Evaluating Political Leaders in Times of Terror and Economic Threat: The Conditioning Influence of Politician Partisanship

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We theorize that evaluations of leaders under terrorist and economic threat vary by both incumbency status and politician partisanship. This argument is based on insights from theories of rally effects, economic voting, and issue ownership, and we assess it with data from four national studies. The first two are experiments featuring hypothetical candidates; consistent with expectations based on issue ownership, the analyses show that Republican incumbents (Democratic challengers) are viewed comparatively better in times of terrorist (economic) threat. Then, with another experiment and with survey data, we consider evaluations of President Obama, whose image under terrorist threat should be helped by his incumbency but harmed by his partisanship, and the reverse for economic decline. We again find evidence supporting our argument and, further, individual-level evidence of issue ownership effects. We conclude that threats, incumbency status, and politician partisanship interact in important ways as they affect evaluations of political leaders.

Classic theories hold that incumbency status is a boon in times of national security threat, and a bane in times of financial vulnerability (e.g., Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Mueller 1970, 1973). Accordingly, during his term in office, President George W. Bush’s approval ratings increased in tandem with terror threat (Berinsky 2009; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Nacos, Block-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011; Willer 2004). And, as the country began its descent into the “Great Recession” in 2008, five senators were voted out of office, and the incumbent party lost its bid to retain the presidency. In short, when terrorists threatened to strike, the public threw support around the incumbent, and when a potentially severe economic recession loomed large, the public held incumbents accountable. These outcomes are consistent with rally ‘round the flag and retrospective economic voting theories, which are incumbent-centered theories of political support under international crisis and under economic decline. Yet, these examples also share a crucial feature: the incumbents are all Republicans. Consider for a moment, then, the public’s reactions to more recent terror threats: Gallup data shows that approval ratings of President Barack Obama were unaffected by the 2009 Christmas Day underwear bomber incident; the Times Square bombing attempt in May 2010; and the discovery of the cargo planes bomb plot in October 2010. Consider also the fact that no Democratic incumbent lost his or her seat in the 2008 Senate elections. These counterexamples raise an important question: under conditions of threat, is public reaction to incumbents (versus challengers) constant regardless of politician partisanship or, instead, conditioned by it?

To the extent that scholarship has addressed differing responses to sitting executives in times of crisis, the focus in rally ‘round the flag research has been on other factors, for example, the leader’s “personal appeal,” the leader’s policies, reactions by other elites and the media, and the national mood (see Gronke and

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1The Knowledge Networks experimental data used in this paper were collected by Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences, NSF Grant 0094964, Diana C. Mutz and Arthur Lupia, Principal Investigators. An online appendix for this article is available at http://journals.cambridge.org/jop and contains descriptive statistics on the samples and supplemental materials. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the findings in the article are available at http://www.cgu.edu/pages/9865.asp.

We develop an original theoretical perspective by which evaluations of political leaders are affected by contexts of economic and terrorist threat conditional upon both incumbency status and politician partisanship. Our argument is grounded in insights from the rally ‘round the flag, economic voting, and issue ownership schools of thought. With respect to the latter, party reputations at the time of this project support the expectation that Republican incumbents will be comparatively advantaged in times of terror threat compared to Democratic incumbents, but they will fare comparatively worse under economic decline.

We test the claim that elite partisanship conditions reactions to incumbents and their challengers in times of terrorist and economic threat with four original studies. Study 1 is a national experiment that presented subjects with a hypothetical election in a context of either terror or economic threat. Absent partisan information, the hypothetical incumbent is evaluated worse than the challenger in the economic threat condition, and the reverse in the terror threat condition, a result that is robust to Study 2, a narrower experiment but with a classic control condition. When partisanship is assigned to candidates, our analyses provide clear evidence that politician partisanship conditions evaluations of incumbents and challengers in times of threat.

Studies 3 and 4 allow us to apply our argument to the case of evaluations of President Barack Obama. Extant scholarship has demonstrated a positive relationship between terrorist threat and evaluations of Republican incumbents and per our argument this makes sense: Republican incumbents possess two characteristics (their partisan affiliation and office-holding status) that, in times of security crisis, has conferred to them a public opinion boost. In contrast, President Obama is advantaged by his incumbency but disadvantaged by his partisanship; thus, the Democratic president’s public image should either get a very small boost (if incumbency matters more than partisanship), be unaffected (if these two factors cancel themselves out), or suffer under conditions when terror threat is salient (if partisanship matters more than incumbency). We, in fact, find some evidence in both studies supporting the latter; at best, we find evaluations of Obama are unaffected. We also show in Study 3 (an experiment) that economic threat had no effect on Obama’s evaluations, a result consistent with our expectations. With Study 4 (survey data), we assess, and find evidence of, the conditioning effect of issue ownership at the individual level.

Significant research shows that public opinion is affected by foreign policy events and economic downturns (e.g., Fiorina 1981; Mueller 1970, 1973). Moreover, anecdotal evidence and issue ownership theory provide reason to suspect that politician partisanship matters in these reactions. Yet, no studies directly assess the conditioning effects of politician partisanship with respect to evaluations of leaders under contexts of terrorist and economic threat. By understanding the extent to which politician partisanship conditions public reactions to threat, we can better understand, and anticipate, the extent to which the public rallies around sitting executives in times of terror threat and, likewise, the extent to which the public punishes leaders who preside over bad economic times.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Incumbency, Partisanship, and Threat**

Seminal research asserts that when a threat is perceived as externally provoked (“international,” per Mueller 1970), the public rallies around the incumbent (e.g., Brody 1991; Kernell 1978; MacKuen 1983; Mueller 1970, 1973; Newman 2002). Conversely, when a threat is perceived as internally provoked (e.g., a typical economic crisis), citizens punish the incumbent and favor the opposition (e.g., Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). Inspired by issue ownership theory (Petrocik 1996), we assert that the nature of such reactions will be conditioned by politicians’ partisanship and the reputations that party branding conveys.

At the core of distinct reactions to international (terrorist) and domestic (economic) threats are differences in the extent to which the incumbent is
incumbents will hold across the two types of threat we explore, missing from those accounts is the notion that politician partisanship may moderate the relationship between threat and leader evaluations. From the public’s perspective, parties hold reputations with respect to their ability to handle different issues (Petrocik 1996). It follows that they may apply these appraisals of a party’s competence to a given political figure in a context of threat, but how so? We assert that a reputation for competence in handling the domain of the threat will buffer against diminished evaluations when the public’s general tendency is to find fault with the executive and will bolster evaluations when the tendency is to rally around the executive. One reason the party’s reputation might imprint upon the political leader’s evaluation is that individuals are generally motivated toward consistency in their attitudes and appraisals (Festinger 1957). In the case of an economic crisis, the tendency to blame an incumbent for poor performance may come into conflict with one’s sense that the incumbent’s party is capable in that issue arena. In order to bring consistency to these attitudes and appraisals, the individual may deflect blame from the incumbent rather than do the more complicated task of reassessing one’s standing evaluation of the entire political party. In fact, a similar type of reaction has been documented in the case of product harm crises. Research shows specific product crises have more severe negative effects on less-established consumer brand names than on those with better reputations, as in those cases “impression-inconsistent information is typically deflected away from the brand” (Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001, 60). It may also be the case that the presence of a threat motivates individuals toward identifying the leader most capable of resolving the issue, and the party’s reputation carries important information in this regard. In the case of an international terrorist threat, individuals are expecting the incumbent to resolve the issue by restoring security, and so a natural tendency would be to transfer the perceived competence of the party in that issue area to the political leader. In short, we expect a bigger boost to a candidate whose party has the better reputation on security and terrorism and, in times of economic decline, a less

It follows that incumbents who can be identified as more clearly responsible for bad economic times receive harsher punishment, whereas rally effects break down when the media and political elites criticize the executive’s response (see Anderson 2000; Brody 1991; Brody and Shapiro 1989).

Threats of attacks by international terrorists and their affiliates fit into the conceptualization of rally events offered originally by Mueller (1970) and adopted by others since (Gronke and Newman 2003).

A number of nonrival mechanisms are believed to fuel rallies, including a surge in patriotism and national identity (e.g., Kam and Ramos 2008; Mueller 1970, 1973); lack of elite criticism of the incumbent (e.g., Brody 1991; Brody and Shapiro 1989; Zaller 1992; also, see Kam and Ramos 2008); and a desire to single out an heroic leader (Merolla, Ramos, and Zechmeister 2007).

considered either a solution to or the cause of the problem. With respect to international terrorism, the threat originates with agents external to the nation and, moreover, “foreign policy events are inherently more ambiguous” (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, 253). Consequently, when confronted with an international terrorist threat, individuals are less likely to level blame against the incumbent. Instead, the public tends toward pouring support behind the incumbent who is expected to lead the charge against the threat. In fact, citizens’ desire to single out a hero to save the day under these circumstances can be so strong that they project additional leadership qualities onto the incumbent, beyond what they would accord in the absence of the threat (Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai 2005; Landau et al. 2004; Merolla, Ramos, and Zechmeister 2007). The general tendency for individuals to “rally ‘round the flag” after exposure to an external threat is manifested in increased expressed support for the incumbent and has been documented in classic studies by Mueller (1970, 1973) and others since.6,7

On the flip side, responsibility for an economic threat is often placed upon the sitting executive (Gomez and Wilson 2001). Standard retrospective voting models claim that the appearance of a public motivated towards “vengeance” (Key 1966) for poor economic performance results in reduced support for the incumbent (e.g., Hibbs and Rivers 1982; Kernell 1978; Mueller 1973; Newman 2002). In comparing rally events and economic downturns, Mueller (1970) explains that domestic crises are more likely to produce or aggravate divisions. Thus, whereas the incumbent is viewed as relatively less blameworthy and comparatively stronger at leading the country in times of external threat, the incumbent who oversees a financial crisis is subjected to intense criticism for his or her role in failing to manage the domestic economy.

While classic scholarship from the rally ‘round the flag and economic voting traditions leads us to expect that these general differences in reactions to

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6These reputations are affected by the nature of the party’s constituency and the incumbent’s record (Petrocik 1996) and are reinforced by candidates who have an incentive to increase the salience of the issues they own (Benoit 2007; Hayes 2008; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003). We are asserting that party reputation is relevant not only in affecting vote choice, but also in the assessments individuals make of politicians’ leadership skills in times of threat.
precipitous decline in the image of a candidate whose party has the edge on that issue dimension.\textsuperscript{9}

Issue ownership, especially on performance issues, can shift over time (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Pope and Woon 2009). Therefore, before we can assert a more specific set of hypotheses, we need to identify which issues are owned by which party. In terms of parties’ reputations over specific issues, Republicans have traditionally owned the issue of national security (Petrocik 1996), and in recent times this has extended to terrorism (Nacos 2007). Considering the economy, Petrocik (1996) finds a mixed bag: Democrats “own” issues related to social welfare and (combating) unemployment, and Republicans own issues related to (trimming) big government (see also Pope and Woon 2009). The former more often capture headlines in times of recession and, thus, Democrats should be generally advantaged in times of economic decline.\textsuperscript{10}

With these reputational advantages in mind, we can now combine the above theoretical perspectives to develop expectations that simultaneously factor in both incumbency (versus challenger) status and politician partisanship. Our general framework holds that when incumbency and politician partisanship both advantage or both disadvantage a leader, the leader with two advantageous traits should be rated most highly, while the one with two disadvantageous traits should be rated the worst. When a politician has just one advantageous trait and, simultaneously, one disadvantageous trait, we refer to this as “dueling traits.” We expect such a politician to fare worse than a politician with two advantageous traits and better than one with two disadvantageous traits.\textsuperscript{11}

More specifically, considering the general reputations of the parties when our studies were conducted, under conditions of terrorist threat a Republican incumbent should fare particularly well, while a Democratic challenger will fare the worst, and a Democratic incumbent and Republican challenger will fall somewhere in between these two candidate types. The Republican incumbent will fare relatively better than all other candidates under terror threat because the public’s tendency to rally around the incumbent administration is combined in this case with a prevailing sense that Republicans are best able to handle that issue. And in fact, as noted, extant research has found that Republican incumbents, in particular George W. Bush but also California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, have appeared to benefit under conditions in which terror threat was salient (Bersinsky 2009; Merolla, Ramos, and Zechmeister 2007; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). These conditions included not only actual events (e.g., 9/11; see Hetherington and Nelson 2003), but also times in which the color-coded terror threat system was elevated due to security concerns (see Willer 2004; Nacos, Block-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011). A Democratic challenger, meanwhile, faces a situation in which the public is geared up to rally around the incumbent and more likely to perceive his or her rival party, the Republicans, as more competent and thus should fare the worst.

When we consider economic threat, our predictions shift. In this case, that same sitting Republican should fare relatively worse to the extent that the public seeks to “throw the rascals out” under economic decline and simultaneously should perceive Democrats as less culpable and more capable of allaying the crisis. In fact, extant work suggests that Democratic challengers may fare better in times of economic downturn. For example, voters concerned with the economy during the 1992 presidential election were more likely to vote for the Democratic challenger, Bill Clinton, than Republican President George H. W. Bush (e.g., Alvarez and Nagler 1995). More recently, the market meltdown that began in mid-September 2008 helped Barack Obama win the presidency over John McCain (Campbell 2008). Meanwhile, a Democratic incumbent and Republican challenger will fall somewhere between these two candidates, since the former has one advantageous trait, party reputation, and the latter has one advantageous trait, challenger status.

\textbf{Evaluating Incumbents (versus Challengers) in Times of Threat (Studies 1 and 2)}

We first assess our argument concerning the conditioning effects of politician partisanship on evaluations of leaders under times of threat with data from two experiments. To fully evaluate the causal relationships implied by our theoretical framework, we developed

\textsuperscript{9}This departs from Petrocik (1996), who posits poor performance harms incumbents regardless of their partisan stripes, and we consider that position a reasonable rival expectation.

\textsuperscript{10}Forty-seven percent of the ANES 2008 sample indicated that the Democratic Party was better able to handle the nation’s economy, while 17% said the Republican Party and 36% said both were capable. Democratic ownership of the economic recovery in 2008 may have been aided by economic decline under a Republican administration. The pendulum may have shifted again during the 2010 congressional elections. Our argument is that politician partisanship exerts a conditioning effect, recognizing that the nature of an effect may change over time as ownership shifts.

\textsuperscript{11}However, a priori we cannot predict which trait matters more.
an experimental design that holds everything constant except the threat context and politician partisanship.

Research Design

Study 1 is a between-subjects, random assignment study containing six (2 x 3) conditions. The context varies between “Terror Threat” and “Economic Threat”. And, the race varies to pit a nonpartisan Incumbent versus a nonpartisan Challenger; a Democrat Incumbent versus a Republican Challenger; or, a Republican Incumbent versus a Democrat Challenger. We did not include a nonterror condition because our expectations are principally focused on comparisons across candidate types within a given context of threat. That said, we intentionally selected two threats that should lead to opposite effects on evaluations of different types of candidates, so we can also compare evaluations of a given candidate across two environments. This approach is akin to framing studies that compare reactions to nonequivalent information contexts (for a review, see Chong and Druckman 2007). Nonetheless, to test the robustness of key results to a more classic design, we developed Study 2, a narrower study that examines evaluations of an incumbent versus a challenger in a control group compared to a terrorist threat condition.

In Studies 1 and 2, as well as Study 3 (described later in more detail), the treatments were delivered in the form of a news story, with information drawn from actual news sources. The objective was to define the threat context as well as the electoral context (see the online appendix for materials). The use of a mock, but realistic news story containing multiple layers of information increases external validity to the extent that it reflects the information environment an individual confronts in times of real threat. This approach mirrors other studies that have successfully induced worry about terrorism and the economy by the use of mock news stories (e.g., Gadarian 2010; Merolla, Ramos, and Zechmeister 2007; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009).

Study 1 was conducted with Knowledge Networks (via TESS) panelists from December 16–23, 2008. We randomly assigned 564 subjects to one of the six conditions. The Study 1 sample was drawn to be close to census representative, and the descriptive statistics on age, race/ethnicity, and education closely approximate the last decennial census (see the online appendix for details). Study 2 was fielded May 21–22, 2012 via Mechanical Turk, with 198 participants. With no quotas in place, the Study 2 sample is younger, less diverse, and more educated than the general U.S. population (see the online appendix for details).

In both studies, participants were invited to participate in an election for governor occurring in the near future in another (unidentified) state. In Study 1, they were asked to read one of two articles, which contained information about the context (economic or terrorist threat) and the election; in Study 2, both the terror threat and control group read about the election, but only the terror threat group read about the threat context. We selected to use a gubernatorial context to focus on an executive seat; previous research has shown that national security threats can affect assessments of gubernatorial candidates (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Information provided about the threat context made specific references to the state’s vulnerabilities. What little background information was provided was equivalent across the two candidates. Our key dependent variable, measured poststimulus, asks to what degree “strong leader” describes each candidate (on a 1–6 scale where higher values mean better assessments; see the online appendix for wording, which was based on the ANES). Because we wanted to capture evaluations of both the incumbent and the challenger, this measure is more appropriate than approval ratings; further, this gives us the opportunity to assess how individuals’ impressions of a politician’s leadership traits are affected by threats, conditional on politician partisanship.

Poststudy diagnostics using Chi-squared and ANOVA tests revealed no statistically significant differences across the experimental conditions with respect to age, education, gender, race, and partisanship.\(^\text{12}\) As appropriate for this design, we analyze mean values across conditions.

Evaluating Nonpartisan Incumbents versus Challengers in Times of Threat

We first consider differences in evaluations of incumbents and challengers across nonpartisan contexts. To refresh, our earlier theoretical discussion supports the following predictions, all else equal, for leadership evaluations in races in which partisanship is not provided:

\(^\text{12}\)A manipulation check confirms that respondents paid attention to the articles: the vast majority correctly identified Candidate A as the incumbent. The treatments also had the intended effects with respect to inducing different threat concerns. In Study 1, we asked respondents “how worried” they are that in the near future there will be an economic recession or a terrorist attack, respectively. In each case, mean values on these variables are significantly higher in the corresponding threat condition (\(p < 0.001\)). In Study 2, subjects in the terror threat condition reported significantly higher levels of both anxiety and anger (\(p < 0.001\) in both cases) relative to those in the control group.
condition, we find that the nonpartisan Challenger (mean of 3.85) is perceived as a stronger leader than the Incumbent (mean of 3.7). This result is also as expected (Hypothesis 1b), although the difference does not pass conventional significance thresholds (p=0.13, one-tailed).

The data also enable us to test for differences across the two threat contexts. We find that both politicians are rated significantly higher under a context of terror threat than economic decline (incumbent comparison p=0.00, one-tailed; challenger comparison p=0.07, two-tailed). The former effect supports Hypothesis 2, since we expected the incumbent to do better in a terror threat context than an economic threat context. We did not have clear expectations for the challenger when comparing across treatments (thus, the two-tailed test); interestingly, the results suggest that economic threats either depress evaluations of all candidates or terror threats boost evaluations of both.

Study 2 allows a robustness check on the effect of terrorist threat on evaluations of nonpartisan incumbents versus challengers. As with Study 1, we find higher leadership evaluations of the Incumbent (mean=4.25) compared to the Challenger (mean=4.09) in a context of terror threat, and this difference is statistically significant (p=0.02, one-tailed). Meanwhile, there is no significant difference in evaluations between the Incumbent (mean=3.87) and Challenger (mean=3.86) among those in the control group, which makes sense given that subjects were not given any context surrounding the election or a partisan identification for the candidates. Finally, across experimental conditions it is clear that the incumbent benefits from a context of terror threat since his mean leadership evaluation is significantly higher in this condition compared to the control (p=0.00, one-tailed). As with the previous study, the challenger also has higher evaluations in the Terror Threat condition compared to the Control condition (p=0.00, two-tailed). In sum, the findings are consistent across the two studies whether the baseline is a control group or another treated group.

Politician Partisanship Conditions Leadership Evaluations in Times of Threat

The above evidence is generally consistent with the types of assertions made about incumbents (versus

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13We do not specify a hypothesis for the challenger across threat conditions since expectations are less certain. On the one hand, a challenger may be rated more highly in an economic threat or control context compared to a terror threat context, since individuals may seek a unique savior and significantly downgrade evaluations of the challenger. On the other hand, evaluations of the challenger may be higher if individuals project leadership onto all candidates in such a context.

14It is important to recognize that, when testing Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we are making comparisons within a given experimental condition; this approach allows us to test these expectations, but such tests have less internal validity than comparisons across conditions, which we turn to when we consider Hypothesis 2.
challengers) in the economic voting and rally ‘round the flag literatures. Using Study 1 data, we now turn to an assessment of our extension to these works, which concerns whether political evaluations in contexts of threat are conditioned by politician partisanship. To refresh, considering races in which information about partisanship and incumbency is present, we expect that, in cases of terror threat, the “best of all possible worlds” (from a politician’s perspective) is to be a Republican incumbent, while the worst is to be a Democratic challenger. In cases of economic threat, the reverse is true. When those same characteristics run in opposing directions (e.g., a Democratic incumbent facing a terrorist threat), the only strong expectation we have is that evaluations of leaders with such “dueling” characteristics will fall somewhere between the ends staked out by the “best” and “worst” of all candidates. Because extant research is silent on whether incumbency or candidate partisanship will matter more, we do not state an expectation for whether the GOP challenger or Democratic incumbent will be viewed more favorably. Finally, looking across the terrorist threat and economic threat conditions, we expect that incumbents will be evaluated more favorably in the former than the latter (as per H2). However, we expect that this will be conditioned by partisanship, such that Republican incumbents get a bigger boost from terror threat (relative to economic threat) than Democratic incumbents.15 Thus, our hypotheses are as follows:

\[ H3a: \text{In times of Terror Threat, GOP I} \succ \text{GOP C} \succ \text{Dem I} \]

\[ H3b: \text{In times of Economic Threat, Dem C} \succ \text{GOP C} \succ \text{GOP I} \]

\[ H4: \text{Terror Threat I} \succ \text{Economic Threat I, conditioned by partisanship.} \]

We begin with an assessment of evaluations under conditions of terror threat. On the left-hand side of Figure 1, we show mean leadership evaluations for each candidate type among those in the Terror Threat condition. According to Hypothesis 3a, we should first find that the Republican incumbent is rated more highly than the Republican challenger and the Democratic incumbent, and this is exactly what we find. The Republican Incumbent in the Terror Threat condition receives a value of 4.38 on the Strong Leadership measure, while the Democratic Incumbent is rated at 4.16, and the Republican Challenger receives a value of 4.18. The difference between the Republican Incumbent and each of these candidates is statistically significant (one-tailed test p-values of 0.06 for GOP I vs. GOP C and 0.05 for GOP I vs. Dem I). Second, we did not have clear expectations for the middle of the expression in Hypothesis 3a (GOP C ? Dem I), and we find that evaluations for the Republican Challenger and Democrat Incumbent are statistically indistinguishable from each other, which suggests subjects did not weigh incumbency and partisanship differently.17 The third expectation from Hypothesis 3a is that the Republican challenger and Democratic incumbent will be rated higher than the Democratic challenger. While mean evaluations of these former two candidates are higher than that of the Democratic Challenger (mean=4.06), the differences between each of these candidates and the Democratic Challenger are not statistically distinguishable (one-tailed test p-values of 0.24 and 0.17, for Dem I vs. Dem C and GOP C vs. Dem C, respectively). The final expectation from Hypothesis 3a is that the Republican incumbent will be rated more favorably than the Democratic challenger, and this is indeed what we find (p=0.01, one-tailed).

\[ \text{Note: Figure shows mean leadership evaluations for Republican and Democratic incumbents and challengers on 1–6 scale across the terror threat (dotted borders) and economic threat (solid borders) conditions.} \]

\[ \text{Data Source: Knowledge Networks (TESS) Study. See the online appendix for sampling design and survey methodology.} \]

15As before, we do not have clear expectations for how evaluations of the challenger will shift and, as with the incumbent, effects may be conditioned by partisanship.

16We also confirmed that our logic with respect to incumbent responsibility holds once we account for politician partisanship (see the online appendix).

17We note that this comparison is within the same experimental condition, as is the comparison between the Republican incumbent and the Democratic challenger.
In sum, a Republican incumbent in times of terror threat has a clear advantage over all other candidate types in these races. That is, this combination of incumbency and partisanship leads to an average evaluation that is significantly higher than that received by the other three candidate types. The relatively more favorable attitude we find expressed toward the Republican incumbent is consistent with previous research showing evaluations of Republican President George W. Bush increased as a result of terrorist threat (e.g., Berinsky 2009; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009).

We next turn to conditions of economic threat, with mean values on the leadership evaluations shown on the right-hand side of Figure 1. According to Hypothesis 3b, we should first find that the Democratic challenger is rated more highly than the Republican challenger and the Democratic incumbent, and this is exactly what we find. The Democrat Challenger receives a mean rating of 3.83 on the strong leadership measure, which is significantly greater than that for the Republican Challenger (mean = 3.61; \( p = 0.06 \), one-tailed) as well as the Democratic Incumbent (mean = 3.46; \( p = 0.01 \), one-tailed). As those numbers suggest, there appears to be a slight advantage given to the Republican who is challenging the seat than the Democrat who occupies it; however, the difference between mean evaluations of the Republican Challenger and Democratic Incumbent is small and not statistically significant (\( p = 0.30 \), two-tailed). The third expectation from expression in Hypothesis 3a is that the Republican challenger and Democratic incumbent should be rated more highly than the Republican incumbent, and we find strong support for this expectation (\( p = 0.00 \)). Clearly, in times of economic decline, the “hero” that people seek out, and project leadership qualities onto, is a Democratic challenger. In sum, while it may be somewhat more important to be the challenger in times of economic threat than it is to be a Democrat, being both puts one in the best possible position with respect to leadership evaluations in these types of races.

We can now assess how evaluations shift across contexts of economic and terror threat. To refresh, we expect that the incumbent will do better in a context of terror threat compared to economic threat (per Hypothesis 2), though we also expect this to be conditioned by partisanship (Hypothesis 4). Figure 1 suggests support for this set of expectations. However, to more systematically examine cross-context effects, we regress evaluations for each candidate, Candidate A (Incumbent Leadership) and Candidate B (Challenger Leadership), respectively, on the following: a dummy variable for the Terror Threat condition, the Republican Incumbent v. Democratic Challenger condition, the (nonpartisan) Incumbent v. Challenger condition, and the interaction of the terror threat condition with these two electoral contexts. The baseline is the Democratic Incumbent v. the Republican Challenger in a context of economic threat.

As the first data column of Table 1 shows, we find clear support for Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 4.\(^{18}\) The Terror Threat condition and its interaction with the

\(18\)The results are consistent if we use ordered probit. We use OLS for ease of presentation.
Republican Incumbent versus Democratic Challenger condition are statistically significant. The effect of terrorist threat (vs. economic threat) is such that Democratic incumbents facing a Republican challenger get a leadership boost of 0.70 units under a terror threat relative to an economic threat, while a Republican incumbent gets a bigger boost of 1.096 (0.700 + 0.396) units. Meanwhile, an incumbent without a partisan label gets a boost of 0.573 (0.700–0.127) from terrorist threat (vs. economic threat), which is not statistically distinguishable from the boost given to a Democratic incumbent. If we turn to the results for the challenger in the second data column, we see a similar conditioning effect of partisanship in a context of terror threat, and in this analysis both interaction terms are significant. The effects are such that a Republican challenger (the baseline category) gets a boost of 0.576 units in a context of terror threat relative to a context of economic threat, which is significantly higher than the boost given to a Democratic challenger, 0.239 (0.576–0.337), or a challenger without a partisan affiliation, 0.209 (0.576–0.367).

The results from the hypothetical election context support our argument that evaluations made of politicians in times of threat are not just a function of incumbency status, but also of the politicians’ partisan stripes. The experimental design was necessary to test our hypotheses since it allowed us to hold everything constant, save the politician’s incumbency status and partisanship. One limitation to such a design, however, is that we are dealing with political figures in the abstract. The next logical step, then, is to examine an actual political figure.

**Conditions of Threat and Evaluations of President Obama (Studies 3 and 4)**

Two studies focused on President Obama allow another lens through which to assess the importance of politician partisanship in times of threat. Our principal point of contrast is the ample extant research that establishes, using both experiment-based data and survey data, that contexts in which terror threat was salient increased support for and evaluations of George W. Bush (e.g., Berinsky 2009; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Nacos, Block-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011; Willer 2004). In our framework, those results make perfect sense. George W. Bush was a politician who, in our terms, possessed two advantageous traits at a time when terror threat was salient: he was a Republican incumbent governing in an era (post-9/11) when his party exerted ownership over the issue of terrorist threat.19

In contrast to the example of Bush, we characterize Barack Obama as having dueling traits: an incumbency status that should benefit him in times of terror threat but a Democratic partisanship that, at the time of our study, ought to mitigate any boost caused by national security concerns. Likewise, Obama has dueling traits in the realm of economic decline: his incumbency status may lead to downgraded evaluations, but the depth of this effect might be mitigated by his Democratic partisanship. To examine the influence of threat on evaluations of Obama, we are able to make use of two unique datasets. The first comes from an experiment conducted in March of 2009 with a national internet sample and the second from a national internet survey in January 2010. In both cases, we find clear evidence that terror threat does not accord a positive boost to Obama’s image; we show that, at worst, Obama suffers a relative deterioration of his public image, and if anything, gets no boost in evaluations. In the experimental analysis, we are also able to assess how conditions of economic threat affect Obama; here the results are also consistent with our argument.

**Experimental Evidence (Study 3)**

In an experiment conducted in March of 2009, a few months after Barack Obama’s inauguration, we randomly assigned subjects from a national sample to a control group (no news story) or a condition in which they read about terror threat, economic threat, or positive news about the country (Good Times). The objective is to assess evaluations made of Obama across distinctly different information contexts, primarily conditions of threat and comparatively better times. When considering the control group, it is important to recall that at the time of our study the economy was in decline and, consequently, individuals in the control group were bound to be only marginally less worried about the economy than those in our

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19Berinsky (2009) shows evidence from the ANES that Bush’s general popularity was higher in 2002 than 2004, with the former year characterized by greater levels of worry about terrorism. Across multiple public opinion studies, Willer (2004) finds a consistent, positive relationship between government-issued terror alerts and support for Bush, while Nacos et al. (2011) show a similar positive relationship between terror threat coverage in the mainstream print media and Bush approval ratings. Merolla and Zechmeister (2009) use an experiment to document a causal link between terror threat and increased evaluations of Bush’s leadership. In short, President Bush’s popularity increased not only following 9/11 but also when the threat of terrorism was salient.
economic threat condition. Because our interest is in comparing across threat and nonthreat contexts, in a manner typical of other framing studies we use the Good Times condition as our primary baseline. Nonetheless, we also assess differences using a classic control group. Once again, the treatments took the form of news stories (see the online appendix).20

The study was conducted online by Survey Sampling International, which used random draw combined with basic quotas to recruit subjects from their opt-in research panel to create a sample that, to the degree it is possible, mirrors a nationally representative sample (see the online appendix for sample details). First, 1,545 subjects participated by first filling out a brief pretreatment survey. Those in the treatment groups were then asked to read a news story, and all subjects then filled out a posttreatment survey. Poststudy diagnostics using Chi-squared and ANOVA tests revealed no significant differences across conditions on relevant predispositions and subject characteristics.

Our dependent variable in this study is an evaluation of President Obama’s job approval, asked in the posttreatment survey on a 5-point scale (higher values indicate more positive assessments). Rather than observe effects consistent with a rally behind the president, we see that mean performance evaluations are lower among those in the Terror Threat condition (mean = 3.22), compared to those in the control group (mean = 3.31) and those in the Good Times condition (mean = 3.37); the latter difference (TT v. GT) is statistically significant according to a difference in means test (p = 0.09, two-tailed). Thus, Obama suffers a significant drop in relation to a more positive context. While these differences are not substantively large, they are in accord with our conception of the implications of dueling traits. Whatever one’s preference for a baseline of the control group or the Good Times condition, Obama certainly does not get the boost that previous research documented was accorded to Bush, nor are his approval ratings drastically lower in the Terror Threat condition.21

Turning to economic decline, per our argument Obama again has dueling traits, which should cancel out a clear positive or negative effect. And, this is what the data show. According to a difference in means test, there is no significant difference in Obama’s mean job performance rating in the Economic Threat condition (mean = 3.30) compared to the Good Times condition (mean = 3.37; p = 0.41) and the control (mean = 3.31; p = 0.89). This is in accord with our contention that Democratic incumbents may not suffer as much from poor economic conditions.

Survey Evidence (Study 4)

There are a few limitations to our experimental study that we address with data from a national survey. First, the study was conducted early in Obama’s term of office, so individuals may not yet have considered him an incumbent. If so, then the lack of a rally behind Obama among those in the terrorist condition and lack of punishment among those in the economic condition may not have had anything to do with his partisanship. One might argue that had we done the study further into Obama’s term, he would have gotten a boost when terrorism was salient and would have faced a downturn when the economy was salient, like his predecessor. Second, up to this point, we have developed our expectations based on aggregate evidence regarding issue ownership. However, perceptions of party ownership of an issue are likely to vary across citizens, and it is worth testing whether the logic holds at the individual level. We address at least some of these issues with Study 4, which consists of data from an Angus Reid online national poll of 1,006 respondents, fielded January 19–20, 2010.22 The key variables are worry about future terrorist attacks (but, due to space, not about economic conditions), perceptions of issue ownership of terrorism, and evaluations of the president.

With respect to the dependent variables, we asked respondents to evaluate the extent to which they approve or disapprove of Barack Obama’s performance in office on a 4-point scale, and the extent to which they perceive Obama as a strong leader on a 4-point

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20To assess whether our treatments worked as expected in increasing anxiety among those in the threat conditions relative to those in the Good Times and control conditions, we asked subjects posttreatment to respond to the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) developed by Watson and colleagues (1988). The PANAS battery asks individuals to report the extent to which they are feeling a range of emotions. We found two factors, one on which negative emotions loaded highly, and one on which positive emotions loaded highly. Mean negative emotions are higher in the threat conditions compared to the Good Times and control groups and these differences are significant (ANOVA test, p = 0.00). Meanwhile, positive emotions are significantly higher in the Good Times and control conditions compared to the two threat conditions (ANOVA, p = 0.00).

21There is no evidence that individuals’ own partisanship moderates the effect of terrorist or economic threat: interactions between treatments and partisanship measures are insignificant.

22To generate a nationally representative sample, panel members were invited to participate based on their demographic attributes, (e.g., age, gender, region of residence) and were sent an e-invitation that provided a unique hyperlink. The completion rate for the survey, open 24 hours, was 25%.
To measure worry about terrorism, half the sample was asked how worried they are that the United States will experience a large-scale terrorist attack in the near future. This Terror Threat measure was asked on a 4-point scale, with higher values indicating more worry.

We include control variables for partisanship (Democrat and Republican), Ideology, whether the person voted for Obama (Voted for Obama), gender (Female), race (African American, White, and Latino), Education, and Income. In addition, we include an individual measure of Republican Ownership of Terrorist Threat (ROTT), based on a question that asked whether a Republican politician is best capable of handling the issue of terrorism (coded as “1”) or whether a Democratic politician is best capable of handling the issue (coded as “0”). All measures are coded to run from 0 to 1.

OLS results of models predicting approval and leadership evaluations of Obama are presented in Table 2. We first discuss the results of a basic model, without the issue ownership variable (ROTT). As the first and third data columns show, those worried about a large-scale terrorist attack have significantly lower assessments of President Obama. All else equal, moving from not being worried at all to being very worried about a large-scale future attack decreases approval of Obama by 0.158 units (on a 0–1 scale) and leadership evaluations by 0.161 units.

We next turn to the models in which we interact worry about terrorism with the perceptions of issue ownership of terrorism measure (TT*ROTT; data columns 2 and 4). These models allow us to look at the effect of worry about terrorism among those who think Democrats own the issue and among those who think Republicans own the issue. The first important thing to note is that the interaction term is significant in both models, which means that there is a moderating relationship between the two variables (Kam and Franzese 2007). The coefficient and standard error on the terrorism variable alone represent the effect of the variable among those who think Democrats own the issue of terrorism. The terrorism variable is not statistically significant in either model; thus, worry about terrorism is not significantly associated with evaluations of Obama.

Table 2: Effect of Worry about Terror Threat on Obama Approval and Evaluations (OLS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Approval</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coefficient (Standard Error)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coefficient (Standard Error)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.667** (0.086)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror Threat (TT)</td>
<td>-0.158** (0.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. Own TT (ROTT)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT * ROTT</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-0.090** (0.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>0.108** (0.134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-0.204** (0.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Obama</td>
<td>0.286** (0.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.037 (0.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.088 (0.061)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.052 (0.059)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>0.032 (0.076)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-0.117* (0.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>-0.046 (0.069)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: Angus Reid Survey. See the online appendix for sampling design and survey methodology.

*p < .05, **p < .10 (two-tailed)

23The other half of the sample was asked about worry regarding a small-scale terrorist attack in the near future. We focus here on the large-scale question since it is more reflective of the terrorism treatment condition in the experiment (but see the online appendix for additional analyses).

24Analyses are weighted with the firm-provided variable, constructed using the 2008 Annual Demographic Supplement of the Current Population Survey. Partisanship is captured with dummy variables (Independents are the baseline). Higher values are associated with more education (7-point scale), income (6-point scale), and conservatism (5-point scale). Asian is the baseline race category.

25The results are consistent if we use ordered probit. For ease of presentation, we use OLS.
terrorism has no effect on Obama’s evaluations among individuals who think Democrats own the issue. It is a bit surprising that Obama would not get a boost from individuals who think Democrats own the issue. However, if we calculate the effect of the terrorism measure among those who think Republicans own the issue, for both models (approval and leadership) we find a statistically significant and negative effect on evaluations of President Obama. Specifically, for those individuals, the slope of the terrorism measure on approval is $-0.29$ ($p=0.001$, two-tailed) and the slope of the terrorism measure on leadership is $-0.27$ ($p=0.001$, two-tailed).

In sum, across two studies we find consistent evidence that evaluations of President Obama’s job performance at worst suffer, and at best are unaffected, when people are worried about terrorism. He certainly does not get the same boost in evaluations under terrorist threat found for President Bush in existing scholarship. Meanwhile, in our experimental analysis, we find Obama’s job performance is unaffected by conditions of economic threat. These results are consistent with our argument that politician partisanship matters and provide evidence from outside the lab that is consistent with the conclusions we drew from the hypothetical election experiment.

## Conclusion

Warnings of financial devastation and news of lethal terrorist plots constitute crisis-laden frameworks within which U.S. citizens have evaluated political leaders, in particular in recent times. We have long known that individuals evaluate politics through their own partisan lenses, but the literature has focused considerably less on how politician partisanship influences evaluations made of politicians in the context of national security and economic threats. In considering the extent to which incumbency and politician partisanship jointly influence assessments of leaders and candidates made under conditions of threat, our research accomplishes several objectives.

Principally, we propose a framework for anticipating how evaluations of politicians under conditions of threat will vary conditional upon the partisanship of the leader as a consequence of party issue ownership. We first presented evidence from studies of races featuring hypothetical candidates and in which, for two threat types, the partisanship of the candidates vying for office was varied. First, affirming expectations based in rally ‘round the flag and economic voting perspectives, we found clear evidence that absent partisan information incumbents within a context of terrorist threat benefit relative to their challengers and relative to incumbents in times of economic threat and to a classic control condition. Second, consistent with the specific hypotheses we derived based on partisan reputations at the time our data were collected, we find clear evidence that a Republican incumbent is comparatively advantaged in times of terror threat relative to economic threat. Furthermore, within a context of terror threat, evaluations of the Republican incumbent were significantly higher than a Democratic incumbent, Republican challenger, and Democratic challenger. However, evaluations of the Republican incumbent were the lowest of all the candidate types in economic threat; and, in contrast, evaluations were highest for the Democratic challenger.

After finding support for our argument with hypothetical candidates, we turned to national survey and experimental data that allow analyses of the connections between terrorist and economic threat, on the one hand, and evaluations of President Barack Obama on the other hand. In contrast to what numerous published works have found for the case of President George W. Bush, we find, if anything, a negative relationship between terrorism concerns and evaluations of Barack Obama. In short, evaluations made of actual sitting Presidents under the specter of terrorist threat vary across these cases, one a Republican and one a Democrat. We also show with the experimental data that economic threat has no effect on evaluations of Obama. Further, the survey data analyses show that the negative effects of terrorism on Obama hold among those who perceive Republicans as owning the issue of terrorism, which affirms our argument at the microlevel.

The framework we have presented can be extended. First, the specific hypotheses we tested may warrant updating as time passes, if issue ownership with respect to terrorist threat and economic recovery changes (see Petrocik 1996; Pope and Woon 2009). Second, it

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26One might question whether partisan bias, rather than issue ownership, is driving our results. However, in analyses by partisan group we find the same pattern of results for Republicans and Independents and, to a lesser extent, for Democrats (see the online appendix for details).

27Our framework suggests that Obama’s relative competitiveness in the 2012 presidential election was influenced in part by his partisanship: the public was poised to be relatively more forgiving of a Democratic incumbent presiding over economic gloom than they would have been a Republican.

28For example, the raid and death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 could have increased ownership of terrorism by the Democrats.
would be worth considering whether politician rhetoric or other characteristics of a leader might bolster or counteract the effects of his/her partisanship under conditions of threat. Third, our framework should travel to other types of performance crises, where the locus of responsibility lies either clearly with or outside the incumbent and where one party has a comparative advantage in terms of its reputation. Fourth, while it layers on complexity, it may be worth examining what happens when a public simultaneously faces multiple threats. Our initial, though very preliminary, foray into this question suggests that threats may interact with important consequences for evaluations of political leaders. Any of these ideas, among other possibilities, would build on the crucial proposition we have argued and supported here with data from four different studies: the mass public perceives and treats political leaders who are confronting either a national security or financial threat differently depending on their party affiliation and the information that affiliation conveys.

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References


In additional analyses of Study 4, we tested an interaction between a proxy measure for economic concern and terrorist threat. In the case of the Obama approval measure, we found that worry about terrorism has no effect among those not concerned with the economy, but it does have a significant negative effect among those who are, which suggests that multiple crises may matter; future experiments could include a multiple crisis condition in order to get greater leverage over this question.


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