

Is Context Pretext? Institutionalized Commitments and the Situational Politics of Foreign Economic Policy

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Abstract

Does the public care if their leaders fail to uphold or comply with their country's standing international commitments? If so, under what conditions? I study this question in the context of attitudes toward institutionalized trade cooperation. Using survey experiments, I find that the public has a pronounced taste for compliance that is largely independent of the underlying political and economic context. The public is less willing to endorse the imposition of trade restrictions when doing so would violate standing trade agreements. This is the case even in contexts where the public would otherwise support protectionist policy: when the unemployment rate is high, when there are a large number of jobs at stake, and when the trade partner has recently failed to honor their own trade commitments. I find little in the way of copartisanship dynamics, but document strong dispositional effects in which those not predisposed to view international cooperation in a positive light impose systematically smaller punishments on leaders who violate treaty commitments.

Keywords: cooperation, domestic politics, survey experiments, reputation, audience costs, trade attitudes

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Does the public care if their political leaders fail to uphold the state’s institutionalized international commitments? If so, under what circumstances? In this paper, I study how concerns about the state’s reputation for honoring commitments and the costs of retaliation—made salient through institutionalized international policy commitments—discipline the otherwise context-dependent politics of foreign economic policy. Using survey experiments, I show that the public is less willing to endorse the imposition of trade restrictions when doing so would violate standing international trade agreements and that this is the case even in contexts where the public would otherwise support protectionist policy: when the unemployment rate is high, when there are a large number of jobs at stake, and when the trade partner has recently failed to honor their own trade commitments. Further, I show that leaders who violate standing agreements increase concerns among the domestic audience about reputational harm and retaliation in a manner consistent with our workhorse models of audience costs and the political economy of cooperation.

This paper complements work on the political economy of institutionalized economic cooperation which often focuses on the important distributional implications of economic policy (Lake 2009). Here, I am motivated by work in the domestic audience cost literature showing that the consistency concerns that cause audiences to punish leaders who make empty threats or commitments are conditional on the ex ante policy preferences of the domestic audience (e.g., Chaudoin 2014; Brutger and Kertzer 2018; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Wallace 2013).¹ That work suggests a potential way in which heterogeneous situations might relax the constraints that consistency concerns are generally expected to impose on leaders operating in the shadow of a public international commitment. In the context of crisis bargaining, where a leader that makes a threat often must decide whether to make good on that threat in relatively short order, situational variation in the magnitude of consistency costs may be of little real-world interest since leaders, anticipating the policy mood of the relevant domestic audience, may be less likely to make unpopular threats in the first place.

However, several features of modern institutionalized commitments make situational variation a potentially important moderator of domestic audience costs. First, institutionalized commitments are often not a policy *choice* that might be made or foregone by a given leader. Instead, they

¹See Martin (1993) and Fearon (1994) for the logic of how the punishments that domestic audiences can impose on political leaders make international threats or commitments more credible.

are policy *facts*, inherited as part of a broad portfolio of commitments made to the international community by past leaders (Gray and Kucik 2017; Grieco, Gelpi, and Warren 2009). Second, while states make a uniform commitment to given treaty, the costs of compliance are likely to vary across situations and over time (e.g., Rosendorff and Milner 2001). Together, these two features of institutionalized commitments create space for audience preferences to vary in ways that might allow a leader to violate long-standing commitments on the cheap (Chaudoin 2014). To see this, consider that political leaders face situations that vary in ways that have direct and often large effects on the overall willingness of the public to endorse the policy content of a state's international commitments and so, as the public moves against the policy implied by a commitment, they may be less likely to punish the leader for violating that commitment. Such a procyclical relationship between concerns about consistency and support for the underlying policy across situations would mean that the existence of an international policy commitment would often do little on the domestic front to enhance a leader's desire to sustain unpopular policies.

But even as institutionalized commitments allow for the audience's preferences to vary over time and across situations in ways that may—at the very least—not encourage compliance, there are important reasons to suspect that concerns for the state's reputation and about retaliation by the aggrieved parties may still limit the domestic audience's willingness to endorse commitment abrogation and so stabilize the magnitude of noncompliance costs across contexts. First, unlike many substantive issues in world affairs, the reputational and retaliatory consequences of failing to honor commitments have direct analogues in the personal lives of individuals (Emler 1990). The public uses intuitions drawn from their personal experiences to inform their foreign policy attitudes (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Rathbun et al. 2016) and to draw inferences about the impacts of international events (Powers and Renshon 2023). As such, to the extent that reputational concerns are salient to a given individual, they should inform their assessments of their leaders independently from the situation in which a leader violates a commitment. In addition, while violating commitments has reputation costs, it also invites direct punishments in the form of legal sanctions and in-kind retaliation. Thus, consistency concerns may be driven by a generalized expectation that failing to honor commitments has important reputational consequences over the long run and the potential

for retribution by the wronged parties in the short run and these expectations may be unlikely to vary across contexts.

Given these countervailing considerations, an important and open empirical question is how situational variation might affect the willingness of domestic audiences to punish leaders for violating standing international commitments. It is worth noting here that some work on reputation has partially spoken to this question of situational variation previously (Tomz 2007; Tomz and Weeks 2021; Davies and Johns 2013). Tomz and Weeks (2021) show, for example, that alliance commitments make a larger difference when the ally is not a democracy. The upshot is that commitments matter more when the audience would otherwise be unwilling to act. These results are driven, in part, by varying the *implicit* commitments that states have across contexts when the state has not made an *explicit* commitment. Absent an alliance commitment, a democratic domestic audience may yet feel obligated to come to the aid of other democracies. In varying regime type, then, Tomz and Weeks (2021) likely induce variation in both policy preferences and in the state's implicit obligations to act absent a commitment. This frustrates our ability to separate the effect of variation in preferences over policy across situations from concerns about the state's reputation. So, while we have learned much from this past work, there is not yet consensus on this question of how variation in policy preferences across time and context shape the willingness of the public to punish leaders who violate the state's standing international commitments.

I investigate this question of variable inconsistency costs in the context of institutionalized trade cooperation using survey experiments. In the experiments, I ask respondents whether they approve or disapprove of a leader who imposes new trade restrictions. To test for consistency concerns, I randomly assign respondents to information revealing that the new import limits *would* violate an existing international trade agreement or that the limits *would not*. To gain leverage on the question of whether situational context moderates the public's taste for consistency, I vary the domestic and international political context in which a leader imposes these new trade restrictions. In the first experiment, respondents learn either that the unemployment is high or low, that the number of jobs at stake is large or small, and that the president is or is not a copartisan. In the second experiment, I largely fix the domestic context, but vary the cooperative reputation of the trading partner such

that some respondents learn that the import limits were imposed on a country that has a history of honoring its own trade policy commitments, while others learn that the trading partner has a history of failing to do so. A third treatment arm reveals no information about the cooperative partner and so serves as a conceptual replication of main effect of consistency concerns in the first experiment.

The results show that the contextual manipulations were successful. Approval of the leader's decision to impose trade restrictions varies as one might expect in response to changing circumstances. Trade restrictions are more popular when the economy is doing poorly, when there are a large number of jobs at stake, when the leader is not a copartisan, when the trading partner has failed to uphold their trade policy commitments in the past, and when the restrictions do not violate standing international policy commitments. At the same time, I find that consistency concerns are relatively stable across contexts. Whether the economy is doing poorly or well, the number of jobs at stake is large or small, or the partner country honors its commitments or not, the public punishes leaders who implement policies in violation of standing international commitments to a similar degree. The single exception relates to the number of jobs at stake. Here, I find suggestive evidence that the public punishes leaders who violate somewhat less when a large number of jobs are at stake, but even in this case, the punishment that the audience imposes is quite considerable. I also find that violations raise concerns about reputational harm and about retaliatory actions, suggesting a consequentialist logic consistent with audience cost theory. The one case where a commitment violation does not increase concerns about retaliation arises when the trading partner has a history of not honoring their trade policy commitments. Subsequent analyses reveal that copartisanship with the political leadership has little effect, but that those who view world affairs as less antagonistic and international involvement as more beneficial consistently impose larger punishments than those who are more hawkish or isolationist in their foreign policy outlook.

Taken together the results of these experiments have important implications for our understanding of the domestic political logic of commitment and compliance. First, the finding that inconsistency costs are quite consistent in their magnitude across situational contexts suggests the public comes to the table with well-defined concerns about reputational and retaliatory consequences of failing

to honor commitments. Conditional on learning about a violation, I show that the public believes it is costly, damaging the state’s reputation for honoring its commitments over the long run and prompting the wronged states to retaliate in the short run. This finding mirrors that of other recent work showing that publics are averse to cooperation with unreliable partners ([Chen, Pevehouse, and Powers 2021](#); [Myrick 2021](#)).

Second, these results help clarify where the public opinion action is in the politics of “backing down” from standing commitments. Past work shows that leaders can increase support for their decision to violate commitments by re-framing that choice in self-serving ways ([Levendusky and Horowitz 2012](#); [Morse and Pratt 2020](#); [Brutger 2021](#)). The results here suggest that when commitments are salient, such efforts may be successful not because they reduce the magnitude of inconsistency costs, but because such strategic re-framing efforts can make those costs more affordable in relative terms. If a leader’s preferred policy can be made popular enough, any inconsistency costs will be less acute in relative terms and may be worth paying if doing so has other political benefits, such as signaling a leader’s commitment to particular constituencies.

And finally, despite this situational stability, ex ante beliefs about the nature of international politics do structure individual views of the reputational implications of violations, showing that dispositional concerns shape noncompliance considerations across issues areas ([Brutger and Kertzer 2018](#)). Doves and internationalists are relatively more concerned about damaging the state’s cooperative reputation and so punish violations relatively more than their hawkish or isolationist compatriots. This implies a potential bargaining advantage for leaders supported by relatively more hawkish or isolationist coalitions as they make and remake the state’s international commitments ([Schultz 2005](#); [Mattes and Weeks 2019](#); [Kahneman and Renshon 2015](#)) and may help make sense of the partisan swings in cooperative behavior by American presidents over the last 25 years. Moreover, in drawing support from coalitions of voters who are less likely to favor international engagement and who are less concerned about the consequences of failing to honor cooperative obligations, populist leaders may be uniquely positioned to demand significant revisions to longstanding cooperative commitments or to overturn them entirely ([Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019](#)).

1 International commitments, domestic audience costs, and consistency concerns

Domestic audience costs are the price in political support that leaders would pay for failing to follow through on threats made during international crises (Martin 1993; Fearon 1994).² The domestic audience, according to the standard account, cares about the state’s reputation for credibility or resolve and so withdraws support for leaders who fail to make good on the state’s threats.

While audience cost theory is most closely associated with crisis bargaining, the logic applies just as well to other kinds of international policy commitments (Martin 1993), especially those enshrined in international treaties (Chaudoin 2014; Wallace 2013; Kreps and Wallace 2016; Tomz 2008). Any mismatch between the state’s commitments and its policies may not be readily apparent to domestic observers in the wild, but many international agreements create monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to alert interested audiences of violations (Simmons 2010; Dai 2005; Fortna 2003). These mechanisms draw the attention of opposition parties, civil society, and the news media and so help make the fact of noncompliance known to the broader domestic audience (Simmons 2009; Pelc 2013; Ritter and Conrad 2016).

Reputational concerns among domestic audiences drive the logic of domestic audience cost theory. In the context of institutionalized commitments, such concerns take the form of worries that violating treaty commitments will make other states less willing to cooperate in the future. These concerns are well-founded; actors have strong incentives to punish defection from cooperative commitments quite harshly (e.g., Axelrod and Hamilton 1981; Keohane 1984; Guzman 2008). Moreover, domestic audiences appreciate the strategic logic of these incentives. Chen, Pevehouse, and Powers (2021) show in a survey experiment that the public withdraws support for new trade cooperation when the trade partner is revealed to have not honored their trade policy commitments in the past. Similarly, Myrick (2021) shows that reminding observers abroad of partisan polarization in the United States raises questions about the reliability of the United States as a cooperative partner and so reduces support for future cooperative endeavors.

Other work suggests that the public’s concern for consistency may be conditional on their

²Tomz (2007); Trager and Vavreck (2011); Levy et al. (2015); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012). See Brutger and Kertzer (2018) for a compact summary of the concept of audience costs and efforts to study them using experiments.

policy preferences and, in some cases, may not be apparent at all. Snyder and Borghard (2011), for example, argue that domestic audiences may “care more about policy substance than about consistency between a leader’s words and deeds” and so “punishment is more likely to be doled out for an unpopular policy than for a failure to carry out a threat.” Kertzer and Brutger (2016) show that leaders who back down after a threat bear the anticipated punishment for inconsistency, but only among some portions of their domestic audience. Other portions of their audience punish them for making the threat in the first place. Brutger and Kertzer (2018) show that this is because foreign policy dispositions inform the kind of reputation that individuals wish their state to cultivate with some portions of the population preferring not to develop a reputation for belligerence while others have a preference for a reputation for resolve. Chaudoin (2014) studies how trade agreements shape support for new protectionist policy, finding that audiences care about the state’s reputation for credibility, but their evaluation of a leader’s failure to honor a commitment depends critically on whether they stand to “gain or lose from policy adjustments made in the name of international cooperation.” Chaudoin finds that inconsistency costs are imposed only by those portions of the public without strong *ex ante* preferences on the policy content of the commitment. In a similar vein, Wallace (2013) provides suggestive evidence that liberals are more likely than conservatives to reduce support for the use of torture when they are reminded that the use of torture is inconsistent with their state’s commitments under international human rights treaties.

While foreign policy dispositions may reliably shape responses to inconsistency, copartisanship with a given political leader may not. Research in the audience cost tradition finds that voters punish leaders of their own party just as harshly as those from the opposite party when leaders back down after an initial escalation (Trager and Vavreck 2011; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). This is striking because partisan attachments are central to our understanding of public opinion formation in the United States (Zaller 1992) and abroad (Brader and Tucker 2012).³

Taken as a whole, this work makes clear that domestic audiences place a premium on honoring commitments, but that the magnitude of that premium is likely to vary across domestic observers who differ in their foreign policy preferences. As such, audience features have important implications

³See also Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013).

for the ability of audience costs to bind leaders who might otherwise wish to abrogate existing commitments. But this work also raises the question of how audiences vary their punishment strategies as their taste for the policy implied by existing commitments changes across situations and over time. When the public sours on the policy content of a given commitment, do they reduce their punishments for inconsistency? When they embrace the policy content of commitments with renewed vigor, do they amplify their punishments accordingly?

2 Consistency concerns and situational context

Moving from the question of *who* punishes commitment violations to *under what conditions* commitment violations are punished makes clear that while leaders face heterogeneous domestic audiences, they also face heterogeneous situations as they choose whether to honor or vitiate the state's promises. In the context of crisis bargaining, where leaders make commitments and then decide whether or not to make good on those commitments in relatively short order, the main effect of such situational variation in consistency concerns is likely to be one of selection in which leaders avoid making unpopular commitments in the first place.

There are, however, three features of modern institutionalized commitments that separate them from commitments or threats made in the context of crisis bargaining and, as a result, suggest different implications for the incentives of leaders. First, the international policy commitments that leaders are tasked with upholding are often not policy *choices* made by the incumbent, but instead policy *facts* inherited from their predecessors (e.g., [Gray and Kucik 2017](#)). Second, states often make a uniform commitment to some set of policies, but the costs of upholding those commitments will vary across situations and over time (e.g., [Rosendorff and Milner 2001](#)). And third, inconsistency invites not just reputational harm but also punishments (e.g., legal sanctions and other forms of retaliation) specific to the act of noncompliance which are unpopular with domestic audiences ([Brutger and Strezhnev 2018](#)). This last point is important since it means that inconsistency concerns will be a function of concerns about reputational harm *and* the costs of retaliation.

These first two differences, inheritance and variation in compliance costs, are important since

they create room for the public to potentially sour on the policy content of a given commitment over time and across contexts. When commitments are institutionalized—especially over long periods of time—leaders may find that they are asked with sustaining international commitments whose policy content is anathema to the domestic audience. If the public conditions their concerns about inconsistency on their policy preferences (Chaudoin 2014), then leaders may be able to abrogate the state’s commitments on the cheap when the public sours on their policy content. The domestic audience, in this case, constructs and sheds obligations depending on their mood.

If concerns about reputation and retaliation are stable across contexts, however, leaders may find that they face a trade off between honoring the commitment and honoring the policy preference of the domestic audience. In principle, this trade off could help sustain commitments on the margin. When leaders continue unpopular policy because it is required by a standing international commitment, the audience can comfort themselves with the knowledge that the state’s reputation for honoring commitments is secure and that the state has avoided the retaliation that a violation might bring.

Such a dynamic would be consistent the findings of recent work on public attitudes on world affairs. As Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) note, “members of the public may often lack information, but they do not lack principles” and they use those principles to structure their views on foreign policy (Wittkopf 1990). Importantly, the principles or dispositions that guide foreign policy attitudes do not find their origin at the water’s edge. Instead, these principles are grounded in “values that structure not only political life but social life in general” (Rathbun et al. 2016). Individuals may therefore be most likely to have strong reactions to events in foreign affairs when those events have direct analogues in their own social lives. For example, Powers and Renshon (2023) argue that international status concerns are salient to domestic publics because “status concerns and competition are innate to social life,” meaning that “their dynamics and implications are natural and intuitive to the public.” While the substantive stakes of any given foreign policy decision may be unclear to individuals, the implications of honoring or violating commitments should not be. This is so, in part, because reputations are fundamental to human social interactions (Emler 1990; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014) and individuals invest significant resources in cultivating and

defending their personal reputations (Nisbett and Cohen 2018).

We can gain some insight into what happens to reputational concerns as the situational specifics vary from the behavior of political leaders. While political leaders do differ from one another in the weight that they place on various dimensions of both their own and the state's reputation, individual leaders appear to carry these weights around with them from one situation to another (Yarhi-Milo 2018). To that point, Dafoe and Caughey (2016) argue that Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson possessed different levels of concern for developing a reputation for resolve and so acted differently when confronted with similar strategic situations. Notably, they ground their argument in research on the southern culture of honor (Nisbett and Cohen 2018), linking leader's interpersonal experiences in childhood and young adulthood to the weight that they assign to maintaining a reputation for toughness or resolve while in office. Leaders according to this view, like members of the broader public, draw on their social experience to form beliefs about the reputational consequences of particular actions and carry those concerns from situation to situation.

In sum, the leader's incentives will depend critically on whether situational context shapes the willingness of the audience to bear the reputational and retaliatory costs of a violation and the audiences underlying taste for the policies implied by these commitments. Past work on how situational variation affects the incentives of leaders to honor commitments has not spoken directly to this question (Tomz 2007; Tomz and Weeks 2021; Davies and Johns 2013). These works study the effect of situational variation in ways that are likely to affect both the domestic audience's taste for the policy content of a commitment and perceptions of the state's *implicit* obligations absent an *explicit* commitment. Tomz (2007), shows that audience costs are larger when a crisis *does not* affect the national interest. Similarly, Davies and Johns (2013) shows that audience costs are higher when the situation involves rescuing hostages compared to a situation in which the goal is to prevent nuclear proliferation to a state that might threaten an ally. Tomz and Weeks (2021), for example, show that alliances have larger effects when they require leaders to respond to attacks on non-democracies and when the stakes are low. The situational variation here has implications not just for support for the policy (in this case, using military force to defend another country or to defend a significant national interest) but also the perceived commitments that the United

States has to act even when an *explicit* threat or commitment has not been made. In the case of alliance commitments, for example, the U.S. public likely views their country as obligated to defend other democracies whether or not a formal alliance agreement exists. This obligation, in part, arises from the reputational harm that would be inflicted on the United States if it stood idly by while a fellow democracy was attacked (Herrmann and Shannon 2001). If situational variation implicates the perceived commitments of the state, the audience cost—the punishment for not acting in the presence of a formal commitment—will be eroded precisely because the reputational concerns absent a formal threat or commitment are still quite acute. This is, of course, not a problem in the foreign policy crisis bargaining context since it is the additional information conveyed by a costly threat or commitment that is of interest, but it frustrates our ability to learn about how variation in policy preferences affect the willingness of the domestic audience to impose punishments on leaders who fail to uphold their commitments.

In the case of many institutionalized policy commitments, however, the domestic audience may not view the state as obligated to any particular policy at all absent formal commitments to the contrary. In those settings, it is easier to generate unbiased estimates of the punishments that the domestic audience inflict as their support for the policy content of the commitment waxes and wanes. Take the issue of institutionalized trade policy, for example. The public’s taste for trade openness varies quite substantially over time in response to domestic economic conditions. Trade openness is less popular in periods of elevated unemployment, but more popular in periods of relatively low unemployment (Mansfield, Mutz, and Brackbill 2019). The size of these temporal swings can be substantial. During the Great Recession, when the unemployment rate rose to over 10 percent, about 50 percent of the U.S. public reported viewing trade as a threat to the U.S. economy. Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with unemployment rates at historic lows in the United States, that figure was just 18 percent (J. Jones 2018). But while variation in the domestic labor market has effects on the overall popularity of trade openness—presumably because it makes the adjustment costs of liberalizing more salient—it should not implicate perceptions of the state’s obligation to implement any particular set of trade policies at all absent a standing trade agreement. In this setting, then, we are better positioned to study how concerns about the reputation effects of a treaty

violation are moderated across situations that induce variation in support for the policy content of a commitment.

Below, I outline a survey experiment that is designed to test for whether situational variation leads to variation in the costs that leaders pay in terms of support from domestic audiences in the context of institutionalized trade policy. I vary the situation in ways that should directly affect the level of support for new trade restrictions. I also randomly vary whether the new restrictions violate a standing international trade agreement or not. This set up, which builds on that of Chaudoin (2014), allows for a clean separation of the domestic audience cost for violating a commitment from variation in support for the policy content of the trade commitment. To guard against the issues of implicit commitments raised above, I varied the situational context in ways that should not themselves have implications for the perceived obligations of the state to implement any particular trade policy. This is important because it sheds light on a key question in the political economy of trade cooperation, that of whether concerns about reputation are given less weight by domestic audiences as their overall taste for economic engagement wanes. In the conclusion, I suggest ways in which future work might make progress via more general tests of how situational contexts shape perceptions of implicit commitment.

3 Research Design

I study this question of situational variation in consistency concern using experiments. I fielded the first study in August 2019, securing a sample of about 1,200 respondents from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (mTurk) service. Study 1 focused on domestic sources variation in situational context.⁴ I fielded the second study in July 2020 on a sample of about 4,300 respondents drawn from Lucid. Study 2 focused on a key source of international variation in context: the cooperative history of the trading partner.⁵

⁴I implemented the screening protocol proposed by Kennedy et al. (2018) and a pre-treatment attention check to guard against fraudulent or excessively inattentive responses. Scholars have validated online convenience samples against national probability benchmarks (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner 2015).

⁵This study included a pre-treatment attention check as recommended by Ternovski and Orr (2022) when using Lucid.

In Study 1, I use a single-option conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015) in which respondents completed a series of eight evaluation tasks. In each task, respondents evaluated a president who imposed new trade restrictions.⁶ The treatment scenarios are styled after real-world media coverage of trade policy decisions in the U.S. press. Press coverage of new trade restrictions often highlights the central role of the President in U.S. trade policy, the number of jobs at stake, U.S. commitments under the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the broader economic context in which trade policy decisions are implemented.⁷ All respondents read a short introduction in which I explained that they would be asked to evaluate the policy choices of a future president.

Following this introduction, respondents evaluated the scenarios which randomly varied key dimensions of the institutional, political, and economic context of the president’s policy choice. To test for consistency concerns, I varied whether the import restrictions were consistent or inconsistent with the United States’ institutionalized trade policy commitments made to other members of the WTO. To ensure information equivalence among respondents within each condition, I informed all respondents that the import limits definitely would or definitely would not violate standing international trade policy commitments. To make clear that the violation was perceived as such by other WTO members, respondents in the non-compliance treatment learn that United States would be sued at the WTO. In the compliance condition, respondents learn that the United States would not be sued at the WTO.

To test for whether consistency concerns vary situationally, I varied the domestic context in which the import limits were imposed in ways that past research suggests have implications for the willingness of the public to endorse trade protection. In particular, I varied the state of the national economy, the number of jobs at stake, and the party of the president. Americans tend to be more protectionist when the unemployment rate is high (J. Jones 2018), when trade protection is framed as saving American jobs (Hiscox 2006), and when a leader from their own party advocates for protectionist policies (B. Jones 2017). The exact wording of the scenario, which builds directly on that employed by Chaudoin (2014), is in the appendix.

⁶Results are similar if we consider only the first choice task. See Appendix.

⁷For example, when the *New York Times* covered the 2016 imposition of global safeguard tariffs on imported washing machines, the article mentioned the president eight times, the potential effects on jobs in direct terms twice, and noted that the tariffs might be inconsistent with U.S. commitments under the WTO (Swanson 2016).

At the end of each scenario, I asked respondents, “On the whole, do you approve or disapprove of the president’s decision to impose import limits in this context?” The response options were on a five point scale ranging from “strongly approve” to “strongly disapprove” with “neither approve nor disapprove” in the center. I also allowed respondents to select “don’t know.” Those who selected “neither” or “don’t know” received a follow up question which read, “If you had to pick, would you say that you lean toward approving or disapproving the president’s decision to impose import limits in this context?” with answer options of “lean toward approving” and “lean toward disapproving.” I use these responses to construct a six-point scale which serves as the primary dependent variable in the analyses that follow. In addition, I asked two follow up questions. The first asked about the respondent’s concerns about the country’s reputation, “In your view, will the president’s decision to impose import limits in this context make other countries more likely or less likely to view the U.S. as a country that honors its international commitments?” While the second asked about expectations of retaliation, “In your view, will the president’s decision to impose import limits in this context make other countries more likely or less likely to retaliate against the United States by imposing new import limits of their own?” Both questions had five-point Likert response scales.

Study 2 was identical to Study 1 except that the domestic context was fixed such that the unemployment rate was high and there were 10,000 jobs at stake. The party of the president randomly varied as above and I introduced a new treatment arm that manipulated the cooperative reputation of the trading partner. In the control condition, respondents learned nothing about the partner’s cooperative reputation, allowing that arm to serve as a conceptual replication of Study 1. In the two treatment conditions, respondents learned that the trading partner “has a long history of violating its trade agreements with the United States and treating U.S. businesses unfairly” or “has a long history of honoring its trade agreements with the United States and treating U.S. businesses fairly.”⁸ The manipulations for both studies are summarized in Table 1.

A few points on the design of this experiment are worth highlighting. First, the design is conceptually similar to the now-standard audience cost survey experimental set up from Tomz

⁸Along with domestic context (unemployment rate or jobs at risk), the reputation of the trading partner is frequently invoked by leaders. For example, the Trump administration called out China for what it views as “unfair trade practices” in the wake of a WTO ruling against U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods (Keaten 2020). See also Schweinberger (2021) who studies the effect of promise breaking rhetoric on support for cooperation.

Attributes	Levels	
	Study 1	Study 2
Economy	The unemployment rate was very [low / high] and those looking for a new job were [able to find one relatively easily / often unable to find one].	The unemployment rate was very high and those looking for a new job were often unable to find one.
Number of Jobs	[1,500 / 5,000 / 10,000]	10,000
Party of the President	[Democratic / Republican]	[Democratic / Republican]
Reputation of trade partner	—	has a long history of [violating / honoring] its trade agreements with the United States and treating U.S. businesses unfairly
Compliance	The import limits [would / would not] violate trade agreements signed by the United States and so [would / would not] lead to the United States being sued at the World Trade Organization.	The import limits [would / would not] violate trade agreements signed by the United States and so [would / would not] lead to the United States being sued at the World Trade Organization.

Table 1: Summary of manipulations. All respondents learn that the president imposed new trade limits. For the economy treatment, randomization is constrained so that the unemployment rate is consistent with the job search experience. For the compliance treatment, randomization is constrained so that the fact of a violation (or not) is consistent with whether the United States is likely to get sued (or not).

(2007). In that setting, a leader makes a commitment to engage and then goes back on it (“backs down”) or the leader avoids making any sort of commitment and remains on the sidelines (“stays out”). In both cases, the leader pursues a policy of non-engagement, but in one case (backs down) the leader damages the state’s reputation for credibility. In the scenarios employed here, the leader always pursues a protectionist policy, but in one condition (violates existing agreement) the leader does so in a manner that our theories suggest ought to damage the state’s reputation for honoring commitments. This design builds directly on that of Chaudoin (2014) who studies how one’s preexisting trade policy preferences moderate reactions to learning that a proposed trade policy might violate a preexisting agreement. While Chaudoin (2014) estimates treatment effects against a control condition that received no information about trade policy commitments, I reveal to *all* respondents in both conditions whether or not the import limits are inconsistent with standing U.S. trade policy commitments, making the commitment or lack thereof explicit in each condition. This is important since respondents may differ in their ex ante perceptions of commitments that a state has to particular policies in particular situations.

Second, the experiment is specifically designed to avoid dynamics that lead the public to impose

differential belligerence costs across conditions (Kertzer and Brutger 2016).⁹ The present design sidesteps belligerence costs by generating inconsistency not through variation in the leader’s policy choices or threats, but through the presence or absence of an *existing* trade agreement. This breaks the link between the commitment and the policy choice that Kertzer and Brutger (2016) argue biases estimates of audience costs in the classic audience cost vignettes.

Third, the treatments are high contrast. That is to say that my goal was to vary features of each scenario in realistic ways that were relatively obvious to respondents and thus provide a clear test of whether differences in economic and political context do, in fact, shape the magnitude of the consistency costs that the public imposes. In the appendix, an analysis of manipulation checks shows that this effort was quite successful. Respondents recalled the details of the scenarios quite well.

Finally, the violation condition includes information about the violation itself and about the potential punishments for that violation. This is a strength of the design in the sense that it reflects a key conceptual difference between institutionalized cooperation on the one hand and the crisis bargaining context on the other: inconsistency in the context of institutionalized cooperation invites both reputational harm and costly institutionalized sanctions. At the same time, by embracing this feature of reality, I am less able to speak to the importance of reputational concerns relative to concerns about retaliation and the magnitude of the recovered inconsistency costs are likely larger than they would be if the violation condition did not mention that the United States would be sued at the WTO. Others have shown, for example, that disputes conceptually similar to those featured in the vignette generate disapproval (Brutger and Strezhnev 2018).¹⁰

⁹See Chaudoin (2014) who also notes this issue.

¹⁰Some readers may view mentioning the WTO dispute in the vignette as problematic since it might lead respondents to be more likely to report that they anticipate retaliation regardless of the situational context. One might be concerned then that we cannot say much about when concerns about retaliation arise organically in the minds of respondents and that the estimated inconsistency effects are biased upwards. Because the WTO suit is fixed across the violation conditions, readers can still learn much from the (lack of) situational effects. In my view, however, because retaliation is so central to the consequences of making policy that is inconsistent with past commitments, the domestic punishments for inviting retaliation through a commitment violation should be included in “inconsistency costs” in this context. And, of course, one reason we institutionalize agreements in the first place is to synthesize concerns about the probability and magnitude of retaliation when those concerns are not naturally salient enough to regulate behavior. As such, making the potential for retaliation clear in the manipulation is part and parcel of studying the effect of these institutionalized commitments. Still, decomposing reputational concerns and concerns about retaliation is substantively important but would require a different research design.

4 Results

Leaders pay significant costs for violating agreements, all else equal

I estimate treatment effects via OLS.¹¹ For Study 1, the models include a battery of treatment assignment indicators for each level of each factor in the experiment (compliance, state of the economy, number of jobs, and party of the president), all interactions between these treatment indicators, and a battery of pre-treatment control variables (political party, gender, age, education, isolationism, militarism, cosmopolitanism, and support for free trade). For Study 2, the models also include treatment assignment indicators for each level of each factor (compliance, reputation of trade partner, and party of the president), all interactions between these treatment indicators, and the same set of pre-treatment control variables. The dependent variables in both studies are presidential approval, expectations of damage to the state’s reputation for honoring its commitments, and expectations of retaliation. I cluster the standard errors by respondent for Study 1.

I present the main effects of each treatment, averaging over the other treatments, on leader approval for Study 1 (blue circles and error bars) and Study 2 (green triangles and error bars) in Figure 1. These results suggest strong consistency concerns among respondents in both samples. In Study 1, learning that the import limits violated an existing agreement reduced the leader’s approval by 1.2 points (95% CI: 1.1, 1.3) on the 6-point approval scale. The same manipulation in Study 2 reduced the leader’s approval by .43 points (95% CI: .51, .34). Figure 2 displays the main effect of a violation on the percentage of respondents in each condition who express any level of approval for the president’s decision. In Study 1, we get about a 30 percentage point reduction in share of the public willing to express support for the president and in Study 2, that same quantity is about 10 percentage points.

Similarly large effects obtain in the case of concerns about damage to the state’s reputation and expectations of retaliation. In Study 1, expectations of reputational damage increased by .68 points (95% CI: .63, 0.74) and expectations of retaliation increased by .63 points (95% CI: .56, .68) when the new import limits violate an existing agreement. The same figures for Study 2 are .3 (95% CI:

¹¹Results are similar if I instead use the approach outlined in Egami and Imai (2018).

.20, 0.33) and .17 points (95% CI: .11, .22) respectively. In sum, we see unambiguous evidence for consistency concerns driven, in part, by the reputational logic suggested by domestic audience cost theory. The public also appears to appreciate the tit-for-tat logic of cooperation, anticipating not just the long-run costs of reputational damage but also the short-run costs of retaliatory tariffs. Inconsistency concerns, in this context, appear to be driven by a combination of these factors.

The other treatments appear to be working as anticipated. As observational public opinion data suggest, the public is more willing to tolerate trade restrictions when the economy is doing poorly and the unemployment rate is high. In Study 1, moving from the baseline of a “good economy” with low unemployment to a “bad economy” with high unemployment increases support for the president’s imposition of tariffs by .33 points (95% CI: .26, .40). The public is both more willing to endorse import limits as the number of jobs those limits are aimed at saving increases and when the trading partner has failed to uphold their end of past trade deals. Relative to when 1,500 jobs were said to be at stake, informing respondents that 10,000 jobs were at stake increased approval of the president’s choice to impose import limits by about .44 (95% CI: .35, .52) points. Again using the case of 1,500 jobs at stake as the baseline, approval was about .27 (95% CI: .19, .34) points higher in the case of 5,000 jobs being at stake.

In Study 2, we see evidence that the public is sensitive to the past behavior of the trading partner. Relative to a no information condition, informing respondents that the target of the tariffs has a history of not honoring trade agreements that they have signed with the United States increased support for the president’s use of tariffs by .12 (95% CI: .02, .23) points. The new limits are commensurately less popular when the trading partner has a record of rectitude. Informing respondents of the trade partner’s poor record for honoring trade commitments increases support for the limits by .12 (95% CI: .02, .23). Finally, these experiments found no main effect on partisanship; changing the party of the president had no effect on approval of the president’s choice to impose tariffs.

The situational context in which a leader imposed the tariffs had almost no effect on either expectations among respondents that the import limits would damage the state’s reputation or affect the probability of retaliation. This is important because it suggests that the situational

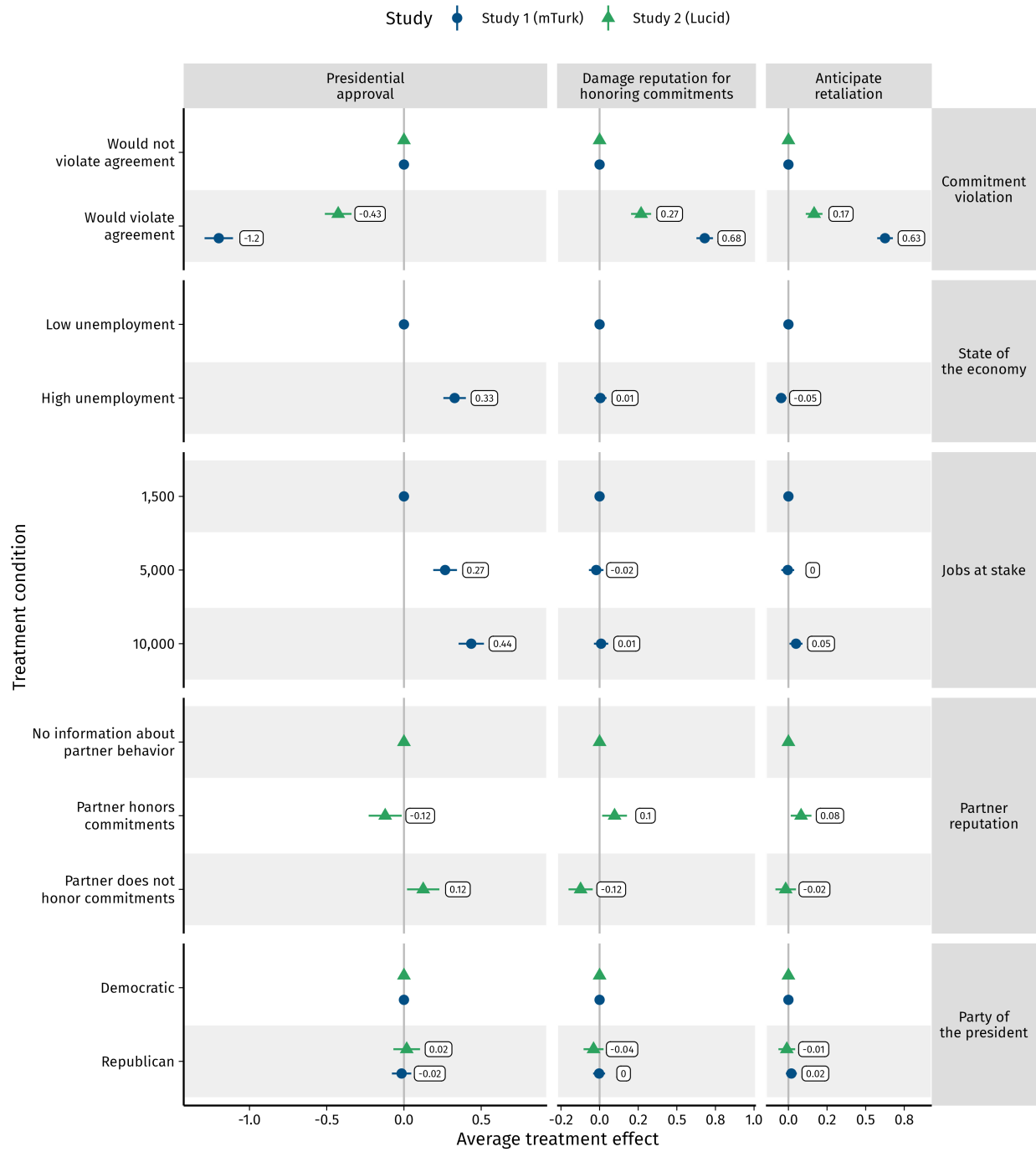


Figure 1: Main effects of treatment for Study 1 and Study 2

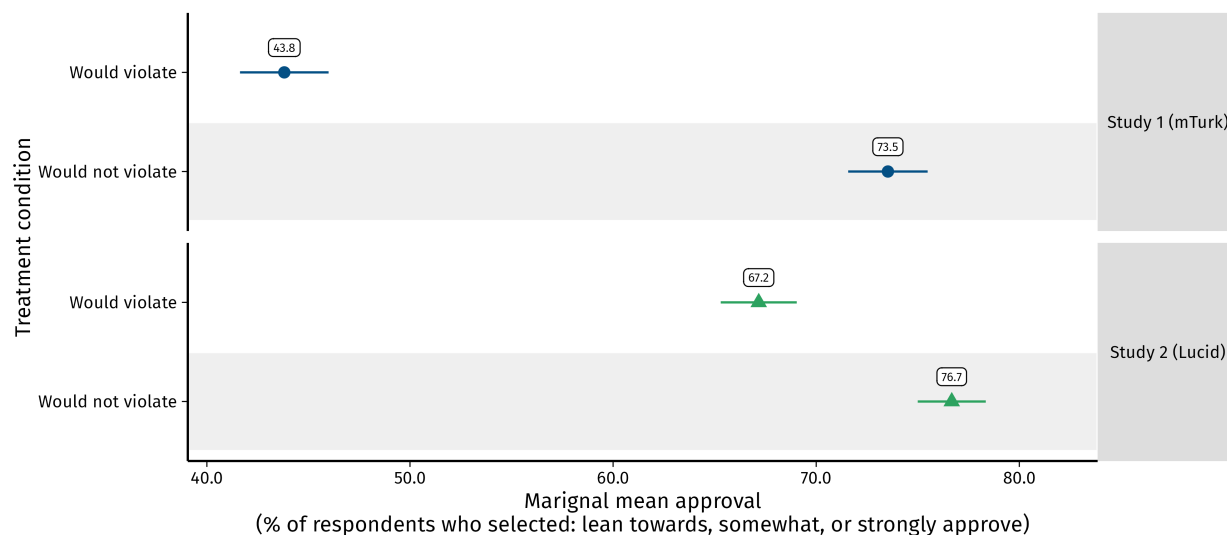


Figure 2: Substantive effect of treaty violation in Study 1 and Study 2 on presidential approval. Quantities are marginal mean levels of approval in each treatment condition.

variation did not implicate perceptions of obligation to impose any particular trade policy. The one exception, interestingly, is that of the partner's past behavior. Relative to the case in which respondents learned nothing about the trade partner's record, the bad reputation treatment in which respondents learned that the partner has failed to live up to its commitments in the past and treated U.S. firms unfairly lowered expectations of reputational damage somewhat (about .12 points w/ 95% CI: .05, .20). The reverse is true when respondents learned that the trade partner has a clean record. Expectations of reputational damage increased by about .10 points (95% CI: .01, .18) in that case. This is an exception that proves the rule: situational variation can have implications for whether domestic audiences feel compelled to implement particular policies and, consequently, the reputational costs of failing to do so. Similarly, we see that the public is more likely to anticipate retaliation when trade restrictions are imposed on states that have a record of treating U.S. firms well.

Thus far, we have seen that, in Study 1, variation in the domestic context affected overall support for trade restrictions, but it did not condition expectations about how those restrictions would affect the state's reputation or how other states would respond. In Study 2, we learned that the past behavior of the trade partner affects support for protectionist policy and that the public is likely,

on average, to anticipate damage to the state’s reputation when trade restrictions are imposed on trading partners who have failed to uphold their trade policy commitments in the past. These results are encouraging because they suggest that the context treatments are working as anticipated. The public is sensitive to the presence or absence of international commitments, but also conditions its support for the underlying content of the leader’s policy choice on situational context. I now turn to tests of whether this variation also drives variation in consistency concerns.

Noncompliance costs vary little in response to changes in situational context

Having demonstrated that the our respondents are sensitive to both the presence or absence of a treaty obligation and to the situational context in which a policy choice is made, we can now test for whether the public is willing to forgive leaders who violate treaties when compliance costs are high or when trade partners are unreliable. To do so, I estimate the effect of violating a treaty within each contextual treatment arm. I use the same fully-interacted models from above to generate these conditional treatment effect estimates. Strong evidence of situational variation in consistency concerns would manifest as significant changes in the magnitude of punishments across contexts. If context is pretext, we might expect that when the unemployment rate is high, the number of jobs at stake large, or in the face of a bad faith trading partner, the public would offer leaders who violated a treaty some dispensation. The absence of such conditional punishments, however, would suggest that consistency concerns loom relatively large in the minds of the public even as their overall willingness to endorse trade openness ebbs and flows.

Figure 3 plots the effect of a treaty violation on support for the president across each of the other treatment arms. The figure shows how much less approval the president enjoys when the new import limits violate a standing international agreement relative to the case in which the limits do not violate an agreement. The left most facet of Figure 3 shows that the public’s willingness to punish for inconsistency does not, in general, depend on situational context. Whether the unemployment rate is high or low, the number of jobs at stake large or small, and whether the trading partner is reliable or not the public is willing to impose substantial punishments for treaty violations. The reasons for this are revealed in the middle and right facets of Figure 3. Here we see evidence that

the public does not condition their punishments on context, in part, because they judge that the international audience will not either. Both concerns about reputational damage and retaliation are largely invariant in the face of changes in situational context. Figure 4 plots estimates of the differences between these conditional estimates and their associated p-values.

There are two results worth remarking on. First, the magnitude of the punishment for inconsistency may be decreasing in the number of jobs at stake. In the 10,000 jobs condition, in which approval declines by 1.1 (95% CI: 1, 1.3) points, respondents were somewhat less sensitive of treaty violations than in the 1,500 jobs condition, in which approval declines by 1.3 points (95% CI: 1.1, 1.4). The difference between these two estimates is not statistically significant in the main model but given the trend in the point estimates, it seems plausible that for a sufficiently large number of jobs we could observe a statistically significant decrease in the magnitude of the audience cost imposed by the public.¹² Regardless, the public appears to appreciate that a leader who violates is purchasing domestic jobs by harming the state's reputation: the anticipated reputational costs do not vary at all as a function of the number of jobs at stake. A second exception relates to expectations of retaliation. When a trade partner has a record of failing to live up to its commitments, the imposition of tariffs is not thought to invite further retaliation. This appears to be the result of respondents anticipating relatively high levels of retaliation from unreliable partners whether or not there is an agreement in place.

Taken together these results suggest that situational variation that affects support for the policy content of a commitment plays little role in the average costs that leaders pay for noncompliance. International commitments thus discipline the otherwise highly-situational politics of foreign economic policy. This is, in part, because the public anticipates that audiences abroad will have little patience with leaders who abrogate agreements when the going gets tough. In the one instance where we find suggestive evidence that the public appears willing to grant some dispensation, that of the number of jobs at stake, that dispensation is rather small. This is apparently because the public appreciates that protection for those at risk of losing their jobs must be paid for with reputational

¹²If we look only at the change in the share of the sample reporting some level of approval for the president (rather than the six-point scale), for example, the consistency cost decreases from about 33 percentage points when just 1,500 jobs are at risk to about 28 percentage points when 10,000 jobs are at risk. This effect, while small, is statistically significant ($p = .03$).

damage and in-kind retaliation from their trading partner.

Foreign policy orientation conditions consistency concerns

I now turn to tests of whether foreign policy orientation affects the extent to which individuals punish leaders for treaty violations. Those who are more open to international engagement, less likely to see U.S. military dominance as the key to world peace, and less likely to privilege national interests over international interests ought to be more concerned about honoring the states cooperative international commitments, in part, because they link commitment violations more directly to reputational harm. I measured these predispositions pre-treatment by asking for agreement with a number of standard statements on each of these themes.¹³ Responses were on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. I code respondents as either high (somewhat or strongly agree) or low (somewhat or strongly disagree) on each of these measures. I assign those who selected neither agree nor disagree to a middle category. I rely on models of the form described above, but this time include an interaction term between the foreign policy orientation of interest and the (fully-interacted) treatment indicators. I estimate a model of this kind for each of the foreign policy orientations of interest and each dependent variable. All models include the same pre-treatment control variables as above.

Figure 5 presents the effect of violating on presidential approval, concerns about damage to the state's reputation, and expectations of retaliation across foreign policy orientations for both studies. The results suggest an important role for foreign policy orientations. In the top panel of Figure 5, we see that in both studies those who are relatively more isolationist (triangles) impose more modest punishments on leaders who violate agreement than those who are relatively less isolationist (circles). In Study 1, isolationists lower their approval by 1 point (95% CI: .86, 1.2,) while their less isolationist compatriots lower their support by 1.4 points (95% CI: 1.3, 1.6). The same figures for Study 2 are 0.25 points (95% CI: 0.13, 0.37) and 0.69 points (95% CI: 0.52, 0.87) respectively. We see a similarly divergent evaluations across levels of militarism. Those who view U.S. military strength as the key to global stability punish leaders less for violating than respondents who reported

¹³Exact wording is available in the appendix.

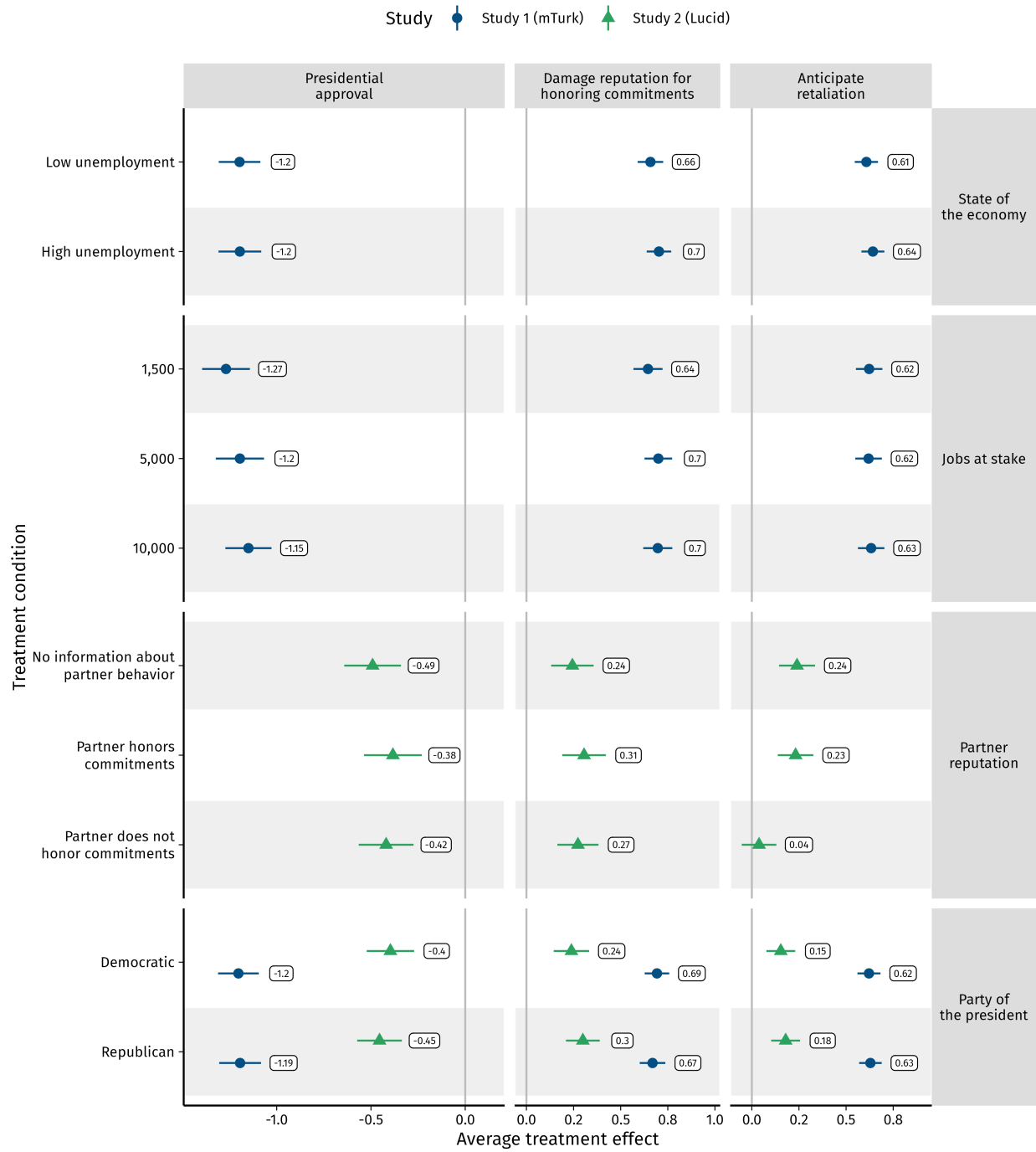


Figure 3: Effect of violation conditional on each treatment condition for Study 1 and Study 2

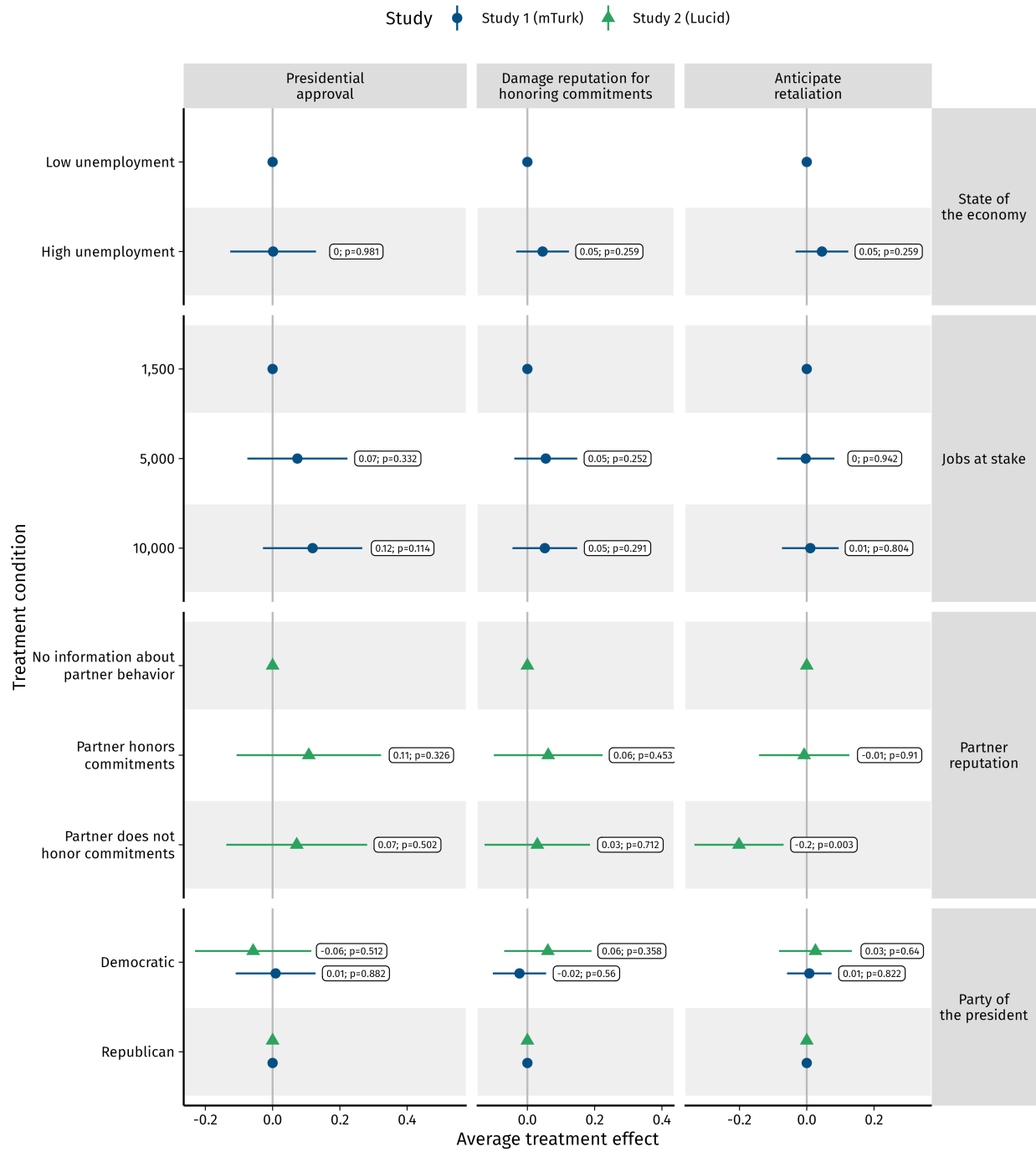


Figure 4: Estimated differences in conditional effects presented in Figure 1 for Study 1 and Study 2

lower levels of militarism. In Study 1, those high in militarism reduced their support for leaders by 1.1 points (95% CI: 0.91, 1.2) in the face of a treaty violation, while those low in militarism lowered support by 1.4 points (95% CI: 1.2, 1.5). The same figures for Study 2 are 0.31 points (95% CI: 0.19, 0.43) and 0.67 points (95% CI: 0.49, 0.85) respectively.

With respect to concerns about reputational damage and retaliation, it appears that the most consistent difference between those reporting high and low levels of isolationism and militarism is concern about reputation. In both studies, isolationists and militarists were consistently less concerned about reputational damage. These traits less reliably shaped expectations of retaliation.

The results on cosmopolitanism are less informative. While the direction of the effects is consistent with the expectations from above, the differences across the sub-samples are not statistically significant. This is, in part, driven by the relatively small number of individuals in the sample willing to somewhat or strongly agree with the notion that international interests are more important than national interests. It may also reflect the notion that one might believe that national interests take precedence over international interests but that part of pursuing the national interest in protecting the reputation of the state.

These results suggest support for dispositional theories of reputation costs. Notably, these dispositional traits condition both leader approval and respondent's expectations about the consequences of a violation, suggesting evidence for the consequential logic laid out above. As I document in the appendix, this is not the case for less fundamental attitudes like support for trade openness. The goal here is not to precisely link particular predispositions to particular levels of audience costs, but to test the general proposition that where one sits with respect to the role of the United States in the world or the utility of particular kinds of foreign policy tools will have important implications for how one judges the implications of failing to honor international agreements. Brutger and Kertzer (2018) show that hawks are more concerned about the state's reputation for making credible threats in the context of crisis bargaining and so punish leaders who back down quite harshly. I obtain analogous results here: those individuals who are most likely to view a reputation for honoring multilateral agreements as valuable are the ones that punish actions that put that reputation at risk most harshly.

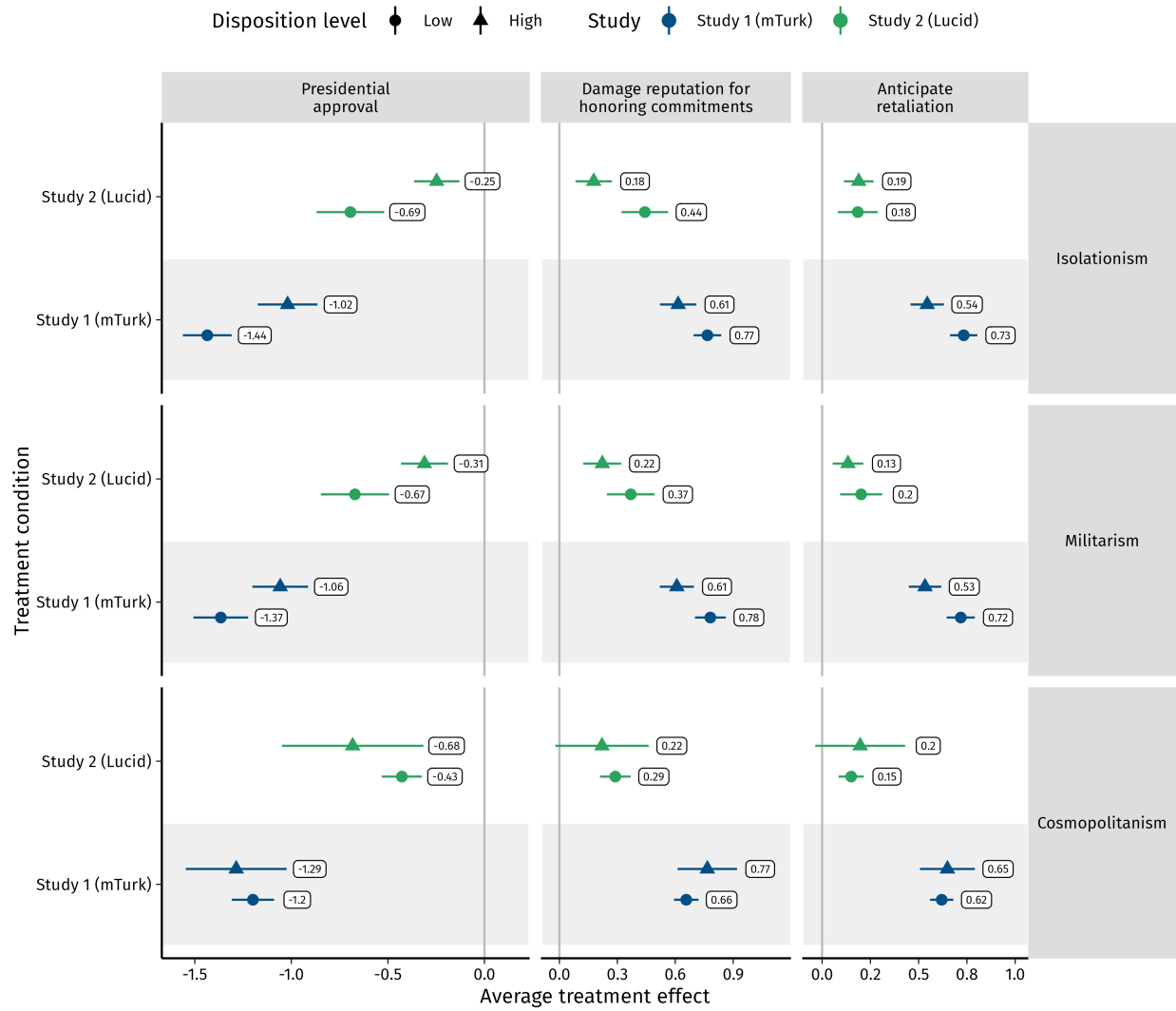


Figure 5: Effects of inconsistency for Study 1 and Study 2 by foreign policy disposition

Copartisanship does not strongly condition consistency concerns

I find little evidence to support the notion that domestic audiences strongly condition their punishment on whether or not the leader is a member of their own political party. To establish this, I first code respondents for whether they are copartisans of the president or not in each of the experimental vignettes to which the respondent was exposed. I run analyses similar to those above, but interact my copartisanship indicator variable with each of the (fully interacted) treatment indicators. I present results based on the the whole sample of partisans. In the appendix, I show that models run on separate samples of Democratic and Republican respondents which allows for the potential that the effect of copartisanship varies across the two major political parties yield similar results.

In Figure 6, we see results that are broadly similar to our main findings. The figure displays estimates of how much presidential approval, expectations of reputational harm, and expectations of retaliation change in response to learning that the trade restrictions violated a standing trade policy commitment. We see that whether the unemployment rate is high or low, the number of jobs at stake is large or small, and regardless of the past behavior of the trading partner, the public punishes leaders who violate institutionalized trade commitments. This is the case whether the leader is a copartisan (solid circles) or not (solid triangles). Similar results obtain in the case of expectations of reputational harm and of retaliation.¹⁴

Grouping our partisans this way has the benefit of greater statistical power, but may obscure differences in the effect of copartisanship across parties. In the Figure A4 in the appendix, I plot results for the sample of Republican respondents and Democratic respondents respectively. In Study 1 (blue), we see that in the case of both Republicans and Democrats, little evidence of substantial copartisanship effects. In Study 2 (green), the absolute magnitude of the estimated effects are broadly similar to those reported in the main results section above, but are less precise due to the smaller sample sizes. Still, we see relatively little in the way of strong copartisanship effects. Democrats may be less willing to punish copartisan leaders and less willing to predict harm will result from their leader violating international commitments. Republicans may simply be less willing

¹⁴Some readers may be concerned that the partisanship treatment was not salient enough. That is possible, but it is worth noting that the partisan treatment has important effects on *absolute* levels of support for the policy among copartisans, but not the magnitude of the punishment for inconsistency.

to punish leaders generally for violations and seem less likely to anticipate any reputation harm or retaliation resulting from a given violation. While these results are suggestive, they are not consistent with a world in which copartisanship strongly conditions consistency concerns.

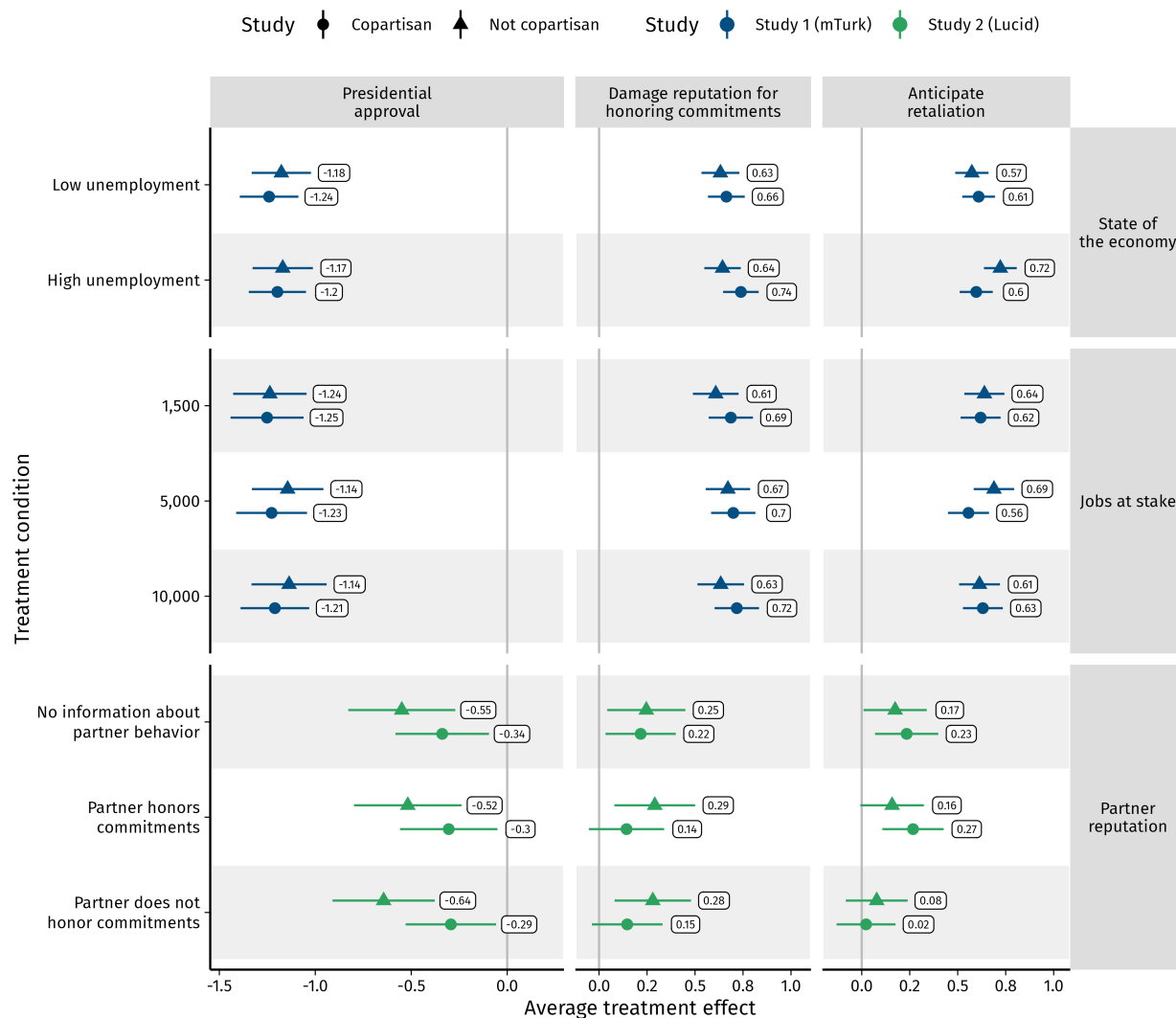


Figure 6: Effects of inconsistency for Study 1 and Study 2 by copartisanship status.

5 Discussion

First-generation experimental tests of domestic audience cost theory found strong, organic, and pervasive concerns for consistency among the public (Tomz 2007). Subsequent work showed that

consistency concerns are conditional on the ex ante policy preferences of the audience or their foreign policy predispositions (Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Chaudoin 2014). I extend this literature by studying the question of whether variation in situational context, which often has direct implications for the level of support for the policy content of international commitments, moderates consistency concerns. In addition, I test for whether foreign policy orientations and/or copartisanship shape consistency and reputational concerns outside the context of crisis bargaining. I make progress on these questions, in part, by designing the experiment so that the presence or absence of policy commitments is cleanly separated from variation in support for the underlying policy content of the commitment. I find that the public responses to violations are fairly stable across situations. There were two exceptions. The first was a suggestive pattern of results for the jobs treatment. In that case, it seems plausible that for a sufficiently large number of jobs the public could come to endorse a violation. Here, however, we saw that expectations of reputational damage did not vary, implying a domestic audience that is sometimes willing to purchase policy with their reputation. By studying how the leader's decision to violate affects expectations of reputational damage and tit-for-tat retaliation across situations, I also provide evidence that domestic audiences anticipate that the costs of inconsistency are quite robust across situations. The second exception speaks directly to this point. When respondents learned that the trade partner had a history of violating their trade policy commitments, the respondents did not increase their expectations of retaliation in the wake of a violation but this was driven by elevated expectations of retaliation even when an agreement was not in place. In sum, the public does not generally expect observers abroad to condition their responses to violations on situational context.

This paper supplements work in the open-economy politics tradition which has focused on the important role that the distributional effects of foreign economic policy have on the incentives of leaders to supply and/or defend liberalization (Lake 2009). Here, in contrast, I draw on the burgeoning domestic audience cost literature (Fearon 1994; Tomz 2007) to motivate my argument about how concerns among domestic audiences about the state's reputation for honoring its commitments and anticipation of retaliation serve to moderate incentives to defect from international agreements even when the domestic audience has soured on the policy content of those agreements.

In doing so, I unite insights from the literature on the political economy of cooperation (Keohane 1984) with recent work on the low-information, yet principled, nature of public opinion on foreign policy (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017) to show that institutionalized commitments can restrain the impulse to endorse treaty abrogation even when compliance costs rise or domestic policy preferences change [].

The findings also have important implications for the study of the political economy of cooperation. First, as noted, these results suggest that the logic of audience costs is robust to situational variation when that variation does not implicate the implicit commitments of states. This is important because it suggests that even when domestic audiences sour on the policy content of commitments, they can appreciate the damage that violating those commitments will do. Indeed, leaders feeling pressured by particular constituencies to violate might do well to raise the salience of international commitments as part of their justification for sustaining the policy. Future research might focus on whether such strategies are effective, complementing other recent work showing that leaders might strategically reduce the salience of commitments in the wake of violations (Morse and Pratt 2020; Brutger 2021).

Second, these results suggest that leaders wishing to violate might invest in eroding support for the underlying policy not because it makes violating the commitment any less costly in absolute terms, but because it may make punishments for violating less costly in *relative* terms. If their preferred policy can be made popular enough, the inconsistency cost may be worth paying if it has other political benefits such as signaling commitment to key constituencies.

Third, my results imply more optimism about the ability of domestic audiences to help sustain international commitments than that of Chaudoin (2014). Given that my study builds directly on that of Chaudoin, this may be surprising. In the appendix, I show in contrast to Chaudoin’s results that, in my experiments, even those with well-defined ex ante trade policy preferences do appear to impose audience costs in the wake of a violation. This difference is likely a result of a key change in the wording of my manipulations relative to Chaudoin’s: I make the absence of standing commitments clear in my “no violation” condition whereas Chaudoin relies on a true control. I made this design choice because respondents likely come to the table with different background

beliefs about the nature of U.S. trade policy commitments (a potential violation of the information equivalence assumption (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018)) and because leaders have incentives to frame their trade policy choices in self-serving ways as they seek to build support for policies that have real costs on consumers. Future work might theorize directly about the conditions under which leaders might be able to select into dynamics more like those recovered by Chaudoin.

Fourth, the dispositional results provide insight into the domestic politics of treaty abrogation as well. Because hawks and isolationists are systematically less concerned with damaging the state's reputation than their more dovish or internationalist compatriots, leaders supported by these more commitment-skeptical voters may be able to violate commitments on the cheap, at least when it comes to the domestic political costs. This provides micro-level evidence for the logic underlying past research on leader turnover and commitment violations (Gray and Kucik 2017) and suggests that the swings in U.S. compliance with international treaties observed over the last 20 years may be explained by considering the reputational concerns of pivotal constituencies. As such, these results suggest that populist leaders who tend to be supported by voters who are less concerned about international obligations and more inclined towards relatively less internationalist (or at least more unilateral) foreign policy have important bargaining advantages. They may be uniquely positioned to demand revisions to existing commitments or overturn those commitments entirely.

Finally, the results of this paper suggest that for a pretty standard class of trade agreement violations, the punishments imposed by domestic audiences for violations are not conditional on situational context. I suggest above that there are good reasons to expect that situational variation is especially unlikely to moderate consistency concerns when that situational variation does not implicate the *implicit* commitments of states, as is the case in trade. In the context of international conflict or foreign policy crisis bargaining, situations often do vary in ways that implicate both the implicit and explicit commitments of states. One reason for this is that publics may view the state as having obligations informed by things other than its existing portfolio of international agreements. Citizens may judge, for example, that the United States has implicit obligations to democracies around the world even if a formal commitment does not exist. But in other issue areas, like that of institutionalized trade cooperation, the public does not appear to view the state as having any

particular implicit policy commitments at all absent explicit policy commitments to the contrary. As a result, formal commitments can likely have a substantial and situationally independent influence. Future work might investigate this more systematically by comparing the magnitude of consistency concerns not just across situations but also across issue areas and theorizing more systematically about the conditions under which situational variation is likely (or not) to implicate obligations across issue areas and over time.

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