The Domestic Cost of Lying about the Use of Force

Word Count: 11,906
It is taken as a given that politicians lie, not only to each other but also to their people. America’s current president, Donald Trump, has reportedly made over 20,000 false statements since taking office, with over 20 percent of these relating to matters of foreign policy or national security.\footnote{https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/} While these numbers are staggering, Trump is certainly not the first president to tell falsehoods to the American public about consequential foreign policy issues. President Kennedy denied that there was an agreement with the Soviets to take Jupiter missiles out of Turkey. The Pentagon Papers revealed “systematic lies” about the scope and nature of American operations during the Vietnam War. More recently, scholars have argued that the Bush administration falsely claimed to have foolproof evidence of close ties between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden (Kellner 2007; Bonn 2010).

But while it is clear that leaders deceive and even flat-out lie at times, it is unclear if these lies have consequences. There are good reasons to doubt whether leaders face significant consequences for lying about foreign policy. In his seminal work on \textit{Why Leaders Lie}, John Mearsheimer writes that “although lying is widely viewed as reprehensible behavior in ordinary life, it is acceptable conduct in international politics because there are sometimes good strategic reasons for leaders to lie to other countries and even to their own people. (6)\footnote{This would be in line with the audience costs literature, which theorizes and finds that the public will punish their leaders for actions which diminish their nation’s credibility (e.g. Fearon 1992; Brutger & Kertzer 2018.)}” According to this view, the utility of foreign policy deception renders it a tolerable practice that costs leaders little at home or abroad. On the other hand, as we detail below, there are moral, strategic, and evolutionary reasons why citizens might be willing to impose costs on leaders who lie. Such a lie could hurt the state’s credibility with other countries\footnote{Jervis 1970; Guisinger & Smith 2002; Sartori 2002}, betray the trust of citizens in their government (Hetherington 1998; Keele 2007),
undermine the rule of law and the legitimacy of democratic governance (Cole 1973), and potentially legitimize and encourage dishonesty in the daily lives of citizens.

In this paper, we use an experimental approach to address three fundamental questions: First, do voters update their support for a policy and a president when it is revealed that the policy was based on a presidential lie? Second, if so, what are the magnitudes of the policy, reputational, and political costs that leaders pay for such lies, and do attributes of the lie/liar influence these costs? Finally, what are the underlying causal mechanisms that most significantly shape voters’ decisions on whether and when to punish leaders for lying? These questions have important theoretical and policy implications.

Despite the burgeoning literature on public opinion about foreign policy, International Relations scholars have yet to carefully examine the domestic consequences of lying in foreign policy. This gap in the literature is significant as it overlooks important micro-foundational clues about potential domestic political forces shaping the strategic behavior of leaders regarding whether to lie or tell the truth to their publics during international crises. Our study thus allows us to analyze a host of questions about whether and when leaders might be more or less incentivized to tell the truth or lie to voters. For example, how might a leader’s existing reputation for lying, or the motive behind the lie, shape his expectations about the marginal domestic cost voters would impose on him when it is revealed whether he told a lie or the truth? Do leaders have stronger domestic political incentives to resort to threat-inflating lies that justify the use of force, or threat-delating ones justifying inaction?

Moreover, a recent and growing literature has focused on why leaders deceive or conceal information from the public about the use of force, but not the consequences of such revelations. Given that revelation is a rare and non-random event, we still know very little about how costly it
is for leaders. Unpacking how and when domestic political deception costs are likely to be imposed on leaders is nevertheless crucial to understanding not only when leaders will resort to deception or concealment in the first place, but also to the efforts they might take to make sure these lies are not revealed to the public. This study also speaks to debates about public valuation for transparency and honesty on issues of national security in democracies. For instance, Myrick’s (2019) insightful work on domestic support for covert actions finds that the public places a low valuation on transparency in their leaders’ foreign policy decisions. It is unclear, however, whether this lack of a normative preference for transparency extend from the strategic withholding of secret information to full-on deception for political gains.

Studies in American politics have looked into public attitudes of voters toward policy flip-flopping, inconsistencies, and revelation of untruthful statements (Swire-Thompson et al, 2020) by political actors. Similarly, a growing literature in social psychology and behavioral economics has offered significant insights into the conditions under which people are prone to lie as well as the factors that affect attitudes towards others’ dishonest behavior. Nevertheless, both bodies of literature stopped short of examining voters’ attitudes toward flat-out presidential lies in the highly-consequential realm of foreign affairs. Finally, the question at the heart of this paper is all the more relevant today: as Lin-Greenberg & Milonopolous (2020) note, advances in information-gathering technologies make it ever more likely that any governmental deceit or concealment could be revealed by a third party. This paper contributes to this discussion by showing how, when, and why these revealed falsehoods affect the public’s willingness to punish leaders.
While scholars have left us with many questions about presidential honesty, the subject has not gone unexamined by pollsters. Over the past two decades, several polls have asked respondents “how important is each of the following qualities of a presidential candidate to you personally,” and have had honesty as one of their qualities of interest. In all of these polls the vast majority (85% - 95%) rate honesty as either “Extremely” or “Very” important. This high valuation of honesty doesn’t appear to change over time or when broken down by political party. At the same time, citizens are highly skeptical that even their most revered leaders really are truth-tellers. For example, according to a 2010 poll 71% of Americans believed that "Honest Abe" Lincoln lied to the public while president, and 74% believed the same was true about George "I cannot tell a lie" Washington. This is in line with public beliefs about more recent presidents: 79% of respondents in a 2000 poll believe that presidents lie to the press "fairly often" or more, and 57% of respondents in a 1998 poll agreed that "all presidents lie". These opinions coexist with consistent majorities responding that it is "hardly ever" or "never" acceptable for a president to lie (according to polls in 1987, 2000) and that a reputation as a liar "would be a deal-breaker" in a presidential candidate (according to polls in 2015).

Public opinion polls and observational studies are important in revealing voters’ preferences, but are inherently ill-equipped to isolate the independent causal effects of the different contexts and conditions in which presidents lie on their public support relative to a host of other variables. Additionally, the limited frequency and specificity of public polling make it difficult to isolate the impacts of any one lie. Moreover, the limits of real-world lie exposures make it difficult to examine the varying impacts that the different aspects of the lies, the lying

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3 See Appendix A for citations/details of these polls.
presidents, or the lied-to audiences might have. Taking an experimental approach allows us to move past these difficulties.

In this paper we present the results from two survey experiments. The first one, conducted in April of 2020 on 1,500 US citizens, included a novel vignette about an intelligence assessment the president of the United States claims to have received regarding a hypothetical adversary’s nuclear program. On the basis of this intelligence, the president then makes a decision about whether or not to use force against this adversary, a decision he communicates to the public. The second survey, which was fielded in September 2020 on 1,000 US citizens, was intended to probe whether the results generalize when the lie involves lower level stakes. The follow up survey thus maintained the same structure of the first survey, but replaced the lie to be about an intelligence report concerning the identity of a country behind recent attacks targeting U.S. forces.

In both surveys, respondents were then asked to record their support for the president and this decision, after which they were presented with a follow-up vignette in which they learned either that the president told the truth about the intelligence assessment or that he lied. We then re-assessed voters’ support for the president and the policy and asked a battery of questions aimed to judge both respondents’ willingness to impose costs on the president and the mechanisms shaping these decisions. Our within-subject as well as between-subject experimental design randomized several factors: whether the president lied or told the truth about the intelligence; whether the alleged intelligence had indicated the adversary was, or was not, developing a nuclear program (survey I) or behind recent attacks (survey II); whether the president decided to use military force or not as well as the cost of the military operation; the
partisan identity of the president; the motivation behind the president’s lie; and the president’s preexisting reputation regarding truth-telling.

Across both surveys, we find robust and statistically significant results indicating that American citizens are willing to impose substantively significant policy, reputational, and political costs on presidents who lie, reducing their support for the president’s policy decision and the president by upwards of 20%. We find these costs to hold across a variety of treatment conditions; whether the president lied to justify the use of military force or to refrain from it; the partisan identity of the president; and the cost of the president’s actions (many or few U.S. military casualties) do not significantly affect how voters update their support for the president and their policy action. We also confirm the presence and limits of partisan politics. Across both surveys, we find that co-partisans demonstrate a higher level of support for the president and his policy before and after the lie is revealed, but at the same time we find no evidence for co-partisanship bias when it comes to how voters update their support in the wake of a revealed lie. Similarly, we do not see evidence for an anchoring bias: voters who initially supported the president and policy impose similar costs when the lie is revealed compared to citizens who initially objected to the policy.

Importantly, two conditions appear to systematically and significantly affect the political and reputational costs of lying: the president’s pre-existing reputation for trustworthiness and the president’s motivation for lying. First, presidents who have a reputation for truth-telling pay a heftier price for lying (as opposed to telling the truth) compared to those with reputations for falsity. By the same token, we find that presidents with a reputation for lying do not get a boost in support if they tell the truth, while presidents with reputations as honest do. In combination, our results suggest that overall a reputation for trustworthiness is easier to lose than to gain, and
that despite the heavy costs of lying presidents already seen as dishonest may have less incentive to tell the public the truth in the future. Second, while presidents pay a price for lying regardless of their motives, lies motivated by personal political gain invoke harsher costs than those motivated by national security concerns.

Our results are robust to a host of additional tests, including respondents’ inferences about the country and president involved in our hypothetical scenario (Appendix G) as well as respondents’ demographics (Appendix I). Finally, we find that concerns about morality, future trust, and the effect the lie could have on policy success are the three most salient mechanisms affecting political and policy support in a wake of a lie, suggesting that the public views lying on issues involving the use of force as abhorrent for both normative and instrumental reasons.

**Does Anyone Care when Presidents Lie?**

The most comprehensive treatment of lying in international politics remains John Mearsheimer’s “Why Leaders Lie,” which explores the different contexts in which political elites lie about foreign affairs and the various motivations for their lies. Nevertheless, the book does not focus on the consequences that leaders pay for lying (nor does it empirically test his theoretical claims). In fact, according to Mearsheimer leaders are not likely to pay a cost at home or abroad for lying on matters of foreign policy. This is because citizens understand that leaders lie to protect national security or gain an advantage in world politics. In contrast, focusing on the international effects of lying, Anne Sartori (2002; 2005), finds that a state with a reputation for bluffing is less capable of communicating credibly to other states, and is thus less likely to attain its goals. But while this research offers a glimpse at how reputations for honesty might form in the context of diplomacy, researchers have yet to address what happens when leaders lie to their own people: whether and when leaders’ might develop reputations for lying in the eyes of their
own citizens, which segments of the public could be expected to impose costs on them as a result of these reputations, and what this might mean for the utility of lying in international relations.

At the same time, a growing body of literature in IR has looked into the domestic sources of punishment for leaders who back down from public threats due to the perceived reputational cost backing down entails on the credibility of future threats. Even with an ongoing debate about how states and leaders calculate others’ credibility, scholars have shown that the public is capable of perceiving reputation and inflicting reputational costs (Kertzer 2016; Renshon et al 2018; Kertzer, Renshon, & Yarhi-Milo 2019). Empirical testing of Fearon’s domestic audience cost model using survey evidence shows that citizens are willing to impose costs on leaders who back down from threats and negatively judge those who fail to uphold them (Tomz 2007; Levy et al 2015), indicating that losing credibility may come with a domestic political price.

Nevertheless, the domestic audience cost literature has mainly focused on measuring political costs resulting from inconsistencies between a leader’s public threats and their subsequent actions. This paper departs from that literature in two crucial ways. First, we focus on cases of flat out lying, as opposed to mere inconsistencies. As such, we are not measuring changes in attitudes that result from a gap between words and subsequent deeds, but those stemming from revelations that a leader’s words were intentionally deceptive. Second, the mechanism underlying the traditional audience cost model involves concerns about the country’s international reputation for resolve, concerns that may not be the driving force behind punishments for actions that do not involve making or backing down from threats. Rather, given our focus on strategically or politically motivated lying, we open the possibility for, and empirically test whether, domestic political costs for lying are imposed for non-reputational reasons.
Our study also intervenes in the scholarly debate surrounding the role of deception in democracies’ decisions to go to war. Dan Reiter (2012) posits that elected leaders are deterred from engaging in such deception because democratic political institutions and the marketplace of ideas increase the likelihood that their deception will be exposed, and that once exposed the high financial and human costs of war will cause deceptive politicians to suffer harsh domestic political punishment. Reiter argues that public punishment is unlikely in other foreign policy cases where costs are lower. John Schuessler (2015), on the other hand, argues that democratic leaders often resort to deception to sell wars to their domestic public. He shows that leaders retain considerable ability to manipulate domestic audiences in the prewar period. When resorting to deception leaders take a calculated risk that the outcome of war will be favorable, with the public adopting a forgiving attitude after victory is secured. Nevertheless, neither study fully examines what the domestic costs of lying truly are before the outcome of the use of force is known to the public, or how they vary depending on the context of the lie or the president. Moreover, both studies are interested in deception only when used to advance the country into war, leaving un-examined whether the public will be equally (in)tolerant when deception is used to deflate a threat and keep the country out of war.

Thankfully, the field of behavioral economics offers a variety of potential theories for how people view lying and the different factors that influence these views. Two such factors are the liar’s motivation and who benefits from the lie. Mcleod & Genereux (2008) find individuals to be most accepting of altruistic lies and least accepting of lies motivated by self-gain. This is similar to the work of Canterero et al (2018), who theoretically distinguish between lies motivated by gain versus those motivated by loss aversion. The size and plausibility of a lie have also been found to matter both theoretically and empirically (Lundquist et al 2007; Fees &
Kerzenmacher 2017; Gneezy et al 2018). Other important facets of the lie include the extent to which it harms others (Gneezy 2005), the observability of the eventual outcome (Gneezy et al 2018), and the domain in which the lie takes place (Baughman et al 2014). Notwithstanding this burgeoning scholarship, ours is the first study to our knowledge that goes beyond the interpersonal context, testing these insights in the context of attitudes toward lying in foreign affairs.

**Whether, When, and Why Lying is Costly**

We define lying as a positive action designed to deceive the target audience via a statement that the speaker knows or suspects to be false (making it distinct from behaviors like breaking commitments or reneging on threats, as well as from other forms of deception such as concealment or spinning). Lying can involve making up facts that one knows to be false or denying facts that one knows to be true (Mearsheimer 2011, 16).

*The Domestic Cost of Lying*

The literature discussed above reveals two opposing predictions about the costs leaders could incur for lying on issues of foreign policy. On the one hand, a large body of literature on public opinion would be skeptical about the public’s willingness to impose cost on leaders who lie about foreign policy. This is because, first, scholarship on public opinion has long argued that citizens pay little attention to issues of foreign policy compared to social or economic issues (e.g. Almond 1950; Smith 2003), and thus should be less willing to let these lies affect their attitudes.\(^4\) Second, citizens might expect leaders to lie in foreign affairs, whether to gain an advantage in diplomacy or to otherwise advance the nation’s interest, and may therefore be more willing to give their leaders leeway about telling the truth on such decisions (Mearsheimer 2011). This could be especially true for co-partisan leaders, with voters interpreting the lie through a partisan

\(^4\) For experimental evidence suggesting that this may not be the case see Tomz, Weeks, & Yarhi-Milo 2019.
lens (see Green et al. 2002; Achen & Bartels 2016; Berinsky 2017). Third, citizens may just expect politicians to lie, factoring these expectations into their political evaluations. We would then expect citizens to show little updating when they discover their leader had not been honest.

An opposing body of literature argues that voters are likely to be less tolerant when their democratically elected leader lies to them on foreign policy. Such behavior might signal to the public that their leader does not trust them to understand foreign policy, and as a result feels the need to use deception to obtain their support (Mearsheimer 2011). Also, such deception is not just immoral but could also lead to a distorted public discourse about viable policy options for addressing a given situation, possibly leading to a foreign policy fiasco (e.g. Bonn 2010). Voters might also fear that their leader’s lying about foreign policy issues would embolden them to further mislead the public on more personally-relevant domestic issues (Mearsheimer 2011). Moreover, citizens might be concerned about the reputational costs their leader and country would suffer when the leader is caught, consequences that could undermine the country’s standing and the credibility of its threats and assurances in the future (Jervis 1970). Finally, from an evolutionary perspective there is reason to expect the public to punish leaders who lie. After all, we belong to a species prone to social cooperation based on mechanisms that tend to embrace both targeted and indirect reciprocity (Yamamoto, Leitão, & Eugenio, 2017; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Lying does not directly contribute to cooperation because the transmission of untruthful information in a group of organisms will undermine beneficial coordination among the group (Számadó, 2011). Thus, the presence of liars imposes a fitness cost on cooperators, favoring mutations that confer resistance to cheating.

We are interested in the effects of lying on three outcomes: voters’ support for the president’s policy (i.e. policy costs of lying); voters’ willingness to trust the president (i.e. reputational costs
of lying); and voters’ willingness to vote for the president (i.e. political costs of lying). We examine these three separate outcomes to capture different ways in which the public might react to the revelation of a presidential lie, as well as to examine whether and to what extent policy and reputational costs for lying translate to political costs in the form of voting, which might be the most significant cost voters can impose on democratic leaders.

| **H1a (Policy costs of lying)/ H1b (Null)**: Voters will be/ NOT BE less likely to support the president’s policy, after they learn the president had lied compared to when they learn the president had told the truth (within-subject). Levels of support of the policy and the president for any given policy will be/ NOT BE significantly lower for policies that are based on a lie than the truth (between subjects). |
| **H2a (Reputational costs of lying)/ H2b (Null)**: Voters will be/ NOT BE less likely to trust the president, after they learn the president had lied compared to when they learn the president had told the truth (within-subject). Levels of trust in the president will be/ NOT BE significantly lower when his policy was based on a lie than the truth (between subjects). |
| **H3a (Political costs of lying)/ H3b (Null)**: Voters will be/ NOT BE less likely to vote for the president, after they learn the president had lied compared to when they learn the president had told the truth (within-subject). Willingness to vote for the president will be/ NOT BE significantly lower when his policy was based on a lie than the truth (between subjects). |

**Attributes of the Lie & Liar**

Even if leaders pay a cost for lying, not all lies are created equal and not all lying leaders would pay an equal price for their behavior. Using insights from existing literature in social psychology and behavioral economics, we examine the effects of lying across the three dimensions discussed above under different leader-level and lie-level conditions to probe whether they significantly modify the domestic costs leaders suffer. These include the nature of the policy, namely whether the policy involves the use of military force and the magnitude of the anticipated human cost; the motivation behind the leader’s lie; the leader’s partisan identity; and the leader’s pre-existing reputation regarding honesty.

A number of studies in behavioral economics have examined how a lie’s cost/size affects its acceptability. Gneezy et al (2018) consider the extent to which individuals lie when falsely
reporting random numbers for monetary payoffs, Lundquist et al (2007) find that the intrinsic costs of lying increase as the size and believability of the lie increase, and in their theoretical model Feess & Kerzenmacher (2017) consider the stakes of cost-avoidance lies. If lying is, as they find, less prevalent when the cost of lying increases, then the political and reputational costs of lying should be harsher when leaders lie on a foreign policy issue with costlier consequences (e.g. higher casualties). Moreover, according to Reiter, the public is likely to punish leaders when the costs of the use of force are high, but tolerate lying when these costs are low.

Studies in behavioral economics have also shown that observers’ tolerance of lies might depend on the liar’s perceived motivation. For instance, McLeod and Genereux (2008) consider four possible motivations in their experimental work: altruism, conflict avoidance, social acceptance, and self-gain. These motivations could easily be extended to the realm of foreign policy: leaders could lie to help another country (altruism); to diminish a threat (conflict avoidance); to increase prestige or status (social acceptance); or to get themselves re-elected (self-gain). In this study, we compare two motivations behind a leader’s lie: lying for national security (conflict avoidance) versus for re-election (self-gain).

Finally, we probe whether the president’s pre-existing reputation and credibility affects voters’ willingness to impose costs. Surprisingly, hardly any research has looked at how a president’s existing credibility influences how domestic observers update following later actions. On the one hand, attribution theory would lead us to expect that voters who face a leader known for telling lies might be more inclined to attribute an additional lie to the true personality of the president and would thus be more willing to punish for that lie. When the president has a reputation for being truthful, voters might be more inclined to attribute a sudden lie to a specific situation and be less willing to impose costs for this deviation. On the other hand, a more
rationalist updating theory could lead to an opposite expectation: the more incongruent the new information is compared to one’s baseline expectations, the more updating would take place. This latter theory would be in line with the expectations of much of the literature on credibility (e.g. Guisinger & Smith 2002): a leader with an honest record is able to make credible commitments, and any deviation from this record significantly harms this credibility. Meanwhile, a leader with a poor record for truthfulness has little credibility to lose, and therefore sees little cost to additional lies.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>H4a (Cost of the lie):</th>
<th>Voters will be more willing to impose costs for lying when the leader’s lie involved greater risks to American lives compared to a low likelihood of fatalities</th>
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<tr>
<td>H4b (Motivation behind the lie):</td>
<td>Voters will be more willing to impose costs for lying when the leader’s alleged motivation behind the lie was personal gain compared to national security.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H4c1 (Leader’s reputation for lying / Attribution Theory):</td>
<td>Voters will be more willing to impose costs for lying when the leader has a reputation for telling lies compared to when the leader has a reputation for telling the truth.</td>
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<td>H4c2 (Leader’s reputation for lying / Reputational Updating):</td>
<td>Voters will impose larger costs for lying when it is incongruous with their priors (e.g. the leader has a reputation for telling the truth, compared to when the leader has a reputation for lying).</td>
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Why Punish for Lying?

We also examine why citizens might seek to punish leaders for lying. We focus on five mechanisms through which lying could lead voters to impose costs on their president. The first is morality: citizens might view lying as an immoral behavior that should not be exhibited by their leader. This is a purely normative rationale. A second mechanism is the effect of lying on citizens’ ability to trust their president. This loss of trust in a lying leader could be issue-specific or it could extend to other policy areas. Third, a leader who lies might be punished because of the reputational damage his lie would have on the ability of other countries to trust the president or the United States. Here, concerns about lying are a result of a strategic logic, with America’s credibility as the primary consideration. Fourth, citizens might anticipate that the policy itself
would be less successful as a result of the leader’s revealed falsity. Finally, citizens might view lying negatively because of the effect it could have on domestic support for the president.

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<tr>
<th>H5a (Morality):</th>
<th>The relationship between presidential lies and voters’ willingness to impose costs will be moderated by voters’ beliefs about the morality of the president’s behavior.</th>
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<td>H5b (Trustworthiness):</td>
<td>The relationship between presidential lies and voters’ willingness to impose costs will be moderated by voters’ beliefs about the trustworthiness of the president’s future statements on the subject of the lie, on foreign policy more generally, or on domestic policies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H5c (Reputation):</td>
<td>The relationship between presidential lies and voters’ willingness to impose costs will be moderated by voters’ beliefs about the impact the president’s behavior will have on their reputation, or America’s reputation, with the rest of the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H5d (Success of the mission):</td>
<td>The relationship between presidential lies and voters’ willingness to impose costs will be moderated by voters’ beliefs about the impact the president’s behavior will have on the success of the mission.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H5e (Domestic support):</td>
<td>The relationship between presidential lies and voters’ willingness to impose costs will be moderated by voters’ beliefs about the impact the president’s behavior will have on their domestic support from the public and Congress.</td>
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### Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we administered two survey experiments to diverse, nationally representative samples. The first was of 1,500 U.S. adults recruited by Lucid Theorem in April 2020, and the follow-up survey consisted of a sample of 1,000 U.S adults also recruited via Lucid in September 2020. The surveys began with a standard consent script and a series of validated measures gathering respondents’ demographic information. Following this, the respondents were told that “on the next few pages, we will describe a hypothetical situation involving the president of the United States and America’s foreign policy. Please read the description carefully. After you have read about the situation, we will ask for your opinions.”

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5 The samples are nationally (to the United States) representative with respect to age, gender, race, income, and partisanship; see Appendix C for a fuller discussion including descriptive statistics for both samples.  
6 1418 of these respondents passed at least one of our two attention checks and were therefore included in the analyses outlined below. Our results are fully robust to the inclusion of all respondents, as seen in Appendix D. 792 of the respondents in the second survey passed at least one attention check.
Figure 1 below presents the layout and ordering of the survey experiments; see Appendix B for the complete instrument of Survey 1 and Appendix K for the complete instrument of Survey 2.

The two surveys differed slightly in their baseline vignette. We begin by describing the first survey, where the baseline scenario stated the following: “Country X is a dictatorship and an adversary of the United States. In the past several weeks, reports have been circulating that Country X might be developing nuclear weapons. If Country X possessed nuclear capabilities, they would pose a significant security threat to the vital interests of the United States.”

Next, we randomly assigned respondents into two treatment conditions (Use of Force or No Use of Force) to capture if the treatment effect of lying depends on whether the lie is used to support a militaristic policy or inaction. Both conditions read “In a publicly televised address to the American people, the president of the United States, who is a [Democrat/Republican] stated that he had reliable and substantial intelligence” about County X. We then manipulated what intelligence the president stated he had received. In the No Use of Force treatment, the president stated that this intelligence indicated “County X was NOT building a nuclear reactor. As a result, the president said, the United States would not take any military action against Country X.” In the Use of Force condition, the president stated that “the intelligence he had received indicated that County X WAS building a nuclear reactor” and that as a result, the president would use military force against Country X. Next, within the Use of Force condition, we inserted the Cost

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of Military Operation treatment which included either “sending ground troops into Country X, an operation that would likely result in significant American casualties” or “conducting airstrikes against Country X, an operation that would likely result in few if any American casualties.”

Following this base-line scenario, we asked respondents about the extent of their support for the president’s decision regarding the use (or non-use) of force against Country X as well as their willingness to vote for this president. This allowed us to capture respondents’ baseline support for both the president and their actions before they are told whether the president’s statement was a lie and quantify the independent effect of lying on public support for the policy.

Respondents were then randomly assigned to either the Truth or Lie condition. In the Truth condition respondents were informed on the next screen that “The next day, an anonymous government source revealed the contents of a classified American intelligence report. The report, consistent with the president’s statement, showed with high confidence” either that “Country X was indeed NOT developing a nuclear reactor” for those assigned to the No Use of Force condition; or that “Country X was indeed developing a nuclear reactor” for those assigned to the Use of Force condition. All respondents were further informed that “the anonymous government source also revealed that the president had read this report shortly before making his announcement,” and that “the classified intelligence report that the source revealed was later confirmed by media sources to be accurate.”

In the Lie condition, respondents were alerted here that the president had lied about the intelligence he had received: “The next day, a government whistleblower revealed the contents of a classified American intelligence report. The report, based on a variety of reliable intelligence sources, concluded with high confidence” that for those assigned to the Use of Force condition “Country X was NOT developing a nuclear reactor,” and for those assigned to the No Use of
Force condition that “Country X WAS developing a nuclear reactor.” Thus, in the Lie condition, the government whistleblower revealed that the intelligence the president had seen indicated the opposite of what the president had initially stated.

Those assigned to the Lie condition also received information about the suspected motivation behind the president’s lie. For those in the Use of Force condition, the Motivation conditions read that the anonymous source either “further indicated that the president lied out of a belief that attacking Country X “would be in the best interests of America’s national security, as it would demonstrate America’s strength and resolve” or “would likely increase the president’s popularity among his voters, helping his re-election campaign.” For those in the No Use of Force condition, the motivation for lying included either “a belief that attacking Country X would not be in the best interests of America’s national security, as it would likely drag the United States into a prolonged war” or that it “would likely decrease the president’s popularity among his voters, thereby hurting his re-election campaign.”

Finally, across all treatment conditions, we provided information about the president’s pre-existing reputation for truthfulness. Here, the scenario indicated that “observers of the president note that up until this point, the current president had developed a reputation for making truthful statements” or “had been suspected of lying on several occasions.”

Immediately after the follow up scenario, respondents were asked once again about their support for the president’s policy and their willingness to vote for this president. This within-subject feature of our experimental design allows us to examine the degree to which respondents in the Force/No Force conditions updated their preferences when they become aware that the president had lied or told the truth in justifying their actions. Moreover, this design has a greater

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8 The depiction of a president lying about a nuclear threat may seem extreme, but similarly high-stakes falsehoods have been a common occurrence throughout history. Nevertheless, we also
external validity in that it more accurately reflects how voters would likely learn about a presidential lie in the real world. They first become aware of the president’s policy based on information that the president chooses to present, quickly form an opinion about that policy, and only later become aware of whether the President was honest.

In Survey II we wished to probe whether and to what extent domestic political costs are imposed when the lie does not involve such a high-stakes situation as the development of nuclear weapons by a rogue state. Thus, in a second survey we kept the structure of the vignette unchanged, but altered the context of the president’s lie to reflect a less consequential issue. In this second survey, the alleged reliable and substantial intelligence was “that Country X was/ was not behind several recent attacks targeting U.S. forces in nearby countries. These attacks resulted in the deaths of over a dozen American service members with a dozen more injured.”

The rest of the vignette in Survey II included the same treatment conditions as in the first survey, with the exception that the COST treatment in the Use Force condition now consisted of the following values: “sending ground troops into Country X to destroy pre-identified military targets, an operation that would likely result in significant American casualties” or “conducting airstrikes against Country X to destroy pre-identified military targets, an operation that would likely result in few if any American casualties,” or “taking no military action against Country X.” The rest of the survey included all the same follow up questions as in the first survey (see Appendix K for more information, including the full language of the vignette).

**Findings**

**Policy, Reputational, and Political Costs of Lying (Survey I)**

How does lying influence respondents’ support for the president’s policy decision? To measure this, we had respondents rate on a 100-point scale their level of agreement with the
statement “I support this president’s decision…” with the specific policy decision (take no action, take the low-cost military action, or take the high-cost military action) piped in. Again, since we measure this both before and after revealing whether the president’s statement was true, we can examine both ultimate levels of policy support and the updating that occurs post-revelation.

We begin by examining whether lying affects respondents’ final, post-reveal levels of policy support. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of this support by each treatment condition as well as pooled together by the Lie and Force conditions. We can see that the lowest levels of policy support result from a president lying to use military force, with a support rate of 36%. This is well below the 54% rate of support we see for the exact same policy when justified by truth, a statistically significant difference of almost 20%. This is compared to an initial level of support of around 53% for all respondents in the Use of Force condition, implying that while truth-telling

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9 Here and in the remainder of the paper, we use a level of \( \alpha = 0.05 \) to determine statistical significance. To ensure that our findings are not reliant on any assumptions about the underlying structure of the data, we derive all statistics via bootstrapping. Our results are robust to this choice, and hold if we instead derive these statistics computationally.
does not appear to make the use of force much more popular, lying makes the public far less supportive.

We see an even larger difference when the president did not use force. When it was revealed that this non-intervention was based on a lie, the president’s policy only receives 48% support, compared to 71% support when the president was revealed to be telling the truth about Country X’s nuclear ambitions. In the no-force condition the initial level of policy support averages at 64%, showing both a huge drop in support for lying and a slight boost for honesty.

The pooled conditions confirm these findings. Regardless of whether the president’s policy involved the use of force, respondents’ ultimate policy support was over 20% lower when the policy was revealed to be based on a lie, a sizeable and statistically significant gap.

The fact that lying is associated with large domestic costs regardless of what foreign policy action it was used in justifying is cemented when we look at within-subject updating. Figure 3’s top panel shows the Average Treatment Effects (ATEs) of lying on within-subject updating for policy support broken down across the Force/No Force conditions. In both conditions, the revelation that the president lied led to respondents being a statistically significant 20% less supportive of the president’s policy than those who saw the president tell the truth. In sum, we find strong support in favor of H1a, and against H1b.

Next, we assess the various reputational and political costs that lying might entail (H2 and H3, respectively). To measure the reputational costs of lying, we asked respondents about the extent to which they would trust future statements from the president regarding Country X, foreign policy more generally, and domestic policy issues. We also asked respondents the extent to which they believed that this incident would influence the international reputation of the president and of the nation. To capture the political costs of lying, we asked respondents to rate
their agreement on a 100-point scale with the statement “I would be willing to vote for this president.” Since we asked this question both before and after revealing the veracity of the president’s statement, we can examine both final willingness and the within-subject updating that occurred in the wake of the revelation. We also measured, at the end of the experiment, respondents’ beliefs regarding public support for the president and their beliefs about Congressional support for impeaching the president, also via agreement on a 100-point scale.

The second and third panels of Figure 3 reveal highly significant costs for lying across all of these outcomes, offering strong support for H2a and H3a. Moreover, we see a similar magnitude of effect sizes for all outcomes, with the effect of lying on policy support appearing only slightly higher (about 3%) than its effect on political support.
Presidential lies seem to have clear **reputational costs**: respondents exposed to a presidential lie were on average 24% less willing to trust future statements by this president regarding Country X. These reputational effects are not issue-specific, as voters were also 20% less willing to trust future statements by this president regarding *other* foreign policy issues, and even 19% less willing to trust future statements by this president on issues of domestic policy. This is a clear indication that presidential lies in one policy domain have significant spillover effects into other, un-related areas. We also see lying to have an effect size of 20% and 19% on respondents’ beliefs about the president’s and the nation’s reputations, respectively. This indicates that voters believe the international community would impose reputational costs that are not leader specific.

Interestingly, we see a clear difference in the reputational costs of lying depending on whether the lie is threat inflating or deflating: respondents are a significant 9% *more* willing to inflict reputational costs on a president in the wake of a lie when that lie was used to *keep from attacking a Country X* that was in-truth developing nuclear weapons, with an equally significant 8% difference in the lie’s impact on America’s reputation. This is consistent with a reputational logic. A president who lies about an adversarial country NOT posing a threat in order to refrain from using force is essentially implicating two types of international reputations: the country’s reputation for honesty (by lying) as well as its reputation for resolve (by not fighting).

There are also large **political costs** for lying, in clear support of H3. After learning that the president’s decision was based on a lie, respondents were 17% less willing to vote for the president, 18% less likely to believe that the public would support the president, and 20% more likely to believe that Congress would be justified in impeaching the president compared to respondents who saw a truthful president. Across these different measurements of political
outcomes, only public support differs based on whether the lie lead to a war: respondents in the Use Force condition were 8% less optimistic about the president’s public support than those in the No Force condition.

Attributes of the Lie & Liar

Next we evaluate hypotheses 4a-4c2, which probe how the various attributes of the lie and of the president impact respondents’ willingness to impose costs. In Figure 4, we demonstrate how the effect of lying (as opposed to telling the truth) on within-subject updating in policy support is influenced by the president’s political party, the cost of the president’s policy (among respondents in the Use Force condition), the president’s motive (among respondents in the lie condition), the president’s pre-existing reputation regarding truthfulness, co-partisanship, and anchoring (initial policy support).

As can be seen, whether the president is a Republican or a Democrat has little influence on how lying impacts policy support (this holds regardless of respondent party; see Appendix F),
nor does whether the president’s lie was motivated by personal gain or by America’s national security (leaving our H4b un-supported). One might expect citizens to exhibit an anchoring bias\textsuperscript{10}, with those who initially supported the president and his policy being less willing to impose costs for lying than those who initially opposed them. In the sixth panel, we compare the ATEs of lying across those respondents whose initial levels of policy support were in the top and bottom quartiles of the distribution (pooling across all other condition/treatment assignments), but find no statistically significant difference in how these groups update.

We do see that among those assigned to the Use of Force treatment, the cost of the president’s policy does appear to matter: those respondents who were told that the president’s use of military force would have few if any American casualties experienced a drop in support post-lie that was over 5\% greater in magnitude than the decline seen among those told that there would be many casualties, a statistically significant difference that upsets our H4a. This discrepancy may reflect the fact that lower casualties are associated with a 7\% higher level of initial policy support. Even after updating, respondents who were told that the president’s policy would be costlier are approximately 3\% less supportive.

The president’s pre-existing reputation seems to have the greatest effect on how respondents update their policy support, with a difference of about 7\%. Even when we look at the final outcomes, compared to a baseline of telling the truth, presidents with a reputation for being truthful see a greater loss in support associated with telling a lie (about 23\%) compared to presidents with a reputation for lying (about 18\%). This suggests that the public punishes leaders for lying (as opposed to telling the truth) in an asymmetric manner, with steeper punishments for leaders who are known to typically tell the truth.

\textsuperscript{10} Anchoring bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) is when an individual depends heavily on an initial piece of information (in our case, the president’s policy) when interpreting subsequent information and making decisions.
As can be seen in Figure 5, which shows both the final levels for political and policy support as well as their pre-revelation averages, those leaders with existing reputations for telling lies will see no gains in policy or political support from telling the truth, while presidents with existing reputations as truthful receive statistically significant rewards for truth-telling across both of these outcomes (of 5% and 4% respectively). A similar discrepancy occurs in respondents’ ultimate judgements of how the president’s behavior will impact their reputation – even when both types tell the truth, presidents previously seen as truth-tellers have almost 10% greater anticipated gains to their personal reputations than those previously seen as liars, while lying itself results in similarly low reputational outcomes regardless of presidents’ pasts.

**Figure 5: Average Final Outcomes by Reputation, Behavior**

Overall, respondents appear to significantly reward honest presidents for telling the truth, while presidents suspected of lying in the past see no benefit from truth-telling. This means that while all presidents might be dis-incentivized from lying, only presidents who already have reputations as honest have a direct incentive to be truthful with the American people.

Focusing on the differences in within-subject updating based on information about the reputations, the evidence is contrary to an Attribution Theory type of explanation for the role of
reputation (H4c1), and supportive of the Updating version (H4c2): when respondents are told in our scenario that the president lied about the intelligence on Country X (as opposed to telling the truth), those who were told that the president had a reputation for being truthful end up less supportive of the president’s policy to a greater extent than those who were told that the president was previously suspected of lying by a statistically significant margin. Taken together, the results suggest that it is easier for leaders to lose a good reputation than to fix a bad one, and that the benefits of future honesty vary depending on leaders’ past behaviors. This has important implications for the strategic behavior of leaders, as we discuss in the conclusion.

In Figure 6 below, we analyze the effects of all president-level and lie-level attributes on respondents’ willingness to inflict reputational and political costs and see similar results as before (See Appendix E for a complete description of how these conditions impact the various outcomes). Neither the president’s party nor the cost of their actions appear to consistently impact the cost of lying. The exceptions are, once again, the presidents’ pre-existing reputation as well as the president’s motive. As discussed above, we find that presidents with pre-existing reputations as truthful face harsher reputational costs for lying (as opposed to telling the truth) than those who were previously pegged as liars. When presidents are believed to be truthful, respondents are 7% more likely to anticipate that the United States’ reputation will suffer in the wake of a lie, a statistically significant impact that extends to the president. This once again suggests that the president’s pre-existing reputation acts as a baseline against which respondents update, and implies that honest leaders pay a larger reputational price for telling a lie than those who are known to be deceptive. And just as before, the underlying dynamics of these costs imply

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11 Due to a slight shift in final support under the “Lie” condition, while the within-subject updating for political support shows significant differences based on pre-existing reputation, the ATE’s of lying on the final political outcomes do not.
that while presidents previously seen as truthful can expect a political reward for future honesty, no such rewards accrue to presidents with pre-existing reputations as liars.

In addition to reputation, we further find that presidents whose motive for lying was personal gain rather than national security face harsher political and reputational costs for lying. Respondents are 5% less willing to vote for such presidents and 5% less likely to anticipate public support. We observe similar differences in their willingness to trust the president and their beliefs as to the president’s and America’s international reputation, all of which are statistically significant. The evidence then strongly supports our H4b and H4c2. As before, we find co-partisanship to have no statistically significant impact on these outcomes (see Appendix F for more discussion of co-partisanship’s role), nor do we see a significant effect for anchoring (initial support).
The Mechanisms Behind These Costs

Finally, we examine why the public may wish to punish presidents for lying, probing the relative importance of the different mechanisms through which lying could influence respondents’ support for a president and their policies. In all treatment conditions, we embedded questions about different potential mechanisms that might affect voters’ support, including the previously mentioned ones regarding trust in the president’s future statements, moral acceptability of the president’s actions, success of the president’s policy, Congressional and public support, and consequences for the president’s and nation’s reputations.

Figure 7 shows the distributions of boot-strapped coefficients from regressions of the policy support and voting behavior outcomes on five of the individual mechanisms. Every one of the mechanisms we tested produced a statistically significant result, consistent across all of our analyses, showing strong evidence in favor of H5a-H5e. While every mechanism has a statistically significant effect, respondents’ beliefs as to the moral acceptability of the presidents’ actions, the anticipated success of the president’s policies, and president’s future credibility appear to be the most salient, with the statistically significant coefficients seen in Figure 7 translating into substantively significant impacts.

For instance, moving from the 25th to the 75th percentile in the moral acceptability mechanism is associated with an increase of over 16% in policy support and an increase of over 14% in political support. Similar effect sizes are seen in our trust and policy success mechanisms. But even for the least impactful mechanism (public support for the president,) such a shift is associated with an almost 6% increase in policy support and an almost 7% increase in

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12 See Appendix H for the full models and regression tables, for full causal mediation analyses with robustness checks and sensitivity analyses, and for regularized regressions confirming the results. Appendix H also demonstrates that our findings are practically identical when isolating to the Force or just the No Force conditions.
political support. These massive effects confirm that there are a wide variety of reasons why individuals impose costs on lying presidents, and that morality, trust, and policy success are paramount among them.

Robustness

One of the strengths of our experiment is that we generalize the scenarios, limiting the likelihood that responses were driven by pre-existing biases related to specific presidents or foreign nations. To ensure that the results we see are not driven by such biases (Dafoe et al 2018), we ask respondents to report the president and the foreign nation that the scenario they read called to mind. As the analyses in Appendix G demonstrate, our findings are robust to these inferences. This also helps to confirm that the results are not driven by respondents’ reactions to the current political situation, or current partisan judgements: the effects of lying do not appear meaningfully different when the liar is perceived to be President Trump than when the liar is
perceived to be President Obama, or President Bush; nor are they meaningfully different when a respondent inferred the country to be China as opposed to North Korea or Iran.

Importantly, we also do not find evidence for co-partisanship bias in the impacts of lying. While co-partisanship does affect respondents’ initial support for the president’s policies and their initial willingness to vote for the president, it has no significant impact on the extent to which this support changes in the wake of a lie. As detailed in Appendix F, respondents from both parties exhibit similar patterns of punishment across the various treatment conditions, with no consistent differences emerging between partisans in either their reactions to the different treatments or their general willingness to impose costs. This holds even when we break it down by respondents’ partisan identity and regardless of the specific circumstances of the lie (i.e. motive, cost, or reputation). This finding is consistent with Hahl, Kim, and Sivan (2018) who find that mere partisanship is insufficient to explain sharp differences in how lying demagoguery is perceived. Interestingly, we observe that co-partisans inflict greater costs (of about 5% points) for lying on their willingness to vote for the president compared to opposing partisans. This may be a result of the high discrepancy in initial willingness to vote for the president between co-partisans and opposing partisans – a gap of 20%, which is over twice as large as the gap in initial policy support – meaning that presidents simply have more support to lose among co-partisans.

Next, we test whether certain demographic attributes of respondents are driving the updating that we observe in policy support in the wake of a presidential lie (See Appendix I for detailed analysis.) We find that education and income appear to have no influence on the extent to which they update following a lie. Interestingly, whereas the behavioral economics literature did not find a statistically significant relationship between age and lying behavior (Garbarino et al 2019), we find that younger respondents (those in the youngest quartile of the sample)
experience a drop in policy support that is a statistically significant 11% smaller in magnitude than the updating seen in their older peers. White respondents exhibit a greater shift in their policy support in the wake of a lie by a statistically significant margin, and women are significantly more likely to punish leaders for lying than men. This is consistent with research in behavioral economics finding that men lie more than women and experience more positive emotions when lying (Baughman et al 2014). Most importantly though, the costs of lying themselves remain substantively and statistically significant across all demographic conditions.

We also confirm, as can be seen in Appendix J, that the main results of the paper hold even after weighting the sample to match the current American public with regards to race, gender, partisanship, age, education, and income. None of our estimates change by more than 2.5 percentage points after this weighting, and the average treatment effects we observe are practically identical. This implies not only that our results are not driven by the specific demographic composition of the survey sample, but also that our results could well be applied to the American population at large.

**Generalizability (Survey II)**

As described above, our follow-up survey was designed to test whether the public’s willingness to impose significant domestic costs for lying is unique to the high stakes of the described scenario – a rogue state acquiring nuclear weapons. To do this, we ran an additional survey experiment on a separate sample of 1,000 respondents with the same structure and outcomes as the initial experiment, but changing the stakes to be a series of attacks that killed several dozen American troops outside the United States. The full results of this second

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13 2019 Data from Pew Research finds younger Americans to be less trusting of government overall, so this finding may just reflect their lower baseline (https://www.people-press.org/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/)
experiment, including replications of Figures 2-7 from this paper as well the complete language of the revised vignette, can be seen in Appendix K.

As shown in Figure 8 below, the average treatment effects of lying on respondents’ willingness to support the president, support their policy, and impose reputational costs are just as severe here as in the first survey.

When we lower the stakes, the robust and consistent results that we obtain hold not only with regards to these ATE’s, but with regards to every analysis described in the paper insofar as across all of the outcomes and under all conditions lying continues to be significantly punished by respondents, with costs appearing very similar if not identical in magnitude (See Appendix K for a detailed analysis of the second survey). Overall, the results provide strong evidence that the robust costs of lying are not specific to the existential threat of nuclear proliferation, and are just as relevant in less extreme crisis situations.

The follow-up experiment also allowed us to test whether the costs that respondents are imposing are a result of the president’s lie, or if they are due to his failure to follow the recommendations of intelligence officials. By bringing in a new mechanism question asking respondents to rate their agreement with the statement “The president should generally follow the advice of US intelligence agencies,” we can examine the extent to which the costs
respondents imposed were driven not by their attitudes towards lying but by their attitudes regarding whether the president should have followed the purported intelligence report. When we break down the costs respondents impose by their relative agreement with this question, (Section K3 in the Appendix) we see that all respondents still impose significant costs regardless of their views (even though respondents with minimal trust in intelligence agencies update less in the wake of the revelation), indicating that these costs really do reflect attitudes towards the lie.

Finally, we also use this secondary survey to test whether our results are robust to the use of a 0-100 agreement scale for the outcomes by re-coding respondents’ agreement into a binary approve/disapprove measure (see Section K4 in the Appendix for details.) As Figure K7 in the Appendix demonstrates, this binary re-coding leads to even larger treatment effects of lying, with respondents in the Lie condition showing an average policy approval rate that is 0.28 less than those in the Truth condition on this 0-1 scale, an indication that our results are strongly robust to the coding decisions made.

**Conclusion**

Despite the burgeoning literature on the domestic costs leaders pay for backing down from threats, and notwithstanding the longstanding debate about the significance and prevalence of deception about the use of force in democracies, scholars have yet to examine whether, under what conditions, and why leaders would pay a domestic political cost for lying over decisions whether to use force. This paper offers the first comprehensive experimental study to investigate these important questions.

Public skepticism about the honesty of politicians notwithstanding, we find that Americans from both parties are willing to impose significant policy, reputational, and political
costs for lying. The effects of lying are both large and extremely robust to a variety of conditions. Importantly, we show that domestic costs are imposed regardless of whether deception is used to inflate or deflate threats, to justify force or inaction, and to address a high-stakes or lower-stakes situation. Our experimental design also enables us to answer the why question. Mediation analysis reveals that members of the public judge leaders’ lying not just instrumentally (implicating their ability to trust the president and the likelihood of policy success as key explanations for public aversion to lying) but also due to moral concerns. This is in line with other recent findings suggesting that public support for foreign policy actions comes from both their concrete benefits and concerns over ethical norms (Tomz & Weeks, Working Paper).

Our findings speak to several important debates in International Relations, and have implications for the strategic behavior of leaders:

First, our study reveals important support for the empirical pattern of presidential deception that we observe. While deception can take many forms, we focus on the most blatant: outright lying. Consistent with Reiter’s argument, our results suggest that rational, strategic leaders of democracies should be deterred from resorting to this type of deception on issues of foreign policy and the use of force due to the considerable domestic punishment they are likely to face when such lies are exposed. And indeed, as scholars have long noted, out of all forms of deception, lying is the least common to be used on issues of foreign policy (Mearsheimer 2011; Schuessler 2015). Thus our results offer important and novel micro-foundational evidence for why leaders might be generally deterred from lying on these issues. Indeed, we find that leaders
face domestic costs for lying even among voters who share partisan identity with the president, suggesting that even co-partisans are likely to rethink their support in the wake of a lie.14

Second, our research offers important implications for the study of reputation in International Relations in several ways. Most generally, we show that reputational costs for lying are neither confined to the leader nor the issue. Voters believe that when a president lies, the reputation of the leader and the state will be significantly harmed. Moreover, the decreased trust in the president spills over to other foreign and domestic political domains. Finally, we find reputational cost to be even higher when a presidential lie is used to deflate a threat and do nothing (as opposed to inflating a threat and using force), as it implicates both the country’s reputation for honesty as well as for resolve. Overall, our results point to important reputational implications that leaders will face when their lie is revealed.

Furthermore, the literature in IR to date has predominantly focused on the importance of the state’s reputation for honesty on foreign audiences’ assessments of its credibility. Here we depart from that tradition by investigating whether a leader-specific reputation for honesty (or lying) shapes domestic audiences’ willingness to trust, vote for, or support the policy of that leader. Our results confirm the importance of leader-specific reputations in significantly shaping voters’ reactions to revelation of a lie. Importantly, our study allows us to also speak to how a leader’s reputation for honesty could shape his incentive to lie or tell the truth. We find that leaders’ reputations have an asymmetric effect on the cost of lying as opposed to being honest: The impact of lying (as opposed to telling the truth) for presidents with reputations for lying is smaller compared to presidents with reputations for honesty. This suggests that a leader who

14 This raises an important question of why leaders sometime do resort to flat-out lies on issues of the use of force. Leaders might be inclined to do so when they believe they would not get caught (Yarhi-Milo, 2014); when they believe the policy will result in success that would off-set deception cost (Myrick 2020); or when there are significant strategic imperatives to do so.
already holds a reputation for lying might feel less deterred from lying in the future compared to a president with a reputation for honesty. Put differently, for presidents who already seen as liars, all else equal, doubling down on lies versus revealing the truth is less costly than for presidents with reputations for truth-telling. Our analysis further indicates that a similar asymmetry is present when it comes to telling the truth: our results suggest that only leaders with pre-existing reputations as truthful directly benefit from being honest with the public. These results have important implications for the strategic behavior of leaders, suggesting that once a leader has an established track record of lying, they may see little strategic advantage to changing course. Positively, this also indicates that leaders who have been honest in the past are strongly incentivized to continue being honest in the future.

Third, consistent with studies in behavioral economics, we also find that the motivation behind the lie is important: voters are more willing to punish presidents who lie to increase their own political support than to protect national security. Importantly, however, we see that the public is willing to inflict domestic political cost even when told that the motivation behind the lie was strategic (i.e. to increase the country’s resolve or maintain strategic interests), and not political (i.e. to increase public support for the president’s own reelection). This suggests that both Republican and Democratic voters demand the truth from the president on crises involving the possible use of force, and presidents who fail to be honest will see a significant decrease in political support. Future studies could probe how long lived these costs are, and whether they are mediated by whether the crisis results in success or failure (Myrick 2020).

Future studies could also build on our work in other important ways. Scholars could use our experimental design to explore the costs of other types of deception such as spinning or concealment. We would expect these types of deception to be associated with less significant
domestic costs due to the ability of leaders to embrace secrecy or ambiguity in rationalizing the lie, or to present it as a “partial” or “alternative” truth. Moreover, future studies could investigate whether the findings apply to lies in non-military domains, such as trade negotiations or climate accords.

Finally, and importantly, our experiment manipulated the political affiliation of the president. Across both surveys, we subjected our findings to multiple tests intended to probe whether co-partisanship bias shapes the willingness of voters to punish their leaders for lying. Our findings show that in the absence of partisan elite cuing, co-partisans are more likely to support the president’s policy prior to the revelation of the lie, but they are no less likely to punish the president in the wake of a lie compared to opposing partisans. This is true for Democratic and Republican voters. As such, our results offer crucial base-line analysis of where the American public stands on these issues and why. Future studies might seek to examine whether, under what conditions, and to what extent this co-partisan consensus begins to break. This can be done by varying the integrity or partisanship of the whistle-blower in the scenario, or by adding cues from partisan sources about the motivation behind the president’s lie.

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