Do Pledges Bind? The Mass Politics of International Climate Targets

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Abstract

Contemporary climate governance rests on voluntary pledges made by states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Absent formal enforcement mechanisms and given a historical lack of popular mobilization on climate, what weight do these pledges carry? We argue that independent of interest group mobilization and transnational naming and shaming, public distaste for backing down from treaty commitments dissuades defection. The targets in these pledges can dichotomize politician performance, creating a salient distinction between compliance with and defection from global climate accords. As a result, voters are better able to distinguish between politicians and electorally sanction those offering policies discordant with climate pledges. Conjoint and vignette experiments fielded in the U.S. indicate that candidates who deemphasize climate pledges lose votes in Democratic primaries and general elections. This demonstrates the electoral implications of international climate treaties, clarifying the sources of compliance with non-binding international law.

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The Paris Agreement marked a sea change in the nature of global climate governance. Rather than relying on the top-down mandates and weak enforcement mechanisms that characterized the Kyoto Protocol, negotiators in Paris opted for a new logic: a bottom-up approach whereby states publicly and voluntarily pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by self-determined amounts, with the goal of limiting warming to 1.5–2°C above pre-industrial levels. The Paris framers gambled that international and domestic "naming and shaming" would induce compliance by establishing easily identifiable benchmarks and allowing audiences to monitor states' performance against them (Falkner 2016).

What weight do these voluntary, non-binding commitments carry? Theories of international cooperation provide reasons to be skeptical of the Paris framework. Classic studies of international organization emphasize material coercion as a means of ensuring that states remain cooperative (Krasner 1976; Barrett 1997). While a rich literature documents the importance of soft law (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Abbott and Snidal 2000) and informality in international law (Roger 2020; Roger and Rowan 2023), the threat of material penalties or withheld benefits has proven crucial where free-riding incentives are strong or where compliance is in tension with domestic political incentives (Keohane 1984; Axelrod and Keohane 1985; Fearon 1998; Hafner-Burton 2012). International climate cooperation features precisely these incentives (Colgan, Green, and Hale 2021; Kennard and Schnakenberg 2023), yet the climate regime lacks formal means of materially sanctioning non-cooperative states.

Research on naming and shaming indicates that its effects are often limited in magnitude, highly conditional, or counterproductive (Hafner-Burton 2008; Terman 2023). Even when naming and shaming succeeds in marshaling domestic disapproval (Tingley and Tomz 2022), it is unclear whether or how these attitudinal shifts translate into tangible political costs for leaders.[1] Despite the increasingly existential stakes of the issue, there has been little popular mobilization around climate (Obradovich and Zimmerman 2016; Egan and Mullin 2017), contributing to an undersupply

[1]Tingley and Tomz 2022, fn. 49. The climate politics literature often sets aside behavioral outcomes (Kallbekken 2023). International law scholarship is similarly mixed on whether public opinion translates into policy change (Chilton and Linos 2021).

of environmental protection (Greenstone and Jack 2015). Countries often fail to criticize others' noncompliance in practice (Murdie and Urpelainen 2015; Terman and Voeten 2018; Terman and Byun 2022). Lagging climate action globally may further erode the basis for potent interstate shaming.[2]

Despite the lack of formal enforcement and limits to naming and shaming, we argue that voluntary climate commitments are meaningful because they generate approval costs that voters levy on noncompliant leaders. Independent of condemnation from the international community or domestic activists, voters may punish governments at the ballot box for reneging on emissions reduction targets when they possess information that suggests noncompliance. The public nature of climate pledges — as well as Paris's overarching goal of limiting warming to 1.5–2°C — enables citizens to calibrate expectations, generating a standard against which politicians can be evaluated.[3] The emissions reduction targets contained therein allow voters to discriminate between politicians' climate performance and platforms and sanction those who reject climate pledges. Though there are challenges in evaluating whether a country is on pace to meet its commitments (Victor, Lumkowsky, and Dannenberg 2022), we assume that voters have access to information on either (*a*) a country's performance, such as from third-party monitors, or (*b*) whether a candidate in an election promises to comply with a target. We see this assumption as reasonable given media coverage of the adequacy of national climate performance (Carattini and Löschel 2021)[4] and the political salience of climate change (Hermwille and Sanderink 2019; Maliniak, Parajon, and Powers 2021).[5]

Climate pledges, formally known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), can in this way activate an audience costs mechanism that encourages compliance. Canonically, leaders who retrench from known international commitments incur approval costs at home since backing down

[2]See the Climate Change Performance Index [`ccpi.org/countries`] (accessed February 2, 2023).

[3]Countries vary in the depth and specificity of their Paris targets (Sabel and Victor 2022; Tørstad and Wiborg 2022). Issuing vague pledges may be a means of avoiding either commitment to specific courses of action or electoral sanction (Snyder and Borghard 2011).

[4]Though see Chaudoin 2022 on how international bodies can shape media coverage.

[5]Exit polls suggest that about two-thirds of U.S. voters rated climate change as a "serious problem" in the 2020 general election, while climate change was tied with immigration as the third-most important issue facing the country among 2022 midterm voters. *Pew Research Center*, October 6, 2020, `rb.gy/zahbry`; *Washington Post*, December 14, 2020, `rb.gy/grgltc`; *Washington Post*, November 10, 2022, `rb.gy/dxry0o`; *New Republic*, November 11, 2022, `rb.gy/3gtvmr`.

makes them look weak or irresolute (Fearon 1994; Tomz 2007; Kertzer and Brutger 2016). Though leaders can sometimes insulate themselves from such sanctions (Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Levy, McKoy, Poast et al. 2015; Lin-Greenberg 2019), including those resulting from breaches of international law (Morse and Pratt 2022), the public nature of emissions targets means that rhetorical reframing or policy substitution may struggle to avert disapproval. Even if the commitments are ambiguous, the basic fact of their publicity, and their ultimate intent of limiting warming to a precise level, draws an important line in the sand.[6]

These approval costs should intensify when other countries comply with their own commitments. Audiences are attentive to reciprocity in international climate politics; citizens are more supportive of environmental treaties with more universal participation (Bechtel and Scheve 2013). Audiences may moreover fear the reputational damage and status loss that could result from noncompliance if other states have found ways to meet similar targets. From a reputational perspective, electorates care about the competence, honesty, and reliability of their leaders (Guisinger and Smith 2002; Sartori 2005; Tomz 2007; Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021; Tomz and Weeks 2021). From a status perspective, deviation from a self-determined target may be seen as incongruous with how states in a country's peer group typically behave (Renshon 2017; Ward 2017; Murray 2018; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Barnhart 2020; MacDonald and Parent 2021).

We test this argument via two survey experiments fielded on diverse samples of the American public. We focus on the United States due to its status as one of the world's largest emitters, making it a potential "linchpin" upholding the global climate regime (Barrett 2003; though see Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2018). Polarized public attitudes around climate (Marlon, Wang, Bergquist et al. 2022), as well as the ongoing "calcification" of voting behavior along partisan lines (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022), makes the U.S. a case in which noncompliance with international climate obligations carries particular salience.

The first experiment takes the form of a candidate choice conjoint. This conjoint experiment is

[6]While elites have significant ability to shape public opinion on domestic and international issues (Zaller 1992; Lenz 2012; Guisinger 2017), they sometimes struggle to align the public with their preferred view when it comes to international cooperation (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020; Dellmuth, Scholte, Tallberg et al. 2022).

an empirical advance over much existing work on audience costs and climate, which often stops short of evaluating whether shifts in public approval translate into behavioral changes that carry costs for politicians (Kallbekken 2023). We show, even after accounting for demographic traits and other policy positions, that positions on a U.S. climate commitment are among the most powerful predictors of vote choice in general elections and Democratic primaries. This suggests that politicians, particularly those seeking votes from the left, have a strong electoral incentive to comply with non-binding climate commitments.

The second experiment explores the mechanisms underlying these candidate choices. We construct a hypothetical vignette that varies whether the sitting president has issued policies that support the U.S. climate pledge and whether peer countries are on pace to meet their own targets. Results indicate that voters disapprove of noncompliance with the U.S. pledge, with this disapproval mounting when other countries remain compliant. We moreover find that voters interpret noncompliance as damaging to the international reputation of the U.S. We identify these effects for Democrats, Republicans, and independents. Viewed in conjunction with the conjoint experiment, these results suggest that while Republicans in principle support compliance with international climate accords, this does not translate into changes in voting behavior when viewed alongside politicians' other policy positions and demographic attributes.

This research extends several strands of literature. First, we shed light on the practical implications of public support for climate agreements (Bechtel and Scheve 2013; Tingley and Tomz 2014, 2022; Beiser-McGrath and Bernauer 2019), offering a new account of the incentives to comply with climate commitments independent of naming and shaming. In doing so, we find that changes in climate preferences may translate into meaningful behavioral changes for individuals, a link that has not been extensively explored in the climate politics literature (Kallbekken 2023). Second, we speak to the effectiveness of soft law regimes more broadly (Abbott and Snidal 2000; Hafner-Burton 2008), illustrating how enforcement may be achieved informally via voters even in the absence of issue linkage or material sanction. Third, we extend the reach of audience costs theory, applying insights from international security (Tomz 2007; Brutger and Kertzer 2018), economic

sanctions (Hart Jr. 2000; Thomson 2016), and trade (Chaudoin 2014; Casler and Clark 2021) to a new issue area while demonstrating that its logic has tangible implications for political accountability (Fearon 1999; Besley 2006; Daley and Snowberg 2011; Ashworth 2012).

Audience Costs and Climate Politics

Many countries are at risk of failing to meet their self-determined emissions targets under the Paris Agreement. Germany, grappling with volatile energy supplies in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has opted to keep several coal plants previously scheduled for retirement online.[7] The United States, despite passing landmark clean energy legislation, fell even further behind its emissions reductions targets in 2022.[8] Brazil, set back by rampant deforestation under former President Jair Bolsonaro, now faces an uphill battle to meet its commitments.[9] Do failures to meet Paris commitments erode leaders' standing with their citizens? If so, do these approval costs translate into tangible electoral losses?

Existing research is skeptical about the public's role in shaping international climate cooperation. The naming-and-shaming mechanism on which Paris relies has proven ineffective or counterproductive in other contexts (Hafner-Burton 2008; Terman 2023). Publics have rarely achieved mass mobilization on climate (Obradovich and Zimmerman 2016; Egan and Mullin 2017), perhaps because of low issue salience (Kennard 2021). While leader and media cues often facilitate mobilization on foreign policy (Guisinger 2017; Brutger and Strezhnev 2022), elites and publics remain split in their concern for international cooperation (Dellmuth, Scholte, Tallberg et al. 2022), suggesting that such cues have been ineffective in this domain. In line with this, Falkner (2016) notes that "the outlook for accountability [to Paris] at the hands of civil society is uncertain and highly uneven" (1123).

Even in cases where scholars posit a role for public opinion of international climate agreements (Bechtel and Scheve 2013), it is unclear whether such attitudes translate into meaningful pressure on policymakers (Tingley and Tomz 2022, fn. 49; Egan and Mullin 2017; Kallbekken 2023).

[7] *Politico*. October 4, 2022. `politi.co/3ZfJjU2`.
[8] *Financial Times*. January 10, 2023. `rb.gy/lbd6ym`.
[9] *Bloomberg*. December 19, 2022. `bloom.bg/3HXqTQ1`.

Scholars of international law identify inconsistent and weak linkages between public preferences and policy choices (Chilton and Linos 2021), suggesting there may be a "democratic deficit" in global climate governance (cf. Dahl 1999).

We revise this conventional wisdom, contending that when leaders fail to meet climate pledges, voters will often sanction them at the ballot box regardless of whether or not the leaders have been shamed. We derive this argument from a large body of work on audience costs in international relations. A key condition under which audience costs operate is publicity, as citizens must be able to observe the general content (though not the specificity) of a commitment in order to punish defection from it (Fearon 1994; Tomz 2007). Commitments are necessarily public under the Paris Agreement. States issue emissions targets that they pledge to meet in their NDCs. For example, the U.S. NDC in 2021 "[set] an economy-wide target of reducing its net greenhouse gas emissions by 50–52 percent below 2005 levels in 2030."[10] Third-party monitors, including foreign governments, international organizations, NGOs, and academics, estimate emissions and state progress toward NDCs.[11] Such monitoring enables the public to observe whether states are on track to reach their targets, even in cases where states hide or manipulate emissions data (Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker 2022). This information allows voters to prospectively evaluate how candidates might perform in office, as well as retrospectively assess whether a politician's policies have accorded with or deviated from Paris targets.

Targets also clarify the *sufficiency* of climate policies. Absent them, it is more difficult to assess whether politicians are meaningfully contributing to global mitigation efforts given the deep uncertainties that surround climate policymaking (Chenet, Ryan-Collins, and van Lerven 2021; Zucker 2023). We suggest that targets help resolve such ambiguity by dichotomizing politician performance and progress on climate. States are, ideally, either on track to meet their NDCs or not.[12] This separates compliant leaders from deviant laggards, transforming a continuous, complex

[10] See the online "Nationally Determined Contributions Registry," UNFCCC, `unfccc.int/NDCREG`.

[11] See, e.g., the European Union's Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research (EDGAR), `edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu`.

[12] As noted previously, assessments of compliance are more difficult for thinner and vaguer NDCs. The audience costs mechanism may weaken when pledges are less precise.

policy space into a more interpretable binary one. Scholars have long recognized the heuristic power of classification schemes and global performance indicators (Dolan 2018; Honig and Weaver 2019; Morse 2019). Their utility, both in the climate domain and elsewhere, derives from their simplicity and ease of interpretation (Kelley and Simmons 2020). This dichotomization of leaders' and candidates' climate policies allows audiences to evaluate their positions and performance and select or sanction them accordingly.[13]

We note here a point of compatibility with naming-and-shaming theory. An element of naming and shaming is the provision of information on a country's noncompliance by foreign actors or domestic civil society. The behavioral changes we theorize may be products of this component of naming and shaming, but do not require some value judgement on a case of noncompliance; Tingley and Tomz (2022), for example, consider declarations that a country should be "ashamed" of itself for poor climate performance. The mechanism we put forth does not depend on normative statements of this sort; we argue that a climate pledge, to the extent it includes a specific emissions target, itself generates views of proper or improper policy.

Sanctions applied by domestic electorates may be a core means by which governments incur costs for noncompliance.[14] This differentiates climate from issue areas like trade and foreign investment, where aggrieved parties can seek financial recompense through institutions like the World Trade Organization and International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (Jandhyala, Henisz, and Mansfield 2011; Carnegie 2015). Though governance through soft law and informal international bodies has become increasingly common (Roger 2020; Roger and Rowan 2023), the absence of material carrots and sticks may limit compliance (Simmons 2009; Posner 2014). Given the lack of statutory enforcement mechanisms for climate, the sanctions that leaders may incur for noncompliance relate not just to naming-and-shaming by other states and third parties (Tingley and Tomz 2022), but also to their electoral standing.[15]

We theorize that public climate pledges, whether made or inherited by a leader, activate an

[13] See Grossman and Slough 2022, 135.

[14] Others argue that compliance with soft commitments is only high because such commitments are shallow (Chayes and Chayes 1995; Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom 1996).

[15] Over- or under-promising on emissions reductions may affect public support (Tingley and Tomz 2020).

audience costs mechanism that incentivizes compliance with stated targets. Classic audience costs theory indicates that leaders pay "inconsistency costs" for failing to follow through on a threat or promise (Fearon 1994; Tomz 2007; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Brutger and Kertzer 2018).[16] This is true even in contexts like trade where leaders often inherit commitments from predecessors (Chaudoin 2014). Pledges sharpen the distinction between compliant and noncompliant climate policy, clarifying when leaders have or have not followed through on their country's stated commitments.[17] In this way, pledges make salient the consistency or inconsistency of a leader's record on climate.

We expect disapproval of inconsistent climate policy to translate into changed voting behavior, eroding the electoral standing of apparently noncompliant leaders. While Tomz (2007) identified an attitudinal-behavioral link in audience costs, much of the subsequent literature bracketed the question of how approval loss resulting from backing down translates into tangible electoral outcomes. Scholarship on climate, while often quiet on tangible behavioral outcomes (Kallbekken 2023), points to a broad lack of popular mobilization on climate and a hesitance to undertake costly behavioral changes (Bechtel and Scheve 2013; Greenstone and Jack 2015; Obradovich and Zimmerman 2016; Egan and Mullin 2017); substantial shares of voters in Western democracies prioritize economic growth over environmental protection (Drews, Antal, and van den Bergh 2018). International relations scholars have similarly identified a disconnect between foreign economic policy and voter behavior (Guisinger 2009; Rho and Tomz 2017); Americans, for example, often have weak prior beliefs about foreign policy (Lenz 2012; Guisinger and Saunders 2017) and vote primarily according to party identification (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022).

Nevertheless, we theorize that concerns over a leader reneging on their country's climate

[16] Audience costs also involve "belligerence costs" paid for issuing a threat in the first place. Given that across states there is little variation in the existence of pledges, we see inconsistency costs as more applicable to climate.

[17] In addition to concern about consistency between leaders' words and deeds, voters are broadly concerned about climate change (Howe, Mildenberger, Marlon et al. 2015; Zucker 2023). We are not the first to apply audience costs to questions of economic cooperation, but by examining inconsistency costs in the climate domain, our contribution is distinct. See Hart Jr. 2000; Dorussen and Mo 2001; Krustev and Morgan 2011; Whang, McLean, and Kuberski 2013; Thomson 2016; Casler and Clark 2021.

pledges extend to evaluations of candidates for political office and ultimate vote choice. To the extent that they create a clear standard against which climate policies and performance can be assessed, pledges make clear the sufficiency of competing climate platforms and — in cases where platforms are clustered around the stated target — separate "consistent" candidates from inconsistent ones.[18] Given voters' general interest in the consistency of leaders, as posited by canonical audience costs theory, we anticipate that voters will tend to select candidates offering climate policies consistent with their country's emissions target.

Hypothesis 1. *Citizens should be more likely to approve of and vote for candidates who prioritize meeting a climate pledge than those who do not.*

A logic of comparative achievement in relation to foreign states may affect how strongly these costs bind leaders. Citizens should disapprove most of leaders who renege on climate commitments when other countries remain on pace to achieve their own such commitments. These approval costs should intensify in this context for two reasons. The first is reciprocity, the principle thought to underpin international cooperation even in settings with high potential for opportunism (Keohane 1984; Axelrod and Keohane 1985). The evidence for reciprocity in public opinion on climate is mixed. Tingley and Tomz (2014) find little evidence of negative intrinsic reciprocity in mass climate attitudes — public support for climate change mitigation only varies positively with other countries' performance. Beiser-McGrath and Bernauer (2019) find attitudes among American and Chinese citizens about the design of international climate accords do not change with information on other countries' noncompliance. We are therefore skeptical that the prospect of conditional cooperation, at least of the form envisioned by intrinsic reciprocity, will shape approval of the leader.

We favor a second mechanism: reputation. On the one hand, domestic audiences have a "taste" for reputation insofar as they care about whether their government comes across reliable, honest, and competent (Guisinger and Smith 2002; Sartori 2005; Tomz 2007; Simmons 2009; Jervis,

[18]Positions on climate pledges may do less to swing votes when all candidates have either weak climate platforms (all would be inconsistent with the pledge) or sufficient platforms (all consistent with the pledge).

Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021; Tomz and Weeks 2021). This is a core premise on which the logic of audience costs rests (Brutger and Kertzer 2018). On the other hand, governments and leaders pursue status, an esteemed position in the global hierarchy. States thus seek inclusion and high rank in groupings of countries (Renshon 2017; Ward 2017; Murray 2018; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Barnhart 2020; MacDonald and Parent 2021).

Public audiences may thus see deviation from climate pledges as doubly damaging. Missing an emissions target could evince not just a lack of capacity or trustworthiness, but also erode a state's standing in relation to foreign peers. Climate, in particular, is a setting in which individual countries can serve as "linchpins" required to hold international agreements together; one major defection can cause an entire agreement to unravel (Barrett 2003). The largest emitters are also the most economically powerful states, which confers membership in an exclusive club: these countries not only hold significant economic sway but are also the actors who possess the resources to address the problem at hand. Failure to act when influential states remain committed to doing so causes domestic audiences to fear that their leader has endangered their country's global reputation. This mechanism is complementary to, but distinct from naming and shaming, the transnational version of which relies on states chastising one another for violating international agreements (Hafner-Burton 2008; Tingley and Tomz 2022). We rather consider how electorates sanction leaders for failing to meet pledges when other countries are or are not themselves compliant.

Hypothesis 2. *Citizens should disapprove more of leaders who renege from climate commitments when other countries remain on pace to meet their own pledges.*

Empirics

We test this theory via a two-pronged experimental approach. We first evaluate whether noncompliance with climate targets affects vote choice. We then probe whether voter disapproval of leaders' inconsistency underlies any sanctioning of noncompliant candidates and electoral outcomes. To do so, we embedded a pair of experiments in online surveys deployed on diverse samples

of U.S. adults in the spring and fall of 2022.[19] The first experiment is a candidate choice conjoint, which permits tests of how voters choose between competing politicians and how politician promises about climate pledges — alongside positions on other salient issues — weigh on this choice (Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins et al. 2021). The second experiment adopts a two-by-two factorial design, offering vignettes that vary in (*a*) a hypothetical president's performance regarding a climate pledge, and (*b*) the compliance of peer countries. Results are consistent with this paper's theory. Americans, especially those on the left, disapprove of inconsistency with climate pledges and express this discontent by adjusting their voting intentions. We further find that disapproval mounts when defection occurs amid compliance by peer countries.

Candidate Choice Conjoint Experiment

We conducted the candidate choice conjoint experiment in November and December 2022. This experiment was embedded in an online survey implemented by Qualtrics, which recruited 2,014 U.S. adults representative of the general population along the dimensions of age, gender, and region of residence. Qualtrics is recognized as a high-quality source of representative samples for social science work (Boas, Christenson, and Glick 2020).

Subjects read a brief description of a hypothetical scenario at the beginning of the experimental module. In this scenario, the U.S. pledged at an international conference in 2025 to reduce emissions by 65 percent by 2035, relative to 2005. Subjects were then told they would be evaluating hypothetical candidates for the U.S. presidency in 2028. The survey then presented subjects with ten conjoint tasks.[20] Each task asked subjects to choose between two unnamed candidates who randomly varied along twelve political and demographic dimensions, which themselves were presented in random order.[21] This forced-choice question permits estimation of average marginal component effects (AMCEs): the marginal effect of adjusting one candidate attribute, relative to

[19]Both experiments were pre-registered with the Wharton Credibility Lab (#94210, #112445).

[20]Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins et al. 2018 find that subjects are comfortably able to perform ten conjoint tasks. However, as a robustness check, we re-estimate the model focusing only on the first task each subject faced; results are consistent. We also find no significant differences in responses across the ten tasks.

[21]We opted for the year 2028 to avoid conflation of Democratic candidates with Joe Biden and Republican candidates with Donald Trump, both of whom may stand for election in 2024. This future scenario also matches the setting of the vignette experiment that follows.

some baseline, on subject vote choice.

The conjoint design is appealing in that it furnishes estimates of how changes in a feature, such as a politician's age or tax platform, affects vote choice when presented alongside a battery of other attributes (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins et al. 2022). This appreciates the multidimensional nature of voter preferences — individuals may form beliefs about candidates on the basis on multiple characteristics — as well as the bundled character of candidate profiles and platforms.

The party affiliation of each candidate was randomized, which naturally generated general and primary election matchups (two candidates from different parties or two from the same party). Each candidate profile listed their position on the climate pledge. Recent work indicates that leaders can effectively reframe noncompliance with international law to avert disapproval (Morse and Pratt 2022); we accordingly paired these positions with a brief justification. Some candidates promised to "reduce emissions to meet U.S. pledge under Paris Agreement and avert the worst effects of climate change." Others said they would "not meet U.S. emissions reduction pledge under Paris Agreement to keep costs of fossil fuel energy low." The profiles also listed each candidate's position on healthcare, taxation, and immigration, as well as their age, gender, ethnicity and race, sexual orientation, profession, political experience, and military service. This design resembles that of other candidate choice conjoint experiments (Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins et al. 2021).[22]

Figure 1 displays top-line AMCEs. Intended noncompliance with Paris causes a six percentage point loss in expected vote share across the full sample, an effect exceeded in magnitude only by the loss of support resulting from a pledge to reduce taxes only for high-income Americans (-16 points, relative to cutting taxes for the low and middle classes).[23] This effect magnitude exceeds that of candidate positions on healthcare and immigration. Overall, respondents voted

[22]We do not restrict any of the attributes in the conjoint. In line with best practices (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014), we selected attributes and candidate positions that are plausible for candidates from either major party. We acknowledge that some candidate positions and attributes are more common in one party than the other; we intend to address this concern with causal forests subsequently.

[23]AMCEs can be interpreted as the expected change in vote share for a given candidate (Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins et al. 2022).

for candidates who pledged to meet the U.S. Paris target 53 percent of the time and for those prioritizing lower fossil fuel prices 47 percent of the time.[24] These results are striking since existing conjoint studies have not found environmental policy to be a significant predictor of candidate choice (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins et al. 2022). These other studies present climate policies without mention of international commitments; the significant findings we identify suggest that compliance with international climate pledges matters beyond general environmentalist preferences.

Figure 2 disaggregates results by subjects' party identification. Clear differences emerge between Democratic and Republican subjects. Among Democrats, the estimated vote share for candidates who rejected Paris was 13 percentage points lower than for those who embraced it. Democrats voted for candidates who prioritized lower fossil fuel prices over the Paris target in just 43 percent of contests. By contrast, candidates who rejected Paris received a slight advantage among Republicans, winning their vote in 51 percent of cases. These results indicate that Democrats are especially sensitive to candidate positions on Paris targets; changes in Republican voting behavior were minor in comparison.

We next examine how Democratic and Republican voting intentions vary between general and primary elections. Party primaries serve an important function in candidate selection in American politics (Hirano and Snyder 2014), particularly given "calcification" of voting behavior in general elections along partisan lines (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022). Results indicate, as expected, that candidate party is the strongest determinant of vote choice in general elections: Democrats vote for fellow Democrats in 67 percent of cases and Republicans for fellow Republicans in 70 percent. Support among Democrats diminishes somewhat if the Democratic candidate rejects Paris, but Democrats nonetheless voted for their party's candidate in 60 percent of cases. Among Republicans, support for the Republican candidate does not meaningfully vary with their position on the U.S. climate pledge.

[24] AMCEs and marginal means calculated via Barari, Berwick, Hainmueller et al. 2018 and Leeper 2020. Marginal means have some inferential advantages over AMCEs (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020).

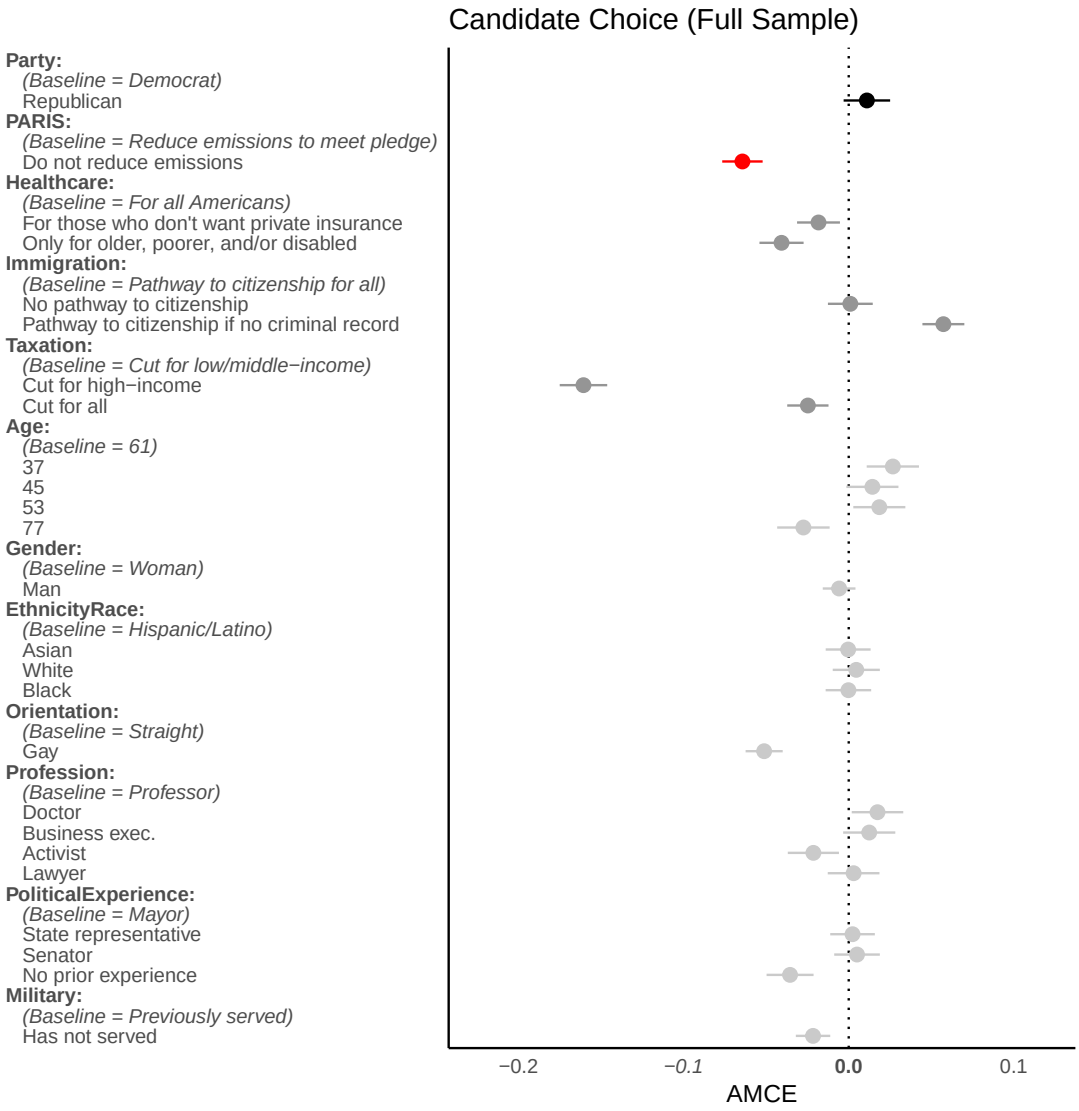

Figure 1: Average marginal component effects for all subjects across all candidate choice tasks. 95% confidence intervals plotted according to standard errors clustered by subject. Estimates based on 40,260 profiles seen by 2,013 subjects.

Clear differences emerge in hypothetical primaries, particularly among Democrats.[25] For Democrats, positions on climate pledges powerfully separate candidates. We estimate that candidates in Democratic primaries who express opposition to Paris targets would see their vote shares decline by 14 percentage points compared to those who promise compliance. For Republicans, by contrast, there is little evidence of vote switching according to candidates' positions on climate

[25] In these analyses, we assume that primaries are closed: only Democrats (Republicans) vote in Democratic (Republican) primaries.

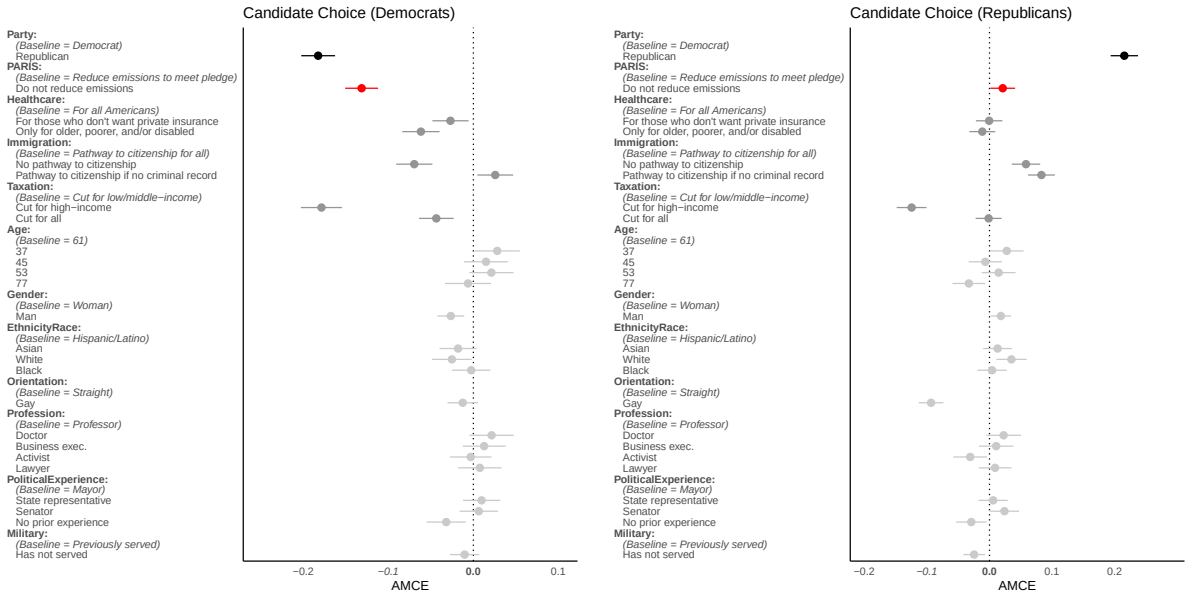

Figure 2: Average marginal component effects for self-identified Democrats (left) and Republicans (right) across all candidate choice tasks. 95% confidence intervals plotted according to standard errors clustered by subject. Estimates based on 14,060 profiles seen by 703 subjects (Democrats) and 13,460 profiles seen by 673 subjects (Republicans).

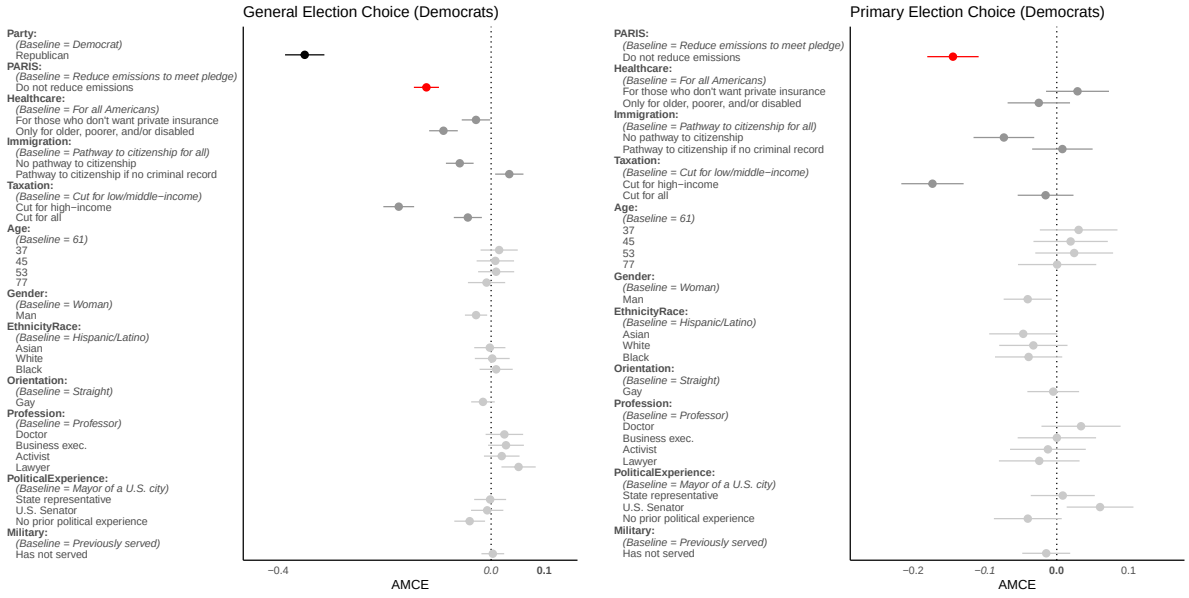

Figure 3: Average marginal component effects for self-identified Democrats in general election (left) and primary election (right) tasks. 95% confidence intervals plotted according to standard errors clustered by subject. Estimates based on 7,376 profiles (general) and 3,342 profiles (primary) seen by 703 subjects.

pledges (AMCE $p = 0.15$). In these mock primaries, self-identified Republicans were principally responsive to candidates' race (white candidates favored), immigration platforms (opposition to a pathway to citizenship for all immigrants), military service (veterans favored), and sexual orien-

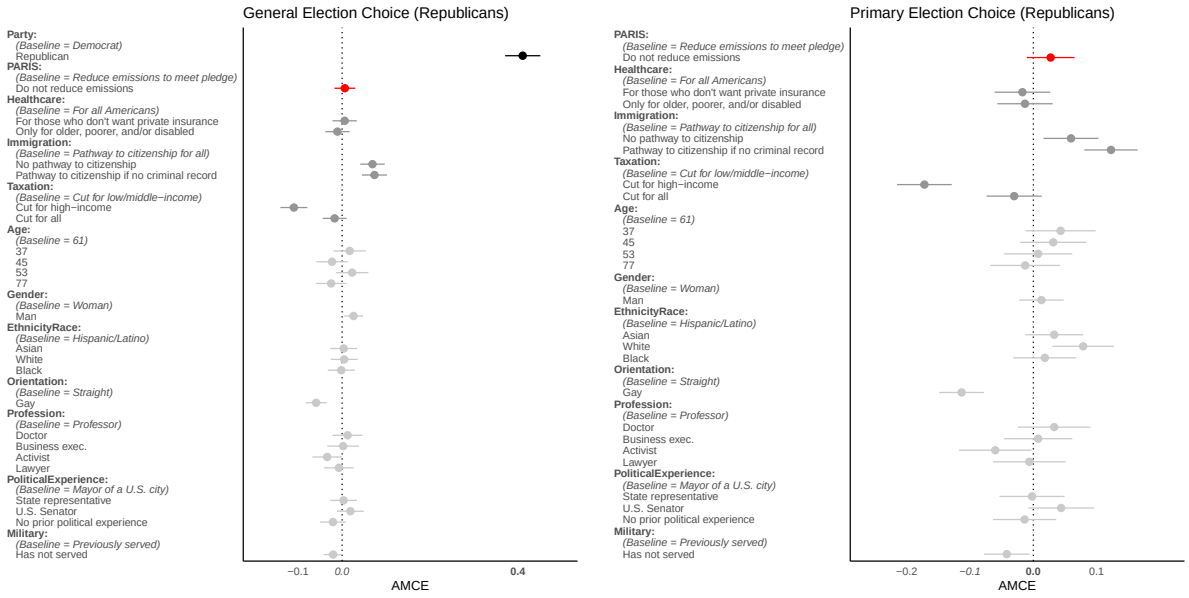

Figure 4: Average marginal component effects for self-identified Republicans in general election (left) and primary election (right) tasks. 95% confidence intervals plotted according to standard errors clustered by subject. Estimates based on 7,032 profiles (general) and 3,214 profiles (primary) seen by 673 subjects.

tation (straight candidates favored). These results align with scholarship finding that Democrats and Republicans respond asymmetrically to climate cues (Hazlett and Mildenberger 2020; Hai and Perlman 2022).

Vignette Experiment

We conducted the vignette experiment in April 2022. We recruited 1,659 U.S. adults via the online platform Prolific, which supplies samples with better quality and similar diversity to Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Peer, Brandimarte, Samat et al. 2017; Palan and Schitter 2018). We collected a variety of pre-treatment demographic and attitudinal information about our subjects, including age, education, income, race, and partisanship. Descriptive statistics for this sample are listed in Table 1; the sample is balanced along these and other standard dimensions, though overall it skews somewhat younger and more liberal than the general population.

The experiment features a two-by-two factorial design with treatment assignment randomized by individual. The intervention follows from the theory described above and resembles that in the conjoint experiments, with four treatment conditions that map onto different combinations of domestic and foreign compliance with climate pledges. Subjects were asked to evaluate a hypo-

Variable	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	1232	38.86	16.98	3	292
Income	1232	1.86	0.77	1	3
Education	1232	3.89	1.21	1	6
Democrat	1232	0.49	0.50	0	1
Republican	1232	0.15	0.36	0	1
Global warming caused by human activities	1202	1.20	0.55	1.00	4.00
Approval	1232	3.08	1.49	1	5
Reputation	1232	2.70	1.49	1	5

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for sample in first survey experiment. All covariates are balanced by treatment condition; no covariate mean significantly differs across treatment arms (p values greater than 0.1).

thetical future scenario, set in 2025, in which the U.S. pledged to reduce emissions by 65 percent over the next decade.[26] Subjects then received two pieces of information, which comprise each treatment arm: First, whether "President Smith," the hypothetical American leader elected after this pledge was made, had enacted policies to ensure that the U.S. would meet its target according to independent climate monitors; and second, whether other major emitters including China and Europe were on track to meet their own commitments, again according to independent climate monitors. Figure 5 contains a sample vignette.

We are going to describe a situation the United States could face in the future. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. This situation is hypothetical.

In 2025, the U.S. pledged at an international conference to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 65% by 2035. President Smith, elected after this pledge was made, has since enacted policies that prevent the U.S. from meeting this target, according to independent monitors.

Other big emitters, like China and Europe, also committed to reduce emissions by 2035. Independent monitors say that these countries will meet their commitments.

Figure 5: Sample Vignette. In this vignette, the U.S. reneges from its climate commitments while other parties remain on pace to meet their own.

Subjects then answered questions designed to assess their reactions to the supplied vignette. The main outcome question asked respondents to indicate their approval of the way that Presi-

[26]This design aligns with best practices for vignette-based surveys in its concision and hypotheticality (Brutger, Kertzer, Renshon et al. 2022).

dent Smith handled the situation. To better understand the sources of public (dis)approval of the president, we also asked whether respondents saw President Smith's actions as damaging to the international reputation of the U.S. Answer options for these questions were structured as five-point scales ranging from strongly disapprove (disagree) to strongly approve (agree).

We first estimate the difference in mean approval between subjects who received information that the U.S. was or was not on track to meet its commitments. The results offer strong support for our hypothesis: approval is 1.8 points higher on the five-point scale when the president is on track to meet U.S. climate commitments (t-test $p = 0.000$). We similarly find evidence that reputational concerns drive these changes in approval. The perception that the president hurt U.S. reputation is 1.9 points higher on the five-point scale when the U.S. is not on track to meet its commitments (t-test $p = 0.000$). Figure 6 displays plots containing bootstrapped treatment effects for each hypothesis, based on 1,500 draws. Both sets of results suggest that audience costs may bind leaders when they issue or inherit climate pledges.

We next test whether approval varies with the behavior of other states. We anticipate that approval will be lowest when the leader backs down and other states remain on pace to meet their climate targets. Table 2 reports results that are in line with this intuition. Holding U.S. behavior constant at noncompliance, approval is significantly lower when other countries comply (difference in means $= -0.2$, $p = 0.033$). We also identify a difference for reputation. Subjects are more likely to believe that U.S. reputation has suffered when the president backs down and other states do not versus when other states also renege (about 0.5 points on the five-point scale; $p = 0.000$). However, we find that approval is always highest when the U.S. complies, regardless of the behavior of other countries. Mean approval is nearly two points higher comparing cases of U.S. compliance to U.S. noncompliance ($p = 0.000$). Approval of a compliant leaders does not significantly erode when other countries renege ($p = 0.4$).

Holding the other countries' behavior constant at compliance, approval is significantly lower when the president fails to meet U.S. commitments (two points lower on the five-point scale; $p = 0.000$); approval recovers somewhat when, conversely, peers renege as well. We also identify

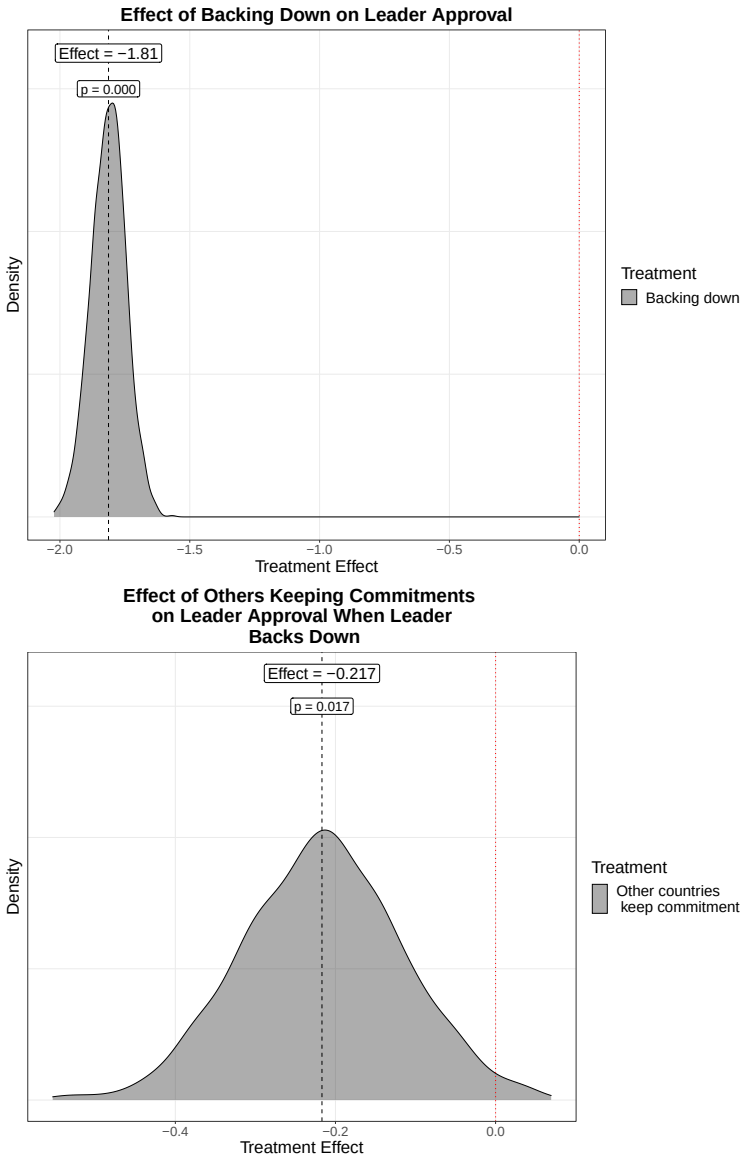

Figure 6: Bootstrapped treatment effects for each hypothesis, based on 1,500 draws. The top plot shows results testing the effect of a leader reneging on a pledge. The bottom plot shows results testing whether this effect varies with the performance of other countries.

a difference for reputation. Subjects are somewhat more likely to believe that U.S. reputation has suffered when the president backs down and other states do not versus when other states also renege (about 0.5 points on the five-point scale; $p = 0.033$).

We next model these tests in a regression framework, controlling for subjects' age, income, education, partisanship, and prior perceptions about climate change. We might expect Democrats, younger respondents, highly educated individuals, and those who believe that climate change is

United States	Peers	Outcome: Approval	Outcome: Reputation
Comply	Comply	3.966	1.773
Renege	Comply	2.004	3.949
Comply	Renege	3.897	1.830
Renege	Renege	2.220	3.484

Table 2: Mean responses by treatment condition. *Approval* indicates subject approval of the president (five-point scale). *Reputation* indicates extent to which subjects see president's actions as damaging the international reputation of the U.S. (five-point scale).

caused by human activity to more harshly punish a president who fails to meet climate pledges. Accounting for respondents' attitudes about climate change is especially important since we argue adherence to climate pledges matters above and beyond individuals' climate attentiveness. Across the models in Table 3, U.S. noncompliance undermines support for the sitting president. Interaction models suggest that this disapproval mounts by about 17 percent when peer countries remain compliant with their own pledges.

	Approval			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
U.S. reneges	-1.814^{***}	-1.821^{***}	-1.677^{***}	-1.684^{***}
	(0.067)	(0.068)	(0.094)	(0.094)
Others comply			0.069	0.058
			(0.092)	(0.093)
U.S. reneges × others comply			-0.286^{**}	-0.288^{**}
			(0.134)	(0.135)
Constant	3.931^{***}	3.664^{***}	3.897^{***}	3.621^{***}
	(0.046)	(0.170)	(0.065)	(0.174)
N	1232	1202	1232	1202
Adj. R-squared	0.371	0.388	0.373	0.390
Controls		✓		✓

$^{***}p < .01$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{*}p < .1$

Table 3: Regressions of approval of the president on U.S. compliance with its climate pledge, interacted in certain models with peers' compliance with their own targets. Estimated by ordinary least squares. Robust standard errors parenthesized. Models 2 and 4 control for subject age, income, educational attainment, party identification, and belief that global warming is caused by human activity.

We further examine whether the identified treatment effects vary across political parties. Table 4 presents these subgroup analyses. We find consistent evidence of approval costs across subgroups, though the effect is substantively largest among Democrats. These results are notable because they indicate that even voters who we might expect to be skeptical of climate investments,

such as Republicans, are sensitive to abandonment of climate pledges. We find little evidence, however, that the behavior of peer countries affects disapproval for Democrats or Republicans; the interactive effect is only present for independents.

	DEMOCRATS		REPUBLICANS		INDEPENDENTS	
	Approval	**Reputation**	**Approval**	**Reputation**	**Approval**	**Reputation**
U.S. reneges	-2.253^{***}	2.090^{***}	-0.510^{**}	0.704^{***}	-1.300^{***}	1.396^{***}
	(0.121)	(0.123)	(0.249)	(0.250)	(0.156)	(0.145)
Others comply	0.191	-0.144	0.016	-0.060	0.012	-0.005
	(0.119)	(0.121)	(0.242)	(0.242)	(0.155)	(0.144)
U.S. reneges $\times$ others comply	-0.202	0.448^{**}	-0.099	0.248	-0.575^{***}	0.819^{***}
	(0.177)	(0.179)	(0.348)	(0.349)	(0.222)	(0.207)
Constant	4.200^{***}	1.653^{***}	3.093^{***}	2.442^{***}	3.752^{***}	1.863^{***}
	(0.083)	(0.084)	(0.181)	(0.182)	(0.107)	(0.100)
N	609	609	188	188	435	435
Adj. R-squared	0.538	0.523	0.038	0.097	0.332	0.436

$^{***}p < .01$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{*}p < .1$

Table 4: Regressions of the approval and reputation outcomes on treatment conditions, by subjects' party identification. Robust standard errors parenthesized.

Tests of reputation costs yield strong results for our first hypothesis. Democrats, Republican, and independents on average see noncompliance as damaging to the reputation of the U.S. — this is important since reputation is a key component of audience costs theory (Tomz 2007), and the results offer support for the audience costs mechanism over alternative explanations, such as respondents' general concern for climate change. Results are weaker for the second hypothesis and match those with the approval DV; only independents see reputational damage mounting when peer states remain compliant with their own targets. This may be because independents are less polarized than partisans on climate, with weaker prior beliefs due to the receipt of fewer partisan cues (Chaudoin 2014; Casler and Groves 2023).

Conclusion

The global climate regime relies, in large part, on pledges made by states in the absence of formal enforcement mechanisms. Canonical theory points to strong incentives to defect from such commitments. We explore one mechanism by which states may nonetheless face pressure to remain compliant: audience costs levied by domestic electorates. Through a series of survey experiments,

we find that many Americans sanction politicians for backing down from non-binding climate targets, preferring those who prioritize compliance over those who sacrifice those pledges in favor of lower energy prices. Whether a candidate intends to uphold their country's climate pledges is one of the most powerful predictors of vote choice among Americans, particularly for Democrats. Results indicate that underlying this voting behavior is disapproval of policies inconsistent with pledges and concern for the global reputation of the U.S. We also find some evidence that other countries' behavior conditions how the public views their own government: some voters are more likely to punish defection when other countries remain compliant with their own climate targets.

Our findings suggest several avenues for future work. First, we encourage scholars to examine whether and to what extent audience costs shape the prospects for climate cooperation among autocracies. We expect our findings generalize to other democracies, and especially developed ones.[27] Though there is some evidence of audience costs in autocratic contexts, particularly among elites (Weeks 2008; Weiss 2013), they may not emerge for climate (Bättig and Bernauer 2009). Second, we encourage scholars of audience costs and public opinion of international agreements to incorporate candidate choice conjoint experiments into their analyses in order to better understand when attitudinal shifts translate into meaningful behavioral changes.

The effects identified in this paper are promising for the future of climate cooperation, the longevity of the Paris framework, and the efficacy of soft international law. Voters appear willing to punish leaders who fail to meet climate pledges. This suggests that voters may care about foreign policy to an extent that existing literature fails to account for (Guisinger 2009; Guisinger and Saunders 2017), though climate may be unique insofar as it has clear and highly salient domestic implications.

[27] See Bush and Clayton 2023 on differences in climate perceptions between developed and developing settings.

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