Evaluating Political Leaders in Times of Terror and Economic Threat:  
The Joint Relevance of Incumbency and Politician Partisanship

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Working Paper, Dated 3/12/10  
Comments Welcome
Conventional wisdom holds that incumbency status is a boon in times of national security threat, but a bane in times of financial decline. In line with scholarship on rallies ‘round the flag (e.g., Mueller 1970, 1973), approval ratings for sitting President George W. Bush and New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, soared following 9/11. Then, and as retrospective voting theories would predict (e.g., Downs 1954; Key 1966; Fiorina 1981), as the country fell into the “Great Recession” in 2008, five incumbent Senators were voted out of their seats and the individual selected by Republicans to succeed George W. Bush, John McCain, lost the presidential contest. In short, when terrorist threat dominated, the public threw its support around the incumbent and when economic recession took hold, the public held the incumbent and his party accountable. These events seem perfectly consistent with rally ‘round the flag and retrospective voting theories and yet they fail to highlight a crucial factor: the incumbents in these examples are all Republicans.

Just over a year following the 2008 elections, Democratic President Barack Obama found his approval ratings remained flat following an attempted bombing by a terrorist traveling Christmas day on a Detroit-bound flight. Where Bush had apparently benefited from being the incumbent during times of terror threat, there was no surge in public approval for Obama. What explains the absence of a rally in this case? One may think of several plausible explanations, but we argue and demonstrate that a politician’s partisanship is a key factor conditioning the public’s assessments of leaders in times of terror threat and, as well, economic decline. Drawing on issue ownership theory (Petrocik 1986), we offer and test a theoretical perspective in which the extent to which the public holds incumbents aloft in times of terror threat or accountable in economic decline depends on the leader’s partisan stripes.

Rather than consider only general indicators of support or rejection, we focus on three appraisal mechanisms that connect threat to overall support for a politician: perceptions of strong

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1 No Democratic incumbent lost his/her seat in the 2008 Senate elections.
leadership, competence, and responsibility. We first provide a theoretical framework by which these assessments are affected by contexts of economic and terrorist threat conditional upon both incumbency status and politician partisanship. This theoretical perspective combines expectations from rally ‘round the flag and retrospective voting literatures with issue ownership theory. Drawing on the latter, we argue that Republicans’ ownership of national security issues and of terrorism following 9/11 cause individuals to view Republican incumbents relatively more favorably when terror threat is salient. We argue, in a similar vein, that Democrats’ ownership of economic issues related to social welfare leads individuals facing economic decline to perceive Republican incumbents as relatively less strong, less competent, and more responsible for the decline; put differently, the public selectively holds leaders accountable to greater or lesser degrees for poor economic conditions. In short, the extent to which the public rallies around or rejects an incumbent in times of terror threat and economic decline is influenced by party membership.

To assess these arguments, we first use data from national surveys to examine, and contrast, the relationships between perceptions of terrorist threat and evaluations of President Bush’s and Obama’s capacities for strong leadership. We show that concern about terrorism benefited the former in 2002 and either hurts (in the case of large scale attacks) or has no impact (in the case of small scale attacks) the latter in 2010. We next turn to data from a national experiment that allows us to examine assessments of political candidates’ leadership traits, competence, and responsibility in a mock election context. The experimental design manipulates both the incumbency status (or none, in the case of an open race) and the partisanship (or none, in the case of a non-partisan race) of politicians vying for office in times of terror or economic threat, respectively. We further assess the relationship between these evaluations and an indicator of general support, vote choice. Analyses of the experimental data confirm that evaluations of candidates in times of crisis are frequently conditioned by both incumbency and politician partisanship and, as well, these
assessments predict support for candidates, providing plausible mechanisms that account for the public’s tendency to rally around or reject the incumbent in the face of national security threats or economic decline.

While significant research shows that public opinion is affected by dramatic foreign policy events and economic downturns (e.g., Bowen 1989; Fiorina 1981; Mueller 1970, 1973), no studies jointly assess the importance of incumbency and partisanship with respect to leadership evaluations under these different types of threat. While much is known about how citizens’ partisanship colors political evaluations (Campbell et al. 1964), we instead demonstrate the importance influence of politicians’ partisanship on these evaluations. Furthermore, rather than only examine the effect of threat on general approval ratings or vote choice, we explore three potential mechanisms that underlie overall evaluations. By understanding that politicians’ partisanship conditions public reactions to threat, we can better understand, and anticipate, the extent to which the public rallies around leaders in times of terror threat and, likewise, the extent to which the public punishes leaders who are in office during economic downturns.

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

We begin this section by briefly reviewing expectations derived from works that treat rally ‘round the flag reactions, retrospective voting, and presidential approval. Collectively this set of research makes straight-forward predictions about how incumbents are treated in times of national security threat and economic decline, respectively. We then draw on issue ownership theory to consider that certain parties’ politicians may be more or less attractive depending on the crisis, with Republicans advantaged by a national security crisis (in this case, terrorism) and Democrats relatively advantaged by financial decline. Finally, we discuss what might happen when both pieces of

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2 Petrocik (1996) discusses both factors, but does not investigate whether one carries more weight.
information, incumbency and partisanship, are considered during either a terror threat or an economic recession.

*The Incumbent (Dis)Advantage in Terror Threat vs. Economic Threat*

One of the most important factors dictating how the public responds to an incumbent politician during a crisis is, in theory, whether the crisis originates internal or external to the nation. In cases in which a prospective threat or event is externally-provoked (e.g., aggression by a foreign actor), individuals are more likely to rally around the incumbent administration (e.g., Bowen 1989; Brody 1991; Kernell 1978; Mueller 1970, 1973; MacKuen 1983; Newman 2002; Simon and Ostrom 1985, 1989). While some argue that the mechanism for a rally is a surge in patriotism (Kernell 1978; Mueller 1970, 1973), others argue that the key mechanism is a lack of elite criticism of the incumbent in such contexts (Brody 1991; Brody and Shapiro 1989; Callaghan and Virtanen 1993; Zaller 1992). More recent work by Kam and Ramos (2008) reconciles this debate with data following 9/11 showing that at the start of a dramatic foreign policy event, the salience of national identity is increased, resulting in a rally. However, over time as elite criticism increases, national identity subsides and partisan identity becomes more salient, causing partisanship to play an increasing role in presidential approval ratings.\(^3\) Under conditions of salient international terrorist threats, then, rally ‘round the flag theories suggest that individuals will view the incumbent as relatively stronger and more competent, and less responsible for policy failures, compared to evaluations made in the absence of a crisis and, as well, compared to evaluations of a non-incumbent.

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\(^3\) Once the U.S. is engaged in a conflict, there is a fairly big literature that explores how long the public supports the incumbent and the war effort. Some argue that support for the incumbent and war may dwindle as casualties mount (Kernell 1978; Mueller 1973). Others argue that individuals take into account the benefits as well as the costs, such that the public may continue to be supportive if they think the mission will be successful and if they believe the U.S. was right to engage in the conflict (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009). Others question this rational cost benefit calculation and argue that partisan cues are key for determining public support for war efforts (Berinsky 2007; Zaller 1992). This literature, while relevant to the topic at hand, lies outside the scope of our analyses.
If the threat is internally-provoked (e.g., an economic crisis), then retrospective voting theory maintains that individuals will punish the incumbent and look to challengers for help in resolving the crisis (e.g., Bligh, Kholes, and Pillai 2005; Fiorina 1981; Key 1964). Individuals are more inclined to blame the sitting president for poor economic performance, and these blame attributions then make individuals less supportive of the president and more likely to vote for the opposition (Gomez and Wilson 2001). Much of the literature on presidential approval cited above finds that incumbent approval declines in periods of poor economic performance, particularly as unemployment and inflation increase (Hibbs et al. 1982; Kernell 1978; Mueller 1973; Newman 2002). Thus, extant research suggests that individuals, who hold incumbents accountable for financial downturns, will report relatively more favorable evaluations of non-incumbents in times of economic decline.

**The Importance of Politician Partisanship**

Incumbency status in times of a crisis is only half of the story. Issue ownership theory, offered first in Petrocik’s seminal 1996 work on campaigns, provides strong reason to expect politician partisanship also to affect evaluations of political leaders under times of terror threat and economic recession. The theory offered by Petrocik asserts that candidates are advantaged by emphasizing issues over which they are perceived as more competent. Succinctly put, a candidate’s chance for success increases to the extent that he “frames the vote choice as a decision to be made in terms of problems facing the country that he is better able to handle than his opponent” (Petrocik, 1996, 826). Evaluations of a politician’s relative competence in an issue area depend in part on the long-term reputation of the party, which parties develop on certain issues based on the constituency bases of the party (Petrocik 1996). These perceptions that one party is better able to handle a particular issue are reinforced by the media, which gives better news coverage to candidates

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4 Gomez and Wilson (2001) suggest that it is particularly those who are lower in political sophistication who are more likely to blame incumbents for poor national-level economic performance. We are interested in general tendencies here and therefore do not disaggregate our data by political sophistication.

5 Another factor Petrocik (1996) recognizes is the incumbent’s record in the issue area.
who stick to party-owned issues (Hayes 2008), as well as by candidates, who have an incentive to
increase the salience of the issues they own (Petrocik 1996, Petrocik et al. 2003). If a party
successfully increases the salience of issues they own in a given election, voters will be more inclined
to vote for that party (Benoit 2007; Petrocik 1996). This theory can be extended to evaluations
other than vote choice. Specifically, in times of threat, individuals, seeking a resolution to the crisis,
should find a politician whose party “owns” the relevant issue to be more appealing along germane
dimensions including capacity for leadership, ability to handle the threat, and responsibility.

In terms of parties’ reputations over specific issues, Petrocik (1996) finds that Republicans
have traditionally owned the issue of national security (i.e., citizens perceive the party as better able
to handle issues in this realm). It appears that this reputation also extends to the national security
issue of terrorism. In responses to the National Election Study in 2004, about 41% of the sample
indicated that the Republican Party was better able to handle the war on terrorism, compared to only
26% who said the Democratic Party (33% said they were both capable). Given that Republicans are
generally perceived as more capable of managing terrorism (at least at the current time), we expect
that, under conditions of terrorist threat, individuals will perceive a Republican in a better light than
a Democratic politician.

Considering parties’ reputations in the realm of economic threat, the story is more nuanced.
Petrocik finds a mixed bag on economic issues, with Democrats “owning” issues related to social
welfare and (combating) unemployment and Republican owning issues related to (trimming) big
government (see also Pope and Woon 2009). The former more often captures headlines in times of
recession. In fact, numerous studies argue that increased economic insecurity is linked to greater
social welfare spending (e.g., Garrett 1995, 1998, Rodrik 1997). As a result, we expect that a
Democratic leader will be viewed more favorably compared to a Republican counter-part under conditions of economic threat.\(^6\)

*Dueling Information*

What happens when we combine these two pieces of information, such as frequently occurs in real election contests? When incumbency and candidate partisanship both advantage, or conversely both disadvantage, a leader, the prediction is strong and straight-forward. Thus, under conditions of terrorist threat, a Republican incumbent will fare better than a Democratic challenger, and the reverse under conditions of economic threat. The Republican incumbent will fare relatively better under terror threat because the public’s tendency to rally around the flag (incumbent administration) is combined with a prevailing sense that Republicans are best able to handle that issue. Extant research provides some indication that terror threat will positively affect evaluations made of Republican incumbents. For example, in an experiment conducted prior to the 2004 presidential election, research subjects exposed an article about terrorism were less likely to blame Bush for policy failures related to Iraq (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009) relative to those not primed to think about terrorism.

In contrast, theory suggests that same politician will fare relatively worse under economic threat as the public seeks to “throw the rascals out” and simultaneously perceives Democrats as more capable of mitigating the negative effects of the crisis. In the case of economic threat, then, the public is likely to cast its vote of confidence in favor of a Democratic challenger. In fact, extant work has shown that Democratic challengers 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 Bill Clinton than Republican President George H.W. Bush (e.g., Alvarez and Nagler

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\(^6\) One potential issue here is that parties may also have ownership over certain candidate traits. According to Hayes (2005), Republicans “own” the trait of leadership, in part because of their perceived strength in national security. To the degree that such factors affect our study, we could see weaker relative increases in a Democrat’s perceived capacity for “strong leadership” even in a crisis context that theoretically should benefit the party.
More recently, the market meltdown that began in mid-September of 2008 had a big effect on helping Barack Obama win the presidential election over John McCain (Campbell 2008).

But what happens when a politician has “dueling traits”, one that theoretically should advantage and one that theoretically should disadvantage that individual? Assuming that both incumbency and politician partisanship matter, we expect that possessing two advantageous traits is better than having only one. Thus, under conditions of terrorist threat, a Republican incumbent should be better off than a Republican challenger or a Democratic incumbent; in times of economic threat, the Democratic challenger should be better off than those same two candidates. To clarify using the former case (terrorist threat) as an example, the public’s tendency to rally around an incumbent combined with the public’s tendency to perceive Republicans as most competent on terrorism should strongly advantage the Republican incumbent; if that same individual were either not an incumbent but a challenger or not a Republican but a Democrat, some of the sheen accorded to the politician should wane by virtue of now only having one advantageous trait. Existing theory and empirical work do not tell us, however, whether one of the two traits will carry more weight.

Last, having neither advantage should be worse than having just one. In the case of terrorist threat, a Democratic challenger 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. Likewise, the Republican incumbent in times of economic decline is not only the one likely to be held accountable but also belongs to a party seen as less able to soften the damages resulting from that recession. Thus, in both cases, we expect the public to express the least positive evaluations toward political figures who hold two disadvantageous traits.

The Differing Effects of Terror Threat on Assessments of Bush and Obama

Contemporary politics provides the opportunity to examine, and contrast, how terror threat affects evaluations of a Republican vs. a Democratic President. 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. In contrast, Barack Obama can be characterized as having dueling traits, an incumbency status that should benefit him in times of terror threat but a Democratic partisanship that ought to mitigate any rally caused by national security concerns.

There is a rich source of data in the American National Election Panel study of 2000-2002-2004 with which to assess how concerns about terrorism affect evaluations of President George W. Bush. An event in late 2009 increased the salience of terror threat again and provided us an opportunity to examine how concerns about terrorism affect President Barack Obama. Specifically, one month after the failed Christmas Day bombing on a flight coming into Detroit, we placed a set of questions about worry about future terrorist attacks and perceptions of Obama as a strong leader on an Angus Reid online national poll. The poll was fielded the week of January 25th, 2010, with a sample of 1,006 respondents. We compare analyses of these data with those using the 2002 wave of the ANES since both leaders were then in the early stages of their term in office.

Our dependent variable is the same across the two datasets, assessments of the leadership qualities of the two leaders. Respondents were asked to evaluate whether the phrase “he provides strong leadership,” describes George W. Bush/Barack Obama extremely well, quite well, not too well, or not at all, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations. We rescaled the measure to run from zero to one.

We have similar, though not identical, measures of worry about terrorism across the two datasets. In the ANES study, respondents were asked to assess how likely it is that there will be another terrorist attack on U.S. soil on a four-point scale in which higher values indicate more likely. While this is a fairly good measure, it does not directly capture worry about pending threats. An individual might conceivably believe a terrorist attack is likely (and report that on the ANES survey) but not be worried about the attack. Alternatively an individual may not think an attack is extremely
likely but still be very worried about the prospect. We therefore opted to use questions that more explicitly capture worry about terrorism on the Angus Reid poll. Half of the respondents were asked how worried they are that the United States will experience a large-scale terrorist attack, similar to 9/11, in the near future. The other half were asked instead how worried they are that the United States will experience a small-scale terrorist attack, similar to the recently attempted Christmas Day plane bombing, in the near future. Both measures are coded on a four-point scale with higher values indicating more worry. We rescaled the terrorism measures from both surveys to range from zero to one. Since we are dealing with observational data, we control for partisanship, ideology, whether the person voted for Bush/Obama, gender, race, education, and income. All of the control variables are also rescaled to run from zero to one.

OLS results of models predicting evaluations of Bush’s and Obama’s leadership evaluations are presented in Table 1. We report one-tailed tests for the effects of terrorism on Bush’s leadership since we have clear directional expectations, and two-tailed tests for Obama since we do not have clear directional expectations. Turning first to evaluations of Bush, as expected, we observe a boost in evaluations of his leadership capabilities as individuals think future attacks are more likely; the effect is marginally significant at p=0.08, one-tailed. While Democrats have lower leadership evaluations and Republicans have higher leadership evaluations of Bush in general, they appear to react similarly to terrorism in 2002. This is evidenced by the fact that, if we run another model interacting the terrorism variable with the partisanship dummies, we do not find any evidence

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7 Exact wording of the questions was as follows: 1) How worried are you that the United States will experience a large-scale terrorist attack, similar to 9/11, in the near future? 2) How worried are you that the United States will experience a small-scale terrorist attack, similar to the recently attempted Christmas Day plane bombing, in the near future?

8 We use dummy variables for partisanship, with Independents serving as the baseline. Higher values on ideology indicate being more conservative. The ANES study asked this question on a seven-point scale, while the Angus Reid poll asked it on a five-point scale. Higher values indicate more education and income. Education was coded on a seven-point scale in both surveys, while income was a seven-point scale on the ANES study but a six-point scale on the Angus Reid Poll. We use white as the baseline race category in the models.

9 We recognize with only four values to the dependent variable, an ordered probit may be more appropriate. The results are the same if we use ordered probit. For ease of presentation, we use OLS. The p-value on the terrorism measure for the Bush model is also lower for the ordered probit analysis (p=0.06, one-tailed).
of a moderating relationship between terrorism and partisanship. These finding are consistent with extant experimental research. In an experimental study during the 2004 presidential election, Merolla and Zechmeister (2009) show that subjects exposed to a terror threat article perceive Bush as a stronger leader compared to those who are not primed to think about terrorism, and they do not find any moderating effects by partisanship.

Table 1: Effect of Terror Threat on Leadership Evaluations of Bush and Obama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bush Large Scale Attack</th>
<th>Obama Large Scale Attack</th>
<th>Obama Small Scale Attack</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Standard Error)</td>
<td>(Standard Error)</td>
<td>(Standard Error)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.505**</td>
<td>0.514**</td>
<td>0.452**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
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<td>(0.046)</td>
<td>(0.051)</td>
<td>(0.049)</td>
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<td>-0.082**</td>
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<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
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<td>0.089**</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.032)</td>
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<td>(0.062)</td>
<td>(0.060)</td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
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<td>(0.080)</td>
<td>(0.080)</td>
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<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
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<td>0.470</td>
<td>0.474</td>
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</table>

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

The picture changes when we turn to a leader with dueling traits, Barack Obama. Among those asked for their level of worry about a large scale terrorist attack (second data column), rather
than observe a rally behind the sitting Democratic president, we see a significant negative effect of worry about terrorism on assessments of his leadership. This effect, moreover, is substantively quite significant: all else equal, moving from not being worried at all to being very worried about a large scale future attack decreases evaluations of Obama as a strong leader by 0.16 units on a 0 to 1 scale. For the half of the sample asked for their level of worry over a small-scale terrorist attack (last data column), we do not observe any significant effect of worry about terrorism on evaluations of Obama’s leadership. It appears then that Obama’s leadership evaluations suffer when people are worried about a large-scale attack but are not affected when people are worried about a small-scale attack. Either way, he certainly does not get the boost accorded to George W. Bush. If we run models interacting the terrorism measures with partisanship, we only find support for a moderating relationship among Democrats, who do not become more negative of Obama’s leadership capabilities when worried about a large-scale attack and do rally behind him when worried about a small-scale attack. Meanwhile, Republicans and Independents similarly perceive Obama as a weaker leader if they are worried about a large-scale attack, while there is no effect if they are worried about a small-scale attack.

In sum, preliminary evidence suggests that Obama does not get the same type of boost in leadership evaluations among those concerned about terrorist threats as we found for President Bush. Of course, other factors, unrelated to differences in partisanship, might explain these findings. For example, given that the attack on 9/11 was different in multiple ways from the attempted attack on Christmas Day 2009, one could argue that any of these differences, and not politician partisanship, are responsible for the differing connections between worry about terrorism and evaluations of the sitting president that we see comparing 2002 to 2010. In the next section, we turn to an experimental design in which we are able to rule out these threats to internal validity.

10 The results are consistent if we use ordered probit instead of OLS.
11 Results available upon request.
Putting Politician Partisanship to the Test

To truly put our argument considering the importance of politician partisanship to the test, we need an experimental context in which we hold everything constant except partisanship and incumbency. We did so in 2008 via a national online study in which we presented participants with mock gubernatorial election scenarios. By presenting the same threat context, either terrorist or economic, while varying the candidates’ incumbency status (including none for an open-seat race) and partisanship (including none in a non-partisan race), we can assess the extent to which individuals’ evaluations of leaders’ capacity for strong leadership, competence, and responsibility, as well as their ultimate vote choice, are influenced by both incumbency and politician partisanship.

Expectations

We begin by stating our expectations. To refresh from our earlier theoretical discussion, in races in which partisanship information is not provided, rally ‘round the flag and retrospective voter theories support the following predictions:

H1a: In times of Terror Threat, Incumbent (I) > Challenger (C)

H1b: In times of Economic Threat, C > I

When instead the race does not contain an incumbent, but merely a Republican versus a Democratic candidate, issue ownership theory supports the following predictions:

H2a: In times of Terror Threat, GOP-Open Seat > Dem-O

H2b: In times of Economic Threat, Dem-O > GOP-O

Finally, 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 the perspective of a politician) 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 in between the ends staked out by the “best of all” candidates. That is, we expect them to fare worse (better) than a candidate with two advantageous (disadvantageous) traits. Because extant research is silent on whether incumbency or candidate partisanship will matter more, we assume they matter equally and thus begin with a soft expectation that evaluations of Democratic Incumbents and Republican Challengers will be essentially equivalent. Thus, our final hypotheses are as follows:

**H3a**: In times of *Terror Threat*, GOP I > GOP C = Dem I > Dem C

**H3b**: In times of *Economic Threat*, Dem C > GOP C = Dem I > GOP I

**Study Design**

To assess the influence of incumbency and candidate partisanship on evaluations made in the context of threat, we conducted a between-subjects, random assignment study containing eight conditions. The context varies between “Terror Threat” and “Economic Threat”. Each context contains four cells describing a gubernatorial contest: Democrat vs. Republican (open seat); Incumbent vs. Challenger (no partisanship information provided); Democrat Incumbent vs. Republican Opponent; Republican Incumbent vs. Democrat Opponent. The treatment was delivered in the form of a news article; the treatment’s objective was to define the threat and electoral context (see Appendix for materials). The use of a mock, but realistic news article containing multiple layers of information (e.g., type of race, reminders of past incidents, expert warnings, and the country’s vulnerability) increases external validity to the extent that it mirrors the information environment an individual confronts in times of real threat. If, in times of actual and

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12 In seven past studies we have successfully induced worry about terrorism and the economy using similar news stories, relative to scenarios depicting better times and relative to classic control conditions.
serious threat, individuals are – outside the sterile lab setting – bombarded with additional information about the threat, our study may under-estimate the effects of such a context.\textsuperscript{13}

The study was conducted via Knowledge Networks in December 2008. 750 subjects were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions, which resulted in observations within each cell that ranged from a low of 81 in one condition (Economic Threat, Republican Incumbent) to a high of 98 observations in two of the remaining Economic Threat conditions (the observations in the Terrorist Threat conditions ranged from 93 to 97). The sample was drawn to be as close to census representative as possible across geographic, demographic, and socio-economic lines. The average age in the sample is 49 years and 75 percent of the sample identifies as White, 11.8 percent as Hispanic, and 7.5 percent as Black. Roughly 32 percent of the sample completed their education with a high school degree, 29 percent with some college experience, and 27 percent with a college degree or more. These characteristics compare well with data from the last decennial census. According to census data, about 74 percent of the population is White, 12.3 percent is Black, and 15.1 percent is Hispanic. Meanwhile, the median age in the census is 36.7, while about 27.4 percent of the public has a bachelor’s degree or higher. While the census does not report on party identification, the average respondent in our study occupies the center, with a mean value of 3.9 on the traditional seven-point party identification scale.

Participants were invited to participate in an election for governor occurring in the near future in another state, with the specific state not identified. They were then asked to read one of two articles, which contained information about the context (economic or terrorist threat) and about the election. No information was given about the candidate’s gender or age, and what little background information was provided was equivalent across the two candidates (see Appendix). Our dependent variables were measured post-stimulus (see Appendix for wording). We assess

\textsuperscript{13} Assessments of generalizability must address the information environment; post-9/11, the front page of the \textit{New York Times} carried no story other than terrorism; under less serious threats, the scope of news stories may be less restricted.
evaluations of leadership with questions replicated from the ANES candidate trait battery, which ask to what degree “strong leader” describes each candidate; we assess competency by asking which candidate is better able to handle the given threat; and, for those races with a sitting candidate, we assess responsibility by asking whether the incumbent is to blame for current conditions in the state. Subjects also cast a vote in the hypothetical contest. Our independent variables are incumbency status (if any), candidate partisanship (if any), and the type of threat.

Post-study diagnostics using Chi-squared and ANOVA tests revealed no statistically significant differences among the eight conditions with respect to age, education, gender, race, and partisanship. We therefore analyze mean values on our key variables across conditions, as is appropriate under this type of research design. Because we are interested in general tendencies and because the number of observations drops to perilously low levels from the perspective of statistical reliability, we do not break down the data into theoretically interesting sub-groups of the population. Finally, where we have clear uni-directional hypotheses supported by extant theories, we evaluate those using one-tailed hypothesis tests; in all other cases, we use two-tailed tests.

Manipulation Checks

We included two types of manipulation test questions to ensure that subjects paid attention to the article and to assess how they were affected by the threat (see Appendix for wording). First we confirm that individuals did indeed pay attention to the articles, in that they were able to recall basic information about the election scenario. The question that we asked was whether Candidate A was the incumbent, Candidate B was the incumbent, or if the information was not provided. In the six conditions that contained an incumbent, the vast majority of respondents correctly responded that Candidate A was the incumbent. The percent of correct answers for those six conditions

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As one would expect, partisanship matters at the individual level, with greater support for Democratic candidates expressed by those indicating identification with that party and the reverse for Republicans. Our focus here is on the less-investigated question of how general tendencies in the population shift depending on the electoral and threat situations we present.
ranged from 69 in the Terror Threat, Democratic Incumbent condition to 84 in the Terror Threat, Republican Incumbent condition. In the two conditions for which there was no incumbent, the vast majority of respondents correctly responded that there was no information about incumbency provided (73 percent in the Economic Threat condition and 87 percent in the Terror Threat condition). We therefore conclude that, overall, respondents read the article with a reasonable degree of care.

Second we verify that the treatments had the intended effects, making those in the Economic Threat condition relatively more worried about the economy and vice versa for those in the Terror Threat condition. We asked respondents to indicate on a 7-point scale “how worried” they are that there will be an economic recession or a terrorist attack, respectively for the two questions, in the near future. In each case values on these variables are higher in the corresponding crisis condition. Thus, the mean value on \textit{Worry Economy} is 5.0 in the Terror Threat condition and 5.5 in the Economic Threat condition while the mean value on \textit{Worry Terrorism} is 3.5 in the Economic Threat condition and 5.0 in the Terror Threat condition.\textsuperscript{15} Across conditions within each type of worry (Worry Economy, Worry Terrorism), the means are statistically distinct at $p \leq 0.01$, two-tailed. Thus, the treatments worked as expected in terms of creating relatively more threat-specific worry in the given condition.

\section*{The Conditional Nature of Strong Leadership Evaluations}

In assessing the experiment-based data, our principal dependent variable is an evaluation of the candidates’ capacity for strong leadership. Our argument is that assessments of candidates’ capacities for strong leadership are conditional on the type of crisis, incumbency, and candidate partisanship.

\textsuperscript{15} The relatively high value on \textit{Worry Economy} in the Terror Threat condition is consistent with our past work on terrorism, which suggests that the specter of terrorist threat increases concerns about corresponding financial loses (a link confirmed for the public by the economic dip that followed 9/11); it may also be due to the fact that, in the fall of 2008, the U.S. had begun a severe economic decline.
Terror Threat

We first consider whether assessments of candidates’ capacities for “strong leadership” vary under conditions of terror threat. H1a and H2a contain expectations that relate to conditions when the candidates differ by incumbent vs. non-incumbent status and when the candidates differ by partisanship, respectively. In these cases, extant theory provides clear expectations that the incumbent will fare better than the challenger (H1a), and the Republican better than the Democrat (H2a). We find clear support for the former hypothesis. As Figure 1 shows, the Incumbent in the non-partisan race is perceived as the stronger leader, receiving a mean evaluation of 4.28 versus the Challenger’s mean rating of 4.04. The difference between the two mean evaluations is significant at \( p=0.03 \), one-tailed. Thus, in a mock election for state-level executive office, we find strong support for predictions stemming from rally ‘round the flag research; individuals favor the incumbent in this situation, perceiving that individual as a stronger, more effective leader than his or her challenger. In contrast, we do not find support for H2a. The Republican opponent appears to be evaluated relatively worse, receiving a mean rating of 4.05, compared to the Democratic opponent who is evaluated at 4.23; however, this difference is not statistically significant (our expectations on direction are not met; \( p=0.24 \), two-tailed). Thus, while issue ownership theory suggests that Republicans should be perceived better under conditions of national security threat, this does not seem to be the case in times of terror threat absent information about incumbency.
We next turn to situations that contain both an incumbent and information about candidate partisanship. Our principal expectation is that a Republican incumbent will be perceived as significantly stronger than a Democratic challenger (see H3a). In the case of incumbent Republicans, both issue ownership theory (which suggests Republicans own issues related to national security) and rally ‘round the flag’ research predict that this candidate will be perceived in a far more positive light than his or her Democratic challenger. And, indeed, our data (see Figure 2) show this to be the case. The Republican Incumbent in the Terror Threat condition receives a value of 4.38 on the Strong Leadership variable while the Democrat Challenger receives a value of 4.06. The difference between these values is statistically significant at p=0.01, one-tailed.

Given that the literature suggests a mixed reaction to a Democrat incumbent (whose incumbency is a benefit in times of terrorist threat, but whose partisanship is not) and to a Republican challenger (who is helped by partisanship but not by being in the seat), we expect values for leaders with those traits to be somewhere in the middle of the range created by the Republican Incumbent and Democrat Challenger (see H3a). Again, the data support this expectation. The Democrat
Incumbent is rated at a mean value of 4.16 while the Republican Challenger is rated at a mean value of 4.18, values that are statistically indistinguishable from each other.

The data in Figure 2 almost seem to suggest an additive effect of partisanship and incumbency; however, whereas these mean values are statistically distinct from that of the Republican Incumbent, they are not statistically distinguishable from that of the Democratic Challenger. In other words, a Republican incumbent in times of terror threat has a clear advantage over all other candidate types in these races. The relatively more favorable attitude we find expressed toward the Republican Incumbent is consistent with our findings earlier in the paper showing that evaluations of Republican President George W. Bush increased as a result of terrorist threat, a relationship also demonstrated in other work (Berinsky 2009; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009a).

Figure 2. Leadership Evaluations in Contested, Partisan Races under Terror Threat

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16 We expected that the mean evaluation for the Republican Incumbent would be greater than the Republican Challenger, and the data support this (difference significant at p=0.06, one-tailed). As well, the mean value for the Democratic Incumbent is statistically distinct from the value for the Republican Incumbent at p=0.05, one-tailed. Neither the mean value on the Democratic Incumbent, on the one hand, nor the Republican Challenger, on the other, is statistically distinct from that of the Democratic Challenger (one-tailed p-values of 0.22 and 0.17, respectively).
Economic Threat

Turning to conditions of economic threat, we again begin by assessing those races that are non-partisan or have an open seat. Here our expectations are the reverse as those we had for the terror threat condition. In the case of economic threat, our principal expectation is that a challenger will fare better than an incumbent, and a Democrat better than a Republican. The means for each candidate type on strong leadership are presented in Figure 3. In the non-partisan race, the Challenger (mean of 3.84) is perceived as a stronger leader than the Incumbent (mean of 3.7), though this difference is not quite statistically significant (p=0.13, one-tailed). In the open race, the Democrat fares worse than the Republican competing for that open seat; however, the difference between the two party affiliates is not statistically significant (uni-directional expectation is not met; p-value=0.42, two-tailed). Thus, again, the expectation developed drawing on issue ownership theory is not supported in open seat elections.

Figure 3. Leadership Evaluations in non-Partisan and Open Seat Races, Economic Threat
Considering races with partisan information and an incumbent, we posited that a Democrat challenger should be perceived as a stronger leader than a Republican incumbent. We expect this because the Democratic party “owns” the type of economic issues that can provide a safety net in times of financial decline and because the “vengeance” exacted by voters against an incumbent overseeing economic decline should benefit the challenger. We again expect that those cases in which a candidate has one advantageous trait and one disadvantageous trait (Republican Challenger or Democrat Incumbent) will end up in the mid-range between the poles carved out by the first two candidate types. As Figure 4 shows, the data confirm these expectations.

**Figure 4. Leadership Evaluations in Contested, Partisan Races under Economic Threat**

![Bar chart showing leadership evaluations](image)

On the strong leadership measure, the Democrat Challenger receives a high mean rating of 3.83, which is much higher than the 3.29 mean value received by the Republican Incumbent. The difference between these two values is statistically significant at p=0.00. Clearly, in times of economic decline, the “hero” that people seek out, and project leadership qualities onto, is a Democratic Challenger. We further see that, as expected, the mean values for the Republican Challenger and Democratic Incumbent fall in between those two extremes, at 3.60 and 3.46 respectively. There appears to be a slight
advantage given to the Republican who is challenging the seat than the Democrat who occupies it; in other words, non-incumbency status may matter more than having the “right” partisanship in the face of an economic crisis; however, this difference is small and not statistically significant (p=0.33, two-tailed). The difference between the Democratic Challenger and Republican Challenger is significant at p=0.05, one-tailed. The difference between the former and the Democrat Incumbent is significant at p=0.01, one-tailed. Finally, while the difference between the Democrat Incumbent and the Republican Incumbent is also as expected, it is not quite statistically significant (p=0.15, one-tailed). However, the difference between Republican Challenger and Republican Incumbent is significant at p=0.02, one-tailed. Thus, we find evidence that incumbency exerts a more robust effect than candidate partisanship: it is more important to be the challenger in times of economic threat than it is to be a Democrat, though being both puts one in the best possible position in these types of races, at least with respect to leadership evaluations.

**Competence over and Responsibility for the Crisis**

In this next section we extend our investigation into candidate assessment by examining evaluations of competence over and responsibility for the given threat. We narrow our focus to incumbents affiliated with the Democratic or Republican Party. One possible explanation for rally effects in times of national security crisis and for classic retrospective voting is that, in the former case, the incumbent is perceived as handling the security threat well and in the latter class, the incumbent is viewed as an incompetent manager of the economy. Another probable factor in rally effects and, conversely, decisions to throw the “rascal” out in times of national security and economic crisis is an assessment that the incumbent is either not to blame or is to blame for the respective crises (Gomez and Wilson 2001). But, are incumbents treated differently depending on their partisanship? At the least, issue ownership theory and the results from the previous section for
races featuring an incumbent suggest that candidate partisanship may influence evaluations made of the incumbent under national security and economic threats.

To examine evaluations of competence over the threat, we asked respondents a single question in which they indicated, on a five-point scale, whether Candidate A or Candidate B “will be better able to handle” the given threat confronting the state. We focus on evaluations of partisan incumbents relative to their challengers. If partisanship does not matter, then we would expect equal assessments of competence across Democrat and Republican incumbents in both the Terror Threat and the Economic Threat conditions. Our expectation, however, is that assessments of competence will mirror the expectations we established in H3a and H3b regarding the partisan incumbents. Specifically, we expect higher evaluations for the Republican incumbent relative to the Democrat incumbent under conditions of terrorist threat and we expect the reverse under conditions of economic threat. Mean evaluations of competence are presented in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Perceived Competence of the Incumbent with Respect to the Given Threat, Conditional on Candidate Partisanship
The results are in line with expectations. Considering the Terror Threat condition, we find a greater tendency for the Republican Incumbent to be perceived as better able to handle the threat (compared to his opponent) than the Democrat Incumbent (compared to her opponent). The mean values for the Republican and Democrat incumbents in the Terror Threat condition are 3.35 and 3.19 respectively; this difference is significant at p=0.08, one-tailed. We find, as expected, the reverse situation when we consider Economic Threat. Here the Democrat Incumbent receives a mean rating of 3.03 while the Republican Incumbent receives a 2.87 (p=0.09, one-tailed). Thus it appears that partisanship matters when it comes to assessing the competence of an incumbent in the face of a terror or economic threat.

Are evaluations of responsibility also conditional on the partisanship of the incumbent? To subjects assigned to conditions that had an incumbent candidate, we asked to what extent they believed that candidate (Candidate A) was “responsible for current conditions”? If the partisanship of the candidate is irrelevant, then we should find an equal level of blame allocated to these candidates. On the other hand, if partisanship combines with incumbency status to influence responsibility attribution in a similar manner to leadership evaluations, then we should find that Democrat incumbents are blamed more for terrorist threat than Republican incumbents and that Republican incumbents are blamed more for economic threat than Democrat incumbents (again, as per H3a and H3b). Given that terrorist threats are externally provoked while economic downturns are usually internal failures, we expect overall blame to be lower in the terror threat comparisons. Figure 6 reports mean assessments of responsibility for the crisis, conditional on threat and candidate partisanship.
Figure 6. Amount of Responsibility Assigned to the Incumbent, Conditional on Threat and Candidate Partisanship

Figure 6 shows that the Republican Incumbent in the Terror Threat condition (mean value is 2.64) is blamed less than the Democrat Incumbent (mean value is 2.77). The difference is in the expected direction, though not statistically significant (p=0.23, one-tailed). Under conditions of Economic Threat, the Republican Incumbent is blamed significantly more (mean value is 3.22) than the Democrat Incumbent (mean value is 3.02). This result is just at the boundary of statistical significance (p=0.10, one-tailed). In other words, the data are consistent with, but do not document with strong reliability, the existence of a slight tendency to differentiate responsibility attribution according to the partisanship of the incumbent. As we would expect, we do clearly see that blame for either type of incumbent is lower in the terror threat conditions compared to the economic threat conditions, and these differences are statistically meaningful (p=0.00, one-tailed for both comparisons).

The Relevance of Candidate Assessments to Candidate Support under Threat

As we have suggested throughout, evaluations of strong leadership, assessments of competence, and blame attribution are some of the likely explanations behind the mass public’s
decision to rally behind an incumbent in times of national security crisis or to toss that individual out of office in times of economic decline. We would be remiss, then, to conclude without presenting some analysis of the relationship between these assessments and an indicator of general candidate support. Such an analysis also allows us one more opportunity to examine the ways in which incumbency and candidate partisanship condition attitudes toward politicians in times of crisis.

To examine general support, we asked respondents to cast a vote for either Candidate A or Candidate B in the gubernatorial election. We examine choice under each threat context separately, and include as independent variables evaluations of the Difference in Strong Leadership across Candidate A and B (created by subtracting evaluations of B from those of A; higher values therefore reflect greater assessments of A); Competence (recall individuals rated the relative competence of A versus B; higher values indicate greater assessments of A); Responsibility (higher values indicate more blame for Candidate A, the incumbent); and, dummy variables for the experimental condition (Democratic Incumbent, Republican Incumbent; the baseline category is Incumbent with no party information). We limit our analysis to races that contained an incumbent, as the Responsibility question was only asked in those cases.

Table 2 shows the results of a logit analysis predicting vote choice under conditions of terrorist threat. We see clear evidence that leadership evaluations and competence matter. However, responsibility assessments are not significant predictors of vote choice in this context. We further see, interestingly, that the signs on Democratic Incumbent and Republican Incumbent are negative; in other words, after controlling for candidate trait assessments, the incumbent without any partisanship information is preferred over a sitting candidate of either party. The substantive effects of both leadership and competence are quite large. Moving from one standard deviation below the mean on the leadership variable to one standard deviation above it results in an individual being 79.4
percentage points more likely to support Candidate A; for competence, the same shift results in an individual being 42.3 percentage points more likely to support Candidate A.

**Table 2. Predicting Voter Choice under Conditions of Terrorist Threat**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient (Standard Error)</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.587 (1.478)</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in Leadership</td>
<td>2.542 (0.536)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>1.568 (0.460)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>-0.066 (0.135)</td>
<td>0.624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.901 (0.406)</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Incumbent</td>
<td>-1.277 (0.422)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>265</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 presents a similar analysis of voter choice, but this time for conditions of economic decline. We see that all three candidate trait assessments – leadership, competence, and blame – are significant, and in the expected direction. The more highly an individual assesses Candidate A’s relative capacity for strong leadership and competence, the more likely the individual is to cast a vote for that incumbent candidate; and, the more the individual blames Candidate A, the less likely he or she is to support that candidate. While responsibility was not a significant predictor of candidate support under conditions of terrorist threat, it is under conditions of economic threat. The substantive impact of all three assessments on vote choice is substantial. Moving evaluations of leadership and competence – respectively – from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above it – an individual’s odds of supporting Candidate A increase by 50 and 60.1 percentage points. Moving across a similar range for the responsibility variable decreases the likelihood of voting for Candidate A by 25.6 percentage points. Finally, we see that the coefficient
on the Democratic Incumbent condition is positive and significant, suggesting that this candidate is preferred in times of economic threat over a non-identified Incumbent or a Republican Incumbent. At the time of our experiment, Democratic candidate Barack Obama had just been elected (and not yet inaugurated) into the presidential office in the midst of economic decline; the data here may be reflecting a type of coat-tail effect as a result.

Table 3. Predicting Voter Choice under Conditions of Economic Decline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient (Standard Error)</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.515 (1.524)</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in</td>
<td>0.918 (0.274)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>1.879 (0.449)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>-0.549 (0.214)</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>0.693 (0.391)</td>
<td>0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Incumbent</td>
<td>0.232 (0.421)</td>
<td>0.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Incumbent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that, overall, the candidate trait assessments we have examined in times of threat – leadership, competence, and responsibility – do help explain overall support (vote choice). Thus, taken together, candidate partisanship (or lack of partisanship) and incumbency condition voter choice in times of threat and they does so in two ways. They exert an indirect effect by way of influencing these assessments, as documented in particular for leadership and competence, in the previous empirical sections. And, they exert a direct effect that differs across conditions of crisis, with a non-identified (non-partisan) incumbent being more preferred in times of terrorist threat and a Democratic incumbent being relatively more preferred in times of economic threat (when candidate traits are controlled for in the model). While we would have expected the Republican
incumbent to be most preferred in times of terrorist threat, this result is due largely to the fact that effect of Republican incumbency is working through leadership and competency evaluations. Recall, these results are found after we control for candidate trait assessments; if we run a logit analysis predicting vote choice with only the experimental conditions we find, for the terrorist threat condition, that the coefficient on Democratic Incumbent is negative and significant (p=0.001) while the coefficient on Republican Incumbent is positive and significant (p=0.004).

We have thus far concentrated almost exclusively on comparisons within each threat condition. As a final comment on the empirical results, we compare across threat conditions. The data in Tables 2 and 3, when considered in light of prior research, reveal an interesting result with respect to the Difference in Leadership variable. In previous research, we have argued this variable should exert a greater influence on voter choice under conditions of terrorist threat compared to better times. Evidence shows that evaluations of strong leadership have this relatively greater effect on support for George W. Bush post-9/11 (Berinsky 2009) and on candidate support among those threatened by terrorism across three elections: Bush vs. Kerry, Schwarzenegger vs. Davis, and McCain vs. Obama (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009a, 2009b). This research is premised on the notion that strong leadership capacity matters most, relative to other candidate traits, in times of terrorist threat. In times of economic threat, while strong leadership should matter, we might expect other traits such as empathy to be more highly valued. Comparing the coefficients across the two analyses, we see that the coefficient on the leadership variable is greater in the terror threat condition, supporting the notion that this trait is more highly valued under the context compared to others.17 In contrast, responsibility is significant in conditions of economic threat but not in

17 If we combine the analyses presented in Tables 2 and 3 into a single model of vote choice and include a variable indicating assignment to the Terror Threat condition and an interaction between that variable and leadership, the interaction variable is significant at p=0.012.
conditions of terrorist threat. And, finally, the effect of competence appears fairly similar across the two conditions.  

Conclusion

Warnings of financial devastation, lethal terrorist plots, or both 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 alters evaluations made of politicians’ leadership strength, competence, and responsibility, in particular in the context of national security and economic threats. In considering the extent to which incumbency and politician partisanship influence assessments of leaders and candidates made under conditions of threat, our research accomplishes several objectives.

We began by analyzing survey data that depicts a positive connection between worry about terrorism and evaluations of George W. Bush’s leadership capacity, while it depicts – at best – no such connection for similar evaluations of Barack Obama. In short, evaluations made of actual sitting Republican and Democratic Presidents are differently influenced by concerns about terrorist threat. These results are consistent with surges in Bush’s approval ratings following 9/11 and a lack of change in approval ratings for Obama following 12/25/09. These results are also in accord with our arguments about politician partisanship, but we cannot easily rule out alternative interpretations.

We follow-up these suggestive results with evidence from an experiment that allows us to examine, first, the separate influences of incumbency and candidate partisanship. In the experiment, some participants were presented with a hypothetical race with an incumbent but no partisanship information and others an open seat race with partisanship information. We find evidence, across

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18 If we combine the analyses presented in Tables 1 and 2, per the previous footnote, but this time include a dummy variable for the Terror Threat condition and its interaction with the competence variable, the interaction variable is not statistically significant (p=0.887).
terrorist and economic threats, that incumbency matters; the incumbent is viewed in a more positive
light in times of terrorist threat and in a worse light in times of economic threat, relative to his or her
challenger. Interestingly, however, we do not find support for hypotheses concerning candidate
partisanship in the open seat race.

Second, the experiment allowed us to consider races in which both types of information are
present, along with a threat. Here we find clear evidence that having two advantageous
characteristics (e.g., incumbency status and Republican party identification in times of terrorist
threat) leads to significantly higher leadership evaluations compared to other candidates. We find
some evidence, in particular, in the economic threat condition, that having just one advantageous
characteristic is better than the “worse of all worlds”, having neither.

Third, considering assessments of competence and responsibility alongside strong leadership
evaluations, our research suggests that the depth of a rally following a national security threat and
the extent to which the incumbent is punished following an economic crisis are bound to be
conditioned by the sitting politician’s partisanship. Simply put, the mass public treats sitting
politicians who are confronting either a national security or financial threat differently depending on
their party affiliation. These results are most robust in the case of strong leadership evaluations and
competence assessments; they are suggested, but not as reliable, in our consideration of
responsibility. Further, these assessments have clear consequences for voter choice, though ones
that differ across the two threats in expected and interesting ways. We find that leadership and
competence evaluations, but not responsibility, predict voter choice in times of terrorist threat; in
contrast, all three assessments predict voter choice under conditions of economic decline. In an
interesting extension to existing research on the importance of strong leadership in times of terror
threat, the data further reveal that strong leadership assessments are weighted more heavily under
conditions of terror threat relative to conditions of economic threat.
In conclusion, the results have important implications for politics in today’s world, which we can see by focusing in on terror threat. Recently, President Barack Obama found that an attempted terrorist bomb attack on Christmas Day did not translate into a rally of political support. Whereas his predecessor benefited throughout most of his tenure in office from instances in which terror threat was heightened, the public response to Obama was lukewarm following the event. Polls showed his approval ratings remained essentially flat. Our research sheds important light on this phenomenon. In our analysis of the survey data, we found that individuals worried about a large-scale terrorist attack actually perceived Barack Obama as a weaker leader, while worry about a small-scale terrorist attack had no effect on leadership evaluations. Since the failed Christmas Day attack was considered a small-scale attempt, it makes sense that approval ratings remained flat. The analysis of our hypothetical election revealed that leadership evaluations granted to Democratic incumbents are significantly lower than those granted to Republican Incumbents in times of terror threat. In short, controlling for possible confounding factors by way of an experimental design, we find clear differences in how the public evaluates these two types of leaders in times of threat. We therefore conclude that, while the public may possess a tendency to rally behind the flag in cases of national security threat, the extent to which that rally materializes is conditional upon the partisanship of the sitting executive.
Works Cited


