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Do Democratic Candidates Suffer ‘Audience Costs’?

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The literature on “domestic audience costs” focuses mainly on threats made by democratic leaders to signal credible commitments. Yet it largely ignores pledges made by democratic candidates along the campaign trail. Candidates often engage in a rhetorical “arms race” with each other to project resolve to voters on issues of international relations, whether it is protecting the country, fighting terrorism, or standing up to foreign aggression. Yet, unlike other audience costs, candidates face a conflict of preferences based on competing time horizons. That is, the short-term incentives (winning votes) for taking more hard-line stances can outweigh the long-term costs (getting boxed in by pledges made). Many campaign promises are mere bluster, but some can signal to foreign leaders a candidate’s future willingness to fight or back down, with important implications for crisis bargaining down the road. Using this framework, this paper analyzes the candidates’ rhetoric regarding foreign affairs during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign and the subsequent policy decisions made by President Barack Obama.¹

This paper seeks to address the following questions: Do threats made by candidates along the campaign trail *signal* to foreign leaders their future resolve – or lack thereof? What costs, whether domestic or international, do these candidates incur for such rhetorical gamesmanship? Finally, when and under what conditions does a candidate get boxed in by campaign pledges, and what are the implications? We assume that once elected, democratic leaders make foreign policy decisions based on sound, rational calculations influenced by their preferences and those of their constituencies. But the literature does not take into account that leaders are beholden to previously taken partisan stances made (often in haste) along the campaign trail that can box them in. I argue that campaign promises do in fact impose future costs on candidates once in office by boxing them in.

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This paper proceeds as follows: First, I review the audience costs literature and examine how it relates to elections and campaign rhetoric. Next, I outline my theoretical argument and causal mechanism. Finally, I briefly examine the 2008 U.S. presidential race, the campaign positions taken by the candidates and their posturing on the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Georgia to determine if their proclamations incurred any future “audience costs,”² and what implications they had for international relations.³

Literature Review

According to the literature on “audience costs,” democracies are better able to overcome informational gaps and reveal their true preferences early on in crises, thus preventing escalation. Facing a steeper cost for waging—and losing—a war than, say, unelected autocrats, democratic leaders are less likely to bluff or try “limited probes” during a crisis (Fearon 1994). Voters, especially those concerned about the reputations of their country, disapprove when their leaders do not follow through on verbal threats made (Tomz 2007). Conversely, opposing states are more likely to assume that threats made by democratic leaders are more credible due to their higher “audience costs.” That is, they would be more likely to see a drop in their popularity or be voted out of office if they issued a threat and then backed down. Because democracies are better able to signal their intentions than non-democracies, this greater transparency reduces the security dilemma between states and lowers the risk of crises escalating into war (Russett, Oneal 2000).

But this theory neglects an important component of the democratic process: elections campaigns. During election years, candidates make any number of foreign policy pronouncements along the campaign trail to win over undecided voters. They face a conflict of preferences based on conflicting time horizons. That is, their first order of business is to win the election, or at least win over undecided voters in the immediate

² This paper does not assume that candidates are cynical or irrational and will say anything to win votes or always take a partisan stance but that their positions do shift depending on what voters want, as the 2008 case of Georgia illustrates.

³ Generally speaking, audience costs theory deals with threats, not promises. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the two interchangeably, since a candidate who is not an incumbent cannot obviously carry out a threat until in power. So stump speeches on foreign policy, almost by definition, are promises. I understand the difference is not just semantic. As Robert Jervis (2002) writes, “I might be believed to be ready to carry out my promises but not my threats.” Renato Corbetta, in a working paper (“Informal Commitments and Intervention in Ongoing Conflicts”), finds that states make any number of “informal commitments”; most just signal “cheap talk” but some of which incurs “reputational costs” to states.

state they are campaigning in. To do this, they often make statements that project resolve. In this sense, they are driven by a shortsighted goal. But they also prefer flexibility once in office to negotiate treaties, bargain with their foreign counterparts, and escalate or terminate conflicts—in short, leave their stamp on the world.⁴ They prefer not to be boxed in. As candidates, they are motivated by ego, ambition, and winning votes, not by winning friends and allies abroad.⁵ They face two decisions once in office: They can renege on their campaign promises and risk alienating voters next time up for office, or they can follow through on their promises, so as not to lose political capital both at home and abroad.⁶

Indeed, the words of candidates *signal* to foreign states their future willingness to fight or not fight, should a crisis arise. At the basis of this theory is an audience-cost mechanism linking a state's foreign policy with the selection and domestic "punishment" of its leaders. James Fearon (1994), for example, writes about a dilemma leaders face regarding misplaced incentives to exaggerate or misrepresent their willingness to use force or escalate crises. They make veiled public warnings, or deploy or mobilize forces. The idea is to signal that the preferred course of action for the state is to use force rather than to make concessions (Fearon 1997).⁷ This is meant to "demonstrate resolve" in the face of a threat. The opponent, realizing the credible commitment of the democratic leader's action, will either escalate or back down. A leader who chooses to back down is perceived to suffer a greater "diplomatic humiliation" (Schelling 1960) the more the crisis escalates. But as a crisis grows, a leader can expect greater reward for standing firm, provided the state's opponent backs down. Think of a poker player winning a large pot after the final round of betting.

⁴ Notice the media-driven trend ever since Harry Truman of stamping a president's name with a doctrine, so we have a "Bush Doctrine," a "Clinton Doctrine," and so forth.

⁵ Note John McCain's repeated campaign slogan in 2008 of saying the three letters he saw when he stared into Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's eyes were "K-G-B." One imagines his rhetoric toward Russia would have changed and been less caustic if he had won the presidency.

⁶ This kind of election cost is obviously not present for an incumbent candidate who wins reelection, unless they are grooming their vice president to follow in their place. This argument is made often to support the fact that second-term presidents often have very successful tenures in terms of foreign policy, because they are neither seeking the approval of the international community nor of domestic voters. They also are worried about cementing their "legacy," and so look to achieve grandiose bargains of lasting import, like a Middle East peace deal.

⁷ Fearon (1997) distinguishes between two different types of "costly signals": tying hands and sunk costs.

Thus, state leaders “have private information about their willingness to use force rather than compromise, and they can have incentives to misrepresent this information to gain a better deal,” writes Fearon (1994). But the audience costs literature has come under some intense scrutiny from scholars in recent years for lacking rationalism (Sartori, 2002), for downplaying the importance of an audience’s policy preferences (Snyder and Borghard 2010), and for lacking plausibility when tested with conflict datasets that contain actual threats (Downes and Sechser 2011). Also, presidential candidates, though privy to daily intelligence briefings on national security threats, do *not* have complete information. Nor would it necessarily matter, since they may have a private incentive to exaggerate threats (especially if the threats are perceived to be the responsibility of botched policies by an incumbent). No candidate in recent history has won an election by waxing soft or uncertain on perceived foreign threats.⁸ The result is an escalation of tough-sounding rhetoric. Much of what gets said on the campaign trail is just rhetorical noise and “cheap talk” and thus not a credible signaling mechanism of future policies or preferences. Still, leaders in foreign capitals cannot tell *which* statements are just campaign bluster to win votes, and *which* are genuine policy stances.

Electoral Audience Costs

There are obvious audience costs present during campaigns, though these are different from those facing democratic leaders once in office. Fearon writes about “public demands or threats [that] ‘engage the national honor’” if a leader backs down in the face of a threat made. He argues that domestic audiences “may provide the strongest incentives for leaders to guard their states’ ‘international’ reputations.” Adds Kenneth Schultz (1999): “[V]oters are therefore motivated to punish those who sully the national honor by making public commitments and then failing to carry through on them. Making a threat and then backing down would be seen by voters—and exploited by challengers—as a foreign policy failure.” Yet, candidates have private incentives to sound more macho,

⁸ This is not to assume that all presidential candidates must be anti-war, as the 2012 Republican field of candidates suggests.

patriotic, and resolute on issues of national security than their opponent.⁹ The cost of *not* engaging in this rhetorical arms race with one's opponent may be an electoral defeat. Thus, like in other cases of crisis bargaining, both camps of a presidential contest may have hidden incentives to bluff.

There are two audiences for every speech a candidate makes, and they are often in conflict. The first audience for these pronouncements is undecided voters in key swing states. According to the Pew Research Center, 63 percent of undecided voters are female, 27 percent are age sixty-five and older, and many tend to be less well educated and more religious than voters who have already chosen their candidate.¹⁰ Scholars find that domestic audience costs tend to be highest among doves, isolationists, the highly educated, and Democrats than among other demographic groups (Tomz 2007). This finding suggests, then, that audience costs would be *lower* among undecided voters.¹¹ Moreover, empirically we find that a strong, muscular foreign policy sells well to a less educated American electorate, whose "citizens disapprove of empty threats" (Tomz 2007, 831). That partly explains why candidates drape themselves in the colors of the flag, surround themselves with military vets in uniform, and make bold declarations of protecting their country.

The second audience, which candidates often forget, is foreign states. After all, one of the candidates will prove victorious and become leader, and so both of their statements are parsed in the international press and can act as signaling mechanisms not just of future policy preferences but also credible commitments of future resolve – or lack thereof (if they fail to follow through, this can signal "hollow threats," which can then be interpreted that the candidates do not mean what they say or are dishonest).¹² The world

⁹ Recall the most talked-about campaign ad from the 2008 election was Hillary Clinton's "3 a.m. phone call" ad, which suggested that her primary opponent, Barack Obama, was untested on issues of national security.

¹⁰ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96403104>

¹¹ With Tea Party-mania sweeping U.S. politics, one prediction, given the "audience costs" literature (Tomz, 2007) is that as American voters lean increasingly isolationist and non-interventionist, then audience costs can be expected to rise, not drop. The implications, in theory, would be fewer American-led crises escalating into conflicts. Consider the growing unpopularity of the U.S.-led NATO intervention in Libya among opposition candidates in the 2012 presidential election and among lawmakers in Congress.

¹² Robert Jervis (2002) suggests such explicit signaling of strength may act in reverse. He writes: "For an actor to claim that it is committed to taking a certain action will increase the costs it will pay if it behaves otherwise, and if this were the only effect this would increase others' estimates of how likely it is to carry

influences the election's participants as much as vice versa. Kristopher Ramsay (2004) writes that candidates are rational actors aware that the "world is watching," and so "open political competition at the national level influences, or gets influenced by, the politics between states."¹³ But foreign leaders do not know these candidates because most enter elections without a clear record on international affairs. This uncertainty, heightened by rhetorical gamesmanship made by candidates along the campaign trail, can trigger an unintended escalation of hostilities and conflicts abroad. A foreign power may dismiss an ultimatum issued by a candidate as mere bluster or "cheap talk." After all, because an opposition candidate cannot mobilize troops or form alliances, it cannot credibly signal commitments of resolve. "The opposition," Ramsay (2004) writes, "has no policy lever that can reveal its competence or one that can undermine the nation's reputation."

Moreover, given the sheer volume of such pronouncements, the message may fall on deaf ears abroad.¹⁴ Yet *because* of the 24-hour news cycle that chronicles a candidate's every last word, not to mention campaign seasons that now stretch for over a year, candidates' speeches are dissected for clues of future behavior. This is not the case for congressional races. Scholars generally agree it is the executive branch, not Congress, which controls foreign policy. Congress can erect roadblocks, but it is powerless to prevent a president from waging war (Howell and Pevehouse 2005).¹⁵ Because a president is the decider when it comes to U.S. foreign policy, foreign governments should parse his statements as a candidate for signals of resolve, or lack thereof.

Consistency also bedevils candidates for higher office. After all, audience preferences vary from state to state. What wins hearts in Miami may turn off voters in Philadelphia. Thus, a rational candidate should tailor their message to the audience whose

out this act. But the fact that the actor felt the need to commit itself conveys information, and others may infer that only the weak need to try to bolster their resolve."

¹³ Ramsay examines the role the opposition plays during a crisis, focusing on the Berlin crisis and presidential campaign of 1948 and Suez crisis of 1956.

¹⁴ During the 2008 campaign, Barack Obama promised to deliver an annual address on U.S. foreign policy. "I'll give an annual 'State of the World' address to the American people in which I lay out our national security policy," he said in an October 2, 2007 speech. Despite the bold promise, he has never delivered such an address.

¹⁵ In their article (*International Organization*, 2005), Jon Pevehouse and William Howell do not argue that Congress should be ignored, unlike most of the literature on America's use of force. Specifically they find that, at least with regards to major uses of force during the second half of the 20th century, it depends on the partisan composition of Congress.

votes are most up for grabs but that also runs the risk of being inconsistent, which can signal a lack of confidence in foreign matters. Tomz (2007) finds that 72 percent of respondents complain that inconsistency hurts the reputation and credibility of the country. It can also result in reflexive speeches by candidates that emphasize “supporting our men and women in uniform” but by extension, leaving open the specificities, such as boosting funding for the war effort (which if it includes veterans’ care, supplies, and troops in the field can heighten the conditions for conflict escalation). Other reflexive campaign rhetoric can manifest itself in stances against competitors like China or Russia. A candidate is rewarded for tough-sounding rhetoric by being voted into office. Once in power, leaders must then either follow through on their campaign promises, or back down and risk alienating voters and losing reelection in four years.¹⁶

According to the democratic peace tradition, democratic institutions promote peace for several reasons: First, they promote accountability and competition among parties, which in turn places constraints on the executive branch; they raise the political risks and costs of waging war (Bueno de Mesquita 1992; Lake 1992); democratic institutions reveal important information about a leader’s incentives in a crisis and improve a government’s ability to credibly signal their commitment and resolve (Schulz 1999). Finally, transparent institutions overcome the informational asymmetries that cause crisis bargaining to break down. But elections do not always comply with this peace-making calculus. For one, to win votes, candidates make speeches to signal their strength on issues of national security. They are not thinking about future interactions with foreign leaders but instead trying to project strength, confidence, and patriotism. Again, candidates’ short-term goal of winning the election often conflicts with their long-term preferences—to *not* get boxed in on matters of foreign policy. Yet this projection of tougher resolve and security, such as building a missile shield in Europe, can be misperceived as a threat to foreign powers. Because foreign leaders cannot determine which threats are genuine and which are not, they must assume that a candidate’s rhetoric will more or less align with future policies, and react accordingly.

¹⁶ A classic example is Barack Obama’s January 19, 2008, campaign speech in which he promised to recognize the Armenian genocide as president. Yet in a statement on April 24, 2009, a day of memorial for the event, he never mentioned the word “genocide” and he has not officially endorsed a House resolution recognizing the genocide, ostensibly for fear of upsetting Turkey (Source: Politifact.com).

According to the “audience costs” literature (Fearon 1994), democratic leaders are less likely to make threats because they do not want to suffer the domestic backlash for not following through on their commitment.¹⁷ Put another way, domestic audiences can enhance credibility of our commitments abroad by “punishing leaders who say one thing but do another.” Conversely, if they do make a threat, a foreign leader is more likely to back down because they know that a democratic leader cannot back down and thus is serious about the threat. Where audience costs are low—such as in an autocracy—these kinds of threats are viewed as less credible because the costs are lower if the autocrat backs down (North Korea has repeatedly promised to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire.”). But a democratic candidate, unlike a democratic leader, is less bounded. Again, the incentive to bluff in the short term to win voters is high. *Because they are driven by ego and ambition, the short-term preferences and cost-benefit analysis of democratic candidates more often mirror those of autocrats than democratic leaders.*

Sometimes these statements are bold promises—such as Barak Obama’s promises to close Guantanamo or to pull combat troops out of Iraq—that line up with a candidate’s *actual* policy preferences. That is to say, sometimes pronouncements dovetail with a candidate’s moral and political philosophy and with their normative view about how the world should work. But some positions will be formulated based solely on interactions with their opponent and informed by short-term calculation to appeal to voters in a certain state or region. Candidates campaigning in southern Florida, for instance, may privately advocate greater engagement with Havana. But to win Cuban-American voters, their speech will have to sound hawkish on U.S.-Cuban relations. In recent presidential campaigns, there are several instances when candidates looking to win voters tended to take hard-line or hawkish stances when it came to issues of national security, specifically on prominent issues such as border security, fighting terrorism abroad, or addressing potential threats like Russia or China. The short-term incentive is to not only exaggerate perceived threats abroad—whether Islamic terrorism or Russian resurgence—but to exaggerate their own resolve and determination should a threat emerge.

¹⁷ Snyder and Borghard (2009) disagree. They find that audience-cost mechanisms are rare and have a small effect on crisis behavior. Yes, the public cares “about their country’s reputation and national honor but independently of whether their leader issues an explicit threat.” But more important, they argue: “[R]eal audiences care far more about the overall substantive consequences of the leader’s policy, which we call policy costs, than they do about the leader’s consistency between threats and subsequent actions.”

Voter preferences, of course, also matter. The public is not always a gun-shy force for pacifism or a check on democratic leaders' ability to wage war, contrary to democratic peace theory. That is because of all-volunteer professional militaries, and the diminished influence of anti-war groups (Rosato 2003). As one historian noted, "The American public has wanted only one thing from its commander in chief: quick wars for substantial victories with minimal costs (Reiter and Stam 2002).

Much also depends on domestic conditions. The literature is divided on the influence of such conditions on U.S. decisions to use force. Some scholars find that political leaders "see" opportunities to use force abroad or escalate hostilities when the domestic economy is not good or they lack a clear plan to rescue the economy (Russett 1990). Others find that electoral cycles have little bearing on a president's decision to use force (Gowa 1998). Moore and Lanoue (2003) argue that "international politics, not domestic politics, [must be] the primary determinant of conflictual U.S. foreign policy behavior." Wang (1996) finds that both "internal and international influences operate but that force is invoked less frequently when elections are near (perhaps because the rally effect is too unreliable) and more often to avoid a foreign policy defeat that would be politically damaging than to achieve outright political gains."

The incentives to push for war ahead of or during an election can vary. Some scholars suggest that crises abroad can distract voters from a candidate's lack of domestic policy experience or declining popularity (or perhaps some scandal). Also, incumbents, especially those facing sinking public approval ratings, may seek to create a "rally around the flag" effect (Howell and Pevehouse 2005; Waltz 1967). Exaggerating a foreign threat or instilling fear can scare up votes. Candidates can signal resolve to voters with tough rhetoric against foreign enemies.¹⁸ John Kerry used this tactic when he repeatedly criticized incumbent President George W. Bush for apparently not pursuing Osama Bin Laden in Tora Bora.

¹⁸ Much has been made of presidential candidates sounding tough on Russia and China on the campaign trail, only to cave or be swooned in front of their leaders once in office. Recall George W. Bush's "looked into his soul" comment when he met Vladimir Putin in 2000.

Empirical Cases from the 2008 U.S. Election

This paper will examine two examples from the 2008 U.S. presidential contest, which dominated the foreign policy agenda: the war in Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Georgia. These case studies provide conflicting outcomes. In the first, President Obama persisted with his policy despite domestic political costs. In the second, the president reneged on his campaign promise with little consequence.

The "situation in Iraq" ranked as the most important issue among voters (along with the economy), according to a February 2008 Gallup poll.¹⁹ A subsequent poll taken in August 2008 found that Republicans, by a margin of two-to-one, rejected a timetable for withdrawing from Iraq. By contrast, Democrats favored a phased withdrawal by a ratio of five-to-one.²⁰ Hence, a common talking point of Barack Obama's campaign was differentiating the "good" war in Afghanistan with the "bad" war in Iraq. In the words of the *New York Times*, Obama's anti-war rhetoric "electrified and motivated his liberal base."²¹ Contrast Obama's comments on Iraq with those of his opponent, John McCain. "The success we've achieved so far was not because we were threatening them. The success we've achieved so far is because we told them we were staying...to threaten withdrawal, frankly, is an option that I would be very reluctant to exercise unless I was sure that we had no other option, and I think we have lots of them."²² McCain's position was one of not disrupting the status quo, for fear of destabilizing Iraq, while Obama had carved a position as that of the anti-Iraq War candidate. During the candidates' second debate, Obama said "[P]art of the reason I think it's so important for us to end the war in Iraq is to be able to get more troops into Afghanistan." He gave a 16-month calendar for removing all combat troops from Iraq, a pledge he later followed through on in August 2010.²³

¹⁹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/104320/iraq-economy-top-issues-voters.aspx>

²⁰ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/106309/iraq-war-attitudes-politically-polarized.aspx>

²¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/us/politics/04military.html>

²² Interview with John McCain, *New York Times* (September 17, 2008):

<http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/issues/iraq.html>

²³ In a August 2 speech, President Obama confirmed the end of all combat operations in Iraq but agreed to leave 50,000-65,000 troops to advise and assist the Iraqi military and government as well as protect U.S. interests.

Contradicting his exit strategy from Iraq, President Obama's surge of forces into Afghanistan has proven more contentious. In a speech delivered back in October 2007, Obama pledged, "As president, I would deploy at least two additional brigades to Afghanistan to re-enforce our counter-terrorism operations and support NATO's efforts against the Taliban." He also promised to ratchet up non-military aid in Afghanistan to \$1 billion. Perhaps most controversially, he said "if we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and [then-Pakistani] President Musharraf won't act, we will." The purpose of his speech was less to win voters than to differentiate his counterterrorism platform from that of his Democratic primary opponent and to sound more hawkish.

In this case, Obama the president followed through on pledges made by Obama the candidate. He surged 30,000 forces into Afghanistan, put more pressure on Pakistan, and eventually even carried out his threat to act unilaterally to kill or capture al-Qaeda's leader were he provided with actionable intelligence, something his opponents suggested was naive because it would imperil U.S.-Pakistani relations. He did get a small "bump" in his approval ratings, which rose above 50 percent approval in a May Gallup poll for the first time in several months.²⁴

Yet the president has suffered audience costs precisely because he followed through on his promise to focus more on the war in Afghanistan. Over the past few years, America's public mood has soured on the war in Afghanistan. According to an August 2009 Washington Post/ABC News poll, 45% of those polled favored a drawdown of forces in Afghanistan.²⁵ That made the president's deliberations on the war, particularly his delicate balancing act between his civilian staff and military generals, a messier and more drawn-out process than anticipated. Also, his use of unmanned drone strikes against terrorist targets in Pakistan opened him up to criticism of killing civilians and turning Pakistanis against America. His speech delivered to West Point cadets on December 1, 2009, was a hedge of sorts: He ordered 30,000 combat troops into Afghanistan but also promised to begin drawing down forces by July 2011—a promise which he fulfilled.²⁶

²⁴ Gallup poll from May 2011 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/113980/gallup-daily-obama-job-approval.aspx>).

²⁵ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/19/AR2009081903066.html>

²⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

In this sense, Obama was boxed in by his campaign rhetoric; he could not credibly draw down forces without reneging on a previously made campaign promise. That arguably ended up costing him in terms of credibility among voters. A Gallup poll showed that the public's approval rating of Obama's handling of the war had dropped from 56% in July 2009 to 35% in December 2009.²⁷ It also may have hurt his credibility in terms of resolve among the military and appearing indecisive among some foreign leaders. There was dissent within military circles, even forcing the resignation of the president's top military commander in Afghanistan. And there was internal backbiting within his top circle of civilian advisors that negatively affected morale, decision-making, and public views of the war.²⁸ Internationally, Hamid Karzai denounced the President's strategy as an overreach of U.S. military power. In sum, there was a ratcheting up of expectations by a candidate that in the end proved damaging once in office. That is, his preferences as a candidate conflicted with his preferences as a commander in chief. By terming the campaign in Afghanistan the "good war," Obama could not credibly commit to a drawdown of forces, without going against his campaign pledge.²⁹

A second case to consider was Russia's war in Georgia. On August 8, 2008, Russian tanks rolled into South Osetia, a breakaway province of Georgia. Following the invasion, there was tit-for-tat rhetorical gamesmanship between the American presidential candidates to signal support for Georgia and resolve against Russia. Obama called for *both* sides to exercise restraint (he was on vacation in Hawaii at the time and appeared somewhat surprised by the invasion). By contrast, McCain, whose foreign policy advisors enjoyed close ties with the leadership in Tbilisi, immediately and forcefully condemned Moscow for its act of aggression. He also placed blame not only on the Russians but also on NATO for not admitting Georgia. After Russia escalated the conflict, McCain gave his now-infamous "We are all Georgians" speech, in which he said, "[W]e learned at great cost the price of allowing aggression against free nations to

²⁷ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124520/obama-approval-afghanistan-trails-issues.aspx>

²⁸ A confidential report by General Stanley McChrystal calling for more forces or else face "mission failure" was mysteriously leaked to the Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* in September 2009 ("McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure,'" Bob Woodward, *Washington Post*, September 21, 2009: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/20/AR2009092002920.html>).

²⁹ Arguably a case could be made that the May 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden provided a window of opportunity to draw down from a position of strength.

go unchecked. With our allies, we must stand in united purpose to persuade the Russian government to withdraw its troops from Georgia.”³⁰ Caught off-guard, Obama followed suit by ratcheting up his anti-Russia rhetoric in a forcefully worded August 12 statement: “Now is the time for action, not just words. It is past time for the Russian government to immediately sign and implement a cease-fire. Russia must halt its violation of Georgian airspace and withdraw its ground forces from Georgia, with international monitors to verify that these obligations are met.”³¹

The Georgia issue received considerable attention in the candidates’ second debate and galvanized the American public. Indeed, the war became a proxy of sorts for whether the future commander in chief would be willing to stand up to aggression abroad and “defend freedom.” By a margin of 52 percent to 27 percent, voters supported McCain over Obama to deal with a resurgent Russia, according to an August 2008 Quinnipiac poll conducted shortly after the war.³² Interestingly, Obama’s vice presidential candidate, Joseph Biden, who had previously visited Georgia, sounded decidedly more pro-Georgia than his running mate. “The war that began in Georgia is no longer about that country alone,” Biden told reporters at the time.³³ “It has become a question of whether and how the West will stand up for the rights of free people throughout the region. The outcome there will determine whether we realize the grand ambition of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace.” (He later convinced the Bush administration to green-light \$1 billion in emergency aid to Georgia). Similarly, McCain’s running mate, Sarah Palin, made headlines after hinting in an interview with ABC News’ Charlie Gibson that she would be willing to “go to war with Russia” to defend Georgia.³⁴ In a further show gamesmanship, McCain dispatched his wife Cindy to Tbilisi to visit Georgian soldiers. At rallies, McCain invoked the war in Georgia to demonstrate his opponent’s inexperience to be commander in chief. “When Russia invaded Georgia,” he told supporters in late August. “Senator Obama said the invaded country should show restraint. He’s been wrong on all

³⁰ <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/08/mccain-to-georgian-president-t.html>

³¹ http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/12/a_statement_of_senator_barack.php

³² <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hezVTZmXwAQXb5LWvNsk4q7HGkDw>

³³ <http://www.politicususa.com/en/Biden-Statement-Georgia-Russia>

³⁴ <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Vote2008/story?id=5782924&page=2>

of these. When I am president, we're going to win in Iraq, win in Afghanistan, and our troops will come home in victory and honor, not in defeat.”³⁵

The Russian leadership paid close attention to how the war was portrayed by the candidates. Prime Minister Putin, while at a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, suggested to reporters the war had been instigated at the behest of the McCain camp or then-Vice President Dick Cheney’s office to win Republican votes. Other countries, following the American candidates’ lead, piled on Russia for trying to “redraw boundaries.” A few European leaders even threatened sanctions against Moscow. In response, Russian officials said they would not be intimidated or isolated.

Did Obama’s rhetoric on the Georgian war tie his hands once he became president? That is, did he suffer any audience costs, whether domestic or international, for his campaign rhetoric against Russia? On one hand, Obama’s initial call for restraint proved prescient, as a European Union commission the following year found that both sides were responsible for the outbreak of hostilities, not just Russia.³⁶ Yet, by ratcheting up his pro-Georgia rhetoric, Obama found himself in an awkward position once he assumed office. On the other hand, he quickly went about repairing relations – or as he put it, “hitting the reset button” – with Russia, knowing that he would need Moscow’s help to rein in Iran and revise the set-to-expire START agreement. Obama rarely if ever mentioned Georgia after assuming office, except to dispatch Biden to Tbilisi to deliver a dose of “tough love” to the Georgians, accusing the leadership of not following through on democratic reforms. The vice president also did not deliver a package of military hardware the Georgians desired (Washington also shelved considerations of fast-tracking Georgia for NATO membership, though the 2008 Bucharest summit had already set back Tbilisi’s prospects to join the bloc). In short, Georgia was put aside in favor of other foreign policy priorities.³⁷ In this case, Georgia may prove that candidates *do not* suffer great audience costs for renegeing on commitments made on the campaign trail.

³⁵ <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/obama-speeches/speech/26/>

³⁶ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,650228,00.html>

³⁷ One offshoot to Obama’s position on Georgia was his stance on a missile defense shield in Central Europe. On September 10, 2008, he told The O’Reilly Factor, “Given what has happened in Georgia, I think we have to send a clear signal that Poland and other countries in that region are not going to be subject to intimidation and aggression...I think the missile shield is appropriate. I want to make sure it works though.” The following September, however, Obama announced a shift in his predecessor’s missile

Still, the Georgia-Russia war proved to be an instructional litmus test for Obama as commander in chief. The candidate reacted with a measured response, not a rash rush to blame one side. That kind of thoughtful discipline has shaped his reactions to crises abroad. Further, he called for a United Nations Security Council resolution to condemn the invasion, a move signaling his belief in the normative power of international institutions.³⁸ Obama reversed course once in office and sought to repair relations with Russia, which ran counter to his campaign's tough rhetoric. While the lack of resolve his Republican opponent accused him of did not go unnoticed in foreign capitals, Obama's popularity and political capital abroad were largely unaffected.

Arguably, a case could be made that President Obama suffered audience costs for his inconsistent position on Afghanistan but not Georgia. Why? First, the stakes for the American public were higher for the former. The war in Afghanistan, despite the lack of shared costs, had declined in popularity among many Americans by the time he took office. Regardless, Obama carried out his pledge to send more forces into the country, only to begin drawing them down less than two years later. It is uncertain what kind of reputational costs the United States may suffer, but Obama did endure audience costs in terms of his sagging approval ratings for following through on his pledge to surge into Afghanistan, a factor of the conflict's diminishing popularity among a war-weary public. By contrast, the war in Georgia was a brief crisis despite the widespread attention it received during the campaign. Obama reneged on his promise to support Georgia, though to a smaller degree than his Republican opponent. Once he was elected, President Obama embraced realism,³⁹ believing that Russian cooperation, arms control negotiations, and strong bilateral ties outweighed any obligations Washington owed Tbilisi in terms of military or moral support. The American public barely noticed that he never criticized Russia for its heavy-handed invasion. But it did penalize the White House (at least in poll numbers) for its perceived mishandling and escalation of the war in Afghanistan. In this

defense policy that called for scrapping plans for advanced radar in the Czech Republic as well as the missile defense shield in Poland. Obama instead called for a redesigned system aimed at shooting down short- and medium-range missiles from sites closer to Iran.

³⁸ <http://www.politicususa.com/en/Obama-Russia-Georgia>

³⁹ Obama's realpolitik, as evidenced by his cozying up to China and Russia, has won him the ire of the human rights community for not pressing harder on human rights abuses. Obama has favored larger states at the expense of smaller, more expendable ones. That said, he is not card-carrying realist, given his statements on the importance of international institutions and his Nobel Peace Prize speech on "just war."

sense, Obama was boxed in by his campaign pledge.⁴⁰ Of course, the reverse argument could also be made: Had Obama as a candidate promised a tougher U.S. military posture on Afghanistan, only to pull out forces once elected president, then his credibility among NATO allies and the military may have suffered.

There is an obvious selection bias with the two cases cited above, which are not meant to constitute a fair or scientific sample size. The case studies are far from complete or comprehensive and may not capture public attitudes or preferences, given the differences in their importance (one is a decade-long war costing thousands of American lives; the other was a five-day conflict costing hundreds of non-American lives). Nor is it clear that such election audience costs are generalizable to other democracies, particularly those with shorter campaigns or parliamentary systems, or where foreign policy is a less salient issue. Audience costs theorists might dismiss promises made by candidates as too weak or imprecise to generate audience costs high enough to matter. But the empirical evidence of recent U.S. presidential elections suggests otherwise. Once elected, candidates do find their policies affected by commitments made along the campaign trail. While the above case studies do not provide an exhaustive examination of a candidate's audience costs, they do provide new evidence to spur further research on an overlooked area related to the effects of elections on signaling future strength and weakness abroad.

Conclusion

The effect of campaign pledges made by presidential candidates – and what audience costs, if any, are incurred – has been under-studied by international relations theorists. Once in office, democratic leaders can be punished at the polls for backing down in the face of a crisis or for not following through on a threat. But they often put themselves in these untenable positions because of hawkish pledges made on the campaign trail to win undecided voters and one-up their opponents. The 2008 presidential race is instructive: Barack Obama promised to escalate the war in Afghanistan, a pledge that boxed him in once, as commander in chief, he sought to draw down forces and the

⁴⁰ Here I am agnostic whether the surge and subsequent drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan reflected Obama's true preferences, or whether they were in response to shifting public moods on the war. What I am interested in demonstrating is how Obama put lots of capital in the war in Afghanistan, followed through on his campaign pledge, and was punished.

war turned unpopular. As a candidate, he also backed Georgia during its August 2008 conflict with Russia, only to turn his back on Tbilisi once in office. For this reversal he did not suffer any real audience or reputational costs, either at home or abroad. Perhaps this is because not everything a candidate says is a credible signal of resolve. But once elected, leaders can and do face audience costs, both domestic and international, for failing to follow through (or vice versa) on their election promises. Further empirical research is required to sufficiently test this theory and measure the effects of campaign pledges on future reputational costs. But the 2008 presidential election sheds some light on the conundrum candidates face when making campaign pledges on foreign policy, demonstrating that macho posturing can escalate tensions abroad, heighten conflict, and “box in” a leader once in office.

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