Where Does the Buck Stop? Applying Attribution Theory to Examine Public Appraisals of the President

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This study applies attribution theory to examine public appraisals of the president. To date, most political science research on attribution theory has focused on domestic policy, and no work has considered both domestic and foreign policy domains in tandem. To fill this gap, we formulate and experimentally test a series of hypotheses regarding the level of responsibility and credit/blame that individuals attribute to the president in both policy domains across varying policy conditions. We also consider how party compatibility affects people’s attribution judgments. Our findings provide a new contribution to the literature on political attributions, executive accountability, and public perceptions of presidential performance.

Modern presidents have increasingly taken on a public leadership role in the political arena. Through wars, economic crises, and increased civic demands, presidents have sought more involvement and influence in overseeing public affairs (Edwards 1983), a development accompanied by an exponential growth and institutionalization of the executive branch (Burke 2000; Hart 1995). Amid such developments, the media has focused on the president as the most salient political actor (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; see also Brody 1991), while public polling surveys have consistently connected the president’s job performance with conditions in the foreign and domestic policy domains.
(see Edwards 1990). Subsequently, the public has developed growing expectations for presidents to be responsive to their needs (Cohen 1995, 1999).

In the course of such systemic and institutional changes, presidents have, particularly during election campaigns, reinforced and embellished the perception that they have the means to solve the nation’s problems. However, presidents consistently fall short of keeping their promises to the public, revealing a gap between public expectations of the president and the president’s capacity for governing (see Cronin 1977). In the midst of this paradox, scholars have become interested in understanding the dynamics that influence whether and how the public attributes responsibility to presidents for the state of national affairs and, in turn, the extent to which presidents are able to claim credit in times of success and avoid blame in times of deteriorating national conditions.

Studies on attribution theory in political science have traditionally focused on the domestic policy domain, particularly on how the public attributes responsibility to the president for the state of the economy. By comparison, attribution research in the area of foreign policy has been scarce, and no work we know of has considered the domestic and foreign policy domains in tandem, nor examined how the public attributes responsibility and credit/blame for foreign policy issues to political figures, particularly the president. To fill this gap in the literature, this study employs an experimental approach to test the influence that policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility have on public appraisals of the president. Our findings provide a new contribution to the literature on political attributions, executive accountability, and public perceptions of presidential performance.

**Attribution Theory in the Study of Politics**

Heider’s (1958) early work in social psychology on the process of causal attribution served as a springboard for studying how people draw inferences from their own behavior and the behavior of others (see Heradstveit 1979; Jervis 1976; Larson 1985). Weiner (1986) later developed a model associating causal attributions with judgments of personal controllability, affective reactions, and behavior (see also Weiner 1991, 1995). In another seminal piece, Jones and Nisbett (1972) posited that actors tend to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to personal dispositions, a pervasive tendency in social attribution commonly referred to as the “actor-observer hypothesis.” Ross (1977) later coined the term “fundamental attribution hypothesis” to denote the propensity for people to explain the behavior of others mainly by considering dispositional, personality-based factors. These works have provided a foundation for political scientists to explore systematically public perceptions of responsibility and accountability for political figures as well as perceptions about political events, issues, and other related phenomena.

As Gomez and Wilson (2003, 273) note, “Attribution is indisputably fundamental to individual decision making, and has been shown to influence powerfully attitudes toward the self and others, as well as emotional arousal” (see also Fiske and Taylor 1991; Hewstone 1989; Petty and Cacioppo 1996). In the political arena, attributions of responsibility, credit,
and blame are commonly associated with public appraisals of political leaders (Iyengar 1989). Such appraisals, in turn, influence voting behavior (Feldman 1982; Lau and Sears 1981) and voter turnout (Arceneaux 2003; Brody and Sniderman 1977), which are central to the democratic process. As such, attribution theory provides a useful framework for understanding public perceptions of political phenomena and their implications (see Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988; Feldman 1982; Lau and Sears 1981; Rosenberg and Wolfsfeld 1977; Rudolph 2006; Rudolph and Grant 2002).

For our purposes, we apply attribution theory vis-à-vis public appraisals of the president to examine the dynamics within which the public ascribes responsibility and credit/blame for a given political event or condition, either internally to the actions of the president or externally to situational factors. More specifically, internal (dispositional) attribution occurs when an individual perceives a president’s performance—successful or not—as a product of that president’s personal abilities and actions. Conversely, external (situational) attribution occurs when an individual perceives a president’s performance as a product of environmental or other exogenous conditions that are beyond that president’s control. As such, whether the public perceives the president to have causal or functional (role) responsibility, as well as control over certain political events or conditions, largely determines overall perceptions regarding the president’s level of accountability (see Arceneaux 2006; Peffley and Williams 1985).

Building on the general dynamics of the attribution model, a growing number of studies posit that ideology plays an important role in influencing responsibility attributions (Christiansen and Lavine 1997; Guimond, Begin, and Palmer 1989; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Lane 1962; Shirazi and Biel 2005; Skitka and Tetlock 1992, 1993; Skitka et al. 2002; Zucker and Weiner 1993). Skitka et al. (2002) find that situational attributions for social problems more often correspond with a liberal viewpoint and that liberals tend to adjust their perceptions of social problems toward external explanations to increase their cognitive consistency. Conservatives, on the other hand, are more motivated to seek punishment for individuals who violate what they view as traditional social norms. Regarding the impact of economic ideology on attribution judgments, because economic conservatives traditionally ascribe a minimum role for the government in economic affairs, they are likely to attribute relatively less responsibility to governmental actors than non-governmental ones (see Rudolph 2003a).

Party cues also play an important role in stimulating ideologically motivated attribution judgments. For example, people who are partisan supporters of a given president may attribute less responsibility and give more leeway to that president during declining national conditions rather than engage in a more objective evaluation of the president’s policy performance (see Lau and Sears 1981). Thus, there exists a favorable ideological bias that liberal Democrats hold for Democratic presidents and conservative Republicans hold for Republican presidents. Nevertheless, Malhotra and Kuo’s (2008) study on Hurricane Katrina finds that although party cues play an important role in stimulating biased partisan reactions, individuals with access to information about the specific responsibilities of government officials are likely to make more evenhanded judgments.

As individuals develop their perceptions of political figures, politicians strive to shape and manage those perceptions in a number of ways. For instance, presidents are
known to use the presence of divided government to “offer a plausible counterproposal” that Congress is to blame for negative policy conditions (Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002, 704; see also Leyden and Borrelli 1995; Norpoth 2001; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b). Presidents and other political figures may also attempt to frame negative policy conditions and outcomes in a favorable manner or try to shift public attention to other salient and more positive policy conditions and outcomes (McGraw 1991; Weaver 1986; see also Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). In addition, news media coverage and the way reporters frame events can influence individual perceptions for attributing responsibility to the president or other political actors (Shah et al. 2004; see also Farnsworth and Lichter 2006).

Last, a number of scholars suggest that an individual’s attribution judgments regarding political figures also depend on that individual’s level of education and political sophistication1 (e.g., Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003). It makes intuitive sense to expect that highly educated and sophisticated individuals have a better understanding of the political process and are generally more aware of national conditions as they relate to governmental performance, which helps such individuals develop more accurate (or at least more consistent) political and economic evaluations (Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000, 639). However, some studies have found that individuals who possess high amounts of political knowledge may instead choose to engage in biased information processing due to affectively charged “hot cognitions” shaped by partisan motivations (see Taber and Lodge 2006; Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000).

Attribution Theory and the Economy

Most studies on attribution theory consider how public judgments of responsibility concerning the state of the economy affect the perceived accountability and election prospects of political leaders (see Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). In exploring how individuals respond politically to economic conditions, a number of scholars have argued that the answer relies partly on the extent to which individuals attribute responsibility and credit/blame to certain political actors (see Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988; Feldman 1982; Lau and Sears 1981; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Rudolph and Grant 2002). For instance, according to the reward-punishment theory, people generally credit political incumbents for improvements in the economy and blame them otherwise (see Fiorina 1978; Key 1966; Page 1978). Therein, a number of studies argue that citizens are more inclined to punish rather than reward the president and other incumbents (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Key 1966; Mueller 1973). Indeed, Mueller (1970, 23) finds that a deteriorating economy often harms a president’s popularity, whereas an improving economy does not necessarily lead to high approval ratings, concluding that “There is punishment but never reward.”

The reward versus punishment asymmetry is closely related to the concept of “negativity bias,” which refers to the “greater weight given to negative information,

1. Generally speaking, one’s level of political sophistication denotes one’s range of factual knowledge and acquired information about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 10; Goren 2001, 161). In addition to using the term “political sophistication,” scholars also employ alternative terms such as “political information,” “political expertise,” “political knowledge,” or “political awareness.”
relative to equally extreme and equally likely positive information in a variety of information-processing tasks” (Lau 1985, 119). Scholars have extensively explored the issue of negativity bias in cognitive and social psychology (e.g., Fiske 1980; Ito et al. 1998; Kanouse and Hanson 1972) and in political behavior research, particularly as it relates to economic voting (e.g., Bloom and Price 1975; Kernell 1977; Lau 1985). For instance, examining the impact of short-run economic changes on congressional voting, Bloom and Price (1975) find that although the deterioration of economic conditions hurts the president’s party, better conditions do not necessarily aid it (see also Kernell 1977). A number of studies also suggest that negativity bias influences public judgments of presidential character and performance as well as evaluations of presidential candidates (e.g., Brody 1991; Goren 2002). However, some studies have found no empirical support for negativity bias, suggesting that its impact may instead be conditional upon other factors (see, for example, Fiorina and Shepsle 1989; Gant and Davis 1984; Kiewiet 1983; Lewis-Beck 1988; Radcliff 1988).

With regards to longitudinal dynamics, Peffley (1989) suggests that people develop their perceptions of presidential competence early on in a president’s term and subsequently refer to those perceptions when deciding whether to attribute credit or blame for economic policy conditions (see also Kinder, Abelson, and Fiske 1979; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Page 1978; Peffley 1984). He further argues that such perceptions are open to revision if the president’s continuing performance on the economy takes a noticeable and lasting turn, for better or worse (see also Fiorina 1981). Other scholars point out that people may at times use such perceptions to determine whether a president could handle certain policy problems in the future, particularly when considering whether to reelect the president for a second term (see Fiorina 1981; Page 1978; Popkin et al. 1976). Thus, individuals are likely to consider past performance as a “prima facie indicator of the government’s competence (or lack thereof)” (Fiorina 1981, 12). That said, Peffley and Williams (1985, 414) find that rather than blaming the current president for poor economic conditions, individuals may instead blame the previous president, especially “during the first half of a new administration.”

As mentioned earlier, a number of studies suggest that the formation and structure of an individual’s attribution judgments in general and economic voting behavior in particular may also depend in part on that individual’s level of political sophistication (e.g., Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003; Goren 1997; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; see also Godbout and Bélanger 2007). According to Gomez and Wilson (2007, 555), “less sophisticated individuals tend to make conceptually proximal attributions, focusing credit or blame on the single most obvious actor in the relevant sphere, while more sophisticated individuals tend toward diffuse attributions, dividing credit or blame between proximal and distal agents.” Applying their proximal/distal attribution argument (which they refer to as the “theory of heterogeneous attribution”) to the context of presidential economic voting, Gomez and Wilson (2001, 2003, 2007) argue that because less sophisticated citizens primarily tend to credit/blame themselves for their own economic circumstances and attribute responsibility for the national circumstances exclusively to the president, they are more likely to vote sociotropically (i.e., based on national economic conditions). By comparison, sophisticated individuals are more likely to engage in pocketbook voting (i.e.,
based on personal economic conditions) since they better understand the impact that macroeconomic policies have on their personal economic well-being while recognizing that the economy is also affected by numerous other actors and economic forces that lie beyond the president’s control (see also Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988, 856-57). 2

Attribution Theory and Foreign Policy

Compared to scholarship on attribution theory regarding the domestic policy domain, scholars have done considerably less work in the realm of foreign policy. Among the small number of attribution studies on foreign policy, scholars have focused on the general perceptions of decision makers and the public concerning international events and conflicts. To our knowledge, almost no work has systematically examined how the public attributes responsibility and credit/blame to political figures, particularly the president, with regards to foreign policy issues.

Jervis’s (1976) study on foreign policy decision making marked the first application of attribution theory in the field of international relations. Specifically, Jervis addresses how leaders’ perceptual/attributional errors concerning a given set of issues and political actors may impair their ability to collect and process information for decision making. On a parallel basis, Rosenberg and Wolfsfeld (1977) explore how decision makers interpret the reasons behind the actions of their adversaries during a conflict and the effects of such causal perceptions on the types of policies they propose. Larson (1985) also applies attribution theory to explain the containment policies employed by U.S. political leaders during the Cold War. In another study, Heradstveit and Bonham (1986) examine the attributions of American and Norwegian officials regarding Soviet activities in Norway. Later on, Heradstveit and Bonham (1996) conduct in-depth interviews with Arab elites to investigate attributions regarding the Gulf War and the actions of the Iraqi government.

Regarding the dynamics of foreign policy attributions among the public, most studies refer to the in-group versus out-group bias, which suggests that people tend to attribute foreign policy successes and positive acts on the part of their in-group to internal causes while attributing the causes of their own failures and negative acts to the out-group and other external factors (see Tajfel and Turner 1979). In a similar vein, people resort to external attributions in response to the success and/or positive behavior of an out-group, whereas they make attributions to internal characteristics when the out-group displays signs of failure and/or negative actions (see, for example, Bizman and Hoffman 1993; Dresler-Hawke 2005; Heradstveit and Bonham 1996; Hewstone 1990; Hulsizer et al. 2004; Islam and Hewstone 1993; Pettigrew 1979; Rosenberg and Wolfsfeld 1977). Studies have found evidence of such in-group/out-group bias by comparing the attribution judgments of various groups in conflict, including those of Israelis versus

2. One should note that a number of scholars offer alternative theorizing and empirical evidence contradicting Gomez and Wilson’s findings regarding the link between political sophistication and economic voting behavior (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Goren 1997; van der Brug, van der Eijk, and Franklin 2007). Such scholars argue that because gathering and processing information about the state of the national economy is a far more difficult task than evaluating one’s own financial situation, sociotropic voting may be more common among sophisticated voters, whereas less sophisticated voters may more often engage in pocketbook voting (Godbout and Bélanger 2007, 543; Fiorina 1981; Krause 1997; Lupia 1994).
Arabs regarding the Middle East conflict (see Bizman and Hoffman 1993; Heradstveit 1979; see also Rosenberg and Wolfsfeld 1977), Protestants versus Catholics in Northern Ireland (Hunter and Stringer 1999), Hindus versus Muslims in southern India (Taylor and Jaggi 1974), and Muslim versus Christian habitants of the island of Mindanao in the Philippines (Montiel and Macapagal 2006). In addition, recent studies find that political leaders can take advantage of such biased perceptions to legitimize the use of force against a historical adversary (Bandura 2004; Sabucedo, Blanco, and De la Corte 2003).

Exploring Public Attributions of Responsibility to the President

As previously noted, most research on attribution theory has focused on the domestic policy domain, particularly the economy. However, scholars have done relatively little work on responsibility attributions in the foreign policy domain and, no work has considered both policy domains in tandem or examined how the interaction of policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility influence public appraisals of the president. To fill this gap in the literature, we formulate and test a series of hypotheses regarding the overall level of responsibility and credit/blame that individuals attribute to presidents in both domestic and foreign policy domains across varying policy conditions. In doing so, we also consider the role that party compatibility plays in mediating people’s attribution judgments.

Scholars note that the public confers a much higher degree of deference to the president on foreign policy issues compared to domestic ones (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998; Hurwitz 1989; see also Peterson 1994; Schlesinger 1973). Given the fact that Congress has long relinquished much of its foreign policy decision-making power to the president by essentially surrendering its constitutional authority to declare war (see Fisher 2000), modern presidents are now more than ever equipped with greater military and diplomatic powers over foreign affairs (Peake 2001). Consequently, the public has become increasingly dependent on presidential leadership when it comes to issues concerning foreign policy, particularly national defense, wherein presidents operate not just as chief executives, but also under the moniker of “commander in chief” (see Holsti 2004; Hurwitz 1989).

In the domestic policy domain, although dire economic conditions such as rising inflation and unemployment may cause great concern among the public and a heightened focus on the president in dealing with them, scholars point out that the president and Congress generally share constitutional and statutory power for shaping macroeconomic policy (Arnold 1990; Keech 1995; West 1987). Particularly with respect to the economy, there are numerous additional external factors that shape economic conditions over which the president and Congress have a limited amount of political control and influence (see Tufte 1978). Therein, we expect that the public is likely to hold the president relatively less responsible for domestic policy conditions than for foreign policy conditions. Accordingly, due to the president’s more centralized control over the foreign policy domain amid congressional and public deference to the president, we hypothesize the following:

H1: People are likely to attribute a relatively higher amount of credit/blame and responsibility to the president for issues concerning the foreign policy domain than for those concerning the domestic policy domain.
In social psychology research, an established finding is that people tend to engage in “group-serving attribution bias” when making causal attributions; that is, they tend to attribute successes to in-group members and attribute failures to out-group members (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Hewstone 1990). Applying this notion of in-group/out-group bias to party compatibility, political scientists have developed the “partisan rationalization hypothesis” (see Rudolph 2003a, 2003b). The empirical findings indicate that partisans are more likely to believe that their own party can best solve economic problems (Peffley, Feldman, and Sigelman 1987; Sigelman and Knight 1985) and that presidents from the opposite party are to blame for economic downturns (Peffley and Williams 1985; Tyler 1982). Accordingly, partisans tend to attribute more responsibility for favorable economic conditions to presidents or governors of their own party than those from the opposing party (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b). So far, scholars have generally focused on examining group-serving attribution bias based on partisan rationalizations only with respect to the state of the economy (but see Malhotra and Kuo 2008). We retest the partisan rationalization hypothesis in a more general setting to include both domestic and foreign policy domains. In accordance with previous findings, we hypothesize the following for both policy domains:

H2: If people are of the same party as the president, they are likely to attribute less blame and responsibility to the president for deteriorating policy conditions, and attribute more credit and responsibility to the president for improving policy conditions than people of the opposing party.

Given our expectations that the public should perceive presidents as having greater control and jurisdiction over issues of foreign policy than domestic policy (H1), we also anticipate that the tendency for individuals to engage in group-serving attribution bias based on partisan rationalizations (H2) is more pronounced in the realm of foreign policy. In other words, compared to the level of biased partisan attributions in the domestic policy domain, we anticipate that people will display even more biased attributions for foreign policy issues given a president of their own party versus a president of the opposing party. We thereby propose that people will attribute more responsibility and credit for foreign policy successes to a president of their own party and attribute more responsibility and blame for foreign policy failures to a president from the opposition party, than they would for domestic policy successes and failures. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H3: The interactive effects of party compatibility and policy conditions suggested in H2 will be stronger in the foreign policy domain.

Method

To test our hypotheses, we conduct an experiment that provides a direct examination of attribution judgments under a controlled setting. One-hundred and forty-nine upper-level undergraduate students (71 female and 78 male) took part in this experi-

3. The full experimental questionnaire is available upon request.
We randomly assigned the participants to eight experimental conditions, in a 2x2x2 between-groups factorial design composed of three manipulated factors: (1) policy domain [domestic (economy) versus foreign (war)], (2) policy condition (deteriorating versus improving), and (3) party compatibility (same party as the president versus opposing party). The experimental conditions were presented as hypothetical news updates. In addition to the experimental manipulations, we also included “political sophistication” in the experiment as a covariate, which we measured using a conventional knowledge scale with 18 factual test items. Given the presence of this covariate factor, the method we employ is analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

Operationalization of the Dependent Variables

The dependent variables we analyze are (1) attribution of responsibility to the president and (2) attribution of credit/blame to the president. To measure these variables, we asked the participants to complete a questionnaire following their exposure to the experimental scenarios. First, they were asked how responsible they thought the president was for the state of the policy issue they read about on a scale of 0 to 10. Then, regarding the distribution of credit/blame (depending on the policy condition), they were asked...
asked to rank the president and four alternative potential sources from 1 to 5, where “1” signified the highest level of credit/blame and “5” signified the lowest ranking. For the domestic policy condition, the sources included the president, the previous administration, business circles, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the state of the global economy. For the foreign policy condition, the sources included the president, the previous administration, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations, and the newly elected government of the fictitious country the United States was depicted to be at war with.

Experimental Scenarios and Manipulations

We designed the experiment around eight hypothetical scenarios in the form of news updates, each one set in the near future with a fictitious president. The structure and content of each experimental scenario were held constant except for the manipulated factors. Four of the scenarios were set around the state of the economy, and the other four concerned the state of a fictitious war. This served as our manipulation of policy domain. Among the scenarios addressing the economy, half of the scenarios described the state of the economy as deteriorating and the other half as improving. The same logic applied to the foreign policy scenarios with one-half of the scenarios depicting the policy condition as deteriorating and the remaining scenarios depicting the policy condition as improving. This served as our manipulation of policy condition.

For the manipulation of party compatibility, we followed a quasi-experimental procedure. At the beginning of the experiment, participants completed a short questionnaire in which they were asked to indicate their party identification. Thereafter, they were exposed to one of the eight hypothetical scenarios where for each policy domain and policy condition scenario, the fictitious president in office was from either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. After the experiment, we coded the cases where a participant shared the same party as the president in a given scenario as “same party” or otherwise as “opposing party.” Since this study focuses on party compatibility between an individual and the president with regards to whether one is of the same or opposing party as the president, 17 of the 149 participants who identified themselves as independents at the start of the questionnaire were subsequently excluded from the analyses, resulting in a sample size of 132 participants.

6. As Gartner (2008) suggests, experimental designs that use hypothetical scenarios provide the researcher a way to get a handle on the broader range of processes concerning public opinion by enabling one to manipulate and vary the factors of interest in accordance with one’s research objectives. Employing hypothetical scenarios also helps prevent any bias or confusion that might arise by referring to present or past time real-world actors and events, which would contaminate the validity and reliability of the findings. Nevertheless, experimenters should avoid developing hypothetical scenarios that are unrealistic or artificial. With these considerations in mind, we created our experimental scenarios in the form of fictional news updates designed in close concert to the type of content found in real news stories by using the Vanderbilt Television News Archive database (see http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu). In addition, we set the experimental scenarios in the year 2018 so that the participants would not inadvertently confuse the fictional setting with that of the current political atmosphere. Indeed, because Barack Obama’s presidency may stretch until the year 2016 and because participants could interpret the year 2016 differently as a presidential election year, we employ the year 2018 to depict the midpoint of a future president’s first or second term. In doing so, we are confident that 2018 serves as a point in time far enough into the future to avoid participant confusion with current and near-future events, but not too far into the future that participants cannot fathom what societal conditions might look like.
The experiment also included manipulation checks. At the end of the experimental questionnaire, we asked the participants (in accordance with the experimental scenario they were exposed to) to recall the following: (1) which political party the president was from (Democratic or Republican) and (2) what the policy condition was (deteriorating or improving) as described in the news update they read. Out of the 132 participants, 91.67% of the respondents recalled the experimental conditions accurately. As such, the manipulation checks served to ensure that the manipulations worked as intended by our experimental design, thus confirming the internal validity of our experiment.7

Political Sophistication as a Covariate

As mentioned earlier, several scholars suggest that political sophistication may have a significant impact on an individual’s attribution judgments (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003). To control for such effect, we included a conventional measure of political sophistication—one’s general knowledge of domestic and international politics—as a covariate in our models. Specifically, we administered a questionnaire on general political knowledge with a total of 18 factual test items at the end of the experiment. We modeled the questionnaire based on items from the National Election Surveys (NES), Gomez and Wilson’s (2001) study, Prior’s (2002) study, and Taber and Lodge’s (2006) study. The questionnaire consisted of three segments: (1) domestic political knowledge, (2) recognition of important national and foreign political figures, and (3) foreign policy knowledge. We then aggregated the separate scores of the three sections to obtain a total score of each participant’s level of general political knowledge.

We estimated a commonly used reliability statistic, Cronbach’s alpha, in order to check whether each constitutive section of the questionnaire measured the same underlying construct (here, political sophistication) and could thus be combined together to generate an additive scale. Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient for this scale is 0.74, which is sufficiently high as per the widely accepted criterion of 0.70 or higher used to determine the internal consistency of summated scales (see Nunnally 1978). Therefore, the results justify the formation of an index variable.

Results

Overall, the experimental results corroborate our expectations concerning the effects that policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility have on the amount of responsibility and credit/blame attributed to the president. Specifically, the results

7. In our analyses, we do not exclude the data from the participants who failed to accurately recall the experimental conditions they were in, since such failure closely reflects real-world circumstances wherein some members of the public often fail to correctly identify the political party of the president or accurately describe certain policy conditions. Previously, we had overlooked this consideration and had instead conducted our analyses by excluding the data from the participants who failed the manipulation checks. The results of these previous analyses (which are available upon request) do not differ substantively from our final analyses. We thank the anonymous reviewer who brought this issue to our attention and recommended the more conservative tests of our hypotheses, which helped increase confidence in our inferences.
demonstrate that policy domain has a significant main effect on attribution judgments, indicating that people place a greater amount of credit/blame and responsibility on the president in the foreign policy domain with respect to the issue of war as compared to the domestic policy domain with respect to the economy. In addition, the interaction between policy condition and party compatibility displays statistical significance, suggesting that people attribute more blame and responsibility for deteriorating conditions and less credit and responsibility for improving conditions to an opposition party president compared to a president of their own party, particularly regarding war in the foreign policy domain.

Attribution of Responsibility

Table 1 shows the results of our analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) concerning the effects of policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility on attribution of responsibility to the president. Following their exposure to one of the eight experimental scenarios, participants were asked to indicate the level of responsibility (on a scale of 0 to 10) they thought the president should hold concerning a given policy issue depicted in that scenario. Our findings indicate that the attribution of responsibility to the president is significantly higher in the foreign policy domain ($M = 6.55$) than in the domestic policy domain ($M = 5.89$), which corroborates our first hypothesis (H1), $F (1, 123) = 3.68, p < .05$.

The results for our second hypothesis (H2) concerning the interaction between policy condition and party compatibility are also statistically significant and in the expected direction, $F (1, 123) = 16.09, p < .001$. As Figure 1 shows, in the case of deteriorating policy conditions, participants attributed more responsibility to a president of the opposing party ($M = 6.71$) than to a president of the same party ($M = 5.36$). On the other hand, in the case of improving policy conditions, the level of responsibility that participants attributed to a president of their own party was significantly higher ($M = 7.13$) than the amount they attributed to a president of the opposing party ($M = 5.70$).

**TABLE 1**

| Attribution of Responsibility to the President—Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) |
|-------------------------------|---|----|----|----|---|
| **Independent Variables**      | **SS** | **Df** | **MS** | **F-value** | **p-value** |
| Policy domain (domestic/foreign) | 13.436 | 1 | 13.436 | 3.680 | <.05 |
| Policy condition (deteriorating/improving) | 4.478 | 1 | 4.478 | 1.226 | >.05 |
| Party compatibility (same/opposing) | .051 | 1 | .051 | .014 | >.05 |
| Policy domain * Policy condition | 15.133 | 1 | 15.133 | 4.145 | <.05 |
| Policy domain * Party compatibility | 1.331 | 1 | 1.331 | .365 | >.05 |
| Policy condition * Party compatibility | 58.755 | 1 | 58.755 | 16.092 | <.001 |
| Domain * Condition * Compatibility | 6.151 | 1 | 6.151 | 1.685 | <.10 |
| Political sophistication | 4.600 | 1 | 4.600 | 1.260 | >.10 |
| Residual | 449.100 | 123 | 3.651 | | |
| **N = 132** | | | | | |
The three-way interactive effect of policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility is moderately significant, $F(1, 123) = 1.68$, $p < .10$. In line with our third hypothesis ($H_3$), the proposed effects of policy condition and party compatibility on the level of responsibility attributed to the president are stronger for the foreign policy domain (see Figure 2). More specifically, regarding deteriorating policy conditions, the difference between the mean scores of responsibility attributed to a president by participants of the opposing party and those belonging to the same party in the foreign policy domain is larger \[ (M_{\text{opposing}} = 7.71) - (M_{\text{same}} = 5.71) = 2.00 \] than the difference in the domestic policy domain \[ (M_{\text{opposing}} = 5.70) - (M_{\text{same}} = 5.00) = 0.70 \]. By the same token,
regarding improving policy conditions, the difference between the mean scores of responsibility attributed to a president by participants of the same party and those of the opposing party in the foreign policy domain is larger \([M_{same} = 7.23] - [M_{opposing} = 5.56] = 1.67\) than the difference in the domestic policy domain \([M_{same} = 7.03] - [M_{opposing} = 5.84] = 1.19\).

Apart from the experimental results directly concerning our hypotheses, there are a number of other interesting findings that also warrant discussion. Primarily, the results show that the interaction between policy domain and policy condition is significant, \(F(1, 123) = 4.14, p < .05\). Specifically, the participants attributed a markedly higher amount of responsibility to the president for deteriorating conditions in the foreign policy domain \((M = 6.71)\) than in the domestic policy domain \((M = 5.35)\). By comparison, the difference in the means regarding responsibility attributions to the president for improving conditions is considerably small between foreign and domestic policy domains \((M = 6.39\) and \(M = 6.43\), respectively). Although the main effect of policy condition is not significant \((p > .5)\), the results concerning the interaction of policy condition with policy domain suggest the presence of a negativity bias in the foreign policy domain, wherein participants attribute higher responsibility to the president for deteriorating conditions than improving ones. Furthermore, the weight of the negativity bias is amplified in the foreign policy domain where responsibility attributions for deteriorating conditions are much greater as compared to the domestic policy domain. Last, political sophistication as a covariate in the model does not demonstrate a statistically significant effect on participants’ responsibility attributions to the president.

**Attribution of Credit/Blame**

Table 2 shows the results of our analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) concerning the effects of policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility on attribution of credit/blame to the president. Each participant, once exposed to a particular experimental scenario, was asked to distribute credit or blame (depending on the policy condition) for a given policy issue by ranking the president along with four other potential sources,
where “1” denoted the highest ranking of credit/blame and “5” denoted the lowest ranking. Similar to the findings regarding the attribution of responsibility, our results concerning the attribution of credit/blame with respect to policy domain indicate that participants ranked the president significantly higher in the foreign policy domain ($M = 2.53$) than in the domestic policy domain ($M = 2.99$), which corroborates our first hypothesis ($H_1$), $F(1, 123) = 4.16$, $p < .05$.

The results also demonstrate a statistically significant interactive effect between policy condition and party compatibility, $F(1, 123) = 12.30$, $p < .001$. As Figure 3 shows, in the case of deteriorating policy conditions, participants ranked a president of the opposing party higher for blame ($M = 2.48$) than a president of the same party ($M = 3.47$). By comparison, in the case of improving policy conditions, participants ranked a president of the same party higher for credit ($M = 2.25$) than a president of the opposing party ($M = 2.85$). These results corroborate our second hypothesis ($H_2$).

Last, the three-way interaction between policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility concerning the attribution of credit/blame displays a moderately significant effect, $F(1, 123) = 2.64$, $p < .10$. In line with our third hypothesis ($H_3$), the proposed effects of policy condition and party compatibility on attributions of credit/blame are stronger in the foreign policy domain than in the domestic policy domain (see Figure 4). Specifically, for the attribution of blame concerning deteriorating policy conditions, the difference between the mean ranking of the president by participants of the same party and those of the opposing party is larger in the foreign policy domain [($M_{same} = 3.25$) − ($M_{opposing} = 2.08$) = 1.17] than in the domestic policy domain [($M_{same} = 3.70$) − ($M_{opposing} = 2.88$) = 0.82]. Likewise, for the attribution of credit concerning improving policy conditions, the difference between the mean ranking of the president by participants of the opposing party and those of the same party is larger in the foreign policy domain [($M_{opposing} = 2.98$) − ($M_{same} = 1.82$) = 1.16] than in the domestic policy domain [($M_{opposing} = 2.72$) − ($M_{same} = 2.67$) = 0.05].
Last, in contrast to the results concerning attribution of responsibility to the president, we find that the interaction between policy domain and policy condition is not significant for the attribution of credit/blame ($p > .5$). In addition, the main effect of policy condition is also not significant ($p > .5$). On the other hand, political sophistication as a covariate in this model demonstrates a moderately significant effect on participant attributions of credit/blame to the president, $F(1, 123) = 1.65$, $p < .10$. Upon closer examination of the parameter estimates for this variable, we find that participants with higher levels of political knowledge tend to give lower rankings to the president regarding the attribution of credit/blame ($\beta = .038$, $t = 1.29$). This finding is in line with previous studies suggesting that less sophisticated individuals tend to attribute credit or blame to the single most obvious political actor (here, the president), while more sophisticated individuals tend to engage in more diffuse attributions, dividing credit or blame between proximal and distal agents (see Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003, 2007).8

8. We also analyzed the covariate effect of sophistication specific to each policy domain by splitting the data into the subsets of foreign and domestic policy domains. The results show that the effect of sophistication regarding credit/blame attribution is mainly driven by the domestic policy domain ($p < .05$), whereas the difference in credit/blame attribution between sophisticated and less sophisticated participants is largely washed out in the foreign policy domain ($p > .10$). As such, the results corroborate Gomez and Wilson’s (2001, 2003) theory of heterogeneous attribution suggesting that sophisticated and less sophisticated individuals differ in their attribution judgments with respect to the economy. At the same time, the results also indicate that such attributional divergence based on political sophistication does not seem to hold in the foreign policy domain with respect to war. This may be because sophisticated and less sophisticated individuals both associate war more directly with the president as commander in chief. The results of these additional split data analyses are available upon request.
Discussion and Conclusion

Given the expectations gap between public perceptions of power and actual presidential capacity, scholars have increasingly investigated the dynamics that shape public appraisals of the president. Building on and extending previous research, we applied an experimental approach to test how policy domain, policy condition, and party compatibility influence public attributions of responsibility and credit/blame to presidents. Our findings demonstrate that the public directs a greater amount of credit/blame and responsibility to the president in the foreign policy domain with respect to war than in the domestic policy domain with respect to the economy. Our findings also show that people attribute more blame and responsibility for deteriorating conditions and less credit and responsibility for improving conditions to a president of the opposing party compared to a president of their own party, particularly regarding war in the foreign policy domain.

Our study offers several implications pertaining to the presidency. Regarding policy domain, our findings that presidents receive more credit for success (and more blame for failure) on the issue of war as compared to the economy may relate to the dynamics of presidential approval ratings, especially in connection with rally effects (Mueller 1973). Typically, international rally effects on presidential approval are often larger than domestic rally effects, including the effects of economic changes. Such disparity in part reflects the fact that foreign policy events and crises that lead to rallies tend to be sudden and dramatic while economic conditions tend to change more slowly, thereby dispersing public reactions across time. Nevertheless, such differences in the magnitude and duration between international and domestic rally effects may also be partly related to different patterns of attribution observed between foreign and domestic policy domains. Our findings further suggest that presidents who choose (or are forced) to focus on foreign policy may find their standing in the polls to be more volatile than presidents who prioritize domestic policy issues given the magnification of successes and failures abroad due to the public’s proclivity to place more responsibility and more credit/blame on the president in the foreign policy domain.9

The implications of our findings concerning party compatibility are also noteworthy and provide additional incentives for further research. Specifically, the finding that partisan attachments lead to biased attributions of credit/blame and responsibility to the president gives credence to the idea that presidents may benefit from emphasizing their accomplishments and downplaying their failures or shortcomings as a means to rally support among their party base, particularly in the foreign policy domain. However, partisan opponents can likewise exaggerate failures and trivialize presidential successes in an effort to undermine a president’s public standing. Given the presence of such partisan bias in attributions of credit/blame and responsibility, one interesting question for scholars to explore is how moderates and independents form their attribution judgments of the president. In an increasingly polarized and partisan environment where political

9. We thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested these valuable points.
parties are constantly seeking to take credit for successes and avoid (or redirect) blame for failures, do moderates and independents develop less biased evaluations of presidential performance or do they simply become agitated or apathetic? Given the importance of the “median voter” for politics (see Downs 1957), especially with regards to policy-making and electoral outcomes, further scholarly investigations that address these questions are warranted.

Further extending the scope of this line of research, one may examine how the involvement of Congress and its level of discretionary power in the policy process mediate public attributions of responsibility and credit/blame to the president. For instance, in the foreign policy realm, although modern presidents have dominated over the legislative branch when it comes to war, Congress holds a significant amount of shared discretion with the president concerning other issues, such as foreign trade (see Peake 2001). In cases where presidents and members of Congress share (and compete for) discretion over policy direction, expectations about public appraisals for either institution are less clear. To date, although there exist some studies that have examined issues such as how divided government influences presidential approval ratings (see Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002) or how the perceived functioning of different levels of government affects voting decisions (Arceneaux 2006), our understanding of the relationship between the “institutional context and the assignment of political responsibility” remains incomplete (Rudolph 2003b, 190). Accordingly, future studies should consider how the level of policy discretion may influence the manner in which the public apportions responsibility and credit/blame to the president and Congress over a given policy issue.

Another alternative avenue for future research would be to experimentally manipulate political sophistication. Although we included a common measure of political sophistication—one’s general political knowledge—as a covariate in our analytical models, applying an experimental manipulation of political information along with the random assignment of participants to experimental conditions would allow researchers to better control for extraneous factors such as intelligence, motivation, and personal interest. One way to experimentally manipulate political sophistication would be to provide varying levels of information about certain issues to participants and then observe how such manipulations may alter participants’ attribution judgments regarding presidential performance.

Last, although our study provides new insights regarding the dynamics within which the public ascribes responsibility and credit/blame to the president, our focus on the issues of war and the economy are not fully representative of each domain, and therefore our findings should not be overly generalized. Indeed, Ripley and Franklin (1991) point out that the range of foreign policy issues is wide and diverse, and the same may be said about the domestic policy realm. As such, future studies should look beyond the issues of war and the economy to examine how the public attributes responsibility to presidents across other foreign and domestic policy issues. Regarding foreign policy, one might consider public attributions with respect to global trade pacts, international treaties on environmental issues, or diplomacy issues and sanctioning policies related to the prephases of war. On the domestic front, one might explore public attributions of responsibility concerning issues such as health care, civil rights, education, or welfare.
To conclude, despite the limited influence and capacity presidents have for solving the nation’s most pressing problems, their position atop the governmental hierarchy obliges them to be responsive to the public’s demands for effective policy leadership. In an era of growing polarization, partisanship, and intense media scrutiny, modern presidents face a significant uphill battle when it comes to earning and maintaining positive public appraisals for their performance in the White House as they take on numerous challenges during the course of their term. As was the case recently, although President Barack Obama was swept into office in 2008 amid much fanfare and high public expectations, he soon suffered a steady drop in public approval as he attempted to deal with the economic recession, two wars, health care reform, and a host of other issues. Thereafter, Obama witnessed—and was partly blamed for—a record loss of Democratic congressional seats during the 2010 midterm elections (Fifield 2010). In the midst of these shifts in public sentiment and voting behavior, presidential scholars, advisors, pundits, and other prognosticators continue to struggle in their efforts to better comprehend the forces that influence public perceptions of presidential policy performance. Accordingly, further scholarly investigations in this line of research are necessary for developing a greater understanding of the dynamics that shape executive accountability and public appraisals of the president.

References


