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The Intertemporal Tradeoff in Mobilizing Support for War

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How do leaders' statements about conflict duration affect public support for their handling of war? We build on two disparate strands of prior research to theorize how approval depends on perceptions of both war's expected value and of the leader themself. The information available for making these evaluations changes over time. The public relies on elite cues in early stages of war. Cues predicting a short conflict mobilize support. As conflict unfolds, the actual conditions provide information about the accuracy of earlier statements, while subsequent messages provide information about the consistency of these statements. Both allow the public to learn about the leader. Inaccuracy and inconsistency negatively affect evaluations of the leader and reduce support for war. Using a panel survey experiment to test these predictions, we find that public approval is highest when (1) the leader initially predicts a short conflict and (2) when initial predictions prove accurate. The results reveal an intertemporal tradeoff for leaders. Predicting a short conflict is optimal for mobilizing support but potentially suboptimal for retaining that support.

We need to set public expectations that this is going to be difficult and it's going to take time.

—President Obama[1]

Democratic leaders worry about securing public support for their military actions abroad (Baum 2004; Canes-Wrone 2006; Foyle 1999; Holsti 2004; Reiter and Stam 2002). Thus, they consistently make public speeches at the start of, and throughout, military conflicts. These speeches include two common elements: invocations of the high stakes of the conflict and proclamations of the inevitability of military victory. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt delivered the well-known "Day of Infamy Speech" in which he stated that "[t]here is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger . . . American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory" (Roosevelt 1941). Leaders believe, for fairly obvious reasons, that stressing the importance of the conflict and the positive prospects for victory builds support for war. Indeed, prior research shows that public perceptions of conflict stakes (Eichenberg 2005; Jentleson 1992; Larson 1996) and victory expectations (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006, 2009; Kull and Ramsay 2001) affect public support.

We focus on a third prominent element of leaders' speeches, one found at the onset of, as well as throughout, military conflicts: statements about the expected duration of the conflict. Unlike statements about stakes and expectations of victory, claims about conflict length vary in content both within and across conflicts.[2] For instance, when initiating airstrikes against the Islamic State, Prime Minister David Cameron said, "We are going to need to be patient and persistent. This is going to take time" (Cameron 2015).[3] Similarly, in the early months of the Korean War, President Harry Truman said, "We know that it will take a hard, tough fight to halt the invasion, and to drive the Communists back. The invaders have been provided with enough equipment and supplies for a long campaign" (Truman 1950). In contrast, in an address to the nation announcing military action in the Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush said, "I instructed our military commanders to take every necessary step to prevail as quickly as possible . . . I'm hopeful that this fighting will not go on for long" (Bush 1991). How does this variation in leader statements about conflict duration affect public support at the start of and throughout a military conflict? We provide theory and evidence to answer this question and in doing so provide a better understanding of a key point of variation in prominent speeches about military conflict.[4]

We argue that evaluations of two factors shape public support for war: (1) the expected and realized net value of conflict and (2) perceptions of the leader themself. The information available for making such evaluations changes as the

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[1] Obama made this statement in reference to the 2009 troop increase in Afghanistan (Woodward 2011, 301–2).

[2] Nearly all leader statements about war invoke the high stakes and inevitability of victory. The motive for making such statements is immediate as the public would punish a leader for entering a low-stakes conflict that will likely be lost. This is not to say that these are not important factors; they are, and public perceptions of them vary. We simply do not observe variation in messaging on them.

[3] President Obama similarly stated, "It will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL" (Obama 2014).

[4] While the concepts apply to democratic leaders generally, this article focuses on the United States as a useful case to explore the relationship between leader statements and public support for war.

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conflict unfolds. At the start, the public has little information from which to form judgments other than the statements of their leaders. Accordingly, these statements will shape public perceptions of both the conflict to come and of the leader's attributes. Initially predicting a short conflict, as opposed to a long one, rallies public support because such statements lead them to anticipate lower costs of war. They also generate more favorable perceptions of the leader by communicating, for example, their competence or optimism.

However, over time the public acquires information from two additional sources. The first is the conflict itself. Information about the conflict, disseminated via news coverage, allows the public to learn about the actual conditions of the conflict and about the leader by evaluating the accuracy of their earlier statements. This latter point is crucial. The public learns *about* the leader *from* the conflict's actual conditions. We expect inaccuracy reduces public support as it generates negative evaluations of the leader. Our account thus highlights divergent effects of leader statements about war duration across time. Predicting a short conflict helps rally public approval but hinders the ability to sustain it if the prediction is proven incorrect. As the conflict unfolds, the public also acquires information from a second source: subsequent leader messages. These statements reveal whether the leader is consistent or switching predictions. Building on prior research that highlights the steep costs associated with inconsistencies across policy statements (Tomz and Van Houweling, n.d.), we hypothesize that the public rewards consistency in statements about expected war duration.

We use a panel survey experiment to assess these hypotheses (Gartner 2008; Kertzer 2016). The experiment employs a treatment regime in which leader predictions of a shorter or longer conflict are assigned before and during a hypothetical conflict. This design captures the dynamic and iterated nature of messaging that occurs throughout actual wars. It allows us to test for the hypothesized divergent effects of different leader messaging sequences across time. Moreover, a survey experiment allows us to hold constant other salient factors about a conflict—such as the stakes, costs, and the nature of the adversary—which could confound observational studies on this topic.

Our findings are threefold. First, preconflict leader predictions of a short conflict increase initial public backing. This confirms our expectation regarding information asymmetries and public assessments. Second, incorrect predictions decrease public approval due to negative evaluations of the leader themself. Taken together, the results illustrate the divergent effects across time of predicting a short conflict. Conditional on conflict being long, it is better—in terms of sustaining public support—for leaders to have initially predicted a long conflict. Third, and contrary to our hypothesis, conditional on the initial message about war duration being incorrect, public support remains unaffected by whether the leader repeats or changes predictions in subsequent messages. Once a leader loses approval due to initial inaccuracy, they face difficulty in recovering that support. Two follow-up experiments help pin down the causal mechanisms underpinning the first and second findings.

The experimental results provide evidence that leaders face an intertemporal tradeoff when determining whether to claim that war will last for a longer or shorter period of time. Stating that a conflict will be quickly over provides a rally effect, but it risks future punishment if the war drags on. This pair of findings suggests that in some circumstances leaders will have incentives to claim that a conflict will be short—in order to gain the public support necessary to enter conflict—even if they know this prediction could be inaccurate.[5] We suggest that these incentives will prove strongest when leaders face a malleable public and when public opinion constrains leaders' choice sets for military action.[6]

In the next section, we theorize the interactive relationship between elite cues and information revealed as conflicts proceed. We hypothesize that as information about the conflict and the leader becomes increasingly available, public support is highest for leaders who made correct predictions, lower for those who got it wrong, and lower still for those who were both wrong and inconsistent in their statements. The following section presents a panel experiment that tests these hypotheses. We then discuss our results, evaluate causal mechanisms, and expand upon the conditions that make the intertemporal tradeoff highlighted the most relevant. The conclusion links our findings to the politics of setting expectations and retrospective evaluation more generally, while noting areas for future inquiry.

An Interactive Theory of Messages and Events

How do statements about conflict length affect the public's evaluation of how well a leader manages a conflict?[7] To answer this question, we draw insights from two countervailing strains of research on the determinants of public support for war. The first emphasizes the role of elite rhetoric (Berinsky 2007, 2009; Zaller and Feldman 1992).[8] A public with limited knowledge about foreign policy (Almond 1950; Holsti 2004) responds to elite cues depending on the unanimity of these cues (Berinsky 2007), the partisanship of cue givers (see Bartels [2002] among others), or the costs suffered by the cue giver (Baum and Groeling 2009). This body of work views the public as either insufficiently informed, or insufficiently calculating, to decide whether or not to support a war based on a careful assessment of its costs and benefits.

The second strain of research, in contrast, emphasizes how the public rationally responds to both the expected and realized costs and benefits of a conflict. It holds that public perceptions of the net value of conflict are shaped by, variously, casualties (Gartner 2008; Gartner and Segura 2000; Mueller 1971, 1973),[9] the stakes of the conflict (Eichenberg 2005; Jentleson 1992; Larson 1996), and the probability of US victory (Gelpi et al. 2006, 2009; Kull and Ramsay 2001).[10]

[5] This could occur either because the leader intentionally misrepresents their true expectations or because they are truly uncertain about conflict length. This article largely brackets the strategic decision-making of the leader and instead highlights the incentive structure they confront.

[6] Executives, for instance in the United States, may face limited legal constraints on initiating many forms of military actions. However, they may confront political constraints in the form of widespread public or congressional disapproval (Baum 2004). This arguably occurred in the United Kingdom and the United States during deliberations about striking Syria in 2013.

[7] See Mueller (1973) and Berinsky and Druckman (2007) on the various measures of public support for war. We further discuss the validity of emphasizing approval of the leader's handling of war as opposed to alternatives (for example, evaluating whether war was a mistake) in a later section.

[8] For work mapping the boundaries of elite cues on public opinion in international politics, see Guisinger and Saunders (forthcoming).

[9] Broadly, as casualties increase, public support decreases. This inverse relationship between public support and casualties may be mechanically determined by casualty levels (Mueller 1971, 1973) or via a more nuanced accounting of marginal changes or trends in casualties (Gartner and Segura 2000; Gartner 2008).

[10] The probability of a US victory affects public backing for conflict or at least conditions the effects of casualties suffered (Gelpi et al. 2006, 2009; Kull and Ramsay 2001).

We integrate these literatures by emphasizing the interactive relationship between, on the one hand, elite cues about conflict duration and, on the other hand, the realized actual conditions of the conflict.[11] Consider the importance of elite cues at the outset of conflict in helping set public expectations. Elites enjoy asymmetric information advantages (Baum and Groeling 2010) about the likely nature of conflict. They have access to classified information (Chapman and Reiter 2004; Chapman 2009; Fang 2008), while the public, as noted above, tends to have very limited knowledge about foreign affairs. When a conflict starts, the public has little information with which to form opinions other than what it hears from elites. Consequently, leaders can make optimistic statements that help set the public's expectations about conflict length. The public responds to such statements given the dearth of information at that juncture.

In this low-information environment, we anticipate public support for the leader's handling of war is higher when they anticipate a short, as opposed to a long, war. Multiple mechanisms, which we empirically disentangle in subsequent sections, underpin this expectation. These mechanisms fall into the two broad classes noted above: perceptions of a conflict's actual conditions and perceptions of a leader's personal characteristics. Preconflict statements shape the public's views on either class of mechanisms. Each class of mechanisms sways public support for the leader's performance. Most intuitively, predicting a short war shapes public perceptions about war costs and/or the probability of victory, which mediate the relationship between predicted duration and public approval. Additionally, the prediction could alter public perceptions about the leader themself in ways that affect public approval. For instance, predicting a short conflict may indicate leader competence, which the public deems a favorable trait. In this case, favorable evaluations of the leader's personal traits (for instance, competence) mediate the relationship between predicted duration and public support for how the leader handles conflict.[12] Regardless of the mechanism, the public is more likely to rally in support of a conflict if the leader states it will be short rather than long.

H1: *Public support for conflict is greater, as assessed at the start of a conflict, when preconflict leader messages predict a short conflict as opposed to a long conflict.*

As conflict unfolds, information becomes increasingly available to the public. But what can or does the public learn from this new information? For Baum and Groeling (2010), the public is primarily learning about the conflict itself. This could concern casualty levels, the war's duration, or any indicator of the war's actual conditions. We build upon Baum and Groeling (2010) by theorizing that, as the conflict progresses, the public also learns about the leader. What the public learns about the leader affects overall support for the conflict. That is, there is an interaction between the content of prior statements and the observed events of the conflict. In our account, the public's response reflects (1) the actual indicators of whether a conflict is going well (as in Baum and Groeling [2010]) and (2) what these indicators reveal about the leader.

On the first point, what is the public learning about the actual conditions of the conflict as the conflict progresses? Unfolding events provide information about casualties, the probability of victory, and, most importantly given our focus on duration, that conflict is either over or ongoing. On the second point, the new information about the actual conditions of conflict also provides the public with information about the leader—such as, whether their predictions were accurate. Intra- or postwar evaluations of the leader's performance do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, evaluations depend on the interaction of the leader's past statements and the actual events of the war. We theorize that greater accuracy in earlier statements helps leaders sustain greater public support. The effect of inaccurate predictions on subsequent evaluations is not purely theoretical. When addressing the nation during the Vietnam War, President Nixon was acutely aware of public incredulity toward additional optimistic predictions that the war would soon end. He stated:

> I can assure you tonight with confidence that American involvement in this war is coming to an end. But can you believe this? I understand why this question is raised by many very honest and sincere people. Because many times in the past in this long and difficult war, actions have been announced from Washington which were supposed to lead to a reduction of American involvement in Vietnam. And over and over these actions resulted in more Americans going to Vietnam and more casualties in Vietnam (Nixon 1971).

Again, assessments of the leader's traits could mediate the relationship between prior statement accuracy and public support. Inaccurate predictions harm evaluations of their competence. Alternatively, the public could infer the leader is reckless or dishonest. Given that setting expectations for a short conflict boosts initial public support, the public, when confronted with evidence contrary to the leader's original statement, may infer the leader manipulated public opinion to facilitate the use of force. In sum, learning that the leader was wrong reduces public support for war due to a diminished view of their competence, prudence, and/or honesty. We do not anticipate that perceptions of the conflict's actual conditions (for example, costs) mediate the relationship between accuracy and public approval. That is, leader (in)accuracy affects public support by altering public perceptions of the leader's characteristics, not by priming alternative interpretations of the actual conditions of the conflict.

H2: *Public support for conflict, as assessed during and after a conflict, is greater when the leader correctly predicted conflict duration in initial statements.*

The downstream consequences of initial inaccuracy highlight how predicting a short conflict has divergent effects across time. Predicting a short conflict increases initial public support (Hypothesis 1). However, this is offset by the long-term consequences of potentially being proven incorrect, in which case it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain or gather public support (Hypothesis 2). The temporal dynamic we highlight relates to a retrospective evaluation of foreign policy outcomes, generally (Gelpi, Reifler and Feaver 2007; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987), and to the interaction of preconflict positions and realized conflict outcomes,

[11] By *material conditions*, we mean conflict-specific factors that the public observes that subsequently affect perceptions of the net value of conflict. In general, this is information about the conflict itself, rather than information pertinent for assessing the leader's attributes. This type of information could be directly about the casualties incurred in the conflict or other conflict-specific attributes that affect perceptions of either the stakes or probability of victory.

[12] The degree to which leader statements affect public perceptions of their characteristics depends upon the strength of the public's priors over these characteristics. New cues will have a limited effect on public perceptions if the leader already has extensive experience with the use of force. Partisanship may similarly limit the importance of this mechanism. On the role of personality trait evaluations more generally, see Glasgow and Alvarez (2000) and Peterson (2009).

more specifically (Gaubatz 1998; Schultz 1998). In our case, how leaders address the intertemporal tradeoff hinges upon the relative values of initial versus sustained public backing. We return to this point when discussing results.

Beyond acquiring information from the unfolding events, the public also acquires information from additional leader statements. Leaders make many statements throughout a conflict, not only at the start. Such statements allow the public to assess whether the leader is consistent or changing their prediction about the expected war duration. With each statement, leaders face a choice: reiterate prior messages or switch predictions. Most importantly for our case, imagine the leader incorrectly predicted a short conflict. In subsequent messages, they can stick with the prior message, remaining optimistic about duration, or switch positions and reset public expectations for a lengthy conflict.

Changing message to reset expectations has potential countervailing effects. Switching predictions carries several costs: (1) to the extent subsequent messages are credible, predicting a long conflict reduces the expected value of war, (2) the switch can further indicate the leader's initial incompetence, and (3) switching brings repositioning costs. Publics routinely punish political figures for inconsistency, labeling them flip-floppers. Steadfastness, even to an incredible position, avoids these inconsistency costs, which are only worth suffering if well over a majority of the public agrees with the newly adopted position (Tomz and Van Houweling, n.d.). However, messaging inconsistency during conflict differs from the more pejorative conception of flip-flopping. Conflict reveals new information that leaders can use to inform subsequent statements about conflict length. Inconsistency in this context may reflect ex-post acknowledgement. While harmful to public perception of a leader's competence, the inconsistency in itself likely carries lower costs than the typical conception of flip-flopping. Moreover, switching predictions can signal honesty in light of new information and restore credibility.[13]

After accounting for these countervailing effects, we predict steadfastness, conditional on initial statements proving incorrect, yields greater public support as opposed to switching predictions. Consistent with the emphasis of Tomz and Van Houweling (n.d.) on statement-to-statement consistency, we expect inconsistency costs trump the potential benefit of boosting perceptions of honesty.

H3: *Conditional on incorrectly predicting a short conflict at conflict's start, public support is greater, as assessed during and after the conflict, when the leader continues to predict conflict will be short.*

In sum, the hypotheses state that the public is initially more supportive of the war effort if the leader predicts it will be short (Hypothesis 1). As information about both the conflict and the leader become increasingly available, public approval is highest when initial predictions were correct but lower when incorrect (Hypothesis 2), and even lower when they were incorrect and when they change positions (Hypothesis 3).

Experimental Research Design

This section presents an experimental survey design to test the hypotheses.[14] Following Gartner (2008) and Kertzer (2016), the experiment consists of a panel survey with multiple rounds of treatment and outcome measurement. Respondents indicate whether they approve of the leader's handling of a hypothetical conflict before, during, and after the conflict. While our theory applies to leader messaging generally, we test it in the United States and refer to leaders as presidents throughout the experimental design and results sections. An important advantage of an experimental survey design is that it allows us to measure the effect of different statements about war duration while holding other conflict attributes constant—such as the stakes, costs, and adversary. Doing so addresses the potential concern that these other factors confound the effect of leader messages on public support.[15]

The panel survey design consists of five components. These include the following: (1) background information about the war, (2) the actual war length, which is randomized between long and short, (3) presidential messages about the expected war length, which are randomized between long and short, (4) factual updates that provide respondents contextual details about the war, and (5) outcome questions measuring approval of the president's handling of the war. Table 1 presents the sequence for each of these respective components of the panel survey across the *long-* and *short*-war scenarios. The remainder of this section discusses each of these components in turn and concludes with a description of the convenience sample used to field this experiment. We leave descriptions of two additional

Table 1. Sequence of the panel survey design in the long and short-war conditions

Years into war	*Long-war panel sequence*
0	Introductory Vignette
0	Presidential Message 1
0	Outcome Question 1
1	War Fact 1
2	War Fact 2
2	Presidential Message 2
2	Outcome Question 2
3	War Fact 3
4	War Fact 4
4	Presidential Message 3
4	Outcome Question 3
5	War Fact 5 (War Concludes)
5	Outcome Question 4
Months into war	***Short-war panel sequence***
0	Introductory Vignette
0	Presidential Message 1
0	Outcome Question 1
6	War Fact 1 (War Concludes)
6	Outcome Question 2

[13] Consistency considerations also relate to the literature on audience costs (see Fearon [1994] and Tomz [2007] among others), but differ in an important way. In our case, consistency refers to statement-to-statement discrepancies, whereas for audience costs, consistency refers to statement-to-action discrepancies. Our contention does not assume leaders are unable to justify a positional change. Conflict provides new information, which leaders can explicitly or implicitly marshal to support a departure from prior positions, as in Levendusky and Horowitz (2012).

[14] For other recent research at the intersection of conflict and survey experiments see, among others, Kreps (2010); Huff and Kruszewska (2016); Flynn and Stewart (n.d.); and Renshon, Yarhi-Milo, and Kertzer (n.d.).

[15] With observational data, we are unable to hold the stakes, costs, adversaries, and leader constant across conflicts. Consequently, it is difficult to disentangle the independent effects of each of these factors while parsing out the effect of messages.

experiments designed to identify causal mechanisms to subsequent sections.

Panel Survey Design

Respondents first receive a vignette that provides background information about a hypothetical conflict that the United States will enter. The vignette specifies attributes of the adversary and the extent of American military involvement. Doing so is intended to give respondents information approximating what they might know at the start of an actual military campaign. We go on to vary both the nature of the adversary and the extent of military involvement. It is important to note that the randomizations of these experimental attributes are not intended to be treatments. Rather, they allow us to vary the perceived stakes and costs of the conflict to explore the extent to which the results hold across a variety of conflict scenarios. The adversary varies between a country that has invaded a US ally,[16] an Islamic fundamentalist terror group,[17] and one with no information specified. The extent of military involvement varies between either the United States putting combat troops on the ground or simply responding (with no combat troops specified). In the main results, we keep the party of the president ambiguous. This follows prior research that explores how the actions of presidents affect public opinion (Tomz 2007). However, in a follow-on experiment discussed in section 3.1 of the supplementary files, we explicitly vary the partisanship of the president. Results from this follow-on experiment are substantively similar to the main effects presented in this article. We find no substantively or statistically significant effect heterogeneity across copartisanship status.[18] To summarize, respondents initially receive background information about a hypothetical conflict involving the United States. An example of one of the background information conditions reads as the following:[19]

> A hostile country, violating international law, has invaded an American ally, and the United States has been forced to send in combat troops in response.

As demonstrated in the supplementary files, results are largely consistent regardless of the specified adversary or whether there are boots on the ground. This mitigates concerns that the results hinge on conflict-specific attributes.

Types of War Duration: Long and Short

After receiving background information about the conflict, respondents are randomly assigned into either a long-war or short-war condition. The main distinction between these categories is the actual length of the war. The number of rounds the panel proceeds reflects the war's length. Short wars end after six months with only one round of presidential messaging. Long wars proceed for five years with three rounds of presidential messaging.

We choose six months as the duration for the short-war condition because the modal war is under one year (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). Thus, having the war last for less than one year conveys to respondents that the war was indeed short, and there is unambiguous evidence about whether the president was "correct" in his initial statement about the expected war duration. In choosing the length for the long war, we seek to convey a lengthy commitment noticeably longer than the short-war condition. In addition, we ensure that the war could feasibly occur within a single administration to avoid the possibility of a change in president. This constrains us to wars less than eight years but still long enough to be considered "long." Given these constraints, we choose five years. Doing so allows us to test our hypotheses without generating an unwieldy number of treatments or taxingly long survey. The downside is that the results cannot directly speak to wars with leadership changes, which may affect war duration and termination (Stanley 2009; Quiroz Flores 2012). Based on conclusions from Croco (2011), we surmise that new leaders representing a clean break from outgoing leaders likely escape punishment for past inaccuracies in predictions and for inconsistencies with prior leaders' statements. Incoming leaders closely associated with predecessors' policies may be held accountable for past statements.

Table 2. Potential presidential messages by round and actual war duration

	Actual war duration	
	Short	*Long*
Round 1 message	Short/long	Short/long
Round 2 message		Short/long
Round 3 message		Short/long

Note: In each round, the president sends a message that the war will either be short or long with these messages randomly assigned each round.

Presidential Messages About Expected War Duration: Long and Short

The initial randomization into the long-war or short-war category determines the number of presidential messages respondents observe. The short-war panel consists of a single round in which respondents receive a preconflict presidential message. The presidential message states that the war will be either long or short. Respondents are then told that the war ended after six months. In contrast, in the long-war panel, presidential messages occur at two-year increments throughout the war. For example, in the treatment sequence when the war is actually long, the first message is at the start of the war, the second is two years into the war, and the third is four years into the war. A final update indicates the war concludes after five years. We choose to have three total presidential messages in the long-war condition as this allows for presidential messaging at multiple stages of the conflict while avoiding a proliferation of treatment sequences. Table 2 depicts the possible messaging sequences given the actual war duration.[20]

In the messages, the president makes a statement about his confidence of eventual American military success and his expectations about the duration of the conflict. We select the content of the presidential messages to mirror real-world statements made by presidents and prominent members of their administrations while ensuring that the

[16] This scenario mirrors that presented in Tomz (2007).

[17] This scenario is intended to mirror more recent US conflicts.

[18] Levels of support do vary in the expected direction with copartisans being more supportive. See the supplementary files for additional details on the experimental design, analysis, and results.

[19] For a comprehensive list of the background information conditions, refer to the supplementary files.

[20] Three rounds of messaging in the long-war condition generates eight possible messaging sequences: short-short-short, short-short-long, and so forth. Coupled with the two short-war conditions, we have ten broad treatment categories. As detailed below, we field the experiment on one thousand respondents, yielding roughly one hundred respondents per treatment cell.

wording across treatment categories is as similar as possible. The only words varying across presidential messages are the specific statements about the expected war duration. A more detailed discussion of the speeches, which motivate the presidential messages used in the experiment, in conjunction with the remaining presidential messages for the long-war treatment condition, are presented in the supplementary files. The presidential message at the start of the war for both the long- and short-duration categories is as follows:

> As part of the speech announcing the initiation of military action, the president made the following statement: "With confidence in our armed forces—with the determination of our people—we will triumph. [I can't tell you if the conflict will last weeks or months, but it certainly isn't going to last any longer than that.] *or* [I can't tell you if the conflict will last one year or more, but it certainly isn't going to be a matter of weeks or months.]"

Presenting the Facts: Updating Respondents about the Conflict

Interspersed with the presidential messages throughout the war, respondents receive factual updates providing information about the conflict. These updates are modeled on material found in actual newspaper articles written throughout recent US military conflicts. They serve two purposes.[21] First, they give respondents the sense that the war is ongoing and that the United States is still involved in the conflict. In particular, in the long-war panel, the fact updates reinforce the idea that the war is indeed "long." This allows respondents to evaluate whether the president was correct in earlier messages about the expected conflict length. Second, the fact updates provide information that there are ongoing costs associated with the conflict. Below is an example fact update. The remainder of the fact updates, which we tailor to reflect whether troops were put on the ground, are presented in the supplementary files.

> One year into the war: An army helicopter attached to the 101st Airborne Division was shot down, killing the two pilots, the American military said. It was the twenty-fourth helicopter crash suffered by American forces since the military conflict began one year ago.

How Was the President's Handling of the War?

After each sequence of presidential messages and fact updates, we ask respondents for their impression of the president's handling of the conflict. We focus on the president's handling of the war, rather than support for either the war or the president more generally, for two reasons. First, the approach is consistent with public opinion polls throughout wartime[22] and prior research on this topic.[23] The implicit assumption in asking the question this way is that the president, and policymakers more generally, care not only about support for the war but also how this support relates to opinion about the policymaker. This is intuitive in democratic systems in which a policymaker's incentive structure reflects the need to build support for reelection and future policy actions. Second, even if the president is concerned with support for war rather than support for his handling of the war, prior research shows these outcome measures are highly correlated (more than 0.9). Thus, it is unlikely an alternative outcome question would change the article's substantive results given the strength and size of the effects we find. The wording of the question we use in this experiment mirrors the actual wording of questions asked throughout recent US military conflicts.

> Do you generally approve or disapprove of how the president is handling the military conflict?
> Approve
> Disapprove
> Note sure

Summarizing the Panel Survey

To summarize, there are five components to the panel survey design. First, respondents receive background information about the war, which randomizes the adversary and whether the United States put troops on the ground. The randomization within the background information addresses the concern that a less specific vignette invites personal associations beyond the researchers' control while also allowing us to make more general inferences across multiple conflict scenarios. Second, we randomize the actual war duration between long and short wars. These categories are distinguished by the actual duration of the war, which is captured by the number of rounds the panel proceeds. Third, we randomize the presidential messages about the expected duration of the war between long and short. These messages mirror real-world statements that presidents and senior officials made about conflict length. Fourth, we provide respondents factual updates with contextual details about the war. These factual updates give respondents the sense that the war is ongoing and that the United States incurs costs. Finally, we ask respondents about the president's handling of the war at multiple junctures throughout the survey.

Implications of the Research Design for External Validity

As with most survey experiments, this one sacrifices some external validity for internal validity. Most notably, there is a difference in the actual amount of time elapsed in the experiment (several minutes) when compared to actual military conflicts (months to years). One implication is that leader statements about expected war length are fresher in the minds of respondents than in the real world.

This difference from reality generates a sharp contrast between the initial leader statements and the actualities of the conflict. This matters because, as time elapses in the real world, respondents are more likely to forget the initial leader statements or are presented with alternative information about the expected conflict length, which might muddy the initial treatment. Our effect sizes, consequently, are likely upper bounds on the real effect sizes. Another result of the experiment's compressed timing is that punishment for inaccuracy may occur earlier and more starkly in the experimental setting than in a real one. Respondents observe a stark contrast between a leader's message and the fact that conflict is still ongoing. Punishment may be swift under this condition. In reality, the contrast be-

[21] As is discussed in the supplementary files, these are based on the first few sentences of newspaper articles written during the Iraq War and American military involvement in Kosovo.

[22] There are many examples throughout US history of public opinion polls measuring public support for the president's handling of war. Throughout the Iraq War, polling firms asked, "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the job that George W. Bush is doing in handling the situation in Iraq?" A similar question was asked during the Vietnam War: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Johnson is handling the situation in Vietnam?"

[23] Gelpi et al. (2006) and Voeten and Brewer (2006) use responses to this question as an outcome measure.

tween the president's statements and actual war conditions will be less immediate. Accordingly, as past work documents (Baum and Groeling 2010), we expect a more gradual decline in public support when the timeline is less compressed.

These are important external validity limitations of the research design, which likely both accentuate and accelerate effects. However, we believe the limitations are unlikely to create effects that would not otherwise exist in a more natural setting. So long as the president expects the public to remember earlier statements or expects domestic adversaries to hold them accountable for earlier statements, then similar dynamics are likely to emerge as those we hypothesize and document. To make both the plausibility and limitations of the theorized effects more concrete, consider how the theory might have operated during the Iraq War. At the start of the conflict, the Bush administration set public expectations that the conflict would be short. Our theory on rally effects suggests that initial support for the war would have been lower had the administration stated the war would be long. As for accuracy effects, we predict that, as war unfolded and the public observed evidence that it was not a short conflict, President Bush and his administration were punished more than they otherwise would have been. That is, several years into the war, public support would have been higher had the administration suggested from the start that the conflict would be long.

Fielding the Experiment

We fielded the experiment on one thousand adults recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in June 2015.[24] In recent years, MTurk has surged in popularity as a cost-effective means for researchers to field survey experiments.[25] When using convenience samples such as MTurk, it is important for researchers to be cognizant of the ways in which experimental effects might differ from results obtained using either a nationally representative or other types of convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Krupnikov and Levine 2014). Berinsky et al. (2012) demonstrate the ability to replicate results from nationally representative samples using MTurk samples. Similarly, Huff and Tingley (2015) show that the underlying distribution of respondents between MTurk and professional polling firms such as the Cooperative Congressional Election Study are demographically similar in a number of important ways.[26]

While there are almost certainly differences between respondents on MTurk and other survey platforms, for the purposes of this experiment, these differences only matter insofar as they interact with treatment. For example, perhaps conservatives and liberals respond to presidential messages about conflict length differently. Since there are more liberals on MTurk than in the national population, the effect we estimate might differ from the one we would estimate from a nationally representative sample. This is an important concern and a useful point to raise for survey experiments fielded on convenience samples. However, as demonstrated in the supplementary files, the experimental results are generally stable across a number of theoretically motivated attributes of respondents that could induce heterogeneous treatment effects.

Results

The results presentation follows the sequence in which the three hypotheses are described. Turning to the first hypothesis, we examine approval rates after respondents receive the first message from the president.[27] Given the scarcity of information about events on the ground, we expect presidential messages to affect approval rates. In accordance with the prediction, approval rates are significantly higher for respondents receiving a message predicting a short war versus a message predicting a long war.[28] Forty-eight percent of respondents support the president's handling of conflict after a message predicting a short (weeks or months) conflict. Receiving the long (one year or more) message treatment reduced support by 16 percent (±7 percent), as shown in Figure 1's upper panel.

Given the low-information environment when conflict starts, the public is responsive to presidential cues about the coming conflict. As discussed below, respondent perceptions of the actual costs of conflict and/or the president's personal characteristics could mediate the relationship between the president's preconflict statements and initial public support. On the former, when the president provides reason to believe costs will be limited, the expected value of conflict increases as does public support. On the latter, predicting a short conflict can boost public perceptions of the president's optimism and competence.

As conflict unfolds, the public learns whether conflict is ongoing or concluded. This information allows respondents to assess the president's prescience in initial statements. The second hypothesis expects public support to be greater when the president's initial statement accurately predicted conflict length. We can assess this expectation in multiple ways due to the experiment's panel design. We focus on the effect of (in)accurate initial presidential messages on levels of support throughout long wars. That is, are presidents punished for originally predicting a short conflict when the conflict exceeds the predicted time span?

Results show a persistent punishment effect for initial inaccuracies. Conditional on a long war, an initial message predicting a long war improves public support two years into war by 16 percent (± 6 percent) from a baseline approval rate of 12 percent. This effect measures approval regardless of the content of the second message, which we address below. This effect is not transitory. Initial predictive accuracy still has strong effects four years into the war, increasing public support by 9 percent (± 4 percent) from a baseline approval rate of 6 percent. The effect persists into postconflict evaluations as well. Figure 1's lower panel plots the marginal effects. While our theoretical discussion focuses on the benefits of accuracy in general, our results focus on the benefits of being accurate, conditional on the war actually being

[24] Participants are paid $0.40 for their participation. In line with best practices for using MTurk respondents, we limited participation in the study to MTurk workers located in the United States, who had completed greater than fifty HITs, and whose HIT approval rate was greater than 95 percent.

[25] Political scientists have increasingly turned to Amazon's Mechanical Turk as a platform for conducting their experiments, with some of this work appearing in the *American Political Science Review* (Tomz and Weeks 2013), *American Journal of Political Science* (Healy and Lenz 2014), *Comparative Political Studies* (Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh 2015), *International Organization* (Wallace 2013), and the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Kriner and Shen 2013).

[26] For other research exploring survey behavior and other attributes of the MTurk worker pool, see Leeper and Thorson (n.d.) and White et al. (n.d.).

[27] Across all tests we code the outcome variable as a binary indicator and exclude "not sure" responses. Altering the variable coding such that "not sure" is lumped with either "approval" or "disapproval," or used to create an ordinal variable, produces substantively and statistically similar results as shown in the supplementary files.

[28] All result estimates are from bivariate Ordinary Least Squares. Incorporating covariates such as gender and political ideology produces equivalent results. See results and balance tables in the supplementary files.

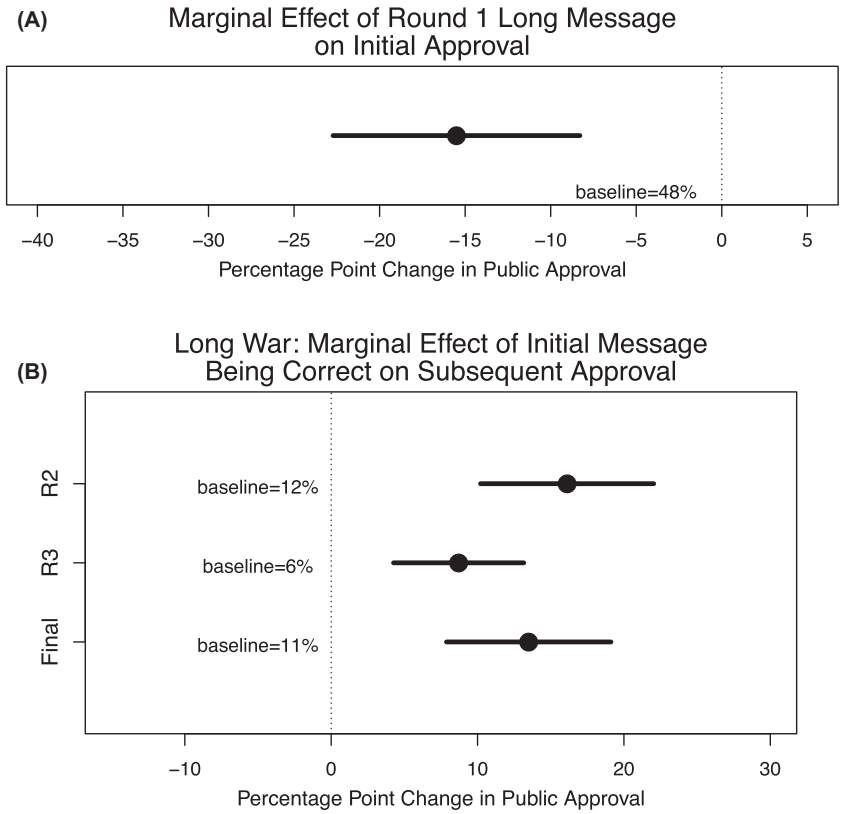

Figure 1. Panel A: Conflict duration predictions affect public approval. Panel shows effect of president's prediction about conflict duration when conflict starts. Panel B: Correct initial predictions improve public approval rates at subsequent points in the conflict. Panel shows that the effect of correctly predicting war will be long on approval rates two years and four years into the war and on postwar approval rates

long. We do this for expositional clarity. An alternative specification where we include a dummy variable for "accuracy" yields substantively similar results. Doing so incorporates results from instances in which the war was actually short.[29] In sum, initial accuracy increases long-term public support.[30]

The divergent effects across time of initial conflict predictions are now readily apparent. A preconflict message predicting a long war reduces initial public support but increases public support at subsequent junctures of the war, conditional on the war actually being long. Consequently, executives must weigh the immediate benefits of predicting a short conflict against the future punishment when the prediction is not borne out. The future punishment is evident when averaging over all subsequent messaging strategies—such as remaining steadfast in the initial prediction or switching positions.

To evaluate the third hypothesis, we unpack the effect of subsequent messaging strategies. Recall, beyond acquiring information from the unfolding events of conflict, the public also acquires pertinent information from subsequent presidential messages. The above discussion demonstrates that incorrect initial predictions are punished. Conditional on this punishment occurring, what is the best strategy going forward to sustain or gain public support? Hypothesis 3 predicts that public support remains higher when the president sticks to the initial message and continues to predict a swift conclusion to the war. Results are inconsistent with this expectation. Conditional on war being long and the president's preconflict message being incorrect, no subsequent message has a meaningful effect on public approval. Steadfastness is no better or worse than flip-flopping for retaining or regaining public support.

Figure 2 plots this result. It shows the marginal effect of consistent predictions of a short war versus two relevant comparison conditions. The first, reported in the upper panel, plots the marginal effect on public support (measured after the third message—four years into the war—and after the war's conclusion) of a short-short-short messaging sequence compared to a short-short-long sequence. Conditional on having said conflict would be short in the first two messages, what is the effect of predicting conflict will be short, versus long, in the third message? A third "short" message decreases public support, at the time that message is issued, by 3 percent (±7 percent at the 95 percent confidence level) and increases postconflict approval rates by 1 percent (±8 percent).

The lower panel repeats the exercise but with a different comparison group. Rather than restrict the alternative treatment condition to a short-short-long prediction sequence, we use all sequences that begin with a short prediction. Again, we find no support for the third hypothesis.

[29] Furthermore, when subsetting the data to only short wars, we find a modest punishment for presidents who originally predicted a long conflict, as shown in the supplementary files. The result points in the expected direction but is not statistically significant. This is likely caused by ceiling effects due to the high approval rates in short conflicts and the relatively small sample (n=186) we allocate to the less substantively interesting case of short wars.

[30] For clarity, we only evaluate downstream effects of preconflict message accuracy. How the accuracy of subsequent messages effects later support is partly addressed below.

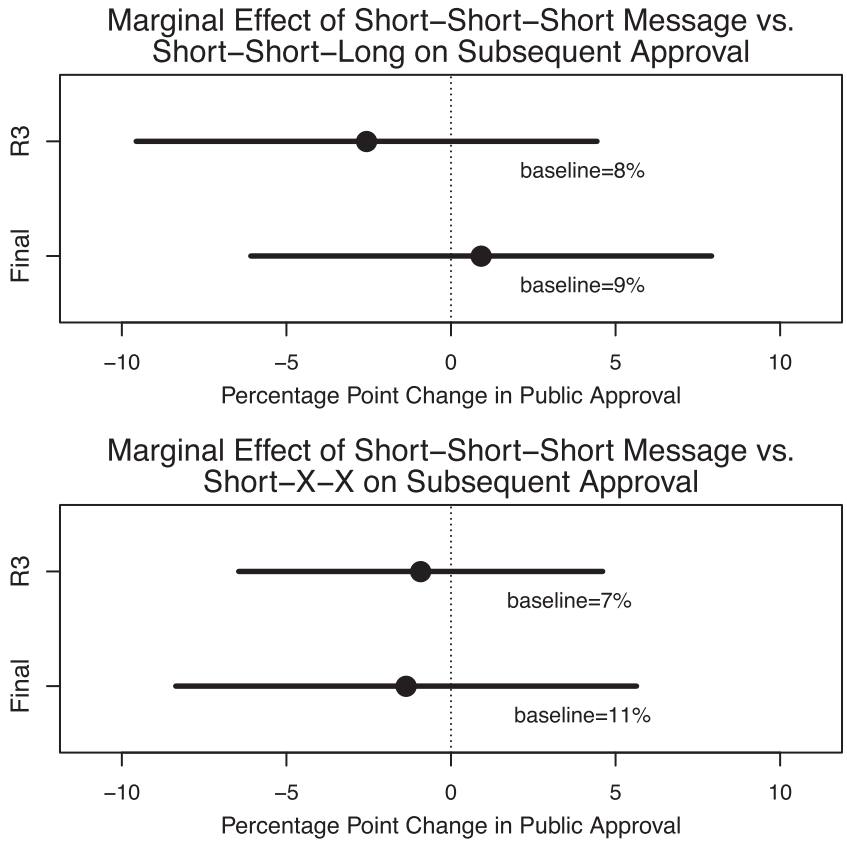

Figure 2. Consistency in messaging is neither punished nor rewarded. Upper panel plots marginal effects of repeating the short prediction at all three junctures in the conflict as opposed to switching to a long message at the final update. Lower panel uses a broader comparison group consisting of all treatment sequences that start with a preconflict short message

Subsequent messages, regardless of their content, do not sway public support if the war is long and the initial message is inaccurate. Measured four years into the war or after the war's conclusion, a consistent (that is, short-short-short) treatment sequence causes a trivial decrease in approval rates.

As discussed in the theory section, there are potential tradeoffs to remaining consistent versus switching positions. Consistency avoids repositioning costs, which we expected would trump the potential benefits of appearing honest when changing positions. Results suggest otherwise. The relevant pluses and minuses cancel out one another, as further illustrated in the supplementary files.[31]

How Messages Affect Perceptions of the Conflict and President

This section presents two follow-up experiments designed to unpack the findings. We address two questions. First, why does public support for the president's handling of the war increase after the president announces his expectation that the war will be short? Is the public learning more about the president or the conflict itself? Second, why is public support for the president's handing of the war higher when the initial message is accurate? Again, is this because of attributes of the conflict or attributes of the president?

Why Presidents Gain Approval by Initially Predicting a Short Conflict

We constructed a truncated version of the original experiment to disentangle the mechanisms underlying the relationship between predicting a short conflict and initial approval. Specifically, does predicting a swift conclusion raise approval due to favorable evaluations of the president and/or favorable evaluations about the actual conditions of the conflict? The follow-up experiment repeats the initial structure of the original design with an introductory vignette and then a randomized presidential message predicting a short or long war. Respondents then indicate their approval of the president's handling of war at its start. After that question, the experiment diverges from the original. Participants are asked to evaluate the president and the conflict on five and two dimensions, respectively.[32]

On the president's traits, we ask, "In your opinion, is the president _____?" and have participants evaluate their level of agreement on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The characteristics are (1) honest, (2) reckless, (3) weak, (4) competent, and (5) optimistic. We anticipate that predicting a short conflict could shape perceptions of the president on these attributes, which could then inform public approval. On the conflict's traits, we ask, "In your opinion, is the conflict likely to _____?" and again present the same five-point scale. The traits are (1) be too costly and (2) end with a US victory. Beyond shaping perceptions of the president,

[31] Though differing on the form of inconsistency, our null result is consistent with Croco and Gartner (2014).

[32] We randomize the order of evaluation between president and conflict traits and within these questions in the listing of the traits.

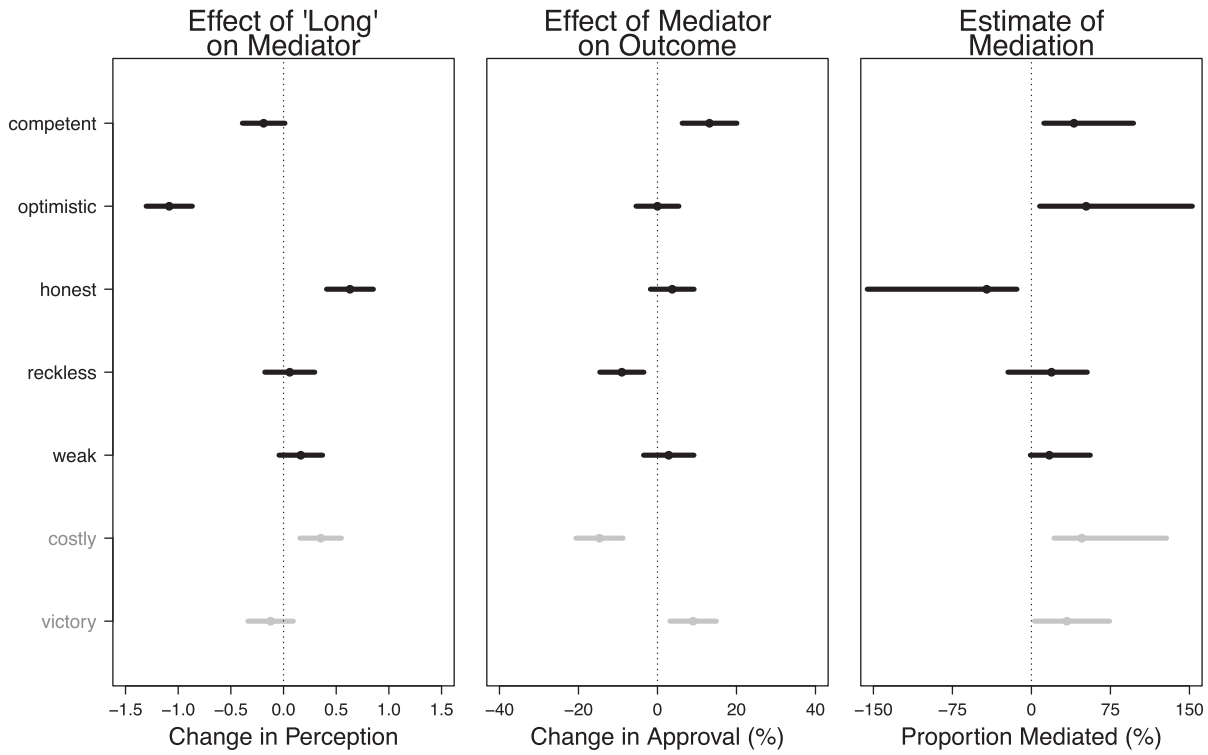

Figure 3. Causal chain. *Left panel*: Marginal effect of initially predicting a long conflict on assessments of president and conflict traits. President traits are shown in black, conflict traits in grey. Traits are measured on a five-point scale; higher values indicate agreement. *Center panel*: Effect of a one-unit increase in the trait's value on approval rate, conditional on treatment. *Right panel*: Decomposition of the treatment effect showing percentage of effect operating through each mechanism, averaged over treatment and control conditions

statements early in the conflict could affect public perceptions of the expected value of the conflict, particularly given the lack of alternative information sources at that juncture.

We fielded the experiment on three hundred adults in the United States, again drawn from MTurk, in July 2015. We restricted the sample to individuals who had not taken our original survey. An added benefit of the mechanism experiment is that it replicates part of the original experiment, and we indeed find our original results persist.

Figure 3 presents the substantive results of the first mechanism experiment, which we evaluate in three steps. First, the left panel shows that initial predictions affect perceptions of both the president's and the conflict's characteristics (our proposed mediating variables). On the former, those receiving the long prediction treatment are less likely to agree that the president is optimistic or competent but more likely to agree he is honest. On the latter, they anticipate conflict would be costlier. The multifaceted effects of presidential predictions support our overarching theoretical contention that respondents are using such statements to evaluate both the president and the expected costs and benefits of the conflict. Second, the middle panel demonstrates the effects of the mediators on the outcome conditional on the treatment. We find that evaluations of both the president and the conflict matter. Particularly, respondents evaluate him on his competence and the conflict on its costs.

Having evaluated the effect of the treatment on the mediator and the effect of the mediator given the treatment on the outcome, we now put these steps together using causal mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2011). The third step decomposes the overall treatment effect between the direct effect on the outcome and the mediated effect operating through various mechanisms. Results merit cautious interpretation. Model-based mediation analysis relies on a strong and difficult-to-test assumption of sequential ignorability, which includes an assumption that there is no unmeasured confounding between the mediator and the outcome, after conditioning on treatment and pretreatment covariates. Additionally, our design posits many possible mediators, some of which likely interact with one another. Though some work addresses estimation under such conditions (Imai and Yamamoto 2013), the existing results and computing packages are limited to two mediators at a time.

Nonetheless, to provide some evidence on mechanisms, we use mediation analysis by decomposing the treatment effect through each mechanism, one by one. For instance, how much of the total treatment effect is mediated by perceptions of presidential competence, ignoring all other potential mediators? The right panel of Figure 4 presents results for each mediator. We find that a president's competence and optimism and the conflict's costs are the substantively most important causal mechanisms underpinning Hypothesis 1.[33] For those characteristics, approximately half of the total effect operates through the specified mechanism. In sum, initial presidential statements affect approval rates through both perceptions of the president and perceptions of the conflict's costs.

[33] The honesty mechanism counteracts the main effect, as predicting a long conflict improves honesty assessments, which increases approval rates. However, this is more than offset by the direct effect.

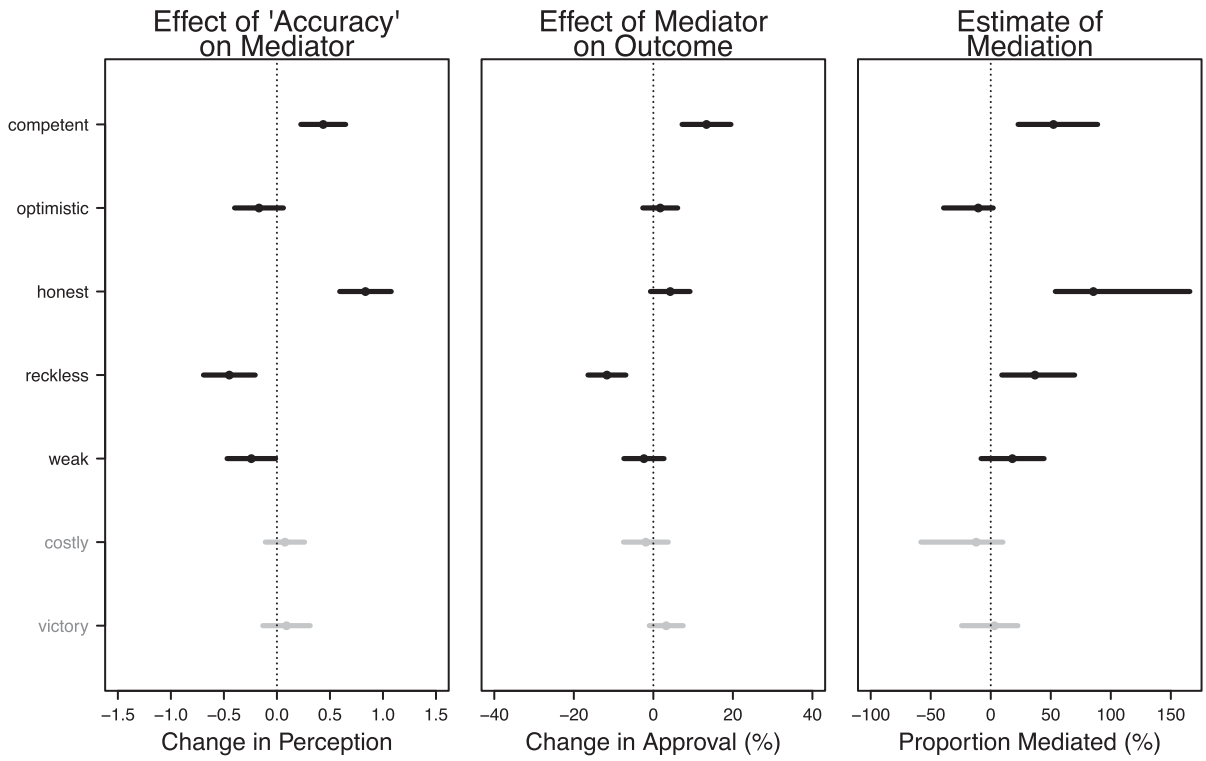

Figure 4. Causal chain. *Left panel*: Marginal effect of initial prediction being accurate during a long war on assessments of president and conflict traits. President traits are shown in black, conflict traits in grey. Traits are measured on a five-point scale; higher values indicate agreement. *Center panel*: Effect of a one-unit increase in the trait's value on approval rate, conditional on treatment. *Right panel*: Decomposition of the treatment effect showing percentage of effect operating through each mechanism, averaged over treatment and control conditions

Why Accurate Initial Messages Help Sustain Support

A second follow-up experiment addresses the mechanisms underpinning the relationship between initial accuracy and subsequent approval of the president's handling of war. We theorize that assessments of the president's traits, rather than of the conflict itself, would be the primary mechanism through which the effect operates. We again used a truncated version of the original experiment that is identical through the first two years of the war, with the exception that there is no short-war condition that ends inside of one year. Respondents get an initial vignette, presidential statement, opportunity to voice approval, two fact updates as the war unfolds, a new presidential statement, and another chance to voice approval.

After making their approval choices two years into the war, participants are asked to evaluate the president and conflict on the same seven traits we employ in the first follow-up experiment. This is also fielded on three hundred adults in the United states via MTurk. Our original results all replicate in this follow-on study.

The results discussion, and presentation in Figure 4, follows the same format as for the first mechanism experiment. First, the left panel shows the effect of treatment on the mediators. Accuracy improves assessments of a president's competence, honesty, and recklessness. In contrast, accuracy has no effect on evaluations of conflict's actual conditions—its costs and prospects for victory. This is intuitive as the conditions of the conflict are identical, regardless of initial accuracy. Moreover, it highlights our theory's contribution, pointing to the importance of public evaluations of not only conflict, but also the leader.[34]

Turning to the second step in the causal chain, we evaluate the effect of each mediator on approval, conditional on treatment. Competence and recklessness are both associated with approval in the anticipated direction. Putting the first and second steps together, how much does each posited mechanism mediate the relationship between accuracy and approval? All of the same caveats noted earlier apply for the mediation analysis here. The right panel shows the importance of public perceptions of the president, particularly of his competence, honesty, and recklessness. Approximately 80 percent of the total effect identified for Hypothesis 2 operates through perceptions of the president's honesty. This offers compelling evidence that events and subsequent statements in a conflict are not issued in a vacuum. Respondents incorporate newly arriving information when evaluating a leader's handling of war.

[34] As stressed in Gelpi et al. (2006), public evaluations of conflict conditions, such as the probability of victory, do matter. That study shows that variation in the perceived probability of victory affects casualty tolerance. In contrast, the mediation analysis here examines whether respondent perceptions of the victory probability mediate the relationship between presidential messages and war support. Because the material conditions of conflict are identical across messaging strategies in the experiment, we observe limited variation in the perceived victory probability. This does not indicate that perceptions don't vary in reality, but instead reflects that this study is not designed to generate variation in these perceptions.

The Intertemporal Tradeoff and Messaging Strategy

The experimental results provide evidence that presidents face an intertemporal tradeoff when determining whether to state that a war will be long or short. When they claim conflict will be short, they enjoy a rally effect. However, if this statement proves incorrect, the public punishes them for their inaccuracy. This pair of findings implies that there might exist circumstances in which presidents have an incentive to state that a conflict will be short in order to gain the rallying boost necessary to enter the conflict at all. This could occur either because the president is intentionally misrepresenting his true expectations of the expected war length or because he is truly uncertain about its length. While the experiment treats the president as a nonstrategic actor in order to highlight the divergent effects of different presidential messaging sequences, in practice presidents undoubtedly respond to strategic considerations. We highlight two conditions affecting the attractiveness of predicting a short conflict. While we view a more complete exploration of the strategic decision-making of the president as an exciting area of future research, doing so is beyond the scope of this article. Accordingly, this discussion is intended to be a starting point for further research.

First, the incentives to predict a short war increase when the public's priors about expected conflict duration are weak—that is, opinion must be malleable.[35] There is no reason to predict a short conflict if no one will believe it. When might the public have weak priors about conflict duration? Most intuitively, priors are weak when the public is unfamiliar with the type of conflict being fought. If, for example, the adversary is a type the public has not recently observed in conflict, then presidential statements are more likely to sway public perceptions of war duration. Indeed, we see tentative results consistent with this claim as the experimental design varies the adversary the United States faced.[36] In particular, the rally effect is smaller when the adversary is an Islamic fundamentalist terrorist group as opposed to a hostile state invading a US ally. This is consistent with respondents holding stronger prior beliefs on the duration of conflicts against Islamic terrorist groups due to the recent and long experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, President Obama's predictions of a lengthy conflict at the start of the Afghanistan "surge" and the bombing campaign against ISIS are consistent with this idea. Following long conflicts that are similar to the new one, the public is less malleable due to their strong prior beliefs. This, in turn, decreases the president's incentive to predict a short conflict.

Second, the president has incentives to predict a short conflict when greater public support allows him to take a military action that he would otherwise struggle to take.[37] For instance, the incentive to predict a short conflict is high when existing support is low and initiating conflict would generate steep political costs—for example, in an upcoming election. This suggests that, had President Bush predicted the Iraq War would be lengthy, entering the conflict would have been more difficult.[38] In contrast, the incentives to state a war will be short in order to rally support decrease if the public is already sufficiently supportive to allow for unconstrained presidential action. If approval is already high, then the president has no need to rally support. For example, before and immediately after Pearl Harbor, the public was already largely supportive of the decision to militarily assist US allies (Braumoeller 2010). Similarly, if the requisite level of support for the preferred form of military action is relatively low, then the president is less likely to need to rally support. For instance, ordering airstrikes against ISIS while claiming that such strikes fall under the purview of an earlier authorization to use force may require a relatively lower level of public support. In sum, the incentives to predict war will be brief are greatest when the public holds relatively weak priors and when additional public support facilitates conflict initiation.

Our results and the strategic considerations that follow from them relate to broader arguments about the depth of agency the public ought to have in crafting foreign policy (Morgenthau 1948). Respondent views are neither incoherent nor ill-structured (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955). Rather, they incorporate elite cues, but not exclusively (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, n.d.), as actual events sway beliefs. To sustain support, leaders ought to be cognizant of these dynamics. And as the epigraph from Obama suggests, we suspect that they are.

Conclusion

Our account synthesizes insights from the contrasting literature that emphasizes elite cues (Berinsky 2007; 2009; Zaller and Feldman 1992) versus actual events (Gartner 2008; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006, 2009) by highlighting their important interaction in leader statements about conflict length. In doing so, we build upon Baum and Groeling (2010) by demonstrating how unfolding events allow the public to learn not only about the conflict itself but also about the leader. In the low-information context that exists when a conflict begins, leader predictions shape public approval. Predictions influence perceptions of both the leader and the value of the coming conflict. As fighting unfolds, it reveals information to publics, who, in turn, can evaluate earlier leader predictions. We find these evaluations of accuracy strongly affect whether approval can be sustained, particularly by shaping public evaluations of the leader.

The intertemporal tradeoff explored in this article is an example of a more general phenomenon that likely travels to a number of different policy areas. For all issue areas in which elites set expectations about an uncertain event, the content of which audiences can subsequently evaluate, we expect this kind of tradeoff to operate. The insights developed in this study therefore matter to related research on setting expectations and on retrospective evaluation (Acharya and Grillo, n.d.; Malhotra and Margalit 2014).

This article is an early step toward understanding how cues and events interact to shape public evaluations of leaders' performances in substantively important issue areas. Future work might relax some of this study's simplifying assumptions. For example, subsequent studies might examine whether effects persist or attenuate across multiple crises within a single presidential administration. For example, did public perceptions of President Obama's wartime traits as a leader evolve during bombing campaigns against ISIS or were views already fixed from his actions during earlier military operations? Future research could also employ panel designs in which more time elapses between each survey panel. Additionally, while bringing conflict duration to the forefront as a determinant of public opinion, we cannot specify exactly why duration, as observed by respondents,

[35] Prior studies address the related issue of opinion leadership by elites; see, for example, Berinsky (2009).

[36] The supplementary files show the rally effect by adversary.

[37] Limitations on presidential autonomy could stem from legal or political constraints. The latter is especially of interest as a lack of public support, which can have electoral implications, could circumscribe the president's choice set.

[38] As noted above, this does not imply that administration officials misrepresented their expectations of conflict duration.

matters. It might operate independently—that is, respondents might view the long duration of conflicts as inherently undesirable—or by changing perceptions of another variable, such as costs or military strategy. As we show, incorporating more elements of the broader conflict context can reveal underappreciated dynamics that affect public support for a leader's handling of war.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary data can be found at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/USIYOG and at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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