, the public reputations of elected executives are vulnerable. Because attribution of responsibility is often not straightforward, elected executives can influence citizens' evaluations of their performance by means of presentational strategies, or explanatory frames which describe their own roles in the management of the crisis. We examine the effectiveness of two ubiquitous presentational strategies: blame claiming, where the executive accepts responsibility, and blame deflecting, where the executive shifts blame to others (especially bureaucrats). 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 a crisis. In investigating the underlying mechanism, we find that blame claiming creates more favorable views of an executive's character 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.

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In late January 2014, a minor storm producing less than three inches of snow left the Atlanta metro area in chaos. Motorists were stranded on interstate highways for hours, students were forced to spend the night at school, shoppers caught unawares had to sleep in supermarkets, and babies were delivered on roadsides (AP 2014). One state legislator described the scene as a “zombie apocalypse” (ibid). This was all despite the fact that the National Weather Service had accurately predicted the inclement weather and began issuing warnings at noon the day before the storm struck. 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 government had failed to adequately prepare for or respond to the storm, 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 Zucchini 2014). In contrast, Reed deflected blame to others. In one television interview, the mayor argued that the traffic problems during the storm were not his fault and that they 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 contrasting 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 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 (e.g., Boin, McConnell, and ’t Hart

¹We cannot directly answer the question of how the public responded to Deal and Reed’s presentational strategies. However, one survey found that only thirty-six percent of likely voters in Georgia found the response of the governor to be poor; even in the affected counties a majority of voters rated the state’s response to be excellent, good, or fair (Galloway, Bluestein, and Malloy 2014). Differently, Reed’s response was largely panned by the press. One headline proclaimed that Mayor Reed’s response to the storm had “stopped a rising political star” (Cobb 2014).

2008; Schneider 2008). While other studies explore how negative outcomes influence the public’s appraisal of elected executives and other political actors (e.g., 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 on public opinion (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 crises occur, elected executives often adopt the presentational strategy suggested by either of these slogans in an attempt 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, especially bureaucrats, associated with the policy. We refer to this as *blame deflecting*. Previous studies posit that blame deflecting is an effective strategy because it reduces the blameworthiness of an elected official, thereby reducing her culpability and shielding her from public disdain (Weaver 1986). Alternatively, elected executives embroiled in crises can instead “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 character valence (Stone and Simas 2010), informed by qualities such as honesty and leadership, which subsequently improves overall evaluations of the executive (Coombs 1995).

In this paper, we draw on survey experiments leveraging five different adverse outcomes for which government may be blamed to examine how the presentational strategies elected executives utilize in the aftermath of a crisis shape public opinion. Despite a scholarly focus on blame deflecting (e.g., Weaver 1986), we argue and present evidence that blame claiming—accepting responsibility for the crisis—is a far more effective strategy for elected executives to manage their public reputations in the aftermath of a governmental crisis. Further, we demonstrate that the character valence mechanism accounts for a substantial share of the positive effect of blame claiming.

Our findings challenge conventional wisdom concerning the efficacy of blame deflecting and encourage elected executives to reconsider how they publicly respond to governmental crises. Motivated by both their political goals, such as electoral success and policy achievement, and an innate

²Current usage of the idiom “the buck stops here” has changed over time (Amira 2012).

desire shared by all human beings “to be well thought of” (Hood 2011, 7-8), elected executives facing a governmental crisis often default to blame deflecting behavior (see also Boin et al. 2010; Weaver 1986). However, our findings suggest that elected executives’ instinctual aversion to blame leads them to select a suboptimal presentational strategy. Rather, we suggest that executives seeking public support and positive evaluations of their character can more effectively achieve their goals by resisting their blame avoidance reflexes and 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 a flood, bridge collapse, budget shortfall, or heat wave. 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 three additional factorial experiments, 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 character 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 et al. 2009; Burnett and Kogan 2017), crime rates

(Arnold and Carnes 2012), and natural disasters (Malhotra and Kuo 2008). As a result, incumbents strategically portray their performance to their constituents to maximize their public support and go to great lengths to minimize their blame for deleterious outcomes. Our focus is on the public response to elected executives' choice of presentational strategies—the explanatory frame through which a political actor seeks to influence citizens' perceptions of an event and the actor's role in it—in the aftermath of a governmental crisis.

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 the “blame game” (e.g., Boin, McConnell, and 't Hart 2008; Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011; Weaver 1986) as citizens seek to understand the cause of the crisis and to attribute blame for it (Bohner et al. 1988; Kelley and Michela 1980; Weiner 1985). Governmental crises and the consequent blame games are dangerous for elected officials because their reputations and public support may suffer if they are blamed.

While any political actor can be held responsible for a governmental crisis, we focus on elected executives because they are especially vulnerable to blame. 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. 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).⁴ As the leaders of the part of government responsible for implementation, executives are more proximate to the actions associated

³These crises do not include scandals surrounding personal misconduct. They only include adverse outcomes which are plausibly caused by government action or inaction. Exogenous shocks such as natural disasters do not constitute governmental crises. However, a government's haphazard response would be considered a governmental crisis.

⁴See also Brown and Jacobson (2008) and Malhotra and Kuo (2008). When constituents can connect an adverse outcome to their legislator's action, such as a military base closure, they hold the legislator accountable (Rocca 2003). However, outcomes resulting from votes on legislation are difficult to trace (Arnold 1990). Legislators more often face criticism and blame for votes on roll calls. Previous studies have examined how constituents evaluate legislators who take controversial positions and how legislators respond to constituent ire (Fenno 1978; McGraw 1991; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995).

with the adverse outcome and are likely to be held more responsible than the legislature (Arnold 1990). Further, voters' expectations of executives and legislators differ substantially. For example, 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). Additionally, 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.

Though elected executives can employ many different presentational strategies to manage their reputations in the aftermath of a governmental crisis, we focus on two ubiquitous types. First, we consider the public's response to a politician engaged in blame-deflecting behavior. When voters encounter a negative outcome, they look to sanction some set of elected officials. While some posit that these sanctions are imposed blindly (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016), others argue that voters hold elected officials accountable as a function of their perceived responsibility for an outcome. Powell and Whitten (1993) finds that voters hold governments accountable for the economy in part based on their "clarity of responsibility" over political outcomes (see also Rudolph 2003). In an examination of blame for the response to Hurricane Katrina, Malhotra and Kuo (2008) finds that when voters are given information about the responsibilities of an office holder, they allocate blame accordingly. These institutional incentives imply that officials may avoid sanction for negative outcomes if they can obscure their responsibility for the outcomes.

Ex ante, elected officials can evade responsibility for future negative outcomes with institutional design choices that distance them from the outcomes, such as diffusing the costs, delaying implementation, or delegating authority to subordinates or independent actors (e.g., Arnold 1990; Hood 2011; James et al. 2016; Marvel and Girth 2016; Piatak, Mohr, and Leland 2017; Weaver 1986). However, once negative outcomes manifest and citizens look for someone to sanction, one of elected officials' primary means for avoiding attributions of responsibility is to deflect blame (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017; Hood 2011). When an elected executive identifies other actors who are plausibly responsible for the adverse outcome, such as his subordinates, the legislature, or Mother Nature,

these other actors become more accessible and salient in citizens' minds, and citizens may shift some of the blame they would otherwise allocate to the elected executive to these other actors (Ellis 1994; Hood 2011; Moynihan 2012; Weaver 1986). Following from this reasoning, the blame deflecting hypothesis is that once a crisis has occurred, elected executives who shift blame away from themselves enjoy higher levels of public support. Implicit in this assumption is a mechanism motivated by culpability; blame deflecting enables an elected executive to manage public evaluations by weakening the linkage between himself and a negative outcome, instead linking it to someone else, thereby making the executive less blameworthy (Alicke 2000; Schlenker et al. 1994).

Second, we consider how the public responds to blame claiming. 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 the politicians as described above. If a politician claims blame as others deny it, then culpability becomes clear and a voter can confidently sanction the blame claiming politician for the negative outcome (Alicke 2000; Schlenker et al. 1994). However, we argue that blame claiming offers elected executives an alternative means of managing their public support by bolstering citizens' perceptions of their character valence.

While voters hold politicians accountable for the outcomes that occur during their terms in office, they also draw on their perceptions of politicians' personal characteristics, such as trustworthiness or competence, to inform their evaluations of the politicians' performance (e.g., Bartels 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; McGraw 2011; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Popkin 1994). Stone and Simas (2010, 373) refers to the dimension of evaluation that considers "the bundle of qualities and skills that relate to character and job performance" as "character valence" (see also Stokes 1963, 1992). Cohen (2015) argues that views of the president's character are foundational to perceptions of his leadership. Relatedly, Buttice and Stone (2012) finds that candidate characteristics such as leadership exert a positive effect on voters' evaluations independent of ideology. This same reasoning extends to incumbent characteristics in governing outside of an electoral context. As incumbents govern, citizens learn about their characteristics both directly through their actions and behavior, and indirectly through outcomes observed under their watch (Stokes 1992). In other words, "accountability is thus not about reducing information asymmetries, moral duties,

containing agency losses, or ensuring that agents stay committed to the original terms of their mandate. Instead, accountability—in terms of both holding and giving—is about sustaining one’s own reputation vis-à-vis different audiences” (Busuioc and Lodge 2016, 248).

Blame claiming, we argue, enables elected executives to improve citizens’ perception of their character 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.” Given that citizens expect their mayors, governors, and presidents to have strong leadership traits, particularly in comparison to legislators (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993), elected executives are motivated to leverage opportunities to present themselves as high-quality leaders in order to enhance their reputations. Voters may view an incumbent as a stronger leader or more honest and trustworthy as a result of their act of accepting blame and stopping the buck. Thus, blame claiming enables elected executives to manage their reputations by improving citizens’ perceptions of their character valence, which underlies citizens’ evaluations of those executives.

Despite common 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 respective responses influenced their political fates. While the governments of Finland and Norway apologized for their post-tsunami responses and were spared lasting political harm, 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, studies in communications and psychology have found that when leaders apologize for negative outcomes, they can minimize reputational damage and strengthen positive evaluations of themselves and their organizations (e.g., 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 overall evaluations because they improve perceptions of an individual or organization's credibility (Lyon and Cameron 2004), trustworthiness (Kim et al. 2004), or ability to provide transformational leadership (Tucker et al. 2006). We hypothesize that these same mechanisms influence assessments of elected executives who claim blame in the aftermath of governmental crises.

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 abundant, 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 2017), 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 elected executive's responses.

Our research design leverages survey experiments to make causal claims and also addresses concerns about the external validity. First, we present results from four survey 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 survey experiments that embed elected executives' presentational strategies in more complex information environments accounting for partisanship and crisis severity. Further, we present a survey experiment drawing

on the real-world Flint, Michigan water crisis and Governor Rick Snyder’s use of blame claiming and blame deflecting strategies in the midst of the crisis. This experiment subjects our theories to a hard test in which respondents are likely pre-treated by their knowledge of 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 with respect to responsibility. Blame is often contentious and not obvious, creating space for political actors to influence the public’s perceptions of an executive’s responsibility (e.g., Boin, ’t Hart, and McConnell 2009). 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) 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.^{5,6}

Table 1 presents the vignette wording we use in our four studies. Across the columns, we present the vignettes for each study, and down the rows we display the common base and the additional context presented in each condition. In each study, we present all respondents with the common base from the first row which 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, each respondent is

⁵Our total MTurk sample includes 1,006 respondents, but we exclude those who failed our attention check from our main analyses. When we estimate our models with the full sample of 1,006 respondents, the treatment effects are substantively similar to those we present here.

⁶For both our TAPS and MTurk samples, we collected basic demographic information, such as gender, education level, and partisan affiliation from our respondents to conduct randomization checks. In the few cases in which we detected covariate imbalance, we reestimated our models with the relevant covariates included and recovered treatment effects substantively similar to those we present here.

presented with a short second paragraph corresponding with their assigned treatment condition. In the control condition, the elected executive does not comment on fault and promises to do better in the future.⁷ In the blame claim condition, the elected executive takes “ultimate responsibility” for the failure. Finally, in the blame deflection condition condition, the executive denies responsibility and casts blame onto another actor.

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 respondents, “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, to gauge respondents’ views of the elected executives’ character valence, we ask 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.”

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 figures present percentage point differences in average treatment effects using binary indicators of our outcome measures.⁸ Along the x -axis, we present treatment effects relative to the control for the blame claim and blame deflect conditions for each outcome of interest: 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 as compared to respondents in

⁷An alternative control condition could present the executive as offering no public comment. However, 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 condition facilitates a hard test for our theory, as observed differences in respondents’ evaluations of the elected executives correspond to whether the executives claim or deflect blame, and not whether they have any public reaction to the crisis at all.

⁸For ease of interpretation and presentation, we present results using binary indicators of our outcome measures. In the flood study fielded on TAPS, respondents were also provided with a “don’t know” option; respondents selecting this option are included in the analyses presented here as not approving or unlikely to vote for the executive in the next election. Our results are robust to using the original four point scales for our outcome measures and to alternative model specifications (see supplemental information).

Table 1: Vignette Question Wording

	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 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 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.

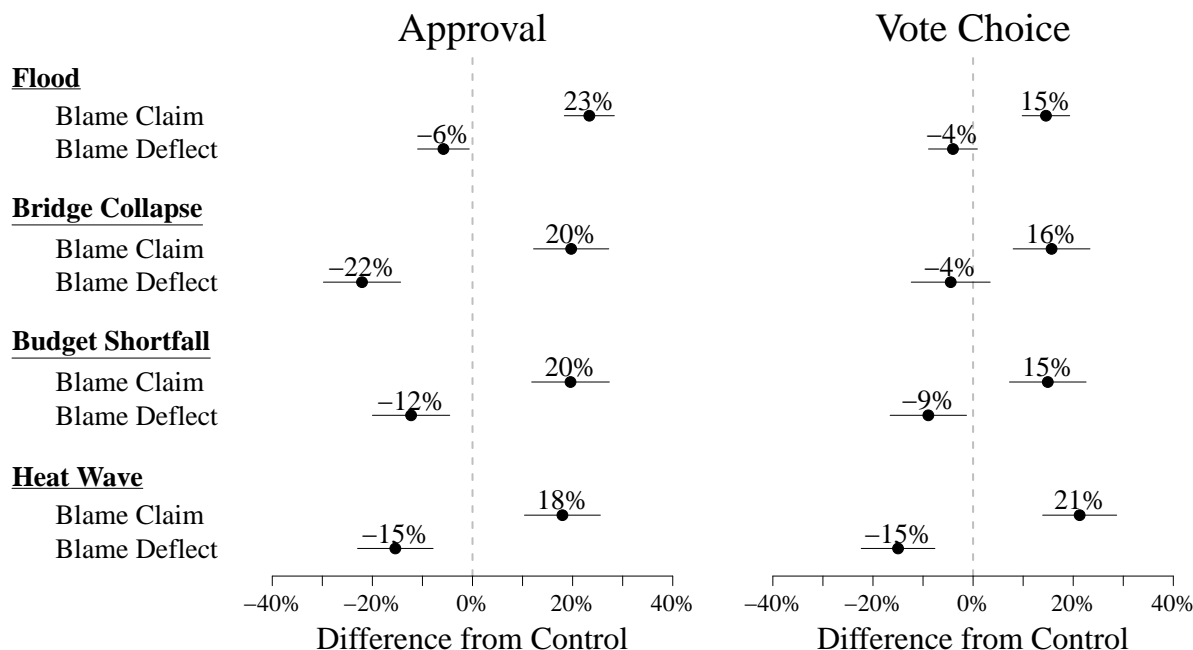


Figure 1: **Effect of Elected Executives' Presentational Strategies on Evaluations.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting on approval of the executive's handling of the crisis (left panel) and likelihood of voting for the executive in the next election (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.

the control condition. In contrast, approval is between 6 and 22 percentage points lower among respondents in the blame deflect condition as compared to respondents in the control condition. The results in the right panel convey a similar pattern; compared 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, while 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 significantly more favorably when those executives engage in blame claiming rather than offer perfunctory responses (as in the control condition) or deflect blame. Further, contrary to our blame deflection hypothesis, we also 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 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 (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Mondak 1993; Popkin 1994). Alternatively, the overall effects may be driven by heterogeneous responses across copartisan and non-copartisan respondents. Similarly, blame claiming may be less effective when the crisis is more severe (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke 2010; Coombs 1995). As the cost of a crisis, as measured by financial losses, property damage, human life, or otherwise, grows, executives may confront limited opportunity to influence public appraisals.

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, independently randomizing the severity of the crisis, the executive’s partisan affiliation, and the executive’s presentational strategy. Whereas our previous studies varied only the executive’s presentational strategy leaving all else constant, a factorial framework allows us to assess whether the blame claiming effect holds as we incorporate additional complexity into 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 experiments in the supplemental information, but we briefly discuss the results here. When looking at

the marginal effect of blame claiming in the presence of, but not conditional 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 our blame claiming effect is conditioned by crisis severity or partisanship. 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 linear 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 overall treatment effects persist in the presence of additional relevant information, and we find no consistent evidence that they are driven by a heterogeneous effect.

Evidence from the Flint Water Crisis

The preceding studies demonstrate persistent 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 have knowledge of or opinions about the event or relevant actors (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007, 15-16).

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 tap water of Flint, Michigan, with lead, *Legionella*, and other harmful bacteria and chemicals (Hanna-Attisha et al. 2016).⁹ Governor Snyder personally appointed several of the key government officials

⁹See also Goodnough, Davey, and Smith (2016) and Flint Water Advisory Task Force (2016).

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). As a result, we were able to construct a survey experiment where we vary the type of presentational strategy Governor Snyder employed without using deception. Because the crisis featured prominently on the national agenda in much of 2015 and 2016, many of our respondents were likely aware of the crisis or had already formed an opinion about the governor’s role in it, thus making their evaluations of the governor more resistant to our treatments (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007).¹⁰

We fielded our Flint experiment on MTurk in March 2016 with 851 respondents.¹¹ 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. Second, the two blame deflecting conditions implicate other government officials with clear lines of culpability for the crisis; in one condition, the governor deflects blame to his political appointee, and in the second he deflects blame to an expert bureaucrat. Third, we measured respondents’ evaluations of Governor Snyder with questions used by a Michigan polling firm that asked 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 office or remain in office (EPIC-MRA 2016).

We present the results from our Flint experiment in Figure 2. 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’ ap-

¹⁰The Flint water crisis featured prominently in media coverage and commentary, congressional hearings, and the presidential campaign throughout 2015 and 2016. Americans throughout the country were aware of the crisis; one poll from March 2016 found that 66 percent of Americans had been following the Flint water crisis “very closely” or “fairly closely,” (Firth, Kirzinger, and Brodie 2016b), and other surveys fielded in the early months of 2016 indicated that a clear majority of Americans were aware of the crisis (DiJulio et al. 2016; Firth, Kirzinger, and Brodie 2016a; Swanson 2016). Many Americans had a negative opinions about Governor Rick Snyder prior to the fielding of our survey experiment; in a survey from January 2016, 52 percent of respondents disapproved of the governor’s handling of the crisis and 38 percent indicated that the governor should resign from office (Moore 2016).

¹¹In total, we recruited 1,011 respondents, but we excluded those who failed our attention check from our analyses. When we estimate our models with the full sample of respondents, the treatment effects are substantively similar to those we present here.

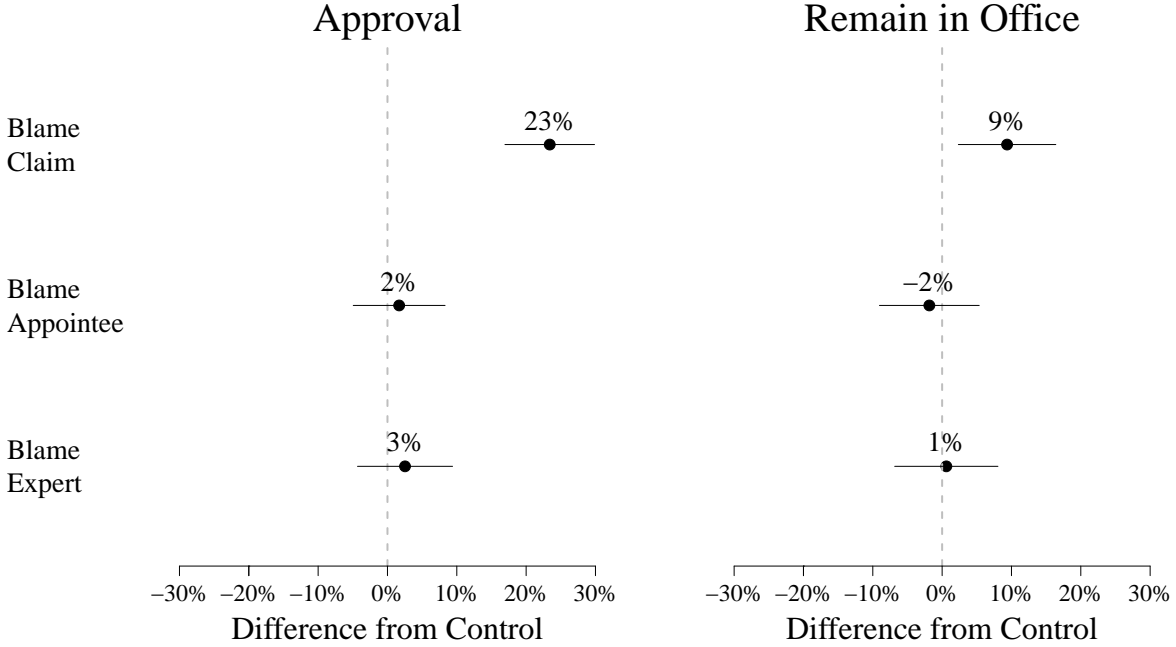


Figure 2: **Public Responses to Governor Snyder’s Flint Water Crisis Presentational Strategies.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting conditions relative to control condition. In the left panel, positive (negative) values along the x -axis reflect 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.

proved 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. Deflecting blame to an appointee or an expert results in substantively small and statistically insignificant increases in approval. 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 insignificant.¹² As in our previous studies, we find that elected executives can better manage their reputations 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 character 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.¹³

We first consider how elected executives' presentational strategies influence respondents' perceptions of their character valence. We define character valence as respondents' perceptions of the executive's character and use respondents' assessments of how well five character traits—intelligence, honesty, competency, strong leadership, and trustworthiness—describe the executive along a five-point scale. Our measure is constructed by scaling these responses.¹⁴ Figure 3 presents differences in mean levels of the five point character 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 and those effects are statistically and substantively significant. 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, the mean value of the

¹²We present alternative model specifications in the supplemental information, which yield the same substantive results.

¹³Because all of our results concerning the overall effect of blame deflecting are either null or counter to our expectations, we do not explore the culpability mechanism hypothesized to underlie the effect of blame deflecting in the main text. However, we investigate this mechanism in the supplemental information and find inconsistent evidence that the effect of blame deflecting is mediated by respondents' perceptions of the executive's blameworthiness.

¹⁴See supplemental information for more on the construction of this scale. Across all four studies, Cronbach's α for the five discrete character trait measures exceeds 0.90, suggesting high internal consistency across the five traits.

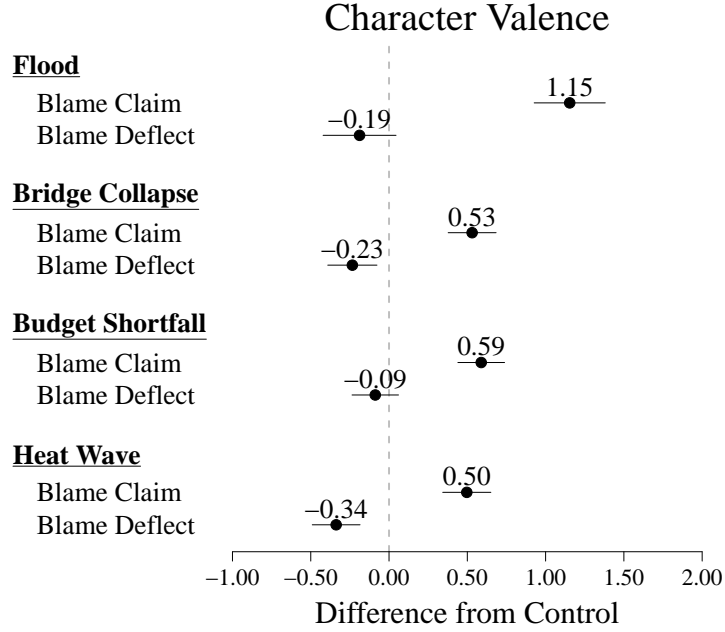


Figure 3: **Public Evaluations of Elected Executives' Character Valence.** Linear regression coefficients for treatment effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting on the elected executive's character valence relative to the control condition in each of our four experiments. Positive (negative) values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

executive's character valence in the bridge collapse study 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. For respondents in the blame deflect condition, the mean value is 2.23—a decrease of 0.23 points, or 9 percent. Thus, we find that respondents perceive elected executives to have more positive character 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 character valence—we employ causal mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2011), which allows us to recover both the direct and mediated effects of blame claiming on public support. 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 et al. 2011, 770).¹⁵

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.¹⁶ In both panels, we observe that character valence mediates substantial portions of the blame claiming effects for approval and vote choice. For example, in the heat wave study the 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 (i.e., 14 out of 18 percentage points) is mediated through respondents’ perceptions of the executive’s character valence. For the bridge collapse and budget shortfall, the effects are comparable with character valence accounting for 75 percent (i.e., 15 out of 20 percentage points) and 80 percent (i.e., 16 out of 20 percentage points), respectively. For our flood study, the mediation effect accounts for a smaller though still sizable 39 percent share of the total affect (i.e., 9 out 23 percentage points). With respect to vote choice, the results are even more stark. 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

¹⁵The sequential ignorability assumption 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. Following Imai et al. (2011), we conduct sensitivity analyses to assess the robustness of our results to violations of this assumption; please see the supplemental information for a discussion of these analyses.

¹⁶We conduct our analyses with the two-step estimation procedure outlined by Imai et al. (2011) and implemented in the `mediation` package in R (Tingley et al. 2014). In both steps, we use linear regression models, though our results are consistent when we use alternative model specifications better suited for dichotomous and ordinal outcomes. We use 1000 simulations to estimate our quantities of interest, and obtain uncertainty measures through bootstrapping. Any differences between the sum of the ADE and ACME and the average total effect in Figure 4 is a consequence of rounding. Any differences between the treatment effects in Figure 1 and the corresponding average total effects in Figure 4 are a consequence of a small number of respondents (fewer than 10 in any single study) who did not provide answers for all five character valence questions and thus drop out of the analysis. See the supplemental information for more details.

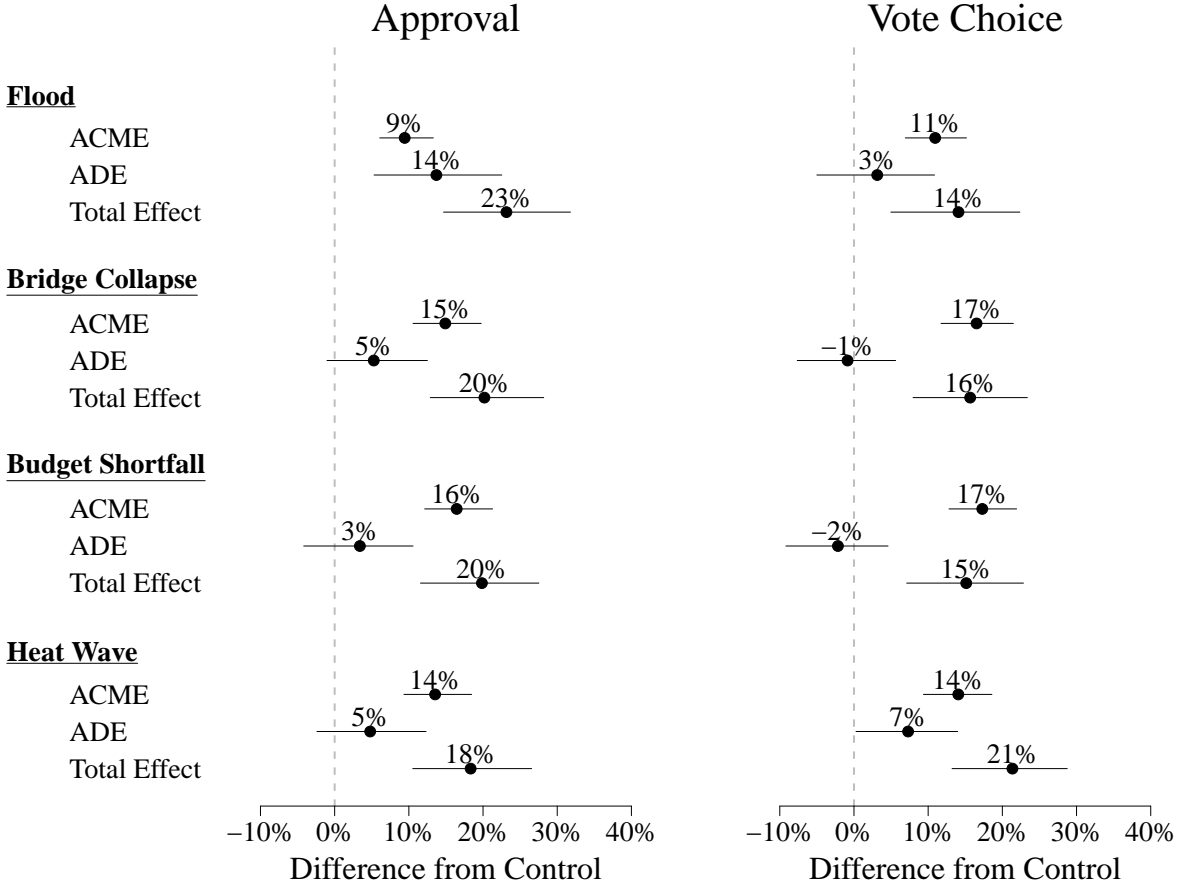


Figure 4: **Causal Mediation Analysis (Mediated Effect of Character Valence)**. Estimated average causal medication effects (ACME), average direct effects (ADE), and average total effects (Total Effect) for respondents in the blame claiming condition relative to respondents in the control condition across 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, character 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 bootstrapping (percentile method). For details on our estimation procedure, please see Footnote 16 and the supplemental information.

evaluations by bolstering individuals' perceptions of elected executives' character valence.

Discussion

Taken together, our research provides consistent evidence that elected executives can effectively manage their reputations in the midst of governmental crises through blame claiming. In contexts ranging from floods, bridge collapses, budget shortfalls, and heat waves, to real world contexts such as the 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 who offer perfunctory responses. Further, we demonstrate that the beneficial effect of blame claiming is mostly mediated by the effect of elected executives' presentational strategies on their character valence. When executives claim blame for a governmental crisis, respondents have improved views of their character, which in turn induces more favorable evaluations of the executive. While recent research has postulated that character valence plays a substantial role in voting, we find evidence that it also mediates how voters hold elected officials accountable.

Despite our findings, it seems that blame claiming is far less prevalent than blame deflecting (e.g., Boin et al. 2010; Hood 2011; Weaver 1986). As President Kennedy noted after the Bay of Pigs, "victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."¹⁷ When politicians make decisions about admitting fault, they consider how the public will respond to their admission, which is the focus of this paper. At the same time, they are also grappling with their own self-serving psychological biases that every human faces when deciding whether to admit blame (e.g., Hastorf, Schneider, and Polefka 1970; Zuckerman 1979). We suggest the relative effect of these two forces on elite decision-making creates an imbalance. Politicians, like all humans, may behave irrationally by hesitating to claim blame because of these well-documented psychological biases. Our findings suggest that in the face of a crisis, elected executives are better served by resisting these biases and claiming blame. Compared to blame deflecting, blame claiming enhance citizens' perceptions of their character and, consequently, maximize public support.

There are several avenues for future research on the nature of the public response to blame claiming. First, future work should consider whether the direct costs incurred by citizens from governmental crises might change their views of a blame claiming politician. The costs incurred by

¹⁷The statement was originally made by Count Galeazzo Ciano during World War II (NPR 2007).

respondents in our experiments were negligible or non-existent. In the first four studies, the damages were described in the context of a 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, as for the citizens of Flint, Michigan, some crises impose severe and salient costs. In these latter cases, the intensity of citizens' anger may diminish the reputational benefits of blame claiming for embattled elected executives. Further research should consider the effectiveness of presentational strategies as these costs are born directly.

Second, further research should examine the effectiveness of repeated blame claiming across time. Though several recent studies have examined how political officials move between presentational strategies during the course of the same governmental crisis (e.g., Hood et al. 2009; Hood, Jennings, and Copeland 2016), we lack an understanding of how an officials' public response to a given crisis affects the public response to her future responses. For example, might repeated blame claiming result in diminishing returns or even lead to diminished support as citizens question an incumbent's competence? In 2014, Speaker of the House John Boehner complained of President Obama, "He's been president for five and a half years! When is he going to take responsibility for something?" (Lowery 2014). In defense, a newspaper columnist noted several times when President Obama had claimed "ultimate responsibility" for a variety of matters from the economy to Washington gridlock (Blow 2014). While it was true that President Obama frequently invoked his responsibility for the state of affairs in Washington, DC, perhaps his words lost their power or rang untrue because of their frequency.

Third, future research should consider the effect of blame claiming in conjunction with other presentational strategies. Rather than employing a single presentational strategy, political officials sometimes utilize mixed strategies, which 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 own auras of leadership by claiming blame while also deflecting that blame to others? In President Obama's case, his admissions of responsibility for governmental failures may have been

ineffectual because he often did so while blaming congressional intransigence, the actions of the previous administration, and world events. This particular mixture of presentational strategies may have undermined the benefits of blame claiming. Further work should disentangle these phenomena.

Fourth, future studies should explore the effectiveness of presentational strategies employed by unelected governmental actors embroiled in crises, such as agency heads, street-level bureaucrats, and private contractors. Governmental crises can ensnare non-elected actors, and harm to their public reputations can threaten their career prospects and standing among their peers (e.g., James et al. 2016; Moynihan 2012; Piatak, Mohr, and Leland 2017). 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 crises (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* (e.g., Ellis 1994; Hood 2011; Nielsen and Moynihan 2017). Further research should consider how unelected governmental actors approach blame games and whether they also benefit from claiming blame.

In the Cherry Tree Myth, George Washington, at the time 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 most famous 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 severe personal psychological costs for accepting blame and "stopping the buck," there are also great reputational benefits for doing so. 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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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.

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Study Descriptions and Question Wordings

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. 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 (Conjoint)

Study Description

We fielded our bridge collapse conjoint 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 attributes 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 (Conjoint)

Study Description

We fielded our budget shortfall conjoint 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 attributes 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 (Conjoint)

Study Description

We fielded our heat wave conjoint 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 attributes 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 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 model specifications. Here, we provide a general overview of our modeling strategies and discussion of how we coded our outcome measures.

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 our 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 (fielded on TAPS) and our bridge collapse, budget shortfall, and heat wave studies (fielded on MTurk) 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 our respondents ordered four-point scales. For example, when asked to indicate their approval for the executive’s handling of the governmental 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 different studies by coding our outcome measures in all of our studies as 1 if they evaluate the executive favorably (i.e., 1 if strongly or somewhat approve of the executive’s handling of the governmental crisis), and 0 otherwise. In this coding scheme, respondents in the flood study 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.¹ 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.

¹For an example, see Mondak, Jeffrey J. 2001. “Developing Valid Knowledge Scales.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(1), 224-238. “Don’t know” answers could also be considered attrition, as respondents are choosing not to provide an affirmative response. Failure to account for attrition—in this case, failure to account for “don’t know” answers—can lead to biased estimates of treatment effects. For more information on how failure to appropriately account for attrition can induce bias in experiments, see Montgomery, Jacob M., Brendan Nyhan, and Michelle Torres. 2018. “How Conditioning on Posttreatment Variables Can Ruin Your Experiment and What to Do about It.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 62(2), 760-775.

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

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.29* (0.02)	0.52* (0.03)	0.42* (0.03)	0.38* (0.03)
Blame Claim	0.23* (0.03)	0.20* (0.04)	0.20* (0.04)	0.18* (0.04)
Blame Deflect	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.22* (0.04)	-0.12* (0.04)	-0.15* (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* (0.02)	0.35* (0.03)	0.35* (0.03)	0.34* (0.03)
Blame Claim	0.15* (0.02)	0.16* (0.04)	0.15* (0.04)	0.21* (0.04)
Blame Deflect	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.15* (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—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.4: 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.5: Governmental Crises Models—Handling (Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	−0.88* (0.09)	0.10 (0.12)	−0.32* (0.11)	−0.49* (0.12)
Blame Claim	0.99* (0.12)	0.85* (0.17)	0.79* (0.17)	0.73* (0.17)
Blame Deflect	−0.30* (0.13)	−0.93* (0.17)	−0.54* (0.17)	−0.74* (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.6: Governmental Crises Models—Vote (Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	−1.18* (0.09)	−0.62* (0.12)	−0.61* (0.12)	−0.67* (0.12)
Blame Claim	0.69* (0.12)	0.65* (0.17)	0.61* (0.17)	0.88* (0.17)
Blame Deflect	−0.24 (0.14)	−0.20 (0.18)	−0.42* (0.18)	−0.79* (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.7: Governmental Crises Models—Handling (Ordinal Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Blame Claim	1.02* (0.13)	1.01* (0.16)	0.84* (0.16)	0.69* (0.16)
Blame Deflect	-0.50* (0.13)	-0.63* (0.15)	-0.54* (0.16)	-0.82* (0.16)
Strongly disapprove—Disapprove	-1.93* (0.12)	-1.79* (0.13)	-2.47* (0.15)	-2.04* (0.14)
Disapprove—Approve	0.16 (0.10)	0.01 (0.11)	0.32* (0.11)	0.44* (0.11)
Approve—Strongly approve	2.64* (0.13)	3.15* (0.18)	3.05* (0.18)	3.15* (0.19)
Log Likelihood	-1560.81	-971.70	-918.00	-951.91
Num. obs.	1352	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.8: Governmental Crises Models—Vote (Ordinal Logistic Regression)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Blame Claim	0.73* (0.12)	0.65* (0.15)	0.56* (0.16)	0.78* (0.16)
Blame Deflect	-0.37* (0.12)	-0.19 (0.15)	-0.42* (0.15)	-0.86* (0.16)
Very unlikely—Somewhat unlikely	-0.80* (0.09)	-0.97* (0.11)	-1.73* (0.13)	-1.49* (0.12)
Somewhat unlikely—Somewhat likely	0.65* (0.09)	0.62* (0.11)	0.58* (0.11)	0.60* (0.11)
Somewhat likely—Very likely	2.51* (0.12)	3.32* (0.19)	3.05* (0.18)	3.17* (0.19)
Log Likelihood	-1770.01	-1051.21	-995.47	-998.39
Num. obs.	1392	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.9: Flood Study Models—Handling (Multinomial Logistic Regression)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Intercept	−1.49* (0.15)	−0.43* (0.10)	−0.38* (0.10)	−2.33* (0.22)
Blame Claim	−0.18 (0.24)	0.06 (0.16)	0.85* (0.14)	1.65* (0.26)
Blame Deflect	0.72* (0.21)	0.73* (0.15)	0.10 (0.16)	0.15 (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 don’t 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.10: Flood Study Models—Vote (Multinomial Logistic Regression)

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely
Intercept	−0.43* (0.11)	−0.36* (0.11)	−0.57* (0.12)	−1.85* (0.19)
Blame Claim	−0.35* (0.17)	0.11 (0.15)	0.60* (0.15)	0.79* (0.24)
Blame Deflect	0.63* (0.16)	0.44* (0.16)	0.06 (0.18)	0.27 (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 don’t 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.

Conjoint Analyses

We use our conjoint analyses to examine whether our blame claiming effects persist in more complex information environments. One way to assess this is to estimate the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for each unique level of each unique attribute (except for the baseline attribute-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.11 and SI.12 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 attribute by attribute interaction (the three levels of the response attribute by the three levels of the severity attribute), but the second such conditional effect requires additional data coding. In each of our conjoint 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 is easier to do graphically than in a regression table, we present in Figures SI.1 through SI.4 the effects of blame claiming and blame deflecting under each unique attribute-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.1, 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 attribute. 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 attribute-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 conjoint analyses remain consistent across these alternative specifications.

Table SI.11: Conjoint Experiments Models—Handling (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	Bridge Collapse	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.45*** (0.04)	0.45*** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.04)	0.34*** (0.06)	0.36*** (0.04)	0.31*** (0.06)
Blame Claim	0.26*** (0.04)	0.35*** (0.08)	0.28*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.08)	0.18*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.08)
Blame Deflect	-0.13** (0.04)	-0.19* (0.08)	0.04 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.05 (0.09)
Moderate Severity	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.07)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.07)
High Severity	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.18** (0.07)	0.01 (0.04)	0.04 (0.07)
Blame Claim x Moderate Severity				0.06 (0.10)		-0.03 (0.10)
Blame Claim x High Severity				0.18 (0.10)		-0.11 (0.10)
Blame Deflect x Moderate Severity				0.13 (0.10)		-0.08 (0.10)
Blame Deflect x High Severity				0.13 (0.10)		0.04 (0.10)
Copartisan	0.02 (0.04)	0.10 (0.07)	0.06 (0.04)	0.09 (0.07)	0.04 (0.04)	0.10 (0.07)
Noncopartisan	0.00 (0.04)	0.05 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.07 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.07)
Blame Claim x Copartisan		-0.16 (0.10)		-0.09 (0.10)		-0.10 (0.10)
Blame Claim x Noncopartisan		-0.23* (0.10)		-0.19 (0.10)		-0.04 (0.10)
Blame Deflect x Copartisan		-0.09 (0.10)		-0.01 (0.10)		-0.06 (0.10)
Blame Deflect x Noncopartisan		0.05 (0.09)		-0.11 (0.10)		-0.04 (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 conjoint 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 attribute (executive response, severity, and the correspondence between the party identifications of the respondent and the executive) presented to the respondents.

Table SI.12: Conjoint Experiments Models—Vote (OLS with Binary Outcome)

	Bridge Collapse	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave	Heat Wave
Intercept	0.34*** (0.04)	0.30*** (0.05)	0.29*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.05)	0.32*** (0.04)	0.32*** (0.06)
Blame Claim	0.26*** (0.04)	0.40*** (0.08)	0.20*** (0.04)	0.25*** (0.08)	0.18*** (0.04)	0.21* (0.08)
Blame Deflect	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.08)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.11 (0.08)
Moderate Severity	-0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.07)
High Severity	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.05 (0.07)
Blame Claim x Moderate Severity		-0.06 (0.10)		-0.02 (0.09)		0.06 (0.09)
Blame Claim x High Severity		-0.02 (0.10)		0.18 (0.10)		-0.20* (0.10)
Blame Deflect x Moderate Severity		-0.03 (0.10)		0.14 (0.10)		-0.03 (0.09)
Blame Deflect x High Severity		0.02 (0.09)		0.01 (0.09)		0.01 (0.10)
Copartisan	0.08* (0.04)	0.17** (0.06)	0.13** (0.04)	0.14* (0.07)	0.12** (0.04)	0.17* (0.07)
Noncopartisan	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.04)	0.01 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.13 (0.06)
Blame Claim x Copartisan		-0.16 (0.09)		-0.08 (0.10)		-0.12 (0.10)
Blame Claim x Noncopartisan		-0.27** (0.10)		-0.22* (0.09)		0.15 (0.10)
Blame Deflect x Copartisan		-0.12 (0.09)		0.03 (0.10)		-0.03 (0.09)
Blame Deflect x Noncopartisan		0.04 (0.09)		-0.04 (0.09)		0.12 (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 conjoint 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 attribute (executive response, severity, and the correspondence between the party identifications of the respondent and the executive) presented to the respondents.

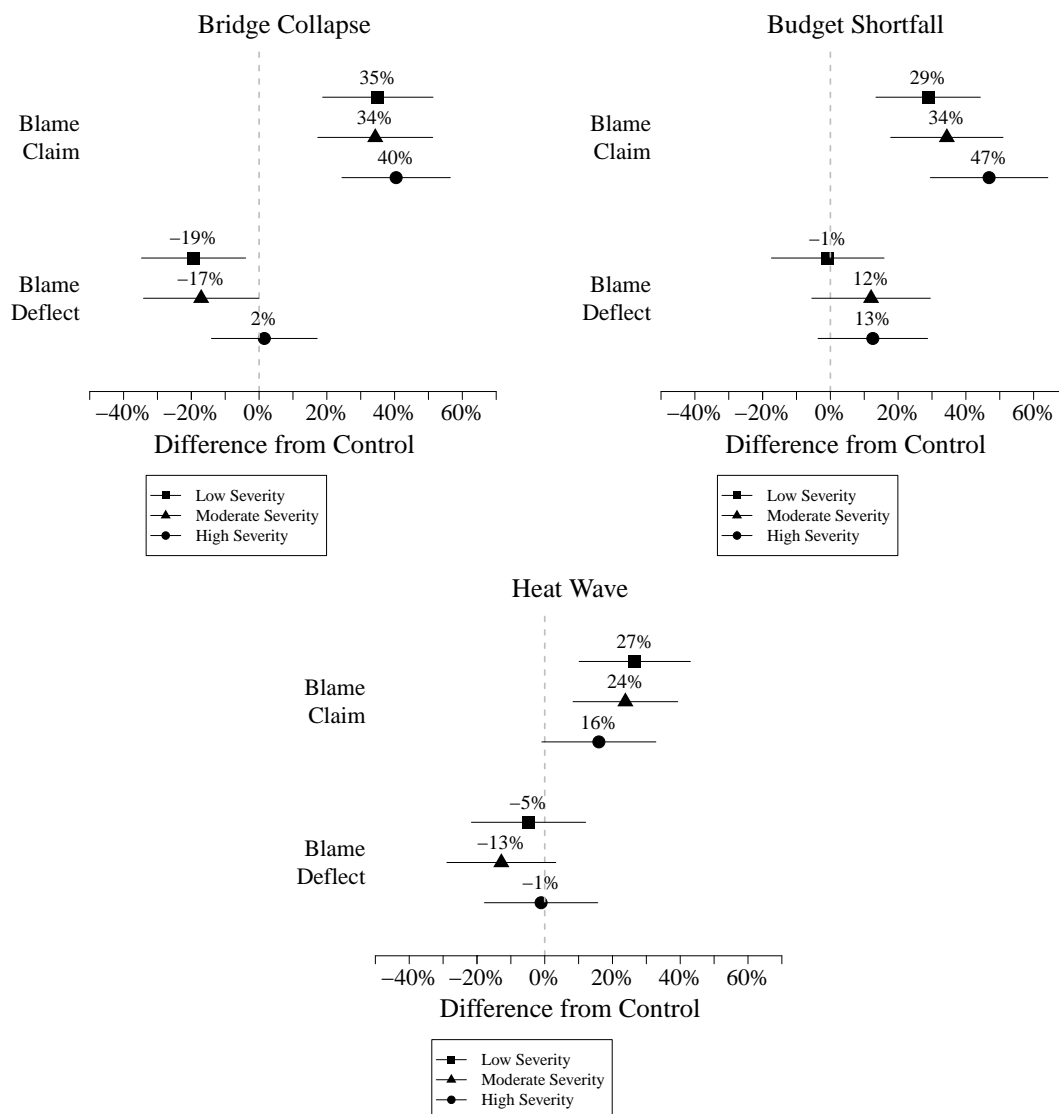


Figure SI.1: **Approval of Elected Executives' Handling of Crises (Response and Severity)**. Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on approval of the elected executive's handling of the crisis conditional 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.

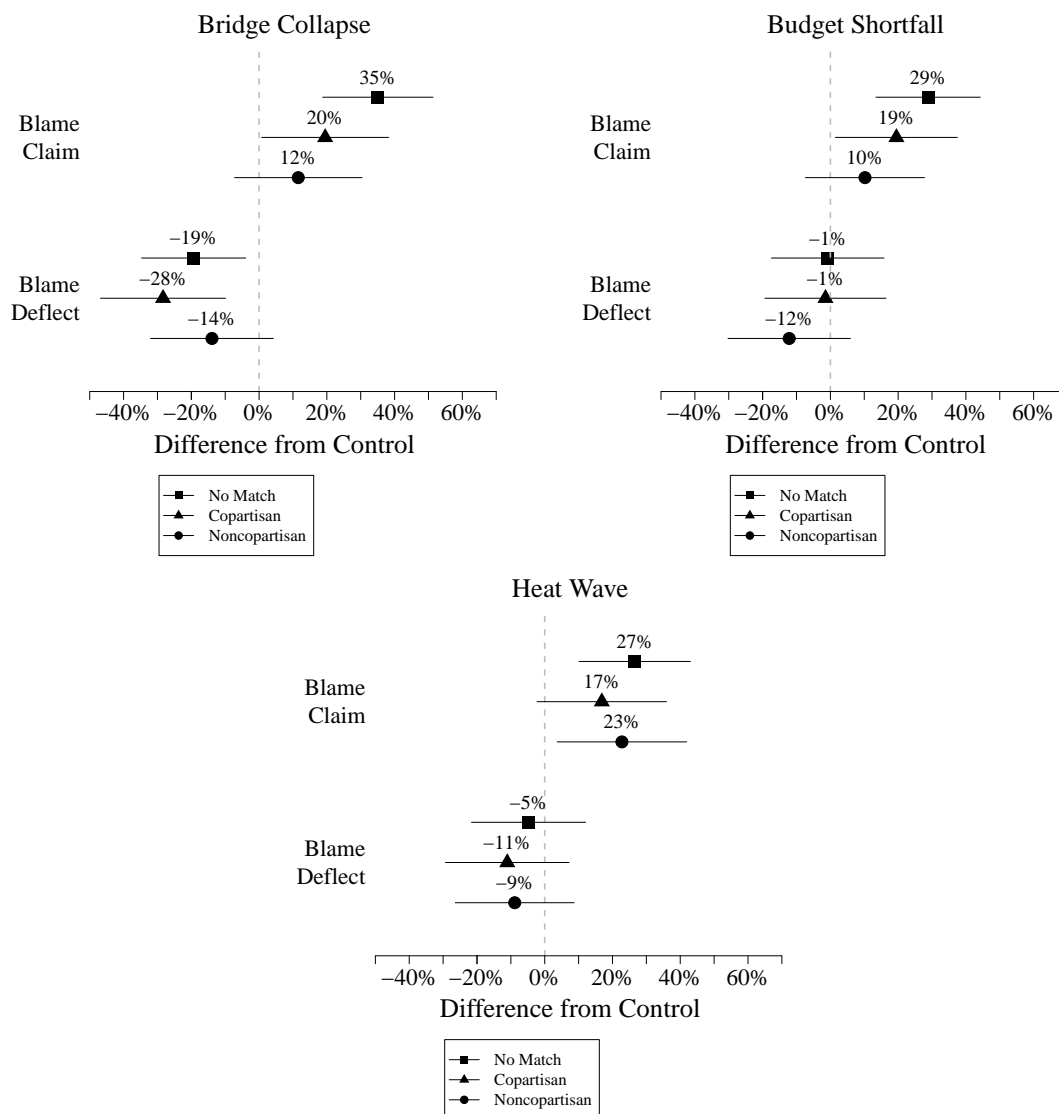


Figure SI.2: **Approval of Elected Executives' Handling of Crises (Response and Partisanship)**. Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on approval of the elected executive's handling of the crisis conditional 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.

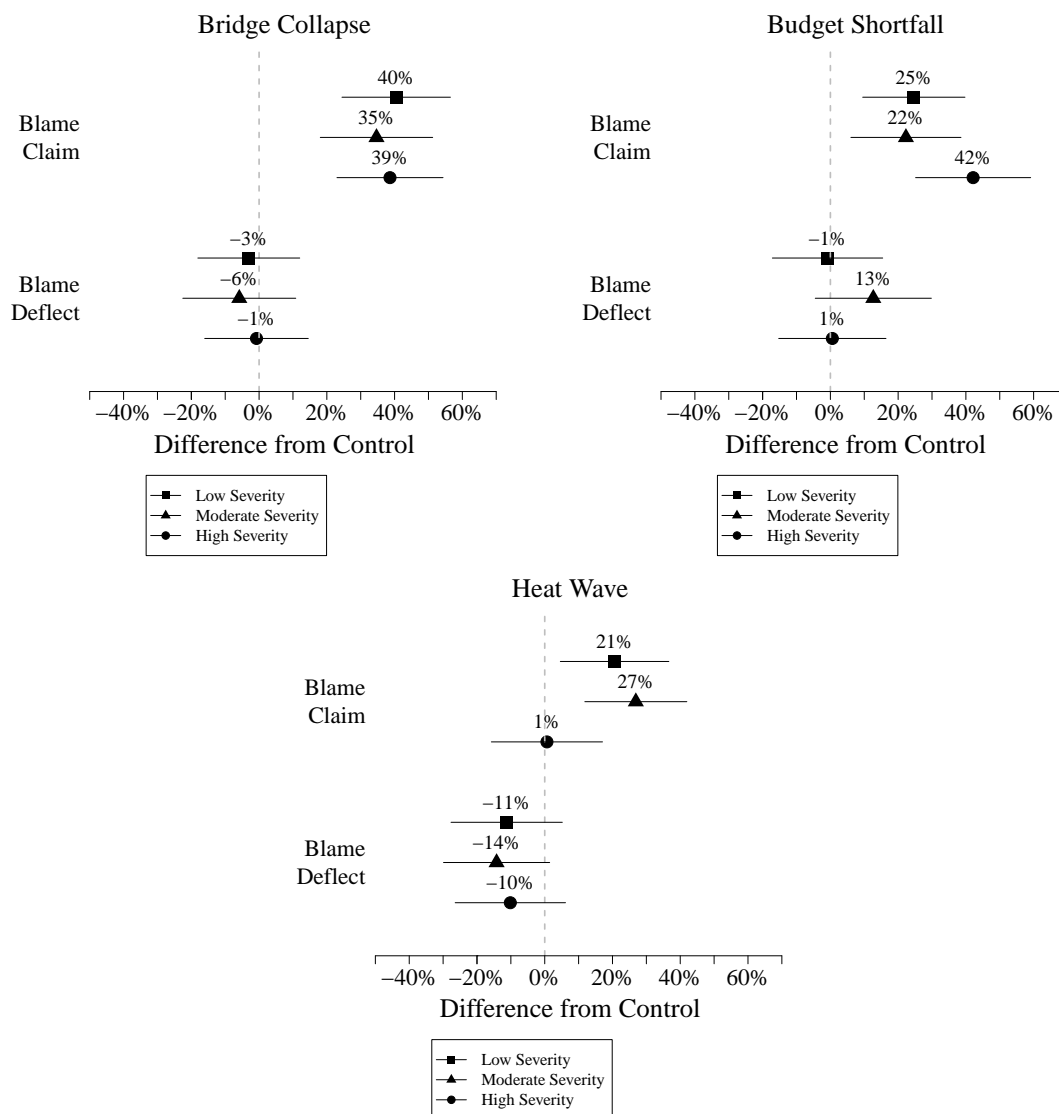


Figure SI.3: **Likelihood of Voting for Elected Executives (Response and Severity)**. Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on likelihood of voting for the elected executive in the next election conditional 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.

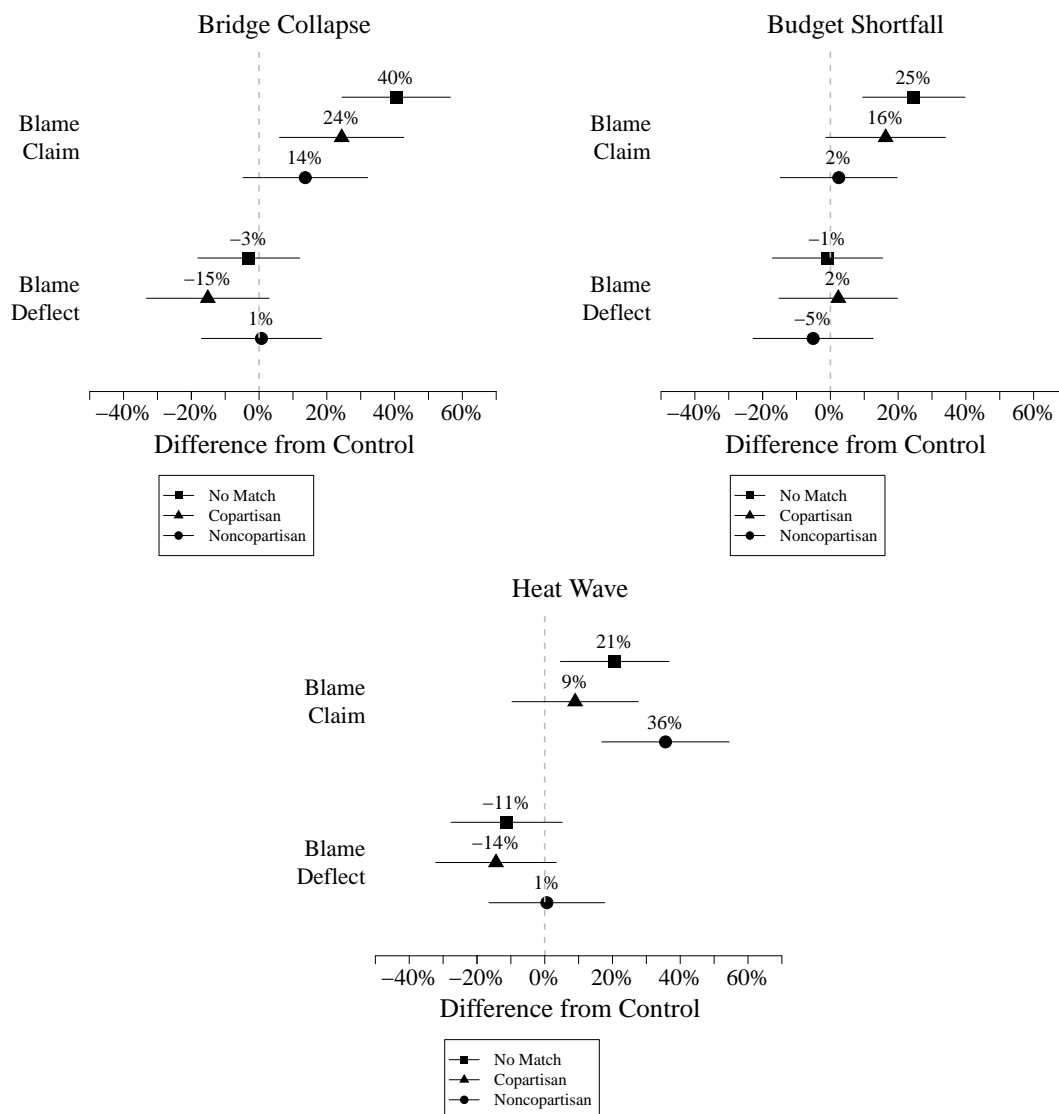


Figure SI.4: **Likelihood of Voting for Elected Executives (Response and Partisanship).** Linear regression coefficients for conditional average marginal component effects (conditional AMCEs) of blame claiming and blame deflecting on likelihood of voting for the elected executive in the next election 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 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 modeling strategies and a brief discussion of how we coded our outcome measures.

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 our 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).

Table SI.13: 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.14: 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.15: 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.16: 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.17: Flint Study Models—Vote (Multinomial Logistic Regression)

	Remain in office	Not sure
Intercept	−1.31* (0.19)	−0.76* (0.16)
Blame Claim	0.65* (0.25)	0.18 (0.22)
Blame Appointee	−0.17 (0.28)	−0.09 (0.23)
Blame Expert	0.09 (0.28)	0.12 (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 character 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 character 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 et al. 2011, 770-771). In order to assess the robustness of the ACME, the sensitivity analysis proposed by Imai et al. (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 character 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 character 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 statistical 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 character 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 character 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 $\alpha = 0.93$). 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.18: Causal Mediation Regressions (Traits on Treatment)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	1.44* (0.08)	2.46* (0.06)	2.46* (0.05)	2.46* (0.05)
Blame Claim	1.15* (0.12)	0.53* (0.08)	0.59* (0.08)	0.50* (0.08)
Blame Deflect	-0.19 (0.12)	-0.23* (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.34* (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' traits 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.19: Causal Mediation Regressions (Approval on Treatment and Traits)

	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)
Character 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 dichotomous 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 traits; see the notes in Table SI.18 for details on the coding of character valence. The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.20: Causal Mediation Regressions (Vote on Treatment and Traits)

	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)
Character 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 dichotomous 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 traits; see the notes in Table SI.18 for details on the coding of character valence. The model in the first column includes survey weights; results remain substantively unchanged when weights are not included.

Table SI.21: Causal Mediation Analysis—Traits and Approval

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood (N=1907)	ACME	0.09	[0.06, 0.13]
	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 (N=875)	ACME	0.15	[0.10, 0.19]
	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 (N=875)	ACME	0.16	[0.12, 0.21]
	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 (N=871)	ACME	0.14	[0.09, 0.18]
	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.18 and SI.19. Only respondents for whom we have outcome measures for approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis and 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.22: Causal Mediation Analysis—Traits and Vote

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood (N=1899)	ACME	0.11	[0.07, 0.15]
	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 (N=874)	ACME	0.17	[0.12, 0.21]
	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 (N=874)	ACME	0.17	[0.13, 0.22]
	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 (N=869)	ACME	0.14	[0.10, 0.19]
	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.18 and SI.20. Only respondents for whom we have outcome measures for approval of the executive's handling of the governmental crisis and 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).

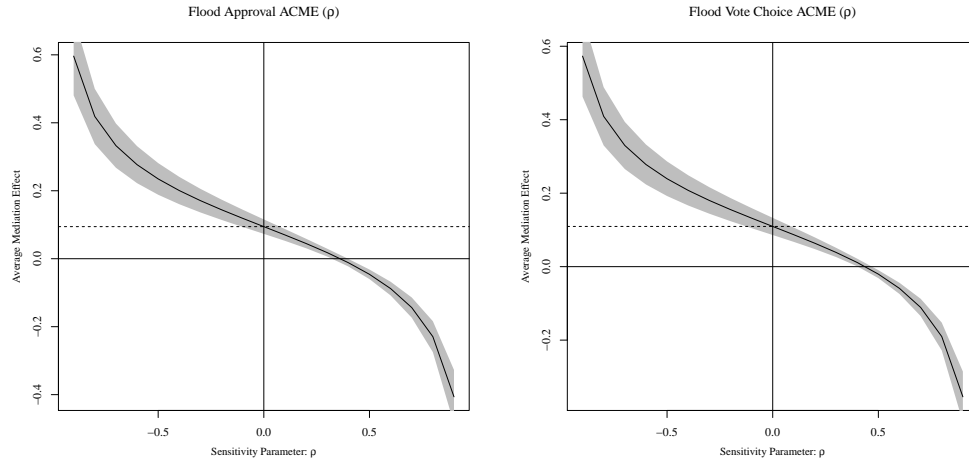


Figure SI.5: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Flood Experiment (Mediated Effect of Character Valence)**. Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval $[-1,1]$. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right panels present 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.

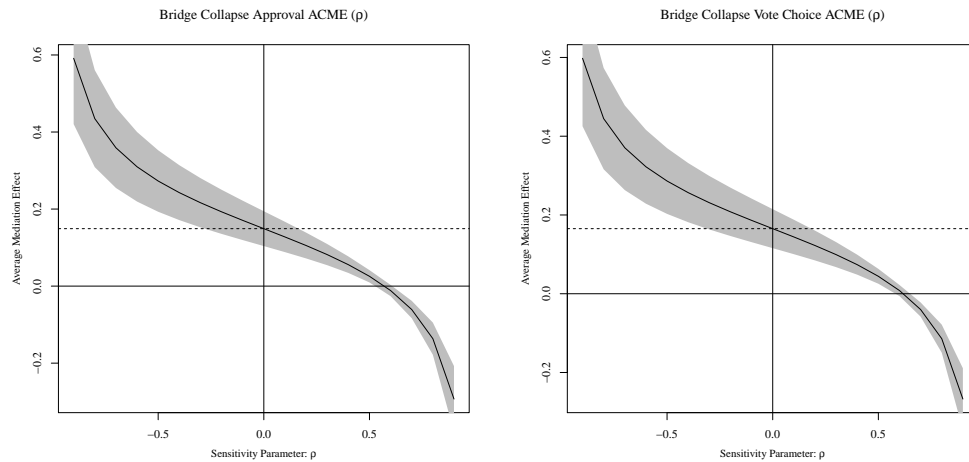


Figure SI.6: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Bridge Collapse Experiment (Mediated Effect of Character Valence)**. Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval $[-1,1]$. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right 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.

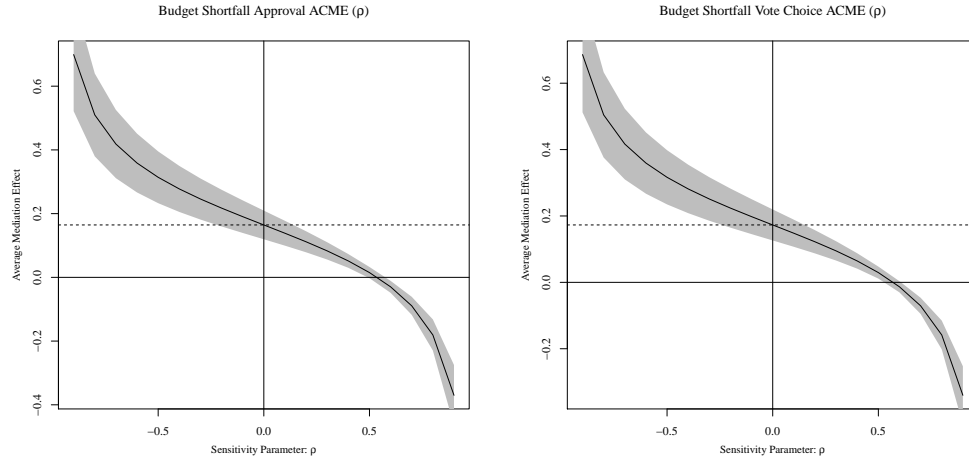


Figure SI.7: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Budget Shortfall Experiment (Mediated Effect of Character Valence)**. Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval $[-1,1]$. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right 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.

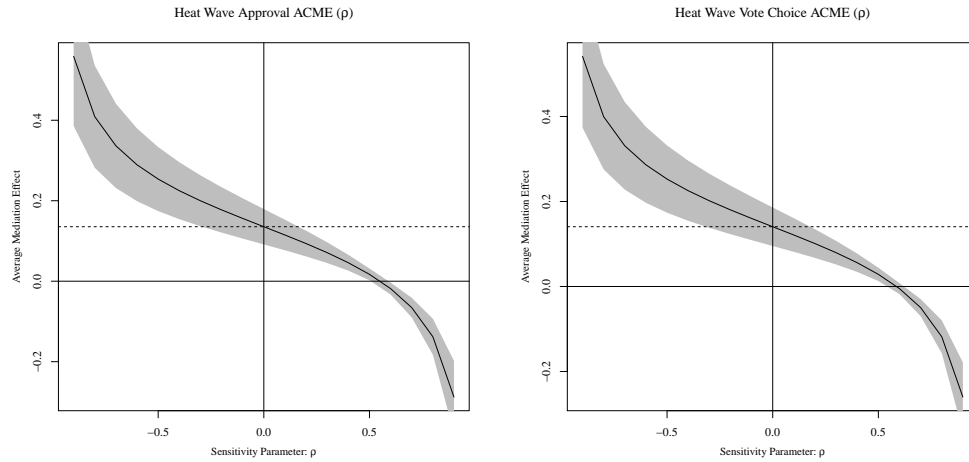


Figure SI.8: **Sensitivity Analysis of Causal Mediation Analysis for Heat Wave Experiment (Mediated Effect of Character Valence)**. Solid line (with 95% confidence interval) indicates ACME given any value of ρ on the interval $[-1,1]$. Dotted line indicates ACME when $\rho = 0$. Left and right panels 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.23: Causal Mediation Regressions (Blameworthiness on Treatment)

	Flood	Bridge Collapse	Budget Shortfall	Heat Wave
Intercept	18.89* (0.75)	31.80* (1.52)	46.77* (1.48)	30.09* (1.50)
Blame Claim	−0.35 (1.03)	6.57* (2.15)	4.73* (2.15)	2.66 (2.17)
Blame Deflect	4.69* (1.06)	−0.94 (2.20)	−6.29* (2.14)	4.36* (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.24: 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 dichotomous 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.25: 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 dichotomous 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.26: Causal Mediation Analysis—Blameworthiness and Approval

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood (N=1925)	ACME	-0.01	[-0.02, 0.00]
	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 (N=878)	ACME	0.01	[-0.02, 0.03]
	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 (N=879)	ACME	0.03	[0.01, 0.05]
	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 (N=879)	ACME	-0.03	[-0.05, -0.00]
	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.23 and SI.24. 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.27: Causal Mediation Analysis—Blameworthiness and Vote

Context	Causal Quantity	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Flood (N=1918)	ACME	-0.01	[-0.03, -0.00]
	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 (N=877)	ACME	0.01	[-0.02, 0.03]
	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 (N=878)	ACME	0.03	[0.01, 0.05]
	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 (N=877)	ACME	-0.03	[-0.05, -0.00]
	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.23 and SI.25. 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).

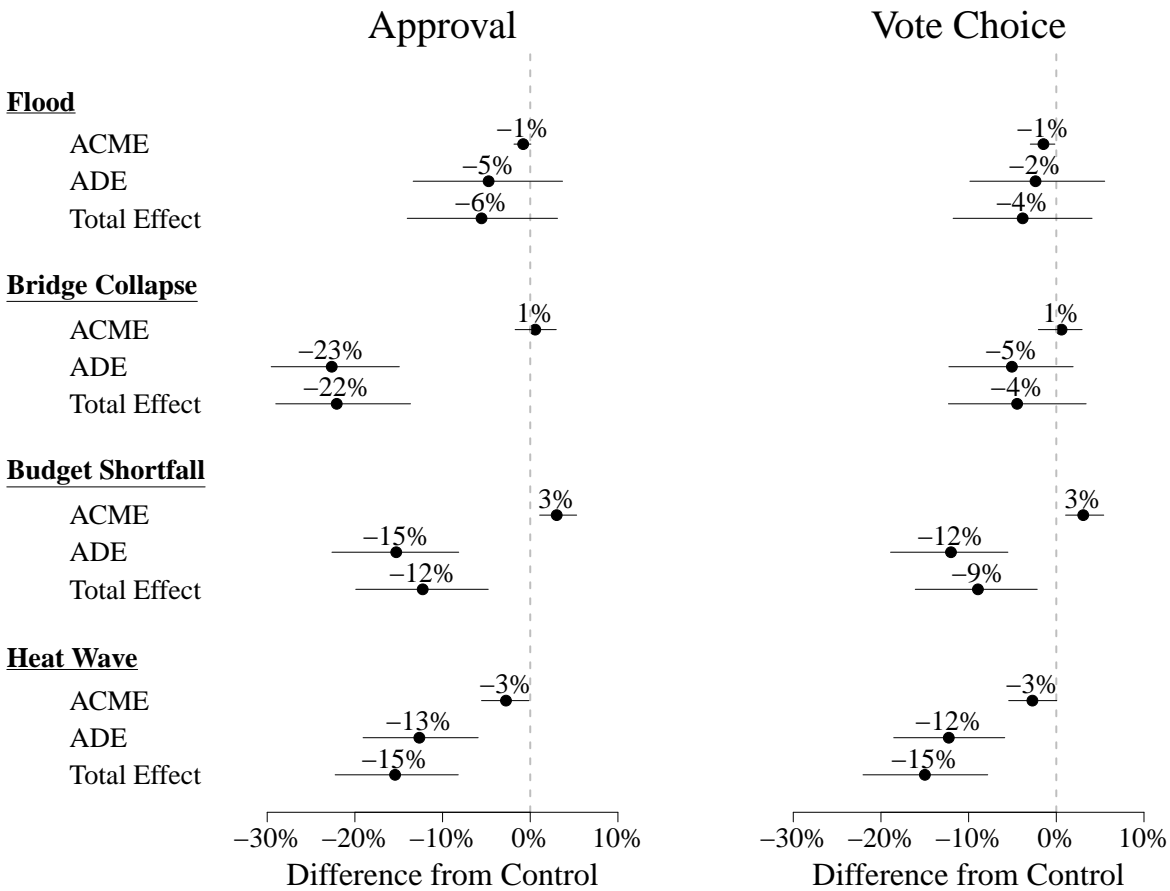


Figure SI.9: **Causal Mediation Analysis (Mediated Effect of Blameworthiness)**. Estimated average causal medication effects (ACME), average direct effects (ADE), and average total effects for respondents in the blame deflecting condition relative to respondents in the control condition across each of 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,² 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.³ While some scholars argue that covariate imbalance does not require any analytical adjustments,⁴ 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.⁵ 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.

²Gerber, Alan S and Arceneaux, Kevin and Boudreau, Cheryl and Dowling, Conor and Hillygus, Sunshine and Palfrey, Thomas and Biggers, Daniel R and Hendry, David J. 2014. "Reporting Guidelines for Experimental Research: A Report from the Experimental Research Section Standards Committee." *Journal of Experimental Political Science*. 1(01): 81-98.

³Gerber, Alan S and Donald P Green. 2012, *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. WW Norton.

⁴Mutz, Diana C and Robin Pemantle. 2015. "Standards for Experimental Research: Encouraging a Better Understanding of Experimental Methods." *Journal of Experimental Political Science*. 2(02): 109-138.

⁵Gerber, Alan S and Donald P Green. 2012, *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. WW Norton.

Table SI.28: Respondent Descriptive Characteristics

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>TAPS</u>	MTurk (Main Analyses)	MTurk (Factorial Design)	MTurk (Flint)
<u>Age</u>				
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%
<u>Gender</u>				
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%
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>				
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%
<u>Education</u>				
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%
<u>Income (TAPS)</u>				
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%			
<u>Income (MTurk)</u>				
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%
<u>Party Identification</u>				

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>TAPS</u>	<u>MTurk (Main Analyses)</u>	<u>MTurk (Factorial Design)</u>	<u>MTurk (Flint)</u>
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%
<u>Ideology</u>				
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%