The Effects of Naming and Shaming on Public Support for Compliance with International Agreements: An Experimental Analysis of the Paris Agreement

Research Note

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How does naming and shaming affect public support for compliance with international agreements? We investigated this question by conducting survey experiments about the Paris Agreement, which relies on social pressure for enforcement. Our experiments, administered to national samples in the United States, produced three main findings. First, shaming by foreign countries shifted domestic public opinion in favor of compliance, increasing the political incentive to honor the Paris Agreement. Second, the impact of shaming depended on how much effort the target exerted. Shaming was effective against partial compliers, but ineffective when the target took no action or honored its obligations completely. Finally, counter-rhetorical strategies such as expressing regret reduced but did not eliminate the effects of shaming. Overall, our experiments expose both the power and the limits of shaming as a strategy for enforcing international commitments. At the same time, they advance our understanding of the most significant environmental problem facing the planet.

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Climate change is one of the most significant challenges facing our planet. Given worldwide reliance on fossil fuels, addressing the problem will require international cooperation. The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement represents the most recent attempt to promote international cooperation on climate change. Each country that joined the agreement publicly declared how much and in what ways it would contribute to the collective goal of mitigating climate change. The agreement did not stipulate legal or economic sanctions for members that failed to meet their promises, however, leading many scholars and policymakers to decry the lack of formal enforcement as the agreement's Achilles heel.

Absent formal enforcement, what might incentivize countries to honor their climate commitments? Some have expressed hope that “naming and shaming” could sustain international cooperation. Naming and shaming occurs when some actors publicly denounce others for doing something wrong. Countries could apply this strategy to climate change by criticizing nations for violating their Paris Agreement pledges. Jacquet and Jamison (2016, 643) characterized the potential to shame laggards as the “soft but significant power” of the Paris Agreement, and Falkner (2016, 1121) regarded shaming as the main tool countries could use to “exhort laggards to raise their game.”

This article investigates how shaming by foreign countries might affect domestic political support for honoring the Paris Agreement. We know of no direct studies on this question, but research about the effect of shaming on respect for human rights suggests three possibilities. First, shaming could increase public support for compliance by convincing citizens that their nation’s policies are shameful and need to change (e.g., Ausderan 2014; Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz 2012; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; 2003). Second, shaming could backfire by provoking a defiant reaction, in which citizens denounce foreign shamers and rally behind their leaders (e.g., Terman 2019; 2020). Finally, shaming could prove inconsequential if domestic audiences are insensitive to foreign opinion or believe the costs of complying would outweigh the benefits of quelling foreign criticism (e.g., Hafner-Burton 2008, Hendrix and Wong 2013).

We used experiments to study whether, and under what conditions, shaming might increase U.S. public support for compliance with the Paris Agreement. In our experiments, all participants considered a future scenario in which the U.S. joined the Paris Agreement and pledged to reduce carbon emissions by 25%. We randomized whether the U.S. subsequently complied with this commitment, whether foreign countries shamed the U.S., and how the U.S. responded to shaming. We then measured to what degree respondents approved or disapproved of what the U.S. government did.

Our experiments yielded three key findings. First, shaming by foreign countries shifted domestic public opinion in favor of compliance, increasing the political incentive to honor the Paris Agreement. This conclusion held not only in the U.S. population as a whole, but also for each of the three main partisan groupings (Democrats, Independents, and Republicans) that future administrations might want to court.
Second, the effect of shaming depended on how much effort the U.S. government exerted. In our experiments, shaming had little impact on U.S. public opinion when the U.S. government made no attempt to comply or met its obligations in full. Shaming was, however, effective in reducing domestic approval when the government took partial steps toward compliance but fell short of its Paris commitments. Our findings suggest that shaming may be most potent when directed against “intermediate” policies that are neither *prima facie* shameful nor laudable.

Third, governments can use counter-rhetoric to reduce the effect of shaming on domestic opinion. We tested how Americans reacted when their government responded with defiance or regret. These counter-rhetorical strategies reduced but did not erase the impact of shaming.

We provide, to our knowledge, the first experimental evidence about how shaming could affect domestic incentives to comply with international agreements. As such, this article complements a growing body of observational studies that use historical cases and cross-national statistical analyses to investigate the effects of shaming. At the same time, this article advances our understanding of the most significant environmental issue facing the planet. The current approach to climate cooperation, embodied in the Paris Agreement, relies on shaming. Our study exposes the power and limits of shaming as a strategy for inducing countries to honor their climate commitments.

**Could Shaming Contribute to Compliance?**

In international relations, imperfect agreements may attract wider membership and prove more sustainable than agreements with harsh penalties (e.g., Downs and Rocke 2005; Johns 2014; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Rosendorff and Milner 2001). The Paris Agreement fits this mold; it achieved nearly universal participation precisely because the key obligations were flexible and unenforceable, at least by traditional legal means. Whether the Paris Agreement succeeds will, therefore, depend largely on nontraditional enforcement strategies such as shaming.

Shaming could affect target governments at two levels. First, shaming could create *international* pressure to comply by imposing material and social costs. Materially, shaming could make it harder to attract international partners (Terman and Voeten 2018) and could even trigger economic sanctions or military intervention against the target (Murdie and Peksen 2014). At the same time, shaming could inflict international social costs. Research has shown that governments value not only their material welfare, but also their status in the international community (Kelley and Simmons 2015; Renshon 2017). By disparaging a country for bad behavior, shaming could undermine a country’s status or prestige on the world stage (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

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2 Recent experimental work investigates other aspects of the Paris Agreement (Barret and Dannenburg 2016, Tingley and Tomz forthcoming).
Second, shaming could generate *domestic* pressure to comply. It is well known that compliance with international agreements depends not only on international calculations about welfare and prestige, but also on the opinions of domestic audiences such as voters, interest groups, and elites (e.g., Dai 2005; Simmons 2009). Foreign shaming could, therefore, affect compliance by altering the preferences and beliefs of domestic groups (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; 2013). Indeed, studies of economic, social and military issues have shown that foreign commentary can "resonate in domestic politics, creating new demands on governments" (Kelley and Simmons 2019, 500; Hayes and Guardino 2011; 2013).

Although both types of pressure are important, we focus on domestic pressure. To our knowledge, scholars have not tested how foreign shaming affects domestic support for compliance with international environmental agreements. They have, however, investigated a related issue: the impact of foreign shaming on domestic mobilization for human rights. A lively debate exists about whether foreign shaming increases, decreases, or has no effect on domestic demands for human rights. We review this literature and adapt it to develop expectations about why foreign shaming might succeed, backfire, or have no effect on adherence to climate commitments.

Some scholars argue that foreign shaming can mobilize domestic audiences to demand better respect for human rights (e.g., Krain 2012; Murdie and Bhasin 2011; Murdie and Davis 2012). Shaming could spur domestic demands for several reasons. First, shaming could *inform* domestic audiences. By exposing violations of human rights, foreign shaming could help domestic audiences recognize the depth and breadth of misconduct by their own government (Ausderan 2014; Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz 2012). Second, foreign shaming could *persuade* domestic audiences. By framing behavior as shameful, foreign actors could convince domestic audiences that their government’s behavior is wrong—that it violates rights, treaty commitments, or international norms (Simmons 2009). Finally, foreign shaming could *sensitize* domestic audiences to international costs of bad behavior, including the material costs of being labeled as unreliable and the social costs of being castigated as a pariah.3

Other scholars argue that foreign shaming can backfire, provoking defiance instead of compliance. In a series of pioneering studies, Terman (2019, 2020) shows that domestic audiences often perceive foreign condemnation as a threat to their status. Political entrepreneurs can reinforce the perceived threat to status by denouncing foreign shaming as an attack on the nation’s prestige, identity, and sovereignty. According to Terman (2020, 4–5), “this defensive reaction alters the domestic political environment,” increasing the likelihood that that leaders “will not only ignore outside pressure, but double down on violations as a response.” Thus, shaming could backfire by pushing citizens to rally behind their government instead of clamoring for reform.4

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3 Studies have shown that domestic audiences are sensitive to their country’s international reputation. See, e.g., Tomz 2007 and Brutger and Kertzer 2018.
4 See also Ayoub 2014 and Wachman 2001. The hypothesis that shaming could trigger defiance fits with psychological research showing that criticism can backfire when the target views the critic as an "outgroup." See Hornsey 2005; Hornsey and Imani 2004.
Shaming could also backfire by eroding the norms shamers hope to defend. A large literature in international relations examines how international norms emerge and evolve (Adler-Nissen 2004; Finnemore 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Towns 2012). This literature suggests two possibilities. On the one hand, shaming could reinforce norms by clarifying which types of behavior are socially (un)acceptable. On the other hand, shaming could erode norms by suggesting that the allegedly inappropriate behavior is common or “normal.” As Carnegie and Carson (2018, 27) contend, shaming countries for violating a commitment could ironically reduce the “perceived social opprobrium that results from a violation.” Thus, shaming could backfire not only by triggering a defensive reaction, but also by throwing fundamental norms into doubt.

A final group of scholars has questioned whether foreign shaming is consequential (e.g., Hafner-Burton 2008; Hendrix and Wong 2013). Null effects could arise for many reasons. Some domestic audiences might question the credibility and motives of foreign critics (Entman 2004, 55). Other domestic audiences might respond, not by dismissing foreign criticism, but by mounting a rebuttal (Bailey 2008). Still others might conclude that the impact of foreign shaming seems minor, compared to the economic or cultural costs of reform.

In summary, scholars disagree about whether foreign shaming promotes, undermines, or has no effect on domestic demands for human rights. All three reactions are plausible, and each has some empirical support. The ongoing debate in the human rights literature has important implications for other issues, including climate change. One should not take for granted that shaming will induce countries to honor the Paris Agreement. How shaming affects domestic support climate policies is ultimately an empirical question, which we address through experiments.

In addition to estimating the effects of shaming, we test the consequences of encouragement or praise. When the Paris negotiations concluded, Janos Pasztor, the UN Assistant Secretary-General on Climate Change, offered his perspective on how the agreement would work. “Whatever they commit to is not legally binding,” Pasztor emphasized, “but they have to report… it is not name and shame, it is name and encourage” (Falk 2015).

IR scholars have long debated the effectiveness of material carrots (e.g., Baldwin 1971; Drezner 1999), but we know less about the effects of social carrots. Would encouragement or praise contribute to compliance? The psychological evidence is mixed: some psychological studies have found that praise enhances motivation, but others have concluded that praise undermines motivation or has no substantial effect (Henderlong and Lepper 2002). We investigate these possibilities in the realm of climate policy by testing whether domestic support for compliance changes when foreigners praise a country for honoring its Paris commitments.
Under What Conditions Might Shaming Be Effective?

Shaming may be more effective in some situations than in others. Previous work has shown, for example, that countries respond more favorably to human rights shaming by allies than by adversaries (Terman and Voeten 2018; Terman 2019, 2020). Studies have also found that domestic and international audiences are more likely to accept commentary from foreign organizations they regard as knowledgeable and fair, than from sources that seem ill-informed or biased (Murdie and Peksen 2014; Kelley and Simmons 2019). Finally, studies have found that reactions to shaming about human rights vary, depending on political institutions in the shamed country (Hendrix and Wong 2013). We complement the previous literature by studying two other sets of moderating variables: the compliance and rhetoric of the shamed country.

Compliance as a Moderator

We predict that reactions to shaming on will depend on how extensively the domestic government complied with its international commitments. For simplicity, we distinguish three levels of compliance with Paris Agreement pledges. Full compliance occurs when a country does exactly what it pledged; partial compliance involves making progress toward the stated goal but ultimately falling short; and noncompliance occurs when the country makes no progress toward the pledges it made. Although shaming could be consequential in all three situations, we expect shaming to be most effective against partial compliers.

Full compliance seems likely to blunt the effects of shaming by encouraging domestic audiences to view shaming as unjustified. If citizens do not reach this conclusion on their own, domestic governments could help cultivate an impression of propriety. In his study of human rights, Búzás (2018) argues that countries can deflect normative criticism by noting that they are complying with international law, even when the letter of the law falls short of human rights norms. Similarly, governments could cite their full compliance with the Paris Agreement to counter criticism that they should be doing more to fight climate change.

Noncompliance, too, seems likely to blunt the effect of shaming. A large literature in international relations shows that citizens disapprove of noncompliance, even in the absence of shaming (e.g., Tomz 2007; Trager and Vareck 2011; Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Simmons 2009; Wallace 2013). When behavior is already viewed as deplorable, shaming restates what citizens already feel, reducing its marginal effect. Applying this logic to the Paris Agreement, we expect that shaming would have relatively little on domestic opinion of governments that take no action toward their commitments. Domestic audiences may acknowledge foreign shaming as accurate and fair, but with disapproval already running high, foreign shaming probably would not trigger large changes in domestic opinion.

We expect shaming to be most effective against partial compliers. **Prima facie**, partial compliance is neither laudable nor shameful. On the one hand, citizens may credit a partially complying government with making progress and keeping some of its promises. On the other hand, citizens may question whether a partially complying government has done enough to
solve the problem and meet its commitments. This domestic ambivalence creates space for shaming to succeed. Foreigners may be able to sway an ambivalent public by emphasizing the negative and downplaying the positive sides of the ledger.

Our prediction accords with recent work about public reactions to corporate environmentalism. Experiments have shown that corporations can earn the goodwill of citizens, interest groups, and politicians by taking partial steps to address environmental problems (Malhotra, Monin, and Tomz 2019). Nonetheless, shaming by NGOs can prevent corporations from reaping the full public relations benefits of their half-hearted actions (e.g., Lyon and Montgomery 2015; Chrun, Dolšak, and Prakash 2016). We expect a similar logic for governments: the public will be most persuadable, and shaming most effective, in cases of partial compliance.

**Counter-rhetoric as a Moderator**

As Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014, 170) points out, “states do not just accept being stigmatized; they develop a variety of ways to cope with their sullied identity.” We consider one approach to stigma management: using counter-rhetoric to minimize or even reverse the effect of shaming (Dixon 2017; Terman 2019, 2020). Faced with foreign criticism, governments could provide a different spin on the facts or values at stake.

At one extreme, governments could fight shaming with defiance: arguing that that outsiders have no right to meddle in the country’s internal affairs and characterizing foreign shaming as an attack. Countries have tried this strategy in the realm of human rights. China, for example, responded to foreign shaming about human rights by arguing that western states were trying to “usurp the issue of human rights to use it as a political lever against developing states, interfering in their internal affairs in a culturally hegemonic fashion” (Wachman 2001, 268-69). Defiant rhetoric could lead citizens to dismiss foreign criticism and/or rally behind their own government (Terman 2020).

At the opposite extreme, countries could respond to shaming with regret: acknowledging that foreign shammers are right, apologizing for falling short, and committing to do better. Scholars have begun to study regret, expressed through apologies, in world affairs. Although we now have a good understanding of how apologies affect foreign countries and interstate relations (Lind 2011), we know less about how apologies affect domestic audiences (though see Lind 2009; Chu and Kitagawa 2020). Would apologies backfire, or would they lead domestic audiences to forgive the government for past transgressions?

In general, we expect counter-rhetoric to attenuate the effects of foreign shaming. The degree of attenuation is, however, an open question. In the literature on political persuasion, there is no consensus about how citizens respond to competing arguments. Some studies find that competing voices offset each other, yielding no net change in public opinion. Other studies find that even in competitive political environments, some arguments carry more weight than others, causing public opinion to change (Druckman and Lupia 2016). Given this controversy, we
designed experiments to estimate whether and to what degree defiance and regret would moderate the effects of shaming.

**An Experimental Approach**

Three considerations led us to study shaming experimentally. First, experiments provided a credible way to isolate the causal effect of shaming. If shaming in international relations occurred randomly, one could confidently use historical data to estimate the effect of shaming on domestic audiences. In reality, though, shaming is a “selective and political” decision (Terman and Voeten 2018, 6). When choosing whether to shame, governments and NGOs weigh many factors, including the behavior, political institutions, and geopolitical relations of the potential target (Murdie and Urpelainen 2013; Terman and Voeten 2018). These complications make it difficult, with historical data, to separate the effects of shaming from the effects of background conditions that contributed to the shaming decision (Ausderan 2014). We overcame this inferential challenge by experimentally manipulating whether foreign countries shamed or not.

Second, experiments provided a way to isolate the effects of moderator variables. We hypothesized that the effects of shaming would depend on the target’s level of compliance and use of counter-rhetoric. Both moderators are endogenous, depending not only on political factors in the target state, but also on expectations about shaming itself. This endogeneity makes it difficult to use historical data to draw firm conclusions about interaction effects. We overcame this limitation by randomizing two contextual moderators: compliance and counter-rhetoric.

Finally, experiments helped address the unfortunate paucity of historical data. The Paris Agreement is a new development, and the first global stocktake—designed to assess progress and inform new NDCs—will not take place until 2023. Without experiments, researchers would need to wait for years information to emerge about compliance, shaming, counter-rhetoric, and the reactions of domestic audiences. Our experiments offered a glimpse into the future, a way to anticipate reactions to events that have not yet taken place.

In summary, we designed our experiments to offer unique insight about public reactions to shaming. We acknowledge, however, that all methods, including experiments, have limitations. Our experiments exposed respondents to news about shaming by foreign countries. In practice, would citizens know whether foreign countries were being critical or not? On the one hand, previous research has found “impressive evidence” of the prevalence of foreign voices in American news (e.g. Hayes and Guardino 2011, 832). On the other hand, some people—especially those with little interest in politics and public affairs—might not follow the news or take note of foreign criticism. Our experiments reveal the potential effects of shaming, i.e., how citizens would react if they learned about foreign shaming. The actual effects of shaming are likely to vary from case to case, depending on public awareness of foreign commentary.
We conducted four experiments, which we embedded in public opinion surveys of adults in the United States in September-October 2018. Respondents were recruited by Lucid (Coppock and McClellan 2019), which used quota sampling to approximate the U.S. adult population with respect to gender, age, race/ethnicity, and region. We weighted the sample to match the distribution of party affiliation in the U.S. population at the time of our study (32.7% Democrat, 41.8% Independent, 25.5% Republican).\(^5\)

In all four experiments, respondents considered a hypothetical future in which the U.S. had joined the Paris Agreement and pledged to reduce emissions.\(^6\) We focused on the U.S. for several reasons. First, the U.S. emits more carbon than any country other than China, and U.S. carbon consumption per capita is among the highest in the world. To address global climate change, then, it is important to understand whether shaming could increase American public approval of emissions control laws. Second, in June 2017, President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Trump’s decision opened a unique research opportunity: to present a hypothetical future scenario in which the U.S. had just entered the agreement and was making decisions about compliance. Nevertheless, future experiments could test the effects of shaming in other contexts.

Experiment 1

Our first experiment (N=2,884) contained two randomized elements: the amount of effort the U.S. exerted after joining the Paris Agreement, and whether foreign countries shamed the U.S. Experiment 1 served as a template for three follow-up experiments, described later in the article.\(^7\)

In Experiment 1, all participants read the following preamble:

The Paris Agreement is an international agreement about climate change. Every country that joins the agreement promises to contribute to the worldwide goal of fighting climate change, by developing and carrying out a plan to reduce its emissions of carbon dioxide as quickly as possible.

In the future, the U.S. government must decide whether to join the Paris Agreement, and whether to pass new laws to reduce U.S. emissions of carbon dioxide. On the following screens, we will describe one approach the U.S. government could take in the future, and ask whether you approve or disapprove.

\(^5\) For details about the sample, its representativeness, and balance across the experimental conditions, see the online appendix.

\(^6\) Other work analyzes the effect of joining versus not joining the Paris Agreement (Tingley and Tomz, forthcoming).

\(^7\) For the text of all four experiments, see the online appendix. We included comprehension questions to make sure participants understood the scenario they received. When analyzing the data, we restricted the sample to respondents who correctly answered at least 80% of the comprehension questions.
All participants then considered a scenario in which a future U.S. administration joined the Paris Agreement.

In 2021, the U.S. government announced that it would join the Paris Agreement. When it officially joined later that year, the U.S. said: “As a member of the Paris Agreement, we pledge to reduce U.S. emissions of carbon dioxide by 25%.”

Having established this context, we randomized what steps, if any, the U.S. government took to comply. Some participants read that the U.S. did not pass any new laws to reduce carbon emissions. Others read that the U.S. passed laws to reduce emissions by either 5% or 25%. We randomized the costs (in square brackets) of these emission control policies, but because costs were not our focus in this article, we averaged over costs when analyzing the data. The three conditions appear below.

**No Action:** Over the next few years, the government did not pass any new laws to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Because it did not pass any new laws, the government did not affect U.S. energy prices or U.S. carbon emissions.

**Cut 5%:** Over the next few years, the government passed new laws to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Experts agreed that the new laws would increase U.S. energy prices by [4 or 10]% and reduce U.S. carbon emissions by 5%.

**Cut 25%:** Over the next few years, the government passed new laws to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Experts agreed that the new laws would increase U.S. energy prices by [4 or 10]% and reduce U.S. carbon emissions by 25%.

These policies differed not only in their effects on carbon emissions, but also in their compliance with the Paris Agreement. Cut 25% amounted to full compliance, cut 5% represented partial compliance, and no action amounted to noncompliance.

We independently randomized whether foreign countries shamed the U.S. Half the participants saw no mention of foreign shaming; the other half received a passage in which foreign countries shamed. The content of the shaming varied, depending on what the U.S. had done.

**Shaming if No Action:** Many countries said the U.S. should be ashamed of itself. They criticized the U.S. for doing nothing to reduce U.S. emissions, and for violating the promises it made when it joined the Paris Agreement.

**Shaming if Cut 5%:** Many countries said the U.S. should be ashamed of itself. They criticized the U.S. for doing so little to reduce U.S. emissions, and for violating the promises it made when it joined the Paris Agreement.

**Shaming if Cut 25%:** Many countries said the U.S. should be ashamed of itself. They criticized the U.S. for doing so little to reduce U.S. emissions.
Having presented the scenario, we asked: “Taking into account all the decisions the U.S. government made in the passage you read, would you approve or disapprove of what the U.S. government did overall?” The response options were approve strongly, approve somewhat, neither approve nor disapprove, disapprove somewhat, or disapprove strongly. For simplicity we focused on a natural and easily interpretable quantity of interest, the percentage of respondents who approved, but our conclusions held when we analyzed the full five-point scale, as well.\(^8\)

Given limitations on space, we focus our empirical discussion on how shaming affected the U.S. population as a whole. The online appendix provides more detail by disaggregating the reactions of three main partisan groupings (Democrats, Independents, and Republicans) that future administrations might want to court.

\textit{Main Effects in Experiment 1}

Figure 1 displays the percentage of Americans who approved of how the U.S. government behaved. The solid dots represent approval without shaming; the hollow dots represent approval with shaming; and the lines bisecting the dots are 95\% confidence intervals.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics{figure1.png}
\caption{Public Approval of U.S. Policy without Shaming (Solid Dots) and with Shaming (Hollow Dots)}
\end{figure}

In vignettes without shaming (the solid dots), three findings emerged. First, only 15\% of Americans approved when the government took no action to reduce carbon emissions. This finding corroborates other opinion polls, showing overwhelming public support for doing something about climate change.

Second, a large majority (64\%) approved when the government slashed emissions by 5\%. Compared to doing nothing, this modest action increased the government’s popularity by 64 –

\(^8\) See the online appendix.
15 = 49 percentage points. Evidently, the government earned substantial domestic credit for cutting emissions, even though the cuts were minor and fell short of the Paris pledge. Previous research has found that corporations can gain goodwill by taking small steps to help the environment (Malhotra, Monin, and Tomz 2019). Our experiment revealed that governments have similar potential; they can boost approval through minor environmental measures, including ones that fall short of international environmental commitments.

Finally, nearly three-quarters of participants (73%) approved when the government took the more ambitious step of cutting emissions by 25%. Although this again shows the public desire to address climate change, the marginal effect of additional effort was relatively small. When the government quintupled its cuts from 5% to 25%, thereby living up to its Paris pledge, approval rose by only 73 – 64 = 9 percentage points. We conclude that, absent shaming, the government could substantially increase its public image by passing modest legislation, but additional environmental effort—including full compliance with international commitments—would not bring commensurate gains in popularity.

We next consider how shaming affected these conclusions. Comparing the hollow versus solid dots, we see that shaming proved inconsequential when the U.S. took no action, and when it cut emissions by 25%. In contrast, shaming substantially changed Americans perceptions of intermediate action. When the government cut emissions by 5%, shaming reduced public approval from 64% to 43%, depriving the government of some credit it would have reaped for taking modest action in the absence of shaming. Figure 2 summarizes how shaming affected public approval, given each of the three U.S. policies in our vignettes.

Figure 2: Effects of Shaming on Public Approval

![Figure 2: Effects of Shaming on Public Approval](image)

**Incentives to Comply in Experiment 1**

How might shaming affect the government’s incentive to comply fully with its Paris commitments? To find out, we used data from Experiment 1 to estimate how approval would change if the government complied fully (cut 25%) instead of partially (cut 5%), and how foreign shaming would affect the size of the gain. Throughout, we use “incentive” as shorthand for the estimated gain in public approval. Of course, many factors in addition to public opinion affect the
government's incentive to comply. Nonetheless, our conclusions should be informative as long as the incentive to adopt a policy is increasing in the domestic popularity a government could gain by adopting the policy.

Figure 3 shows the government’s incentive to comply, conditional on three shaming strategies. First, foreign countries could abstain from shaming altogether. Recall that, in vignettes without shaming (solid dots in Figure 1), 64% approved when the government cut emissions by 5%, whereas 73% approved when the government cut emissions by 25%. Thus, even in the absence of shaming, the government could gain $73 - 64 = 9$ approval points by legislating deep, compliant cuts instead of shallow, partially compliant ones.

Second, foreign countries could employ blanket shaming, criticizing the U.S. regardless of how much or little it did. When foreign countries shamed the U.S. indiscriminately (hollow dots in Figure 1), 43% of respondents approved of cutting emissions by 5%, whereas 70% approved of cutting emissions by 25%. Thus, if other countries engaged in blanket shaming, the U.S. government could gain $70 - 43 = 27$ approval points by making the cuts it promised when it joined the Paris Agreement.

Finally, foreign countries could shame selectively, by criticizing the U.S. if and only if it failed to honor its Paris pledge. As we have seen, 43% of Americans approved when the U.S. cut emissions by 5% and foreigners responded with shaming, whereas 73% approved when the U.S. cut emissions by 25% and foreigners refrained from shaming. Thus, assuming selective shaming, the government could gain $73 - 43 = 30$ approval points by complying fully with the Paris Agreement.

We draw two conclusions from Figure 3. First, shaming can incentivize governments to honor their international commitments. In our experiments, the political incentive to comply fully instead of partially was three times stronger when foreign countries shamed than when they did.
not. Second, blanket shaming was as effective as selective shaming. Blanket shaming could have been a double-edged sword, reducing support not only for partial compliance but also for full compliance. In our study, though, shaming proved ineffective when the government cut emissions by 25% as per its Paris pledge. Consequently, blanket shaming performed just as well as selective shaming in incentivizing the government to meet its commitments.

**Experiment 2**

Experiment 1 showed that foreign countries can use shaming to manipulate U.S. public opinion, creating political pressure to honor the Paris Agreement. We next investigated whether a hybrid strategy, blending shaming and praise, could be even more effective at changing the domestic political calculus.

To test this hypothesis, we introduced a new experimental condition in which foreign countries praised the U.S. for complying fully. People assigned to this condition read: “Many countries said the U.S. should be proud of itself. They praised the U.S. for doing so much to reduce U.S. emissions, and for honoring the promises it made when it joined the Paris Agreement.” We administered this new condition to 527 participants in October 2018.

We anticipated that foreign encouragement would make Americans even more positive about “cut 25%,” creating an even stronger incentive to comply. To our surprise, though, praise had no effect. Recall (from Figure 1) that 73% of participants approved when the U.S. cut emissions by 25% and the vignette contained no foreign commentary. Approval rose by only one point, to 74%, when foreign countries responded with praise instead of silence.9

**Experiment 3**

We hypothesized that governments could use counter-rhetoric to negate the effects of foreign shaming. To study the effects defiance, we introduced a new experimental condition in which the government responded defiantly to shaming. Participants read: “The U.S. government responded by saying that other countries had no right to meddle in our affairs. It said other countries were trying to hurt or control the United States.” We administered this condition to 1,214 participants in October 2018. By combining these data with measures from Experiment 1, we estimated the effects of shaming with and without a defiant rebuttal.

Figure 4 presents the effects of shaming when the U.S. did not respond (solid dots), and when it responded with defiance (hollow dots). All treatment effects in Figure 4 were estimated with

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9 Praise proved inconsequential not only in the sample as a whole, but also in each of the three partisan subgroups. Praise increased approval by 1 point among Democrats, 0 points among Independents, and 2 points among Republicans.
respect to a baseline in which foreign countries abstained from shaming. Figure 4 shows that defiance was not particularly effective at counteracting the effects of shaming. 

![Figure 4: Effects of shaming without a rebuttal (solid dots) and with a defiant rebuttal (hollow dots)](image)

**Experiment 4**

We introduced one more experimental condition to test whether regret might ameliorate the effects of shaming. Participants read: “The U.S. government responded by saying that other countries were right. It apologized for not doing more and said it would work to reduce U.S. emissions in the future.” We administered this condition to 1,160 participants in October 2018. We combined the new data with information from Experiment 1 to estimate the effects of shaming with and without regret.

Figure 5 shows that regret was partially effective in counteracting shaming. When the government cut emissions by 5%, shaming alone caused approval to fall by 21 percentage points, but expressing regret reduced the effect to only 8 points. Thus, a government that wanted to escape compliance could minimize the political consequences of shaming by acknowledging that the foreign critiques were valid, and by promising to do more in the future.

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10 Although defiance was not effective on average, reactions varied by political party. Defiant rhetoric reduced the effect of shaming on Independents and Republicans, while backfiring among Democrats. See the online appendix.

11 Here, too, reactions varied by political party. Regret counteracted shaming among all three partisan subgroups but was most effective among Independents and Republicans. See the online appendix.
Although expressing regret could counteract shaming in the short run, it is not clear how long the public would accept this excuse. If, as time passed, the U.S. failed to take additional action and bring itself into full compliance, would shammers regain the rhetorical advantage? Future research could examine the long-run sustainability of expressing regret.

Conclusion

We used experiments to investigate how naming and shaming could affect domestic support for compliance with international agreements. Our experiments focused on the Paris Agreement, which relies primarily on social pressure, rather than traditional legal and economic enforcement mechanisms.

Our experiments produced three main findings. First, shaming by foreign countries shifted domestic public opinion in favor of compliance, increasing the political incentive to honor the Paris Agreement. Second, the impact of shaming depended on how much effort the target exerted. Shaming was effective against partial compliers but proved ineffective when the target took no action or honored its obligations completely. Finally, counter-rhetoric reduced but did not eliminate the effects of shaming. Overall, our experiments exposed both the power and the limits of shaming as a strategy for enforcing international commitments.

Beyond its substantive findings, this article offers a methodological template for future experiments about the effects of shaming in international relations. One could, for example, adapt our vignettes to test how reactions to shaming depend on the identity of the shamer. How would domestic audiences respond to shaming by allies versus adversaries? Would the credibility of shaming depend on how strictly the shammers had honored their own international commitments? Would criticism from international organizations be taken more seriously than criticism by individual countries? Follow-up experiments could shed light on these important questions.
Additional experiments could also deepen our understanding of the rhetorical battle between shamers and targets. In our vignettes, shamers complained that the target had not done enough to address climate change and, in cases of partial compliance or noncompliance, had violated its Paris commitments. The target responded, in certain scenarios, with either defiance or regret. Of course, countries could deploy other arguments to reinforce or counter the effects of shaming. Future experiments could test the effects of a wider range of rhetorical strategies and measure how those strategies are received both at home and abroad.

Finally, our experiments could be ported to other countries and issues. We focused on the world’s most powerful country, the United States, on an issue of undisputed importance for the future of the planet. It is, however, natural to wonder whether the effects of shaming would be different in other countries, or on other international issues. Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this article. We expect, however, that future experiments will complement observational studies to provide a fuller understanding of the role of shaming in international relations.

References


