

American Politics Research

Asymmetric Blame-Shifting in the era of Globalization

Journal:	<i>American Politics Research</i>
Manuscript ID	APR-23-130
Manuscript Type:	Original Research Article
Keywords:	Blame Attribution, Blame-Shifting, Polarization, Democratic Accountability, Globalization

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Abstract

In the globalization era, ruling parties are motivated to shift the blame for poor economic performance to external factors. While motivated reasoning explains how partisans update their blame attribution to the ruling party, it fails to predict whether the blame really shifted to the external factor which voters have no direct influence on. Meanwhile, the incumbent's excuse also implies that this issue cannot be solved by its own democratic system, lowering people's democratic belief. This article examines this asymmetric blame-shifting hypothesis and its negative impact through two pre-registered survey experiments on Amazon MTurk (n = 802 and 999) after the 2022 midterm election. After reading Biden's accusation that Putin caused inflation, Democrats and Republicans polarized their blame attribution on Biden. Meanwhile, their blame on Putin remains unchanged in both Study 1 and 2, implying that the blame did not shift "to" or "from" the external factor. Meanwhile, Study 2 offers limited evidence that Republicans lower their democratic belief after receiving the Biden's excuse. Our findings suggest that politicians may play an active role in the rise of populism during globalization, and that voters may have different psychological mechanisms on forming their blame toward domestic and external factors.

Keywords: Blame Attribution, Blame-Shifting, Polarization, Democratic Accountability, Globalization

Word counts: 7169

Introduction

Democratic accountability is the fundamental function of democracies. Citizens are expected to regularly check the performance of the government, prevent the government from extracting rent, and ensure that the government represents the will of the people (Fearon 2011; Svolic 2013). Voters need to collect data on the government's performance, compare the observations with the expectation, evaluate, and take action to reward or punish the incumbent. It is not an easy task -- responsibility attribution requires a certain level of political sophistication (Gomez and Wilson 2001), time horizon (Healy and Malhotra 2009), emotional stability (Malhotra and Kuo 2009), and, of course, a good memory (Achen and Bartels 2017).

The abovementioned accountability process becomes much more complicated in the contemporary globalized era. Nowadays, a country's national economy may be tied to the stability of the global supply chain (Hayes et al 2015) or international organizations (Alcañiz and Hellwig 2011). The global impact of COVID-19 since early 2020 is the most salient example. All politics is local, but the cause may not be. When the national economy is in trouble, this globalized environment renders a wonderful opportunity for the ruling parties or the president to blame external factors for the poor national economy. This blame-shifting strategy is carried out by the ruling party in both democratic (Bellucci 2014; Sommer 2020) and undemocratic regimes (Rozenas and Stukal 2019). Rulers need a scapegoat to shift the blame no matter where the scapegoat lives.

Literature in blame attribution and elite cues has found profound evidence of motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006) at the domestic level, especially through the case of Hurricane Katrina. Voters attribute the poor performance or governance to the ruling party along with their partisanship (Arceneaux 2008; Malhotra 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2009; Tilley and Hobolt 2011),

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3 with the help of political sophistication and political knowledge (Gomez and Wilson 2008).
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5 Partisans blame less on their preferred party and follow their elite cues accordingly. When the
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7 ruling party tries to shift the blame to the opposition party, their supporters follow the words (Healy
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9 et al 2014), while their opponents may backfire and blame the ruling party even more (e.g.,
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11 Schlipphak et al. 2022; Porumbescu et al. 2022). This blame game is reasonable at the domestic
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13 level for vote-maximizing parties.
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17 However, does this blame-shifting strategy extend its effect across the border? Interestingly,
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19 existing literature offers mixed and indirect evidence that the incumbent could shift their blame to
20
21 external factors. For example, Hobolt et al. (2013) conducted a survey experiment and showed that
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23 the information provided by the EU officials failed to change the blame attribution among British
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25 voters. In Latin America, Alcañiz and Hellwig (2011) show that whether voters will blame the
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27 international organization is conditional to the relationship and history between their own country
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29 and the international organization, while the partisan effect alone is insignificant (see their Table
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31 3) or contingent (see their Table 4). In the US context, priming respondents to think more about
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33 the international economy does not change their blame attribution on average (Hellwig et al 2008).
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35 Moreover, existing literature does not examine directly and empirically whether the elite cues may
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37 successfully shift the blame from domestic factors (the ruling party) to an external one
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39 (international organization or global economy).
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45 This article argues that the *elite cue on blame-shifting only works for people's evaluation*
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47 *of domestic politics, not external factors*. In other words, the effect of blame-shifting is asymmetric
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49 and is not really a “shifting.”
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52 Why do the elite cues on blame-shifting may only change people's blame attribution on
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54 domestic politics but not on external factors? Because people have no direct influence or control
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3 over those external factors. Information consumption is energy-consuming and goal-oriented. In
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5 politics, voters are motivated to consume political information and increase their political
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7 knowledge when relevant to their political participation (Lupia 2016). Even though the elite cue
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9 may serve as a cognitive shortcut to help people make political decisions (Lupia 1994), voters can
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11 neither reward nor punish the external factors blamed by the domestic elites. As a result, when the
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13 ruling party tried to shift the blame from domestic to external factors, voters may only respond by
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15 changing their blame attribution for the domestic politicians but having no change for the external
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17 factors. Voters may still form their attitude and a certain level of blame attribution toward the
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19 external factors, but the attitude may be from the elite cues but from the history of the external
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21 factors (Alcañiz and Hellwig 2011) and the type of political issues (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl
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23 factors (Alcañiz and Hellwig 2011) and the type of political issues (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl
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25 2020).

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28 A recent panel study during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects such an asymmetric tendency.
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30 Graham and Singh (2022) implemented six panel surveys in the United States right after the
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32 outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. In their Figure 2, the blame attribution toward Trump for
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34 the COVID-19 outbreak was quickly polarized along with the partisan lines between March and
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36 April 2020. During this period, Trump openly blamed China and the Chinese people for the term
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38 “Chinese virus.”¹ Given the increasingly polarized blame toward Trump within two months, both
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40 Democrats and Republicans did not change their level of blame statistically toward China,
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42 immigrants, luck, or nature during the same period; a certain amount of blame seems to appear or
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44 disappear at the domestic level but not the international or natural ones.
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54 ¹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/03/trump-supporters-china-226309> and
55 <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/19/coronavirus-outbreak-trump-blames-china-for-virus-again.html> Access: June 7,
56 2023.
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3 Following the theoretical reasons and the existing observations above, this article lists four
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5 hypotheses:

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10 *H1: After the ruling party attributed the bad performance to the external factor, supporters of the*
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12 *ruling party will blame the ruling party less.*

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15 *H2: After the ruling party attributed the bad performance to the external factor, supporters of the*
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17 *opposition party will blame the ruling party more.*

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20 *H3: After the ruling party attributed the bad performance to the external factor, supporters of the*
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22 *ruling party will not change their blame on the external factor.*

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25 *H4: After the ruling party attributed the bad performance to the external factor, supporters of the*
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27 *opposition party will not change their blame on the external factor.*

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31 However, if the abovementioned asymmetric blame attribution is true given the context of
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33 globalization and motivated reasoning, this tendency seems to offer a blank check for any
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35 incumbent - all they need to do is to attribute anything to the external factor. In such a scenario,
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37 voters may respond to the incumbent's blame-shifting excuse accordingly, but they may also
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39 realize that they cannot hold the external factor accountable. In short, democratic accountability -
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41 the foundation of liberal democracy - does not function well in the democracy voters live in. As a
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43 result, voters would lower their overall belief in democracy because it is not able to solve the
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45 problem people were facing.
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50 Since the globalization of capital and labor force, Lasch (1996) argued that economic and
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52 technical elites, such as financial managers and computer engineers, may exploit the global system
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54 and always migrate across the borders; any government can hardly enforce taxing or even law on
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3 them, and they also expressed low interest in any domestic affair. Governments are incapable of
4 dealing with the economic consequences of capital globalization such as offshoring,
5 unemployment, and tax evasion. Consequently, domestic workers thought that their voice was not
6 heard, and they were not represented by the established parties who only cared about symbolic
7 issues (Hochschild 2018). As a result, they turned to support populist politicians who oppose
8 globalization and try to overturn the established democratic system (Fukuyama 2018; Norris and
9 Inglehart 2019).

19 The elite's blame attribution toward external factors may add one more mechanism within
20 the negative effect of globalization on democracies. In the aforementioned examples, democratic
21 governments play a passive role in globalization - they lack the authority and capacity to regulate
22 the flow of capital and labor. In the case of elite's blame attribution in this article, however,
23 political elites are motivated to accuse the external factor so as to lower their own responsibility.
24 Even though their supporters may accept the excuse, this excuse also indicates that their
25 government lacks the capacity to change the outcome even though their incumbent had elected
26 and exercised its power. In other words, the elite's blame attribution toward external factors may
27 make people believe that their current regime is useless and lower their trust toward the existing
28 regime.

42 Following the discussion above, this article further hypothesizes that the negative impact
43 of blame attribution toward external factors is that is that voters will lower their trust toward the
44 democratic regime.

51 *H5: After the ruling party attributed the bad performance to the external factor, voters will lower*
52 *their trust toward democracy.*

Context: Biden attributed high oil price to Putin in 2022

To examine the asymmetric blame-shifting hypotheses directly, this article designed and conducted a survey experiment based on a real-life political blame-shifting scenario during the 2022 midterm election: US President Biden's blaming Putin for the high oil price. Because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in March 2022, gas prices and inflation become a top issue in the United States (Montanaro 2022). A representative poll shows that "57%, including 63% of independents, said Biden's policies have made the economy weaker (ibid)." One year after the invasion, gas price and inflation remain the most important issues among the US public in a YouGov poll.²

Given the democratic accountability he faced, President Biden tried to shift the blame abroad. He openly linked the gas price spike to Russian President Vladimir Putin and his war in Ukraine: "I'm going to do everything I can to minimize Putin's price hike here at home," Biden declared in a speech given in March, and it is a line that he has continued to use since (Talev 2022).

This Biden-Putin scenario is suitable for examining the asymmetric blame-shifting hypotheses for three reasons. First, inflation is one of the most salient issues during the 2022 midterm election. Given the already-unstable economy impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many citizens suffered from the rising inflation caused by the Russian invasion. The ruling party was motivated to shift the blame, while the partisans were motivated to respond. Second, inflation itself is a complex issue and is not directly linked to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Meanwhile, inflation influences all citizens. Therefore, voters rely on the elite cue much more as a cognitive shortcut. Third, US politics is highly polarized. Both Democrats and Republicans did not want to

² <https://today.yougov.com/economy/articles/45918-americans-belief-government-inflation-statistics> Access: Oct 19, 2023

see their opponent winning the election, so their response to the blame-shifting would be strong. To sum up, This Biden-Putin case is the most likely scenario to detect the blame-shifting effect and to examine the asymmetric blame-shifting hypothesis.

To examine the five hypotheses on the effect and consequence of asymmetric blame attribution, this article conducts two pre-registered survey experiments in November 2022 and August 2023, respectively. The first experiment in Study 1 examines the first four hypotheses on the asymmetric blame attribution. After nine months, the second experiment in Study 2 tries to replicate the main findings in Study 1, and further examines the fifth hypothesis on the negative effect of asymmetric blame attribution on democratic belief.

Study 1: The Phenomenon of Asymmetric Blame Attribution, November 2022

Research Design

On November 27, 2022, 831 respondents were recruited through the Amazon MTurk web service (MTurk hereafter), and 802 completed the survey (96.5%). Respondents are over 18 years old, located in the U.S., and have a 90% or above HIT approval rate. Respondents were invited to take a survey titled “A Brief Survey About News, Society, and Politics” and were compensated with \$1 after completion. The research design was approved by the author’s institution and was also pre-registered by Open Science Foundation before the data collection. The sociodemographic background of the MTurk respondents can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Background of the MTurk respondents in Study 1 (n=802)

<i>Gender</i>	Male	645 (80.4%)
	Female	152 (19.0%)
	Others	3 (0.4%)
<i>Age</i>	Under 18	3 (0.4%)
	18~24	58 (7.2%)
	25~34	475 (59.2%)
	35~44	156 (19.5%)

	45~54	60 (7.5%)
	55~64	41 (5.1%)
	65 and up	8 (1.0%)
<i>Education</i>	Some high school or less	3 (0.4%)
	High school diploma/GED	37 (4.6%)
	Associate degree	6 (0.7%)
	Some college	17 (2.1%)
	Bachelor's degree	542 (67.6%)
	Master's or Professional degree	188 (23.4%)
	Post-Graduate or Professional Degree (e.g., MBA, Ph.D., MD)	6 (0.7%)
<i>Ethnicity</i>	White	620 (77.3%)
	Black or African American	40 (5.0%)
	American Indian or Alaska	46 (5.7%)
	Asian	53 (6.6%)
	Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0 (0%)
	Middle East/North Africa	0 (0%)
	Other or multiple	39 (5.0%)
<i>Party Identification</i>	Democrat	292 (36.4%)
	Republicans	414 (51.6%)
	Independent	93 (11.6%)
	Others	2 (0.2%)

All 802 respondents were first asked questions about political interest and information consumption. Afterward, 405 (50.5%) respondents were assigned to the Control Group, and 397 (49.5%) were assigned to the Treatment Group. In the Control Group, respondents were mentioned that inflation had hit a 40-year high (*“According to Reuters, inflation has hit a 40-year high and crude oil prices have reached a 14 year high as of March 2022.”*). In the Treatment Group, respondents were not only mentioned that the inflation is high but also how the Biden administration accused Putin of the inflation (*“...This rise in prices has been politically difficult for President Joe Biden, who has sought to find a way to shift blame. He and his administration has pointed to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine. Biden*

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3 *has referred to the price increases for oil and gas as “Putin’s price hike” and hopes that*
4 *Americans will agree with him....”* for the full text, see Appendix Table A1). The wording is
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6 phrased from multiple news coverages to explain Biden’s rationale for the blame-shifting briefly.
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10 After reading the message, all respondents were asked how much they blamed Biden and
11 Putin for the inflation, respectively. Unfortunately, existing literature does not reach a consensus
12 on how to measure blame attribution. Some articles ask the respondent to pick up one target from
13 a list of potential candidates (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Rudolph 2003), while others require
14 respondents to estimate the level of responsibility respectively (Alcañiz and Hellwig 2011; Healy
15 et al. 2014). To test the asymmetry hypothesis, this article measures how voters blame Biden and
16 Putin for inflation, respectively. After reading the message, all respondents were asked, “*Do you*
17 *blame the US President Biden for the inflation?”* and “*Do you blame the Russia President Putin*
18 *for the inflation?”* (Agree strongly (+2) Agree (+1) Neither agree nor disagree (0) Disagree (-1)
19 Disagree strongly (-2)).
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33 In the Treatment Group, a manipulation check is used to verify whether MTurk respondents
34 really read the message. Right after evaluating Putin and Biden, they were asked about a poll
35 number in the message, and the question was put on the same page as the message. Among the
36 397 respondents in the treatment group, 272 (68.5%) passed the manipulation check. Those who
37 answered wrongly were removed from further analysis.
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44 All respondents were then asked a series of questions related to protest and inequality,
45 which is beyond the scope of this article. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked about
46 their party identification and sociodemographic background, and then they were debriefed and
47 compensated.
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3 Randomization check is further used to examine whether the respondents in the Treatment
4 Group (n=272) and Control Group (n=405) share a similar socio-demographic background.
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6 Fortunately, the Treatment and Control Groups have the same distribution on the level of education
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8 (Two-group t-test, $p = 0.29$), gender (Two-group t-test, $p = 0.68$), age (Two-group t-test, $p = 0.86$),
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10 race (measured by the percentage of self-reported White respondents, Chi-squared test, $p = 0.93$),
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12 and partisanship (measured by Republican, Democrat, and Others, Chi-squared test, $p = 0.27$).
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14 Overall, the treatment group and control group share a similar socio-demographic as well as
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16 political background. In other words, dropping respondents who did not answer the manipulation
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18 check correctly (post-treatment) did not undermine the random assignment process. In addition,
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20 Independents and other party identifiers are further removed from the analysis (95, 11.8%) because
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22 they are irrelevant to the hypothesis testing.
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30 *Result of Study 1: H1 and H2*

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32 On average, Biden's excuse failed to lower people's blame on him for the inflation. Two-
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34 group t-test shows no difference in the level of blame between the Control Group and Treatment
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36 Group (0.637 and 0.665 in the -2 to +2 scale, respectively. Two-group t-test $p = 0.782$).
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39 However, this seemingly null result is driven by two partisan effects canceling out each
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41 other. Figure 1 shows the distribution between the Treatment Group and Control Group by the
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43 partisanship of the respondents. When Democrat and Republican MTurkers were assigned to read
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45 Biden's excuse, their blame attributions toward Biden were polarized: Democrats who read
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47 Biden's excuse tended to lower their blame attribution toward Biden (from 0.64 to 0.47, Two-
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49 group t-test $p = 0.29$), while Republicans blamed Biden even more (from 0.64 to 0.81, Two-group
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51 t-test, $p = 0.07$). The two-way ANOVA test yields a significant effect in both the partisanship (p
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53 = 0.09) and the interaction between partisanship and the treatment ($p = 0.054$).
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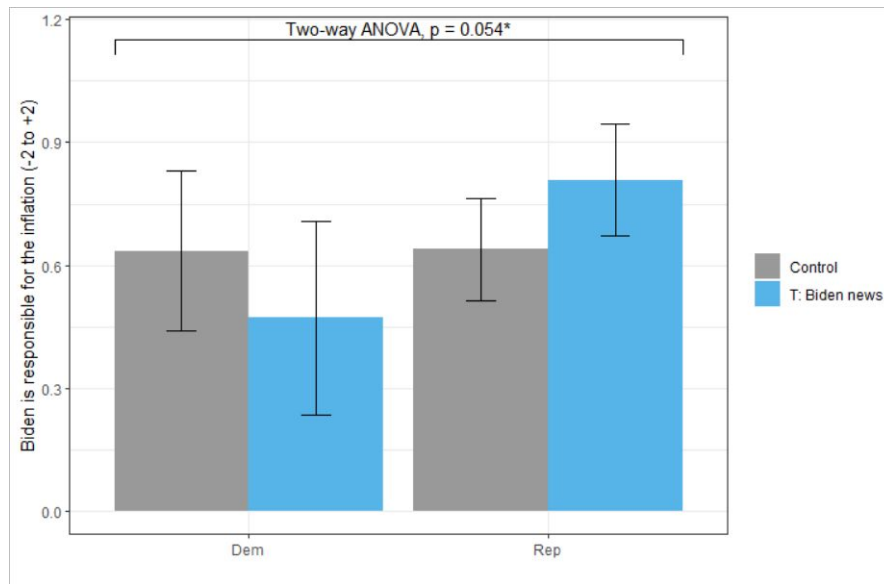


Figure 1. Elite cue and polarized blame-shifting on domestic politics, Study 1 (n=802)

Regression analysis is further used to estimate the treatment effect across the partisans, as is shown in Table 2. In this table, Model 1 shows that the treatment alone fails to change how people attribute the blame on average. Nevertheless, the interaction between partisanship and treatment shows a significant interaction effect in Model 2. The significantly positive interaction effect indicates that the treatment makes Republicans raise their blame attribution toward Biden. The effect size remains the same after other socio-demographic variables are controlled in Model 3.

Figure 1 and Table 2 provide empirical support for *H2* and some support for *H1*. In a polarized society like the United States, the elite cue on blame-shifting works oppositely for co-partisans and opponents. The supporters of the ruling party lower their blame, while the supporters of the opposition party blame the ruling party even more. It is worth noticing that the attitude between Democrats and Republicans are similar in the Control Group but are polarized in the Treatment Group after they read Biden's blame-shifting. The result also indicates that the

treatment used in this experiment can successfully stimulate the partisan motivated reasoning among the MTurk respondents.

Table 2. Regression models of blame attribution on domestic politics

DV: blameBiden	(1)	(2)	(3)
Biden News	0.024 (0.086)	-0.163 (0.131)	-0.177 (0.130)
Republican		0.004 (0.112)	0.008 (0.117)
Biden News X Republican		0.333* (0.173)	0.340** (0.171)
age			-0.008 (0.046)
edu			0.118** (0.055)
White			-0.382*** (0.107)
female			0.213* (0.113)
Constant	0.637*** (0.055)	0.635*** (0.087)	0.333 (0.350)
Observations	584	584	583
Adjusted R ²	-0.002	0.006	0.029
F-Statistic	0.077 (df=1; 582)	2.221* (df=3; 580)	3.450 (7; 575)

Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.001

Result of Study 1: H3 and H4

If the effect of partisan motivated reasoning can be extended to the external factor, we should expect that Democrats in the Treatment Group will raise their blame on Putin, while Republicans in the Treatment Group will lower their blame on Putin. Interestingly, the empirical result suggests something different.

To begin with, Biden's excuse did not shift the blame to Putin as well, on average. After reading Biden's blame-shifting, the level of blame toward Putin *tends to decrease* insignificantly (0.78 to 0.69, Two-group t-test $p = 0.18$).

Figure 2 shows the change in blame attribution toward Putin by partisanship. Interestingly, after reading Biden's claim that Putin is responsible for inflation, Democrats tend to have a lower blame attribution toward Putin (Two-group t-test, $p = 0.09$), while Republicans did not change their opinion toward Putin (Two-group t-test, $p = 0.85$). The ANOVA test yields no significant interactive effect ($p = 0.197$) or main effect ($p = 0.427$) between the treatment and partisanship on the level of Putin's blame attribution.

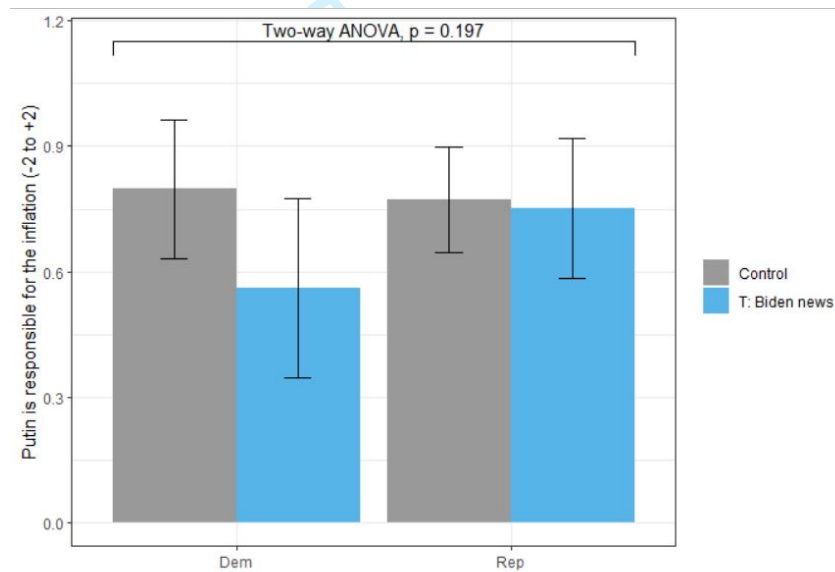


Figure 2. Elite cue and polarized blame-shifting on the external factor, Study 1 (n=802)

Table 3 shows the three OLS regression models on blame shifting and the level of blame on Putin. The treatment itself is insignificant in Model 1. After adding the interaction term between the treatment and partisanship in Model 2, the treatment effect is negative for Democrats – in other

words, Democrats *lowered* their blame for Putin after Biden shifted the blame to Putin. Meanwhile, Republicans did not change their level of blame toward Putin after they had already read Biden's excuse and raised their blame toward Biden. The result holds after covariates are controlled in Model 3. Overall, the result supports *H4* but less on *H3*.

DV: blamePutin	(1)	(2)	(3)
Biden News	-0.114 (0.083)	-0.236* (0.127)	-0.252** (0.126)
Republican		-0.025 (0.109)	-0.120 (0.113)
Biden News X Republican		0.216 (0.168)	0.222 (0.166)
age			-0.058 (0.045)
edu			0.056 (0.053)
White			-0.388*** (0.103)
female			-0.103 (0.110)
Constant	0.782*** (0.053)	0.797*** (0.084)	1.100 (0.336)
Observations	588	588	587
Adjusted R ²	0.002	0.002	0.027
F-Statistic	1.896 (df=1; 586)	1.399* (df=3; 584)	3.334*** (7; 579)

Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.001

Discussion of Study 1

Figure 3 combines the mean value of Republicans and Democrats by the experimental groups in Figures 1 and 2. In the Control Group, both Republicans and Democrats share a similar

view on Biden and Putin, respectively. After reading Biden's blame-shifting excuse, Democrats and Republicans are politically polarized in blame attributions. Their divergent blame attribution on Biden can be easily explained by motivated reasoning: Democrats lowered their blame on Biden, while Republicans raised their blame on Biden.

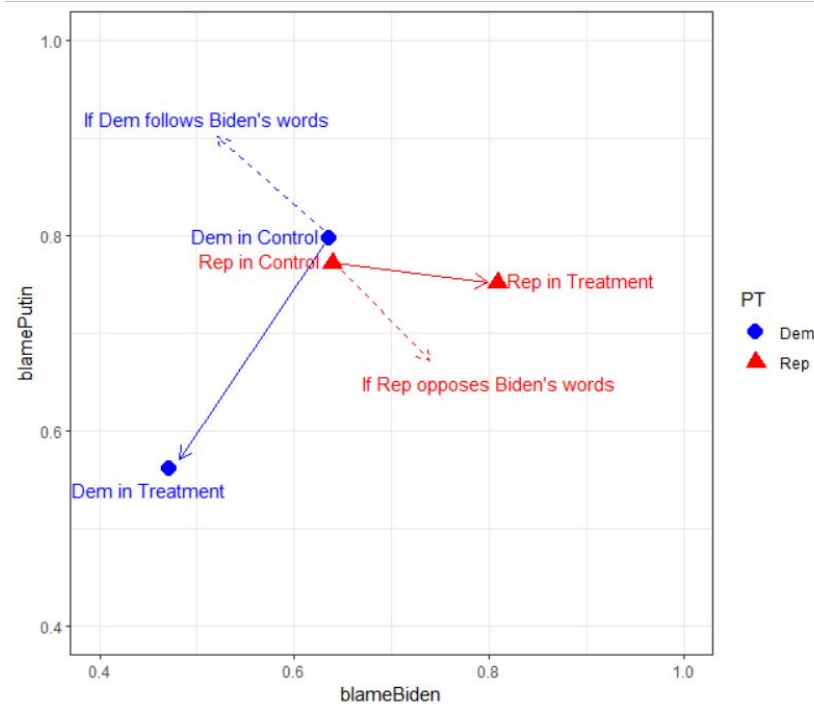


Figure 3. Asymmetric blame shifting between domestic and external factor, Study 1 (n=802)

However, if Biden's excuse really shifted the blame through motivated reasoning, we should expect the shift will follow the diagonal dashed lines: Democrats shifted the blame from Biden to Putin while Republicans did the opposite. The empirical data in our experiment shows the opposite: Republicans raised their blame on Biden but did not change their attitude toward Putin, while Democrats lowered their blame on both Biden and Putin. Biden's blame-shifting treatment did not really shift the blame elsewhere; it only polarized how Democrats and

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3 Republicans evaluate him. Motivated reasoning only works for domestic politics because of the
4 party competition, but it does not work for external factors because people cannot really influence
5 it.
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11 Nevertheless, why did Democrats lower their blame attribution on Putin? One possible
12 explanation is the anchoring effect: because the survey asked respondents to evaluate Biden first,
13 Democrats' evaluation of Putin may be anchored by their evaluation of Biden. In Appendix Table
14 A2 and A3, we add the blame attribution on Putin to Table 2, and the blame attribution on Biden
15 to Table 3, respectively. In Appendix Table A3, both treatment and interaction effects on
16 explaining the blame attribution on Putin turns to insignificant after we control the attitude on
17 Biden. Meanwhile, in Appendix Table A2, the interaction term explaining blame attribution on
18 Biden is still statistically significant after controlling the attitude toward Putin. The result implies
19 that partisans' attitude toward Putin may be anchored by their answer on Biden first, but this result
20 cannot explain the no change on Putin among Republicans. Besides, even if we admitted that the
21 anchoring effect exists, it will also serve as evidence that the blame shifting is asymmetric, and
22 that motivated reasoning does not extend to external factors. To avoid such a potential anchoring
23 effect, future work may need to randomize the items on blame attributions.
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44 **Study 2: The Negative Impact of Asymmetric Blame Attribution, August 2023**

45 *Research Design*

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48 On August 29, 2023, 1045 respondents were recruited through the Amazon MTurk web
49 service (MTurk hereafter), and 999 completed the survey (95.6%). Respondents are over 18 years
50 old, located in the U.S., and have a 95% or above HIT approval rate. Respondents were invited to
51 take a survey titled "A Brief Survey About News, Society, and Politics" and were compensated
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with \$1 after completion. The research design was approved by the author's institution and was also pre-registered by Open Science Foundation before the data collection. The sociodemographic background of the MTurk respondents can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Background of the MTurk respondents in Study 2 (n=999)

<i>Gender</i>	Male	688 (68.9%)
	Female	306 (30.6%)
	Others	5 (0.5%)
<i>Age</i>	Under 18	0 (0%)
	18~24	85 (8.5%)
	25~34	616 (61.6%)
	35~44	198 (19.8%)
	45~54	63 (6.3%)
	55~64	31 (3.1%)
	65 and up	6 (0.6%)
<i>Education</i>	Some high school or less	1 (0.1%)
	High school diploma/GED	58 (5.8%)
	Associate degree	7 (0.7%)
	Some college	20 (2.0%)
	Bachelor's degree	774 (77.4%)
	Master's or Professional degree	133 (13.3%)
	Post-Graduate or Professional Degree (e.g., MBA, Ph.D., MD)	6 (0.6%)
<i>Ethnicity</i>	White	925 (92.5%)
	Black or African American	14 (1.4%)
	American Indian or Alaska	1 (0.1%)
	Asian	14 (1.4%)
	Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1 (0.1%)
	Middle East/North Africa	0 (0%)
	Other or multiple	32 (3.2%)
<i>Party Identification</i>	Democrat	637 (63.7%)
	Republicans	271 (27.1%)
	Independent	86 (8.6%)
	Others	5 (0.5%)

The questionnaire design in Study 2 is the same as Study 1 for replication, but Study 2 includes the items of democratic belief after the treatments. All 999 respondents were asked questions about political interest and information consumption. Afterward, 502 (50.2%) respondents were assigned to the Control Group, and 497 (49.7%) were assigned to the Treatment Group. The treatment is the same as Study 1 (see Appendix Table A1). After reading the message,

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3 all respondents were asked how much they blamed Biden and Putin for the inflation with the same
4 five-point scale, respectively. The randomization check shows that the distributions of race, age,
5 level of education, partisanship are not indistinguishable between the control and treatment group
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10 ($p > 0.05$).

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12 After the questions on blame attribution, all respondents were then asked two questions on
13 democratic belief. The first question is “*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:*
14 “*Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government*” (Agree strongly
15 (+2) Agree (+1) Neither agree nor disagree (0) Disagree (-1) Disagree strongly (-2)). The second
16 question is “*Which of the following statements comes closer to your own view? Democracy is capable of*
17 *solving the problems of our society (+1) Democracy cannot solve our society’s problems (0).*” Two
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questions are used to measure democratic trust in Global Barometer and Asian Barometer (Lu and Chu 2021).

All respondents were then asked a series of questions related to minority and vote choice, which is beyond the scope of this article. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked about their party identification and sociodemographic background, and then they were debriefed and compensated.

Result of Study 2: Replicating Study 1

Similar to Study 1, Biden’s blame shifting to Putin successfully polarized the attitudes between Democrats and Republicans on how much they blamed Biden. There is no statistical difference between Democrats and Republicans on their level of blame toward Biden in the control group (Tukey HSD $p = 0.243$). However, supporters of the two major parties polarized in the treatment group (Tukey HSD $p = 0.013$); after hearing Biden’s blame shifting, Democrats blamed

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3 Biden less and Republicans blamed Biden even more. The polarization is illustrated in Appendix
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5 Figure A4.
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8 Meanwhile, people's attitude toward Putin remains unchanged after they received Biden's
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10 excuse. Two-way ANOVA and Tukey tests all revealed insignificant results (all $p > 0.30$). In other
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12 words, Study 2 successfully replicates the main findings of Study 1 and renders empirical support
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14 again to *H1*, *H2*, *H3*, and *H4*. Since Study 2 was implemented nine months after Study 1, the
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16 replication indicates that we have more confidence on the psychological mechanism of asymmetric
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18 blame shifting.
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24 *Result of Study 2: Limited evidence on Lowering Democratic Trust*

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27 After the question on blame attributions, all respondents were then asked how much they
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29 (still) believed in the democratic regime. Figure 4 illustrates the negative impact of blame shifting
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31 on democratic belief, measured by the first five-point scale (-2 to +2). Overall, Biden's accusation
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33 did not lower everyone's attitude on democracy evenly (t-test $p = 0.89$), but a clear partisan effect
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35 is observed. In the control group, Democrats and Republicans have the same level of democratic
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37 belief (Tukey HSD $p = 0.84$). After receiving Biden's accusation, however, Republicans lowered
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39 their trust to the democratic system, and a significant difference between Democrats and
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41 Republicans emerged (Tukey HSD $p = 0.07$). The first measure provides some evidence to support
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43 *H5*: people indeed may have changed their democratic belief because of the elite cue, but the effect
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45 is heterogenous and mainly takes effect on the supporters of opposition party.
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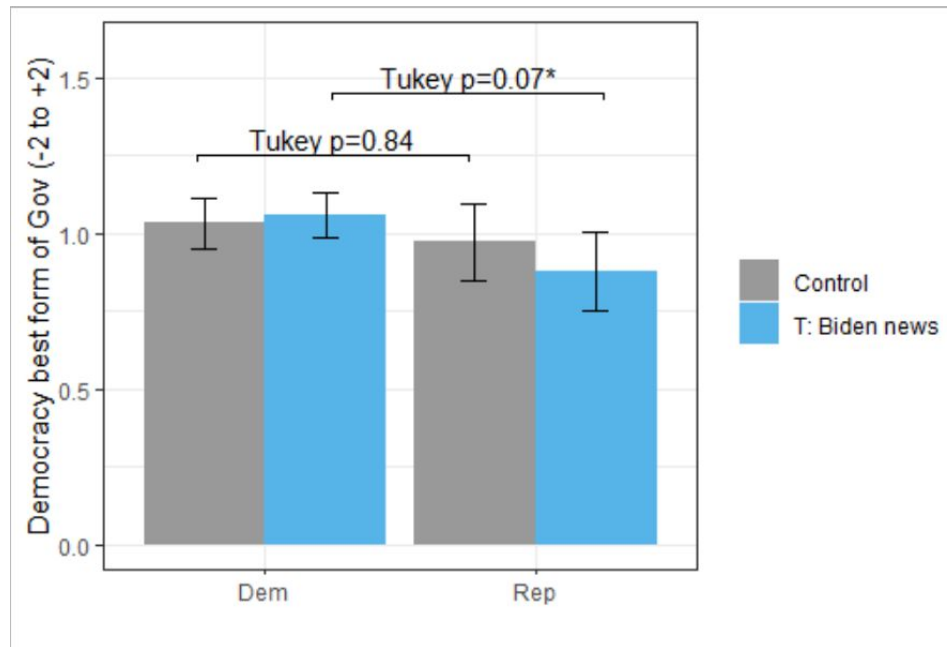


Figure 4. Blame shifting and polarized democratic belief, Study 2 (n=999).

However, the same polarization pattern does not appear on the second measure. The second binary measure reveals no general effect (t-test, $p = 0.642$). The result also fails to render a clear partisan effect. In the control group, Democrats and Republicans have a similar pro-democracy attitude (Tukey HSD $p = 0.75$); in the treatment group, Democrats have a higher democratic belief than the Republicans, albeit the difference is not statistically significant (93% for Democrats and 86% for Republicans in the treatment group. Tukey HSD $p = 0.75$). The null finding in the second measure may partly be because that the majority of Democrats and Republicans still believe in democracy (close to 100%), so the treatment effect is not big enough and is failed to be captured by the second measure.

Overall, Study 2 offers limited evidence on the negative impact of blame shifting on democratic belief. The effect mainly takes place on the supporters of the opposition party. It is not

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3 easy to distinguish whether this decline reflects a lower democratic belief or reflects a spillover
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5 effect from blaming the incumbent more.
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10 11 **Conclusion**

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14 Does elite cue on blame shifting for external factor work? This article combines the theory
15 of democratic accountability and motivated reasoning and suggests an asymmetric blame-shifting
16 hypothesis. The hypothesis is supported by two pre-registered survey experiments (Study 1 and
17 Study 2) on Amazon MTurk, exploiting a real-life case of Biden accusing Putin of the increasing
18 oil price. However, this polarized blame shifting comes with a price -- the supporters of the
19 opposition party may also lower their overall confidence in the democratic system, given that the
20 incumbent implicitly confirmed that the democratic system cannot deal with some important issues
21 driven by the globalization (limited evidence in Study 2).
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33 Our findings suggest that the incumbent may be motivated to exercise the asymmetric
34 blame shifting for concentrating their support from the in-party members in expense of a lower
35 support from out-party members. This strategy could be useful during the primary election, but
36 how long the effect may last needs further investigation in the future. In this article, there was a
37 nine-months gap between Study 1 and the replication in Study 2, and we found a similar
38 polarization effect. Nevertheless, this article did not examine the treatment effect toward the non-
39 partisans given the insufficient number of cases in both Study 1 and Study 2. The motivated
40 reasoning and goal-oriented knowledge theory in this article fail to form a testable hypothesis, and
41 the number of non-partisan respondents is not enough in this article to examine the tendency.
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54 However, the number of non-partisans has been rising in recent years (Klar and Krupnikov 2016),
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3 and they will be much more influential soon. Therefore, future research should expand beyond the
4 examination of self-identified partisans to non-partisans. Additionally, future research should
5 consider the effects of multiparty systems versus a two party one. The analysis here may be
6 understood in the context of that two-party system. The literature has hit upon multiparty systems
7 before such as Bellucci's study of Italy and blame attribution after the 2013 elections. However,
8 the study came in the context of a "Italians, facing the severest economic crisis in post-war times,
9 voted against all parties that supported the outgoing technical government, and instead rewarded
10 a new opposition" (2013). Future studies should therefore seek to find the same effects found here
11 in the context of a two-party system work in a multiparty context with likely less partisanship than
12 the United States.
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27 Our findings also imply that voters may form their understanding and blame attribution on
28 the external factor beyond domestic partisanship. Instead, their understanding may come from the
29 historical dynamic between their country as a whole and the external factor. In both Study 1 and
30 Study 2, neither Biden's cue nor the partisanship significantly explained US voters' attitude toward
31 Putin. It could be possible that how much US voters blame Putin has been decided by US voters'
32 general knowledge on the past interaction between US and Russia as a whole. This hypothesis is
33 in line with the literature. For example, Kosmidis' survey experiment in Greece (2018) shows that
34 the manipulation of how much the government controlled the economic policy did not change the
35 pattern of economic voting. Meanwhile, Alcañiz and Hellwig (2011) show that how much Latin
36 American voters blame international organizations for the poor economy is related to the previous
37 interaction between their country and those organizations. In addition, Jensen and Rosas (2020)
38 conducted experiments in the US and Canada and revealed that the perceived level of globalization
39 did not change how voters blame the government for economic performance. Our findings in
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3 Figure 3 serve as direct evidence that voters indeed form the blame attribution toward domestic
4 and external factors independently, and the level of the blame cannot be shifted between them.
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8 In the end, our findings offer an alternative mechanism on the rise of populism in the
9 globalized era. It is true that many issues are beyond the control of any single government, and
10 voters can hardly hold their government accountable for such issues. However, this article shows
11 that politicians may also actively shift the blame to external factors so that they can consolidate
12 their in-party support. Meanwhile, this myopic strategy will make the out-party members in the
13 country blame the incumbent more and lower their trust in the democratic system. Overall, this
14 scenario suggests that politicians in democracies may also play an active role in brewing the anti-
15 democracy belief in the era of globalization.
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3 **Appendix**
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6 Appendix Table A1. Messages for the control group and treatment group

Control Group (n = 405)	According to Reuters, inflation has hit a 40 year high and crude oil prices have reached a 14 year high as of March 2022.
Treatment Group (n = 397)	<p>According to Reuters, inflation has hit a 40 year high and crude oil prices have reached a 14 year high as of March 2022. This rise in prices has been politically difficult for President Joe Biden, who has sought to find a way to shift blame. He and his administration has pointed to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia's decision to invade Ukraine. Biden has referred to the price increases for oil and gas as "Putin's price hike" and hopes that Americans will agree with him.</p> <p>According to the article, the United States has banned the importation of Russian oil and according to polling 80% of Americans support it. The concerns about prices have been especially acute since oil prices surged 30% after the war began. This means that gas prices will go up, which is concerning to administration officials. President Biden is also concerned that rising prices will damage his party's political prospects in the upcoming midterm elections. The administration is hoping that by pointing blame at Vladimir Putin, that voters understand that they are not responsible for inflation or price increases.</p>

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Appendix Table A2. Regression models of blame attribution on domestic politics, controlling the external factor

Dependent Variable: blameBiden

IV	(1)	(2)	(3)
TreatmentT: Biden news	0.066 (0.080)	-0.081 (0.123)	-0.091 (0.123)
PTRep		0.010 (0.105)	0.047 (0.110)
Treatment: Biden news: PTRep		0.261 (0.162)	0.267* (0.161)
blamePutin	0.361*** (0.040)	0.356*** (0.040)	0.345*** (0.040)
age			0.011 (0.044)
edu			0.099* (0.052)
White			-0.250*** (0.102)
female			0.247** (0.106)
Constant	0.356*** (0.060)	0.354*** (0.087)	-0.046 (0.332)
Observations	584	584	583
R ²	0.123	0.130	0.149
Adjusted R ²	0.120	0.124	0.137
Residual Std. Error	0.954 (df=581)	0.952 (df=579)	0.946 (df=574)
F-Statistic	40.843*** (df=2; 581)	21.725*** (df=4; 579)	12.532*** (8; 574)

Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.001

Appendix Table A3. Regression models of blame attribution on external factor, controlling the domestic politics

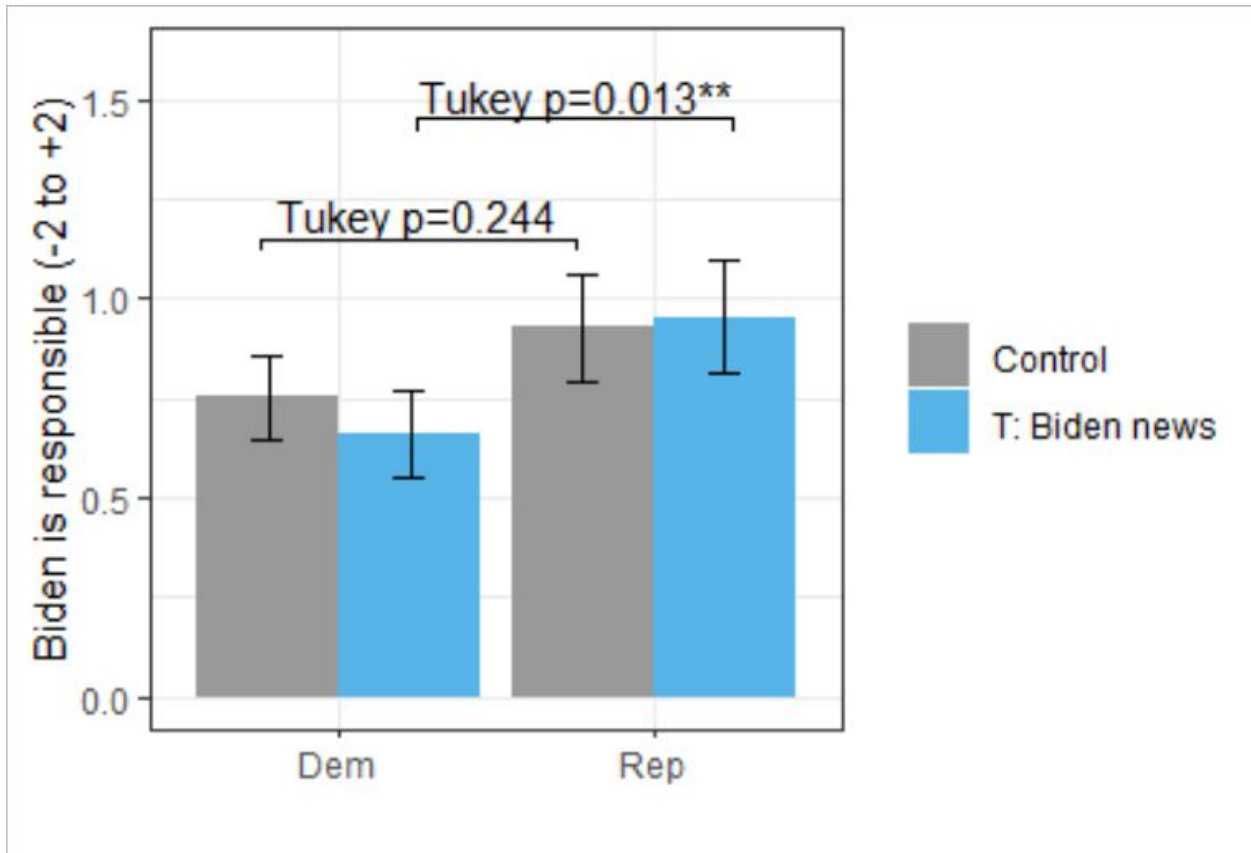
Dependent Variable: blamePutin

IV	(1)	(2)	(3)
TreatmentT: Biden news	-0.125 (0.078)	-0.176 (0.120)	-0.192 (0.119)
PTRep		-0.019 (0.102)	-0.115 (0.107)
Treatment: Biden news: PTRep		0.091 (0.158)	0.099 (0.157)
blameBiden	0.341*** (0.038)	0.339*** (0.038)	0.327*** (0.038)
age			-0.055 (0.043)
edu			0.015 (0.051)
White			-0.258*** (0.099)
female			-0.168 (0.104)
Constant	0.560*** (0.056)	0.573*** (0.083)	0.990 (0.321)
Observations	584	584	583
R ²	0.126	0.127	0.146
Adjusted R ²	0.123	0.121	0.134
Residual Std. Error	0.927 (df=581)	0.928 (df=579)	0.921 (df=574)
F-Statistic	41.921*** (df=2; 581)	20.999*** (df=4; 579)	12.294*** (8; 574)

Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.001

Appendix Figure A4. Political Polarization on attributing to Biden after Biden's excuse, Study 2

(n = 999)



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