CrossMark

In Capable Hands: An Experimental Study of the Effects of Competence and Consistency on Leadership Approval

Ayala Yarkoney Sorek [1] · Kathryn Haglin[1] · Nehemia Geva[1]

Abstract Current research demonstrates that instances where leaders' promises and actions are inconsistent leads to lower public approval and support. While there are exceptions to this trend there is no cohesive framework to address this issue. We introduce a conceptualization where public reactions to a leader's inconsistency is placed in a broader context of public perception of the leader's overall competency. We claim the public evaluation of the leader is dependent on her competency. And while inconsistency of a particular act can negatively affect public evaluations of the leader, the extent of that effect is conditioned by leaders' competency. To test this perspective we experimentally manipulate both the competency of the leader as well as her consistency in following up on her promises. Furthermore, we expand the context of inconsistency to include both international and domestic domains. We find both leaders' competency and inconsistency matter in public approval. Our findings hold across policy domains and levels of issue salience.

Keywords Presidential approval · Consistency · Competency · Experiment

When a leader fails to follow through on a threat or promise, conventional wisdom indicates that this inconsistency causes backlash in approval ratings and support (Hummel 2010). Yet this is not always the case. Leaders who do not follow through on a promise sometimes escape public sanction, creating variation in the effects of

✉ Kathryn Haglin
  hagl0098@tamu.edu

[1] Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University, 2010 Allen Building, 4348 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4348, USA

🖉 Springer

inconsistency on approval of said leader. For example, in 2013 President Barack Obama promised to take action against the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Despite evidence of chemical weapons use, Obama never took any steps outlined in his "red line" speech, yet faced no significant public backlash.

This variance in public reactions to broken promises is a critical puzzle for scholars of public opinion, elections, executive politics, and any other field concerned with the politics of commitment. Unkept promises can lead to a loss of political capital, electoral support, or international credibility. In this project, we explore this puzzle and argue that approval of a leader is driven by both competency and inconsistency. Specifically, we suggest that the effect of consistency is conditioned by the effect of competency. Competency is often assumed to serve as a baseline for the overall impression of a leader, and is often referred to in studies of leadership as a general term for various attributes of a leader. Yet previous studies have not defined and examined the differential effects of competency in an experimental setting. We evaluate the effects of competency in a controlled experiment, where we manipulate both the competency of the leader as well as the leader's consistency and examine the effects on presidential approval. This work has implications for both political leaders and the voting public. By parsing the effects of consistency and competency and the conditions under which they operate, we can better understand real-world considerations regarding unkept promises used by leaders and the public.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the existing literature in international relations and American politics on inconsistency and approval. Next, we suggest a framework to explain how competency and inconsistency can explain variation in approval ratings as independent factors. Then we describe an experimental design to test our hypotheses. Our findings suggest that leadership inconsistency has political costs and approval assessments are affected by both competency and inconsistency. This finding holds not just in foreign affairs, but also in domestic politics, as well as across levels of issue salience.

Consistency and Leadership Approval

Politicians and political scientists believe that inconsistent behavior has a strong negative effect on leadership approval (Tavits 2007; Fearon 1994). Changing ones mind, or flip-flopping, is seen as detrimental because, as Hummel (2010) notes, the public may view leaders as unable to take a firm position and perhaps as less truthful as they pander to different audiences. As a result, consequences of repositioning often prevent leaders from changing their positions. Tomz and Van Houweling (2012) suggest that the tendency for the public to discount shifts towards more popular policies deters leaders from repositioning, even if they are "out-of-step" with the public. Tomz and Van Houweling (2014) also find that repositioning has substantial electoral costs. Only when public opinion reaches a certain threshold is switching positions advantageous. Additionally, research in social psychology has shown that when individuals assess a leader's traits, consistency is highly valued and meaningful, as it signals that the person is predictable and that the individual

feels a sense of control in the person's actions (Heider 1958). Thus, inconsistency in a leader's positions is expected to lead to more negative evaluations and lower approval levels.

The politics of executive inconsistency has been addressed by scholars of international relations and often described in the framework of audience costs. Students of audience cost theory argue that information about unfulfilled threats harms public approval of an executive. According to this view, leaders who issue threats in international crises and then back down can be punished at the ballot box for tarnishing the nation's reputation (Fearon 1994). Again the public values consistency between words and actions of leaders and is wary of the consequences of making threats and backing down later (Guisinger and Smith 2002; Schultz 2001; Tomz 2007). Audience cost scholars argue that since voters care about the reputation of the nation, they see these unfulfilled promises as damaging to the country and thus punish the leader with lower approval ratings. Hence, we might expect the public to punish leaders for failing to follow through on a public promise.

However, other research shows that inconsistency may not always lead to greater public disapproval for a leader. Additionally, Tomz and Van Houweling (2009) argue that inconsistency can be perceived as a positive quality in some cases. They find that a president who "waffles" on domestic politics can be perceived as "open-minded, flexible, and pragmatic" and be rewarded for their inconsistency. Similarly, Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) suggest that when the president gets new information and explains why backing down was in the nation's best interest, the audience costs he suffers shrink dramatically. In short, the public understands that backing down can sometimes be the right decision. Further, Levy et al. (2015) argue that inconsistency between threats and actions has different implications for public approval when the leader backs down from a threat compared to when the leader promises to not intervene and fails to honor this promise. They find that leaders suffer greater consequences for backing down from a threat than from failure to honor a promise to stay out of a conflict. These arguments suggest that consistency between words and actions does not produce the same effect in every context. The audience cost mechanism emerges when a leader backs down from a threat, but is limited in explaining inconsistency in other circumstances.

Scholars have offered alternative explanations for when inconsistency can produce no change in approval ratings. A large body of work, most notably Downs (1957), finds that people tend to prefer the politician whose policy stances most closely resemble their own. Since voters have varying preferences, when a leader changes their policy stance, some voters will prefer the new position, while others will prefer the original position. As such, voters will evaluate the leader differently based on their orientation to the leader's position after the change in policy stance. Previous work finds that those who support the leader's new position tend to evaluate the politician differently than those who preferred the original position. Specifically, voters evaluate politicians based on their agreement with the present position relative to their own position, with less value placed on if the politician changed their mind or not (Hoffman and Carver 1984; McCaul et al. 1995; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Croco and Gartner 2014). As a result, those who prefer the new position may find that the positive effect of substantive policy agreement outweighs the negative

impact of flip-flopping. Thus, there are times when inconsistency might increase approval of the leader.

A few conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. First, there is an on-going debate on the effect of inconsistency on leadership approval. Some scholars argue that inconsistency produces negative effects when backing down from a promise, while others show that inconsistency has positive effects on approval when the public believes reneging is the right choice. Second, it is not clear what drives the evaluative process in voters minds when they are asked to assess the consequences of inconsistency. Scholars find some voters draw upon substantive policy orientations, while others consider the reputational costs to the nation. Given these observations, we propose a framework that explains how both consistent and inconsistent behavior may lead to higher approval ratings. Specifically, we suggest a process to explain how inconsistency is interpreted in the minds of voters. This process is driven by the overall impression of a leader's competency prior to their consistent or inconsistent behavior.

Competency and Leadership Approval

Previous research has noted that competency mediates candidate support (Kinder 1986; Markus 1982). Competency is often assumed to serve as a baseline for the overall impression of a leader, yet previous studies have not examined the differential effects of competency in an experimental setting. Tomz and Van Houweling (2012) suggest that when candidates change issue positions, and thus act inconsistently, this leads to negative character evaluations (see also Doherty et al. 2016). The prior history of the candidate's position on an issue matters; however, Tomz and Van Houweling (2012) refer only to specific issue positions and not an overall impression, or competency, of a leader. This might precipitate different findings, as overall impressions are formed prior to specific acts of inconsistency, while inconsistency on specific issue positions arise as the political landscape changes.

We argue that competency evaluations have the ability to change how the public evaluates a leader's inconsistency by diminishing the effect of the inconsistent behavior. While it is plausible that other beliefs about leaders would structure reactions to inconsistency, competency can serve as an umbrella for a variety of qualities used to evaluate a leader. Executives are often not a "blank slate" with the public at the moment they choose to keep a promise or break it. The executive has typically already established a reputation for competence or incompetence that precedes any discrete decision made. Thus, by the time the promise was made and either kept or broken, the public has already formed an opinion about the executive's abilities. We argue this opinion of the leader frames new information about the executive, including revelations of a broken promise or unfulfilled threat.

Work on motivated reasoning provides support for this argument and can explain why a reputation for competence might limit negative reactions to inconsistency. Motivated reasoning suggests that previously held attitudes structure how new information is interpreted, with evidence consistent with those prior beliefs being given more weight than those that challenge prior attitudes (Leeper and Slothuus

2014; Taber and Lodge 2006). Leaders that are perceived as competent have already established a reputation for being skilled and capable at doing their jobs. Given this prior, individuals will be more likely to see inconsistency as a savvy political move rather than a demonstration of inept leadership. Of course, because individuals will condition their reaction based on their priors, there will not always be a uniform reaction to inconsistency. Those who perceive the leader as incompetent will likely find inconsistent behavior to be a signal of the leader's incompetence (Croco 2016). Thus, motivated reasoning suggests that negative reactions to inconsistent behavior might be altered by the priors held by individuals.

While competency has been examined in various literatures in political science, little work has been done on how competency can specifically frame approval. In studies focusing on presidential approval, competency is discussed in the context of presidential traits. Studies of presidential character have focused on a group of traits deemed most relevant to the presidency. Along the way, various concepts have been grouped together, and at times similar concepts are given different names. For example, Kinder (1986) focuses on competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy as key presidential character traits, but then collapses competence and leadership into one category and finds that this grouping is related to evaluations of the president's performance. Mondak (1995) notes the cross-partisan appeal of competency, but does not operationalize it in his analysis. Duch and Stevenson (2008) discuss competency as a function of economic outcomes, with voters deriving competency signals from the nation's economic performance in the previous time period. Though a part of their economic voting model, Duch and Stevenson do not address competency as a pre-existing condition or separate from economic outcomes in an approval context.

In sum, while competency as it is conceived of in this paper has been included conceptually in studies of leadership approval, its effects have not been parsed out or operationalized. Additionally, research on competency in the political science literature has specified only one possible causal path between competency and inconsistency, explaining only cases where the leader is either consistent, and thus competent, or inconsistent, and thus incompetent. In other words, competency is discussed as a consequence of inconsistency, rather than an independent factor that can reduce the effects of negative behavior on approval.

Competency and Evaluations of Inconsistency

Works addressing consistency in political science have examined the relationship between competency and inconsistent behavior. These studies view the leader's level of perceived competency as the outcome of the leader's degree of consistency. Sigelman and Sigelman (1986) discuss the importance of how people interpret the interaction between consistency and competency, noting that people focus not on the actions themselves, but rather on the fit between these actions and the president's prior record. Out-of-character actions subject the president to what is known as a "credibility gap." This credibility gap becomes the basis for which citizens formulate their perceptions of competency.

While consistency is considered a response to a specific action (or inaction) taken by a leader, we define perceived competency as a dynamic and broader assessment of a leader, constantly updating and adjusting to actions taken over time. At different points in time, the impression of the leader will be different based on the subjective assessment of the observer. For example, a newly minted president will have attempted to establish competency during the campaign, but is given more leeway early in their tenure, as they have yet to take many actions in office. The president will subsequently be evaluated based on actions taken in office and citizens observe these actions, making note of their impact along the way. It follows then that a president in their fourth year in office has much more of a record and thus their perceived competency is more clearly established with the public.

Our contribution to the leadership approval literature is that we introduce competency and consistency as independent factors and are able to use separate measures to assess the relative contribution of them on approval. Competency can intervene on the effects of inconsistency by reducing the negative backlash incurred when the leader does not fulfill a promise. If citizens are satisfied with their leader overall and feel they are in capable hands, then there is no reason to remove her from office because she fails to carry out one particular promise. In this case, flexibility can improve perceptions of competency and thus give the leader more leeway to renege on promises.

From this, we argue that approval of a leader following an inconsistent behavior is affected by perceptions of her competency. However, the consistency literature mainly attends to perceived competency as a function of consistency or inconsistency. Here we suggest that competency as a preexisting condition affects a leader's approval ratings differently and independently from inconsistent behavior. In other words, when the leader is perceived as competent prior to the inconsistent action, inconsistency may derive lower costs.

From the discussion thus far, we know that broken promises affect the approval of leaders. Research in audience cost theory demonstrates that inconsistency between words and actions causes a loss of political capital amongst the public. However, audience cost theory and other studies of leadership approval do not fully examine the variation in these responses to a leader's inconsistency. Given the previous discussion, we generate our first hypothesis

Hypothesis 1 Inconsistency between promises and actions will lead to lower approval assessments and reduce the likelihood the respondent would vote for the leader in the next election.

While inconsistency drives approval ratings, it cannot account for all the variation in said ratings. We theorize that perceived competency, rather than being a result of inconsistent behavior, is a driving force in approval assessments separate from inconsistency. From this, we generate our second and third hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 The degree of competency of the leader positively affects approval assessments.

Hypothesis 3 For leaders perceived as having higher levels of competency, the effects of inconsistent behavior will have less impact on approval ratings.

Issue Domain

Our argument expands on previous research by generalizing competency and consistency beyond the international relations context. By focusing on leaders' behavior more generally, we can parse the role of the public's perceptions more carefully and extend what we know about consistency not just to threats, but to different types of inconsistency or broken promises.

To bridge the divide between different policy domains and make comparisons between the two arenas, we control for the saliency of the issue area. The saliency of a promise may mitigate the effect of competency or the perception of inconsistency; thus, our saliency measure looks at how relevant the issue area is to the individual and the nation. Since perceived saliency is very personal, a person may choose whether to support an action or not based on the relevance of the matter to their life. In a pretest conducted prior to the final experiment, we found that our domestic politics scenario was considered more relevant to the participants. This serves as evidence that domestic matters are often seen as more immediate and pressing than events taking place abroad.[1] Furthermore, Doherty et al. (2016) find that the public penalizes changes in position on complex issues less than changes on issues seen as "more accessible" to the general public and that these more accessible matters are often domestic matters rather than foreign policy ones. They also find that the public has less confidence in their ability to evaluate changes in these more complex issues. Those complex issues also tend to be issues with foreign policy implications. These arguments support our saliency hypothesis by demonstrating that foreign policy topics elicit weaker responses to inconsistency than domestic policy topics might. From this discussion, we generate the final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 In domestic politics scenarios, individuals will be more sensitive to inconsistency due to domestic matters increased relevance to individuals.

Experimental Design and Methods

The experiment was conducted March 8–9, 2015 and followed the procedures employed in prior work in international relations (Sigelman and Sigelman 1986; Tomz 2007).

Participants

A sample of 1023 Amazon Mechanical Turk users participated in the experiment.[2] They were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions. Table 1

---

[1] While we find domestic matters to be more salient, we acknowledge that there are cases where international politics and policies are seen as more salient to the public. For example, international affairs are often more salient to military families.

[2] All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

	Parameter
Table 1 Summary of demographic variables in MTurk sample	
	Gender
	Mode Male (60%)
	Age
	Mean range 26–35 years
	Mode 26–35 years
	Ideology
	Mean range Slightly liberal
	Median range Slightly liberal
	Mode Liberal
	Race
	Mode White (61%)
	Religion
	Mode Christian (47%)
	Education
	Mean range Associates degree
	Mode Bachelor's degree
	Employment
	Mode Employed for wages
	Income
	Mean range $20,000–40,000
	Mode $20,000–40,000

presents a summary of the demographics of the respondents. Our sample was majority male (60%), under age 35, liberal, and white. While the majority identified as Christian, our sample also contained a large number of non-religious respondents. Most had at least some college credit or a bachelors degree and were employed.[3] We do not claim that this is a perfectly representative sample of the American public. However, research shows that MTurk samples are more diverse than typical convenience samples and provide high-quality data for low cost (Berinsky et al. 2012).[4] It should be noted that our study focuses on the effects of the experimental treatments and the individual differences are addressed by randomization of subjects into conditions.[5]

Design

The experiment is structured as a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-groups factorial design, as depicted in Fig. 1. Our main dependent variables are presidential approval, support

---

[3] The appendix contains a detailed exposition of the demographic distribution of the sample by condition.

[4] For more on the use and issues with MTurk samples, see Chandler et al. (2014) and Tingley and Tomz (2014).

[5] In the online appendix we include information on the distribution of the participant characteristics across treatment conditions. This suggests that our randomization process was successful.

	International Relations Domain		Domestic Politics Domain	
	Competent	Incompetent	Competent	Incompetent
Consistent	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Inconsistent	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)

Fig. 1 The factorial experimental design

for the intervention/policy and voting assessments. We included manipulation checks to establish the internal validity of the study and assure the participants paid attention to the three main experimental factors in the study. The manipulation checks did not reveal any significant problems with the material and that the participants were generally sensitive to the treatments.[6] Our design also included a battery of demographic questions and items about the participants ideology and partisan identifications.

The Research Material

 The experiment was framed to the MTurk participants as a study of American policymaking. To depoliticize the content of the text and control for political orientations, we place the scenarios in the future and provide no information about the president's party or ideological position. We used this particular language and a scenario occurring in the future because we wanted to minimize participants associating specific politicians with the content of the vignettes. Similarly, we did not want to draw direct parallels to on-going policy debates or political events. The instructions to the participants were as follows:

> You are about to read a fictional scenario about an international crisis that involves U.S citizens. This event takes place in the future at 2018. You will read about the presidents actions and be asked to evaluate his decisions. There are no right or wrong answers; feel free to provide your honest opinions.

On the next screen the participants were introduced to the first manipulation: level of competency. Participants read about the achievements of the president in the first three years in office. For the competent president participants read the following paragraph:

> January 30, 2018 marks the three year anniversary of the President's tenure in office. In summarizing this period, presidential scholars conclude that the President's record in domestic and international domains is highly successful. Objective parameters of the national economy, including employment, inflation

---

[6] See Tables 4 and 5 for evidence of successful manipulation checks.

and GDP, are at one of the highest points in recent history. Moreover, the president was able to diffuse several major international crises in Iran and Azerbaijan and organized international humanitarian relief missions in Central Africa.

For the incompetent president participants read the following paragraph:

January 30, 2018 marks the three year anniversary of the President's tenure in office. In summarizing this period, presidential scholars conclude that the President's record in domestic and international domains is not successful. Objective parameters of the national economy, including employment, inflation and GDP, are at one of the lowest points in recent history. Moreover, the president was unable to diffuse several major international crises in Iran and Azerbaijan and failed to organize international humanitarian relief missions in Central Africa.

On the next screen participants were shown one of the four vignettes that introduced the policy domain and whether the president was consistent or inconsistent. In the consistent conditions where the president promised to take action, participants learned that action was taken. In the inconsistent condition, participants learned that the action had not been taken. In all cases the conflict or policy-making process was on-going and no indication was provided regarding the success of the international intervention or the implementing of a policy to alleviate tax rates. The text of these scenarios can be found in Table 2. The final section consisted of the questionnaire, which included questions used to measure the dependent variables. In addition to

Table 2 Consistency Treatments by Domain

	International relations	Domestic
Consistent president	On February 12, 2018, an African country invaded and killed many citizens of its neighboring country. The target country that was attacked is a U.S ally. The US president said that if the attack continued, the US military would push out the invaders. The invaders continued their attacks and issued further terroristic threats. The President deployed troops and Special Forces to the region	In a February 12, 2018 speech, the President discussed tax reform, an issue that impacts millions of Americans. The President promised to reform the nations tax policies in his first term and to sign an executive order addressing the problem, if necessary. In a recent appraisal of the Presidents first term in office, it was noted that the president had signed an executive order to reform the nations tax policies
Inconsistent president	On February 12, 2018, an African country invaded and killed many citizens of its neighboring country. The target country that was attacked is a U.S ally. The US president said that if the attack continued, the US military would push out the invaders. The invaders continued their attacks and issued further terroristic threats. The President did not deploy troops or Special Forces to the region	In a February 12, 2018 speech, the President discussed tax reform, an issue that impacts millions of Americans. The President promised to reform the nations tax policies in his first term and to sign an executive order addressing the problem, if necessary. In a recent appraisal of the Presidents first term in office, it was noted that the president did not sign an executive order to reform the nations tax policies

approval, we also measured degree of support for the intervention and behavioral intentions, including how likely it is the respondent would vote for the president in the next election. The saliency of the international relations and domestic domains was also measured in addition to the manipulation checks and battery of demographics.

Measurement

The three dependent variables (presidential approval, support for the intervention/policy and voting assessment) were measured using three separate items, in which respondents were asked to indicate their level of approval of the president, support for the policy/intervention or likelihood to vote on 11 point scales, ranging from 0 (lowest level) to 10 (highest level). Drawing from recent experimental works in international relations that use similar measures of presidential approval (see Tomz 2007; Trager and Vavreck 2011), we used non-binary measures of approval and support to more precisely understand the range of sentiments respondents had, ranging from very strong disapproval to very strong approval. Having identical scales for all the dependent variable measures allows us to make substantive inferences and comparisons across all dependent variables. Figures showing the distribution of these three dependent variable measures can be found in the online appendix.

Results

In our experiment, we find support for our four hypotheses. First, we replicate previous findings that inconsistency between promises and actions will lead to lower approval assessments. Second, we find that a pre-established reputation for competency has a positive effect on approval assessments, even in the face of inconsistent behavior. Third, we find evidence that leaders having higher levels of perceived competency are less effected by inconsistent behavior. Finally, our analysis holds across both foreign and domestic affairs, with inconsistency having a greater effect in domestic policy scenarios.

Evidence About the Main Effects of Competency and Inconsistency

Before turning to our models, to assist in interpreting our results, we provide the group means on the dependent variables, breaking down the results by condition.[7] Table 3 summarizes these means of the dependent variables in the different conditions. As Table 3 shows, the conditions the with the highest means are as we expected, with competent and consistent domestic conditions having higher levels of approval and support than the international relations conditions. Furthermore, participants in the competency and consistency conditions were more supportive of

Table 3 Mean of dependent variables by condition

Condition	Presidential approval	Support for intervention	Voting assessment
IR Comp Consis	7.9	7.5	7.7
IR Comp Inconsis	5.3	6.6	6.8
IR Incomp Inconsis	4.3	6.2	4.2
IR Incomp Consis	6.6	7.0	5.5
Dom Comp Consis	8.2	7.9	7.8
Dom Comp Inconsis	6.5	6.9	6.9
Dom Incomp Consis	5.9	6.3	5.1
Dom Incomp Inconsis	4.2	5.3	4.1
Total	6.1	6.7	6.0

All dependent variables measured on eleven point scales, where 0 is highly disapprove and 10 is highly approve

the leader and willing to vote for her, in comparison to when the leader was either incompetent or inconsistent. This variation in the dependent variables across conditions provides some initial support for our hypotheses and aids in interpreting the tables that follow.

The first model in Table 4 shows the regression results where the dependent variable is approval of the way the president handled the situation presented in the vignette, measured on a zero to ten scale.[8] We find a significant effect for presidential inconsistency across policy domains. In addition, we find the manipulated level of competency has a significant effect on approval ratings. Figure 2 shows the graphical representation of the marginal effects for the three treatment variables. Here we see that when a leader is consistent, competency increases approval across policy domains, with the level of approval reaching identical levels as a leader moves from incompetent to competent. Additionally, when a leader is inconsistent, their approval levels are significantly lower than a consistent leader. Thus, we replicate previous findings that inconsistency hurts approval ratings. Further, competency matters more for domestic policy issues, with levels of approval increasing beyond levels seen in international relations contexts when a leader becomes competent. Since the interaction between the international relations domain and competency is significant, we find that relative to the domestic politics scenario, when a leader is competent in the international relations context, their approval ratings are significantly lower.

Returning to Table 4, consistency has a significant effect on presidential approval when controlling for saliency to the respondent and to the nation, with both saliency measures exerting significant positive effects on approval. In other words, consistency matters across policy domains, regardless of how salient the domain

---

[8] Analysis using ANOVA can be found in the appendix. We also include tables showing the average treatment effect (ATE) for each pair of treatment variables and the significance level on each dependent variable. Overall, these tables show that both consistency and competency have significant ATE's across domains.

Table 4 Linear models of main dependent variables

	Presidential approval	Support for intervention	Voting assessment
Intercept	3.69*	3.09*	1.97*
	(0.34)	(0.34)	(0.39)
Inconsistency	−1.67*	−1.07*	−1.05*
	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.35)
Competency	2.03*	1.27*	2.37*
	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.34)
Policy domain (IR = 1)	1.10*	1.18*	0.88*
	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.35)
Importance to nation	0.13*	0.31*	0.19*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Importance to respondent	0.16*	0.10*	0.22*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Policy domain × competency	−1.00*	−1.02*	−0.45
	(0.42)	(0.42)	(0.49)
Policy domain × inconsistency	−0.76	0.08	−0.32
	(0.43)	(0.43)	(0.49)
Competency × inconsistency	0.14	0.20	0.31
	(0.43)	(0.42)	(0.49)
Policy domain × competency × inconsistency	−0.08	0.17	0.40
	(0.60)	(0.60)	(0.69)
N	1023	1023	1023
R^2	0.29	0.20	0.27
adj. R^2	0.28	0.19	0.27
Resid. sd	2.40	2.39	2.75

Standard errors in parentheses

* Indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

is to the individual. This demonstrates how consistency can exert influence separately from competency and in different policy scenarios. Finally, the interaction between competency and inconsistency is insignificant and positive, suggesting that there is no linear conditional relationship between competency and inconsistency; both competency and inconsistency affect approval ratings independently.[9] This finding extends previous work by manipulating pre-established competency and demonstrating its positive effect on leadership approval in different policy domains.

The second and third models in Table 4 show the results where the dependent variables are the degree of support for the intervention used in the vignette and the respondent's propensity to vote for the president in the next election. These

---

[9] A figure showing the graphical representation of the marginal effect for this interaction can be found in the Online Appendix.
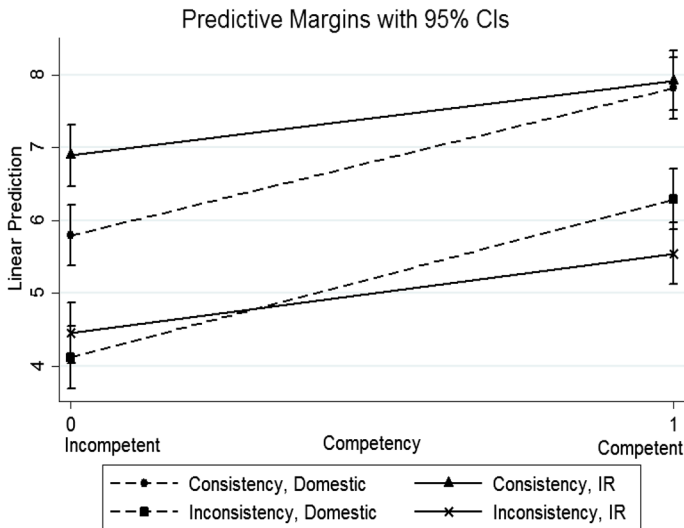
Fig. 2 Predicted margins of the three way interaction for presidential approval

additional models are used to assess whether competency and inconsistency have the same effects across different attitudinal variables and if those effects extend to behavioral variables like voting intentions. While these variables are correlated with approval, we ran separate models to avoid conflating attitudinal measures with the more action oriented behavioral measures, such as voting assessments and intentions. Like the approval model, we find a significant effect for inconsistency across policy domains and pre-established levels of competency for both variables. Finding these results across both attitudinal and behavioral dependent variables provides confidence that both competency and inconsistency have substantive effects on the way voters think about leaders. We also find that competency increases intervention support and the likelihood of voting for the leader. When we examined our findings across policy domains, we found that the interaction between competency and policy domain is significant for intervention support. Inconsistent behavior does not have significantly different effects for intervention support or voting assessments across policy domains. This further supports the notion that competency matters for both foreign and domestic affairs, regardless of the level of consistency.

In order to control for the potential effects of individual level characteristics, we conducted covariate analysis, shown in Table 5, on the three models of our dependent variables. We find our results hold when controlling for gender, political ideology, income and education level of the respondents. Education is the only significant covariate, with significant positive effects for approval ratings and voting assessment as years of education increase. This finding is consistent with other experimental findings[10] and does not change the substantive conclusions for our independent variables of interest.

---

[10] See Levendusky and Horowitz (2012) for an example.

Table 5 Linear models of main dependent variables with individual-level controls

	Presidential approval	Support for intervention	Voting assessment
Intercept	3.26*	2.88*	0.89
	(0.49)	(0.50)	(0.55)
Inconsistency	−1.72*	−1.14*	−1.11*
	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.35)
Competency	2.01*	1.30*	2.32*
	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.35)
Policy domain (IR = 1)	1.13*	1.09*	0.76*
	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.36)
Importance to nation	0.14*	0.31*	0.21*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Importance to respondent	0.17*	0.10*	0.21*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Ideology	−0.02	−0.01	−0.07
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Female	−0.19	0.09	0.04
	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.17)
Education	0.13*	0.03	0.23*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Income	−0.06	0.04	−0.07
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Age	−0.18*	−0.05	−0.06
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.10)
Policy domain × competency	−1.03*	−0.98*	−0.34
	(0.43)	(0.43)	(0.49)
Policy domain × inconsistency	−0.82	0.25	−0.21
	(0.44)	(0.44)	(0.50)
Competency × inconsistency	0.15	0.22	0.28
	(0.43)	(0.43)	(0.50)
Policy domain × competency × inconsistency	0.06	0.08	0.41
	(0.61)	(0.61)	(0.70)
N	988	988	988
R^2	0.31	0.20	0.29
adj. R^2	0.30	0.19	0.28
Resid. sd	2.39	2.39	2.72

Standard errors in parentheses

* Indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Evidence for Causal Mechanisms

Given the nature of the concepts, we know that consistency and competency have the potential for endogeneity. Tomz (2007) proposed that exposure to the president's inconsistency is translated by the public to incompetence. Therefore, in this section we address this possible limitation by testing the measures of consistency and competency post-hoc. In our experiment we included two questions asking how competent the respondents thought the president was and whether or not the president carried out their promise.[11] By including these questions, we both were able to carry out manipulation checks and were able to test how consistency and competency affect one another empirically.

A Linear Model of Perceived Competency

Here we address whether exposure to inconsistent behavior influences perceptions of a leader's competence. If participants in high competency conditions perceived the president as less competent in light of inconsistent behavior, this would establish that inconsistency has an effect on perceptions of competency despite the pre-established competency. Table 6 shows the regression results where the respondent's perception of the president's competence is analyzed using the independent variables from the main effects models above, including policy domain, competency, inconsistency, and our two salience measures. To help establish internal validity, we find that our participants were sensitive to the competency treatment. As illustrated in Fig. 3, the participants correctly perceived the leader established as competent as more competent, with a positive and significant increase in competency ratings. We also find an effect of inconsistency, with exposure to inconsistent behavior reducing perceived competency ratings.

Notably, the interaction between pre-established competency and inconsistency is significant and positive here, which suggests that for a competent leader, inconsistency matters less when assessing the overall impression of the leader's competence. To further illustrate this finding, Fig. 4 shows the interactive effects of the competency and consistency treatments on perceived competency. The findings suggest that the costs of inconsistency are higher for incompetent leaders than competent leaders. An incompetent leader sees a drop in perceived competency, compared to a roughly half point drop for a competent leader. This indicates that competent leaders are less tarnished by their inconsistent behavior.

Effects of Competence on Perceptions of Consistency: A Robustness Check

Finally, we conducted a post-hoc analysis examining how competence affects perceptions of inconsistency. We find that a reputation for competency has a positive effect on consistency perceptions. In a logistic regression shown in

---

[11] These items were towards the end of the questionnaire and therefore should not affect responses to the dependent variable questions.

Table 6 Linear model of perceived competency

	Model 1
Intercept	3.69*
	(0.33)
Policy domain (IR = 1)	0.69*
	(0.29)
Competency	2.18*
	(0.29)
Inconsistency	−1.48*
	(0.29)
Importance to nation	0.20*
	(0.04)
Importance to respondent	0.10*
	(0.04)
Policy domain × competency	−0.65
	(0.41)
Policy Domain × inconsistency	0.02
	(0.41)
Competency × inconsistency	0.87*
	(0.41)
Policy domain × competency × inconsistency	0.19
	(0.58)
N	1023
R^2	0.30
adj. R^2	0.29
Resid. sd	2.32

Standard errors in parentheses

* Indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Table 7,[12] we find a significant positive effect of competency on perceptions of consistency, indicating that a reputation for competence made the participants more likely to say the president was consistent, even when told there was inconsistent behavior. We find further evidence for this by looking at the raw frequencies. When asked if the president had done what he said he would do, respondents over reported the president as being consistent by four percent. In sum, this robustness check provides additional evidence that competency is a driving causal factor in evaluations of consistency, rather than a result of inconsistent behavior.

Discussion

This project explores public reactions to inconsistency in leaders, and in particular inconsistency between their promises and actions. While previous studies have established the negative effect of inconsistency on approval, they do not provide an

---

[12] Our measure of perceived consistency was measured as a binary variable, where the respondent indicated if the president did what he said he would do by answering "Yes" or "No".
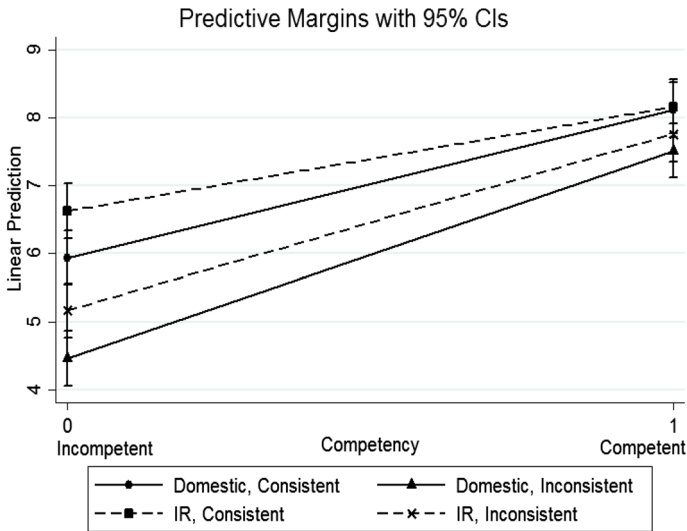
Fig. 3 Predicted margins of the three way interaction for perceived competency
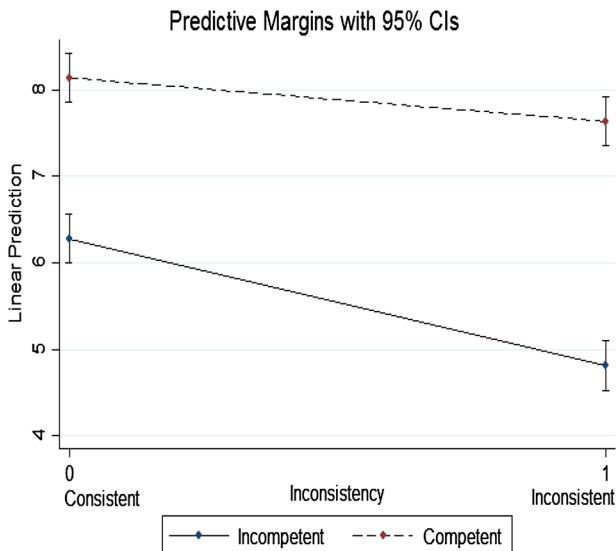

Fig. 4 Interaction of consistency and competency on perceived competency

explanation for cases in which inconsistency does not result in a loss of approval or political capital. In this project we looked at inconsistency in a broader context and introduced a competency manipulation to test cases and conditions where inconsistency matters less. Specifically we explored how the case of a leader reneging on her promise is considered when the public is provided with information about her overall competence. We employed an experimental design where we

Table 7 Logistic Regression of Perceived Consistency

	Model 1
Intercept	0.28
	(0.33)
Policy domain (IR = 1)	0.38*
	(0.18)
Competency	0.49*
	(0.17)
Inconsistency	−3.33*
	(0.18)
Importance to nation	0.08
	(0.05)
Importance to respondent	0.08*
	(0.04)
N	1023
Psudo R^2	0.36

Standard errors in parentheses

* Indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

manipulated both the particular inconsistency and the competence of the leader and assessed the effects of these two factors on public approval and support of the leader.

Our evidence from an MTurk convenience sample in the United States suggests that when the leader expressed inconsistency between her promises and her actions, public approval and intention to vote for the leader decrease. This result was obtained across domains (domestic and international affairs) and across levels of competence. However, our findings suggest the the public's negative evaluation of the inconsistent behavior is different across contexts. We find that leaders are perceived as being more competent, even in light of inconsistent behavior. In contrast, approval evaluations are not conditioned by the competence treatment. Additionally, individuals in our sample are more sensitive to competency in international relations and to inconsistency in domestic policy matters.

While our findings on effects of competency and inconsistency fare equally well in the two different policy domains (domestic and international), our results are not without limitation. In this paper we posit that the two domains represent different levels of saliency to the public. We found that the domestic issue is more salient than the international relations issue. Yet we can easily identify specific scenarios where the opposite is true. For example, there may be an international case where high American casualties make the scenario more salient with the public than standard domestic policy issues. Thus, saliency of the issues involved has implications for the strength of the effects of consistency and competence. Future research might explore these differences in saliency and domains in more depth and expand our understanding of public opinion, policy, and personal relevance further.

Finally, another limitation of this paper is the specific sample. As has been previously established, MTurk samples do not represent the current national demographic composition of the United States. For example, our sample has more males than females and we know that MTurk users tend to be more libertarian,

making the "conservatives" in the sample different from those found in national samples. While we do not claim that our results are generalizable to the larger national population, we can feel confident in our findings based on our randomization procedure and covariate analysis. Nevertheless, future work would benefit from studying these effects under different contexts with different populations. Examining the effects of competency and consistency in conflict areas, for example, might produce different findings, given the changes in issue salience in those areas. Furthermore, introducing domestic conflict into the analysis may demonstrate whether saliency of the domain or the characteristics of the crisis drive the public's reaction to the leader's behavior.

Our findings have implications for a broad audience in political science. Because inconsistency is not uncommon amongst political actors, we can demonstrate under what conditions competency and inconsistency can influence political behavior in the mass public. This has applications for scholars of voting behavior, public opinion, and the presidency. Additionally, our findings speak to the audience cost literature in international relations. The on-going debate on the effects of backing down from international threats or promises is affected by the reputation of the leader and how the public perceives them. Moreover, our perspective highlights the importance of varying aspects of context on the way inconsistency is interpreted by individuals. Inconsistency can have varying levels of negative effect on approval depending on a leaders pre-established reputation for competency. Future work should further explore the effect of competency on other questionable behaviors and their effect on approval and perceptions of competency. For example, the public versus private behaviors of politicians are often highly scrutinized. Finding that competency has the capacity to override problematic behaviors in shaping perceptions of a leader's competency, but not in shaping approval evaluations, may emphasize the role of competency in shaping attitudes. This incongruency has important implications for understanding elite inconsistency, as it may imply that approval ratings might not fully reveal if the public feels it is in capable hands.

References

Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon. com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis, 20*(3), 351–368.

Chandler, J., Mueller, P., & Paolacci, G. (2014). Nonnavet among Amazon mechanical turk workers: Consequences and Solutions for behavioral researchers. *Behavior Research Methods, 46*(1), 112–130.

Croco, S. E. (2016). The flipside of flip-flopping: Leader inconsistency, citizen preferences, and the war in Iraq. *Foreign Policy Analysis, 12*(3), 237–257.

Croco, S. E., & Gartner, S. S. (2014). Flip-ops and high heels: An experimental analysis of elite position change and gender on wartime public support. *International Interactions, 40*(1), 124.

Doherty, D., Dowling, C. M., & Miller, M. G. (2016). When is changing policy positions costly for politicians? Experimental evidence. *Political Behavior, 38*(2), 455–484.

Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.

Duch, R. M., & Stevenson, R. T. (2008). *The economic vote: How political and economic institutions condition election results*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fearon, J. D. (1994). Domestic political audiences and the escalation of international disputes. *American Political Science Review*, 88(03), 577592.

Guisinger, A., & Smith, A. (2002). Honest threats the interaction of reputation and political institutions in international crises. *Journal of Conict Resolution*, 46(2), 175200.

Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Psychology Press.

Hoffman, H. S., & Carver, C. S. (1984). Political waing: Its Eects on the evaluations of observers. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 14(4), 375385.

Hummel, P. (2010). Flip-flopping from primaries to general elections. *Journal of Public Economics*, 94(11), 10201027.

Kinder, D. R. (1986). Presidential character revisited. In R. R. Lau & D. O. Sears (Eds.), *Political cognition: The 19th Annual Carnegie Symposium on Cognition*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.

Leeper, T. J., & Slothuus, R. (2014). Political parties, motivated reasoning, and public opinion formation. *Political Psychology*, 35(S1), 129–156.

Levendusky, M. S., & Horowitz, M. C. (2012). When backing down is the right decision: Partisanship, new information, and audience costs. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(02), 323338.

Levy, J. S., McKoy, M. K., Poast, P., & Wallace, G. P. R. (2015). Backing out or backing in? Commitment and consistency in audience costs theory. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(4), 9881001.

Markus, G. (1982). Political attitudes during an election year: A report on the 1980 NES panel study. *American Political Science Review, 76*(3), 538–560.

McCaul, K. D., Ployhart, R. E., Hinsz, V. B., & McCaul, H. S. (1995). Appraisals of a consistent versus a similar politician: Voter preferences and intuitive judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68(2), 292.

Mondak, J. J. (1995). Competence, integrity, and the electoral success of congressional incumbents. *The Journal of Politics*, 57(04), 10431069.

Schultz, K. A. (2001). Looking for audience costs. *Journal of Conict Resolution*, 45(1), 3260.

Sigelman, L., & Sigelman, C. K. (1986). Shattered expectations: Public responses to out-of-character presidential actions. *Political Behavior*, 8(3), 262286.

Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 755–769.

Tavits, M. (2007). Clarity of responsibility and corruption. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(1), 218229.

Tingley, D., & Tomz, M. (2014). Conditional cooperation and climate change. *Comparative Political Studies*, 47(3), 344–368.

Tomz, M. (2007). Domestic audience costs in international relations: An experimental approach. *International Organization*, 61(04), 821840.

Tomz, M., & Van Houweling, R. P. (2009). The electoral implications of candidate ambiguity. *American Political Science Review*, 103(01), 8398.

Tomz, M. & Van Houweling, R. P. (2012). Candidate repositioning. Unpublished manuscript.

Tomz, M. & Van Houweling, R. P. (2014). Political repositioning: A conjoint analysis. Unpublished manuscript.

Trager, R. F., & Vavreck, L. (2011). The political costs of crisis bargaining: Presidential rhetoric and the role of party. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(3), 526545.