Harnessing Backlash: How leaders can benefit from antagonizing foreign actors

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Abstract

Leaders nearly always claim that their diplomatic campaigns are intended to attract foreign support. However, many diplomacy campaigns fail spectacularly in this regard. While these events have largely been explained as diplomatic failures, I argue that alienating the apparent target of an international diplomatic campaign can be a deliberate strategy leaders use to win domestic support. Under certain conditions, a costly backlash from a foreign actor can be a credible signal that the leader shares the domestic audience's preferences. Therefore, by intentionally provoking a backlash from a valuable foreign actor, leaders can exchange foreign condemnation for an increase in domestic support. I support this argument with evidence from Netanyahu's 2015 speech to the U.S. Congress. I show that, as expected by this theoretical framework, Netanyahu's efforts resulted in a significant backlash among American Democrats and a corresponding increase of support among right-wing Israelis, a crucial constituency for his upcoming election. (150 words)

1 Introduction

International public diplomacy is generally understood as an attempt to increase foreign goodwill and cooperation. However, many diplomatic efforts dramatically fail to win foreign amity and some even have the opposite effect, producing a negative backlash. In 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to the United States to oppose a multilateral agreement with Iran, only to infuriate the Obama administration and polarize American support for Israel. On his first foreign trip as president in 2017, Donald Trump caught his own national security team by surprise by openly antagonizing NATO leaders, chastising them for failing to meet their payment obligations and calling into question the principle of collective defense. UK Prime Minister Theresa May took aggressive bargaining positions when negotiating Brexit that were seen as absurd and alienated the international partners with whom she needed to strike a deal.

This presents an important puzzle: Why do leaders so often appear to deliberately and publicly provoke foreign negotiating partners when we think that the goal of diplomacy is to attract foreign support? These examples have largely been labeled as diplomatic failures, but I argue that alienating the nominal target of an international diplomacy campaign can be a purposeful strategy used to win support from segments of a domestic audience. I refer to this as "strategic antagonism." When a key segment of a leader's domestic audience has policy preferences which oppose those of a foreign target, the leader's willingness to pay a cost in terms of foreign support serves as a credible signal that the speaker is committed to the preferred policy of the domestic constituency. Viewed this way, international diplomacy provides leaders with a powerful and little understood tool for achieving their domestic goals. Consequently, the conflicting incentives leaders face when crafting their diplomatic strategies can drive uncooperative international outcomes.

After discussing the theoretical mechanism and outlining the conditions necessary for a leader to benefit from strategic antagonism, I apply the logic to the case of Israeli Prime

Minister Netanyahu's provocative speech to the U.S. Congress in 2015. To form a majority coalition, Netanyahu needed to win support from far-right Israeli voters whose preferences were antithetical to the American Democrats Netanyahu alienated with his speech. Israeli reliance on American diplomatic and economic aid meant that an American backlash against Israel could be costly to Netanyahu. As a result, he could use this backlash to credibly signal his commitment to the ideals and policies of his ongoing electoral campaign.

The high volume of media coverage, public attention, and public opinion surveys surrounding this case provide a unique opportunity to identify observable patterns that are consistent with strategic antagonism. I compare responses from individuals surveyed just-before and just-after Netanyahu's visit to show that the speech had the predicted effect on public opinion within key subsets of both the Israeli and American publics. Specifically, Netanyahu's speech reduced support from American Democrats and Americans who approved of Obama, polarizing American support for Israel. At the same time, the speech increased support for a Netanyahu-led coalition among far-right Israeli voters. Though risky, Netanyahu's strategic antagonism appears to have paid large dividends, as he won an extremely tight election the following week and was successful in forming a right-wing coalition government.

This article makes several key contributions to the study of international diplomacy. An important body of work applies the logic of a two-level game to show how domestic audiences can shape the credibility of information being conveyed to an international counterpart (Fearon, 1994; Putnam, 1988). However, when diplomatic actions are played out on a global stage, sometimes the key audience with whom leaders are trying to resolve information asymmetries is their own domestic public rather than foreign states. Just as democratic leaders may benefit in international negotiations from potential costs imposed by their domestic audience, leaders can benefit in their domestic sphere when a foreign actor imposes a cost on them, though the mechanism is different. In cases where leaders prioritize communicating with their domestic audience, they may be less likely to successfully cooperate with international partners.

This paper also examines a new way of thinking about principal-agent relationships in international politics. The fact that a leader's incentive to maintain power is sometimes at odds with the state's overall welfare generates puzzling foreign policy outcomes, such as an increase in the probability that a state will initiate conflict (Mueller, 1970; Downs and Rocke, 1994). I present a new mechanism through which agency loss can result in non-cooperative international outcomes that is distinct from the logic of diversionary war.[1] Rather than generating an immediate military threat that evokes nationalism and unites domestic support, leaders can use strategic antagonism to pay a cost in terms of future international cooperation in order to signal commitment to a policy preferred by a specific domestic constituency.

In addition to explaining what appear to be grossly botched diplomatic campaigns by highly strategic and informed actors, this argument provides a new lens through which to examine the broader goals and outcomes of diplomacy. The key insight is that diplomacy played out in public is powerful for leaders because it reaches multiple audiences who have a variety of predictable reactions. In this way, what first appears as bad diplomacy may in fact be good politics.

2 The goal of public diplomacy

The theory of strategic antagonism offers a new explanation for the time and resources leaders invest in diplomatic activity. The study of diplomacy has largely focused on states' ability to use "cheap talk" – which does not have any inherent costs for the speaker – to communicate with or manipulate their international negotiating partners, in spite of strong incentives to misrepresent their interests. Recent scholarship argues that diplomacy can affect international outcomes when it is played out in front of the leader's domestic audience

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[1]See Lindsey (2017) for an example of how agency loss between government actors can shape diplomatic outcomes.

due to that audience's ability to punish the leader if they are caught in a lie. If leaders rely on public support to stay in office, then leaders will be more likely to keep their word when their commitments are made in public view (Fearon, 1994). Additionally, the fear of creating audience costs for international negotiating partners can motivate leaders to keep negotiations private (Kurizaki, 2007) and the potential for a partner to leak damaging negotiations to a public can increase the credibility of private negotiations (Yarhi-Milo, 2013). This literature sees the domestic audience as primarily a (sometimes helpful) *constraint* on the government in its negotiations with foreign actors.

Flipping this logic on its head, I argue that the domestic audience is regularly a leader's primary *target* when engaging in international diplomacy, while the foreign actor serves as the tool. Rather than focusing on how the prospect of paying a domestic cost can signal credibility to international actors, I explore how paying a cost in foreign cooperation can signal credibility to domestic constituencies. By incorporating a broader set of potential audiences for diplomatic outcomes, this perspective expands our ability to dissect the complicated goals and implications of diplomatic activity.

I also contribute to research that examines when leaders have domestic incentives to enact aggressive foreign policies. For example, the "rally 'round the flag" effect can create a diversionary incentive and reward leaders for provoking international crises (Mueller, 1970). Additionally, leaders may act aggressively towards international audiences to produce a sense of gratification by imposing retribution on perceived provocations (Lickel et al., 2006), or to increase perceptions of their competence by fostering a masculine image (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). Strategic antagonism differs from these theories by relying on an informational mechanism to reveal the leader's credibility to a specific constituency.

A separate line of literature investigates diplomacy that is explicitly targeted at shaping the opinions of foreign publics, through both "cheap talk" public diplomacy and "public diplomacy through action." This research develops taxonomies for a wide range of public diplomacy strategies and explores variation in approaches between countries (Cull, 2008;

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Gilboa, 2008). The literature also theorizes when public diplomacy will be effective in attracting foreign publics, drawing from theories of public relations, frame cascades in American politics, and social psychology (Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2009; Entman, 2008; Sheafer and Gabay, 2009; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush, 2021). These studies are unified by their assumption that public diplomacy is intended to increase positive foreign opinion for the state or the state's preferred policies (Gregory, 2008; Nye, 1990). While diplomats nearly always claim to be seeking attraction, leaders also commonly elicit negative reactions from foreign publics. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to consider alternative goals for actions that look like public diplomacy but have the opposite effect. Not all instances of strategic antagonism will look like public diplomacy, but some actions that look like public diplomacy can be better understood as strategic antagonism.

Focusing on public antagonism shifts the question away from who can influence a foreign state and towards the question of who would want to. While the limiting factor in traditional public diplomacy research is the *ability* to provoke a desired reaction from a foreign actor, the crucial condition for when a leader will engage in strategic antagonism is whether they benefit from it. This is the question I address in the following section.

3   When leaders benefit from strategic antagonism

In order for a leader to engage in the risky strategy of antagonizing a foreign actor, the domestic benefit must make the gambit worthwhile. To identify the conditions when this is true, I adapt the logic of a signaling model. In this section, I discuss the structure and implications of the model conceptually. The model is presented formally in Appendix A.

I consider a scenario where the leader of a country is trying to win domestic support by convincing a key constituency (which I will call the public) that she is more committed to their preferred policy than the opposition. The "public" may be the overall domestic constituency of the leader's country, or it may be a portion of that constituency or domestic

political elite that are critical to a leader's political goals. This situation requires that the public be somewhat uncertain about the leader's ideal policy on a key issue, not that they are entirely ignorant about the leader's preferences. When seeking election, leaders have an incentive to say whatever will earn them public support, and therefore pundits often question whether their words credibly signal the policies they will implement. Leaders thus go to great lengths to convince constituents that their platforms are genuine, especially on the key issues. While time in office reduces public uncertainty on a leader's preferences, the constantly shifting political environment ensures that incumbents continue to seek ways to credibly communicate their goals to their constituency.

I assume that leaders are able to elicit a costly, negative backlash from a foreign actor should they wish to do so.[2] The backlash may come from a variety of foreign actors, a leader, an international organization, or a public. A foreign backlash will be costly when the leader depends on that actor to achieve their future foreign policy goals. There is a good reason that diplomacy is usually conducted delicately and with great attention to respectful prose. From negotiating complicated trade agreements, to achieving cooperation on tricky military maneuvers, to maintaining flows of foreign aid, achieving international goals depends on others' beliefs that states are trustworthy partners that share their goals. By taking aggressive stances that alienate foreign governments or their publics, leaders increase these actors' estimation that they are not on the same side of key issues, eroding future cooperation.

After observing a foreign backlash, if there is one, the domestic public chooses whether to support the leader or the opposition. Additionally, leaders lose public support after an election by implementing a policy that is significantly different from the one she campaigned on (Ashworth, 2012). This support can be conceptualized in a number of ways. Most bluntly, it could be seen in terms of an election, where the incumbent remains in power only if she wins a certain level of public support. Public support is also critical to political objectives outside of election cycles: in democratic settings, leaders need political capital to pass their

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[2]I expand on the scope conditions for this assumption in section 3.3.

policies, and in some institutions, a lack of support could trigger an election. Even in non-democratic settings, leaders rely on domestic support from certain elite constituencies to maintain power (Weeks, 2008).

The public wants to support whichever candidate has preferences closest to its own, and a costly foreign backlash can be a credible sign that the leader shares their preferences. Suppose, for example, that a crucial domestic constituency prefers a hardline or "hawkish" policy. That constituency may be unsure whether the leader is fully dedicated to the hardline policy, or is instead willing to later settle for a compromise on a more moderate policy. In this case, invoking a foreign backlash, and paying the associated costs, can allow the leader to separate herself from a leader who less willing to hold firm on the issue.[3]

I propose that leaders will be willing to provoke a costly foreign backlash when 1) the domestic public has preferences that are misaligned with the foreign actor, and 2) the foreign backlash is sufficiently costly to be informative to the public, but not so costly that it outweighs the domestic benefits. Both of these conditions are shaped by the characteristics of the foreign actor imposing the costly backlash.

3.1 Misaligned preferences

In order for strategic antagonism to succeed, the leader must provoke a backlash from a foreign actor that the domestic constituency views as being opposed to their goals on a key issue. Where the domestic public prefers a hawkish policy, the leader could shore up

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[3]See Appendix A for a formal discussion of this equilibrium. The model focuses on the leader's ability to convey information on her preferences, but a different interpretation could instead communicate the degree to which the politician is willing to compromise or stand firm on the policy in the future. In this view, a costly backlash could help the leader signal their level of *commitment* to the policy, separating themselves from less committed types. For example, two candidates may declare the same policy goal, but the voters may be uncertain whether the candidates are devoted enough to pay costs for continuing to support the policy if the political winds change in the future.

support by provoking a backlash from a dovish foreign actor.[4] When the leader's domestic constituency observes a backlash from a foreign actor that is hostile to their policy goals, they can more clearly interpret the preferences being signaled by the leader. Importantly, the public must only have a belief about which *side* of the issue the foreign actor currently supports, a condition that is frequently met. In contrast to this rudimentary understanding of the foreign actor's preferences, the domestic public must make a more sophisticated evaluation of whether they believe their leader will actually follow through on a specific policy in the future, relative to other candidates.

The stylized example focuses on a leader signaling commitment to a hawkish security policy, but strategic antagonism can be applied to a broad range of policy spectrums. For example, a leader may alienate a hawkish foreign actor in order to signal a commitment to a more peaceful policy, or alienate an internationalist foreign actor in favor of an isolationist policy. In his high-profile speech at a NATO summit in May 2017, Trump openly provoked European leaders, spurning his more internationalist foreign policy advisors like Rex Tillerson and James Mattis who urged him to take a more conciliatory tone.[5] This antagonistic approach, recommended by White House aides Steve Bannon and Steven Miller, signaled Trump's re-commitment to the "American-First" agenda on which he campaigned.[6] Strategic antagonism can also be used to signal preferences on economic policy questions. Theresa May's seemingly outrageous public demands of European negotiators during the

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[4]Appendix B presents an analysis detailing the conditions for a "hawkish" public.

[5]Susan Glasser. "Trump National Security Team Blindsided by NATO Speech." Politico. June 5, 2017.

[6]Although Trump's voter base may not have held negative sentiment towards NATO as a specific institution before Trump took a stance on these issues, they did hold strong anti-internationalist preferences. NATO was pushing for stronger cooperation between members, and therefore was known to have preferences that were misaligned with Trump's base.

Brexit debate can be understood as a costly signal to British constituencies and politicians committed to a hard line economic policy on Brexit.[7]

One might question why a foreign actor with misaligned preferences would take the bait of the leader's provocation, knowing that a backlash could assist the leader achieve their domestic goals. On this point, I adopt Hall's (2017) framework that distinguishes between responses to international provocation by the public and political leaders. Because the media and other elites thrive on stoking public anger, leaders can often induce a genuine backlash from foreign publics by "wrongfully challenging or violating their values and goals, thereby eliciting outraged reactions" (p. 3). Foreign leaders may better understand the incentives driving the antagonism. However, when the visiting leader is openly antagonistic towards the foreign leader's public stance on an issue, the foreign leader will face pressure to react negatively in order to maintain consistency, especially if their constituency expresses outrage to the provocation. This domestic incentive will in most cases outweigh the strategic incentive to avoid bolstering the visiting leader's own domestic support.

3.2   Balancing the costs and benefits of foreign backlash

When engaging in strategic antagonism, leaders must calibrate the size of the backlash to balance the international costs against the domestic benefits. This is unlike traditional public diplomacy, where we would expect leaders to always try to maximize the shift in foreign sentiment, assumed to be positive. If the backlash is only trivially costly, the public may not update their beliefs on the leader's preferences. For example, if the American president alienated a minor power like Bolivia or Nepal, the costs to future international

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[7]Having originally campaign for the UK to remain in the EU, May lacked credibility among the hardliners of her own party. Her aggressive language during negotiations was often received well by domestic pro-Brexit actors. For example, after a combative speech in September 2018, MP Digby Jones praised May for 'standing up to the EU 'bully boys" and dismissed opponent Boris Johnson as an "irrelevance" (''I do believe in Brexit,' says Theresa May.' BBC. September 30, 2018.)

cooperation would be small, and the action may not send an informative signal about the president's preferences. However, strategic antagonism is also not a viable strategy when the costs of the backlash are too high. An extremely costly backlash that produces a severe loss in future cooperation from critical international players may permanently hogtie the leader and ultimately outweigh the domestic gains.

Although leaders likely face some uncertainty about how foreign actors will react to provocation, they have several tools to shape the size and scope of the backlash to suit their needs.[8] First, leaders carefully choose their tone and topic in diplomatic statements. In this way, leaders stop short of challenging values or goals that are extremely sensitive or important to the foreign audience. Second, leaders can shape the cost of a backlash based on the position of the foreign actor they choose to alienate. The cost of a backlash will be larger when the foreign country is crucial to the leader's international agenda, either as a cooperative partner or a potential adversary. A backlash from an important strategic ally could risk losing their cooperation at a critical moment in the future. This could manifest in a number of ways: coming to the country's aid in case of conflict, permitting military exercises or use of bases, providing diplomatic support in international forums, or sustaining aid.[9] In other cases, aggravating a particularly conflictual adversary could carry a high risk of increased tension and potential for conflict.

In addition to a foreign country, it might be an international organization or collection of countries that imposes the cost. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte earned the nickname "Mr. No" for his openly antagonistic public stance against EU spending, most recently regarding a large Coronavirus relief package in early 2021. As a result, some observers noted

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[8]This is similar to the dynamic leaders face when leveraging domestic audience costs. Leaders have some control in directing domestic attention, but "the reactions of the domestic 'audience'- once engaged - are not entirely predictable" (Baum, 2004).

[9]The same logic applies to important economic partners. When Theresa May negotiated with the EU on the conditions of Brexit, she stood to pay a significant cost because the UK depended so heavily on trade and security cooperation with the EU countries.

that the negative international response to his isolationist rhetoric would obstruct "efforts to effectively pursue national interests in the long term."[10] However, this also lent Rutte credibility among potential supporters during the Dutch elections in March 2021, where many voters supported decreased commitments to the EU.[11]

An interesting feature driving this balancing act is that, in some cases, the leader's domestic audience also suffers the cost of the backlash, but the politician can still be rewarded with increased domestic support. If the loss in the foreign actor's future cooperation is costly to the leader, then it is likely also costly to the constituency she represents. This is the price that the constituency must pay for the information about their leader's preferences. In other cases, the voters might find that the leader's strategic antagonism is not worth the price and punish the leader for alienating a valuable foreign ally, even if it produces a credible signal that the leader's preferences are aligned with their own.

Leaders are more likely to engage in strategic antagonism during times when there are high domestic benefits to signaling commitment to a constituency's preferences. This may be especially likely in the lead-up to an election, as was the case with Netanyahu's speech to Congress and with Dutch Prime Minister Rutte's rhetoric on EU Covid relief. However, leaders also have pervasive incentives to shore up domestic support during times without a proximate election. For instance, leaders could use this tactic in the lead up to votes on important legislation, thereby credibly signaling that the policy represents the preferences of the constituencies of wavering legislators and making a passing vote more palatable. The example of Theresa May antagonizing European leaders on Brexit fits this logic – May was likely trying to signal to skeptical voters and pro-Brexit MPs that the deal she was negotiating sufficiently protected their interests. Leaders may also engage in strategic antagonism when

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[10]Luuk Molthof. "Mark Rutte is in danger of repeating David Cameron's mistakes." July 22, 2020. Politico.

[11]In 2021, Rutte's People's Party for Freedom and Democracy won 21% of seats, allowing him to maintain control of the government.

they face the prospect of seeing their political capital undermined by criticism for being insufficiently committed to the policies on which they campaigned.

3.3   Who has the global microphone?

Together, the two conditions described above outline when a leader might want to induce a foreign backlash. However, the leader must also *be able* to provoke a foreign backlash if they so choose, which requires that they be able to sufficiently capture the foreign actor's attention. Additionally, the leader's domestic audience must be able to interpret that the foreign backlash entails a cost for the leader, which is more likely when they have access to free media. These factors define the scope of cases where when I expect the argument to hold.

Leaders who can easily capture foreign attention will have a larger potential to benefit from strategic antagonism. In this way, strategic antagonism is yet another tool that is most readily available to the leaders that are already powerful. Leaders are more likely to be able to draw foreign attention when they can leverage a strong military and economic capacity or an existing cultural or historical connection with the targeted audience (Sheafer and Gabay, 2009). However, unlike in the case of "persuasive" public diplomacy, strategic antagonism sometimes provides an outlet for leaders who might otherwise be disadvantaged. Even leaders from relatively weak states, or states with historically misaligned preferences, can sometimes make headlines with bombastic, antagonistic rhetoric. For example, in 2016, Philippine President Duterte made headlines when he called US President Obama a "son of a whore" for criticizing the human rights implications of Duterte's war on drugs. Duterte's language resulted in Obama canceling his visit with Duterte in the Philippines.[12] However, Duterte's

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[12]Damien Gayle. "Barack Obama cancels meeting after Philippines president calls him 'son of a whore."' September 5, 2016. The Guardian.

willingness to stand up to the powerful United States demonstrated his commitment to the war on drugs, winning the praise of his domestic base.[13]

The magnitude of the cost is also determined by how it is perceived by the leader's public. If the leader privately pays a cost that the domestic public does not observe, then the leader cannot use it as a credible signal. The degree to which this is possible depends on how the foreign actor and the backlash is portrayed in the domestic media (Baum and Potter, 2015). In particular, the mechanism of strategic antagonism is more likely to be viable when the leader's domestic audience has sufficient access to free media such that when they hear about the backlash, they believe that it is likely to be a true representation of the events.

4   Mr. Bibi goes to Washington

In March 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu inspired scandalized headlines when he harshly criticized the Obama administration's pending nuclear agreement with Iran in a speech to a joint session of Congress. The American public reaction was mixed, but in the end the speech elicited a backlash from Democratic politicians and voters while doing little to change the minds of Republicans, who already supported his position. Far from rallying behind Netanyahu, Congress postponed a bill that would have allowed a vote denouncing the agreement.[14] Ultimately, the speech exacerbated polarization on policies regarding Israel among the American public and political elites. The Israeli public response was also divided.

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[13]Duterte maintained strong public support throughout this event, and in a 2017 survey, a large majority (63%) reported approval of his handling relations with the US. (Jacob Poushter and Caldwell Bishop. 'People in the Philippines Still Favor U.S. Over China, but Gap Is Narrowing.' September 21, 2017. Pew Research Center.) Commentators at the time also noted that, although Filipinos usually express high favorability towards the US, Duterte's aggressive words 'tapped a deep strain of resentment among Filipinos who feel as if they are treated like a second-class ally.' (Richard Paddock. 'Leader's Bluster Stands in Contrast to Filipinos' Deep Ties to U.S.' October 27, 2016. New York Times.)

[14]Ted Barrett and Alexandra Jaffe. "McConnell postpones vote on Iran bill." March 5, 2015. CNN.

It appears that Netanyahu exchanged his valuable time only to evoke a mixed domestic response in Israel and aggravate the polarization of policy towards Israel in the United States.

When examined through the lens of strategic antagonism, Netanyahu's visit to the US makes more sense. Netanyahu's speech took place just two weeks before an election in Israel, when Netanyahu's Likud party was just barely ahead of the opposing Zionist Union party. Netanyahu's campaign strategy relied on mobilizing right-wing voters who were not part of his previous coalition. Facing a tight election at home, Netanyahu was precisely in the position where he would be willing to pay a cost in international support from an important ally in order to win support from a key domestic constituency.

In addition to meeting the scope conditions outlined by the theory, this case provides clear sub-populations in the US and Israel that the theory expects to be influenced by Netanyahu's strategic antagonism. First, I expect to see a cost: the foreign actor will decrease their support for the leader implementing strategic antagonism. The Iran agreement was highly politicized in the US, delineating clear subsets of the American public who were opposed to the policy preferences of Netanyahu's right-wing Israeli constituency – the Obama administration was strongly pursuing the agreement with Iran, and American Democrats were largely in favor of it. If Netanyahu indeed provoked a backlash, American Democrats and Obama supporters should decrease their support of Netanyahu following his speech. This would significantly contribute to the long term cost of increased polarization towards Israel within the United States, enabling Democratic politicians to take policy stances that are less favorable towards Israel.

I also expect a corresponding increase in support from the key domestic constituency Netanyahu was trying to mobilize: the Israeli voters who supported far right-wing political parties. This was the group who Netanyahu needed to convince that he would stand up to future international pressure on Iran and whose preferences were most misaligned with sup-

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porters of the Iran agreement in the United States. In order to retain the prime ministership, Netanyahu needed these voters to support a coalition led by his Likud party.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify what this case does and does not aim to do. The remainder of this paper discusses how this case satisfies the requirements identified by the theory for Netanyahu to be both able and willing to provoke a costly backlash from the United States. It then presents evidence that the speech moved public opinion among predicted subsets of the population in both Israel and the United States. At the same time, I do not intend to show definitive evidence that Netanyahu's motivations were driven entirely by strategic antagonism. Doing so would require access to declassified documentation of internal discussions that are not available at this time. The selection of this case provides an unusual opportunity to triangulate the predicted public opinion *outcomes* of strategic antagonism within the current international environment. This is important in light of the fact that most research on public diplomacy has struggled to show systematic evidence of the effect of leaders' diplomatic efforts on public opinion. [15] However, I acknowledge that the selection of a recent case presents a necessary trade-off of not being able to directly pinpoint the leader's motivation. Before concluding the case, I attempt to minimize this concern by explicitly discussing alternative mechanisms that might drive the observed patterns and behaviors.

American public vs Israeli right wing preferences

A backlash from the United States was well suited to send an effective signal because American preferences were appropriately misaligned with the goals of the Israeli constituency crucial to Netanyahu's re-election. A majority of Americans supported the agreement, with public opinion split strongly along partisan lines; nearly four times as many Democrats ap-

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[15]See Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009) and Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush (2021) for an important exception.

proved of the agreement relative to Republicans.[16] The Israeli public widely understood the Obama administration, who took a leadership role in the negotiations, to be open to compromises with Iran.

In contrast, the Israeli public was strongly opposed to the agreement with Iran. After the agreement was signed in July 2015, 69% of Israelis stated that they opposed the deal and 78% said that they thought it endangered Israel.[17] This view was most deeply held among Israelis on the far right, the crucial constituency whose support Netanyahu needed to secure the prime ministership. In the 2015 election, Netanyahu made a dramatic shift to the right in the late stages of his campaign, attempting to stimulate high turnout from far-right parties and openly rejecting the moderate parties that formed his 2013 coalition. In addition to taking an antagonistic approach to opposing the Iran agreement, Netanyahu turned his back on the two-state solution, revising the stance he campaigned on in 2009.

A reasonable skeptic might argue that Netanyahu's preferences on Iran were well known to the Israeli public. He had, after all, been an active public figure for decades and the Prime Minister for six years. However, Netanyahu's main political opponents also publicly opposed the deal and Netanyahu had a reputation for being a pragmatic politician with a penchant for shifting his positions for political expediency. More than just being opposed to the Iran deal, Netanyahu's campaign focused on convincing hardliners that he was uniquely committed to standing up to future international pressure on Iran, relative to the other candidates.

Cost of American backlash

The case also meets the second condition of strategic antagonism: Netanyahu faced a meaningful (but manageable) cost as a result of provoking American Democrats. Israel receives substantial aid from the US, estimated at $127 billion by 2016 and accounting for 20% of

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[16]Gallup. "US Public Opinion on Iran Deal." September 4, 2015.

[17]Teresa Welsh. "Where Israel stands on the Iran deal." September 14, 2015. US News.

Israel's defense budget.[18] The United States also frequently defends Israel in the United Nations, vetoing dozens of resolutions critical of Israel. On the one hand, the strong historical connection between the US and Israel created an upper bound to the cost that Netanyahu would have expected to pay for an American backlash, allowing him to criticize Obama in front of Congress without fearing a devastating retribution. Support for Israel has generally been robust and bipartisan due to Israel being seen as a democratic, pro-American government in a hostile region. Many evangelical Americans see it as a religious duty to defend Jerusalem, and many Americans perceive Israelis as sharing their values.

That said, Netanyahu did face the prospect of important negative consequences stemming from increased polarization of American support for Israel. Though Democrats are less uniformly supportive of Israel than Republicans, support has historically been strong across the aisle. Israelis view the bipartisan nature of American support to be vital to their survival and Israel invests extensively in public and cultural diplomacy aimed at maintaining broad public support in the US.[19] Commentators at the time pointed out that politically polarizing the public's support for Israel could result in less stable American policies towards Israel, noting that if Israel was "coded as a 'Republican' issue," it would strengthen Democrats who were less supportive of Israel. A Brookings fellow observed, "Younger Democrats look at their leaders and they see Nancy Pelosi irate, and they see the president obviously irate. They're probably taking cues. And I think in the future, you may see a generation of Democratic leaders that's quite different [from the current pro-Israel leaders]."[20]

By contributing to the polarization of American support, Netanyahu risked future US policies towards Israel being contingent on the party in power. Legislative polarization also risks policy gridlock, including on foreign policy issues. For example, this poses a significant

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[18]Congressional Research Service. U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel. December 22, 2016.

[19]This includes leaders' messaging campaigns – referred to as "Hasbara" (which translates to "explaining") – and the Birthright cultural exchange program.

[20]Zack Beauchamp, "The Netanyahu speech controversy, explained," March 3, 2015. Vox.

a problem if Congress needs to affirmatively approve line items for Israel aid in the budget (Friedrichs and Tama, 2022). By alienating Democrats and invoking these costs, the speech could serve as a meaningful signal to the Israeli public about Netanyahu's preferences.

The American response

Netanyahu's visit drew significant American attention, in part because of Netanyahu's historical position within American domestic politics and also because of the invitation and endorsement of prominent American politicians. News outlets were flooded with stories about his speech and its political implications. In order to successfully leverage strategic antagonism, Netanyahu needed to provoke a backlash among the subset of American public and political leaders whose preferences were known to be misaligned with his targeted Israeli constituency: Democrats and Americans who approved of Obama.[21]

This is indeed what occurred, and this pattern is evident in survey data asking American respondents about their opinion of Netanyahu shortly before and after his speech.[22] Figures 1 and 2 show the marginal change in American public support for Netanyahu after his speech, broken down by partisanship and support for Obama.[23] Favorability towards Netanyahu decreased by 21.1% among American Democrats and by 17.1% among Americans that approved of Obama. Importantly, Netanyahu did not exchange a decrease in Demo-

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[21]Although the political leaders are the individuals who directly set the policy which may be costly to Netanyahu, their positions are constrained by public opinion (Sobel, 2001; Baum and Potter, 2015).

[22]This dependent variable reflects both costs to Netanyahu personally and potential costs to Israel as a country because perceptions of a country's leader shape the sentiment and respect towards the country (Balmas, 2018).

[23]These data are from four Gallup and Pew surveys run in February and March 2015. The marginal effects are from a probit regression predicting approval of Netanyahu based on whether the respondent was surveyed after his speech, interacted with partisanship or approval of Obama. See Appendix C for a detailed discussion of the analysis, the full regression tables, and robustness checks.

cratic support for an increase in Republican support, which was already very high. As a result, the net change in American public opinion was decidedly against Netanyahu.

Figure 1: Change in favorability towards Netanyahu following his speech, by partisanship.
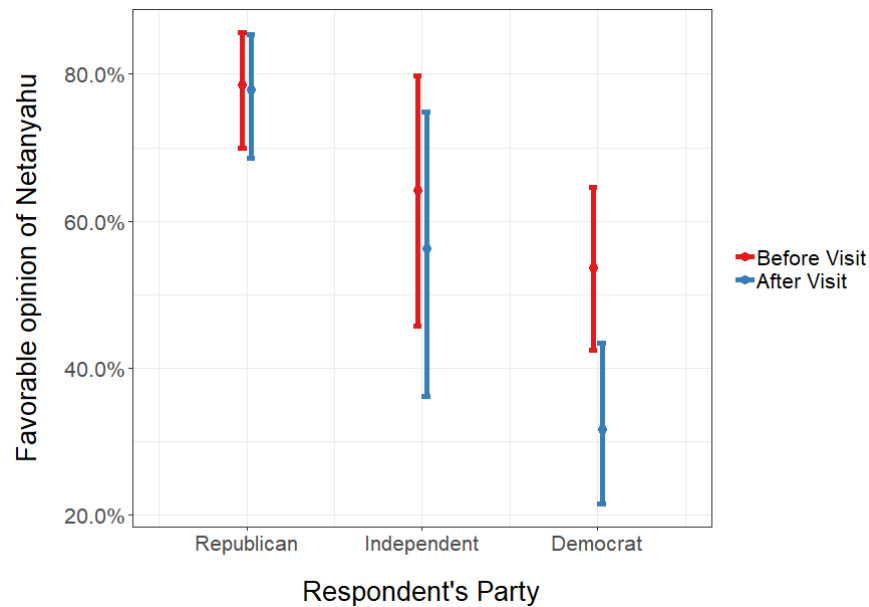

Republicans did not significantly change their approval of Netanyahu, while Democrats decreased their approval of Netanyahu by 21.1%. The decrease within Democrats is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Marginal effects from Model 3, Table B2 of the appendix.

The response from American political elites was also divided along partisan lines. Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner initially issued the invitation, and Netanyahu received a standing ovation from the Republican members of Congress. In contrast, prominent Democrats declared the speech to be offensive. In a blatant snub, the speech was boycotted by 58 members of Congress, all Democrats. National Security Adviser Susan Rice said the speech was "destructive to the fabric of the relationship" between Israel and the US, and House minority leader Nancy Pelosi said that it was "an insult to the intelligence of the United States."[24] Obama responded coolly, issuing a ten-minute rebuttal from the Oval

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[24]Julie Hirschfeld Davis. "Obama Aide Calls Netanyahu's Planned Visit 'Destructive' to U.S.-Israel Ties." February 25, 2015. New York Times. Dan Williams and Matt Spetalnick. "Israel's Netanyahu draws rebuke from Obama over Iran speech to Congress." Reuters. March 3, 2015.

Figure 2: Change in favorability towards Netanyahu following his speech, by Obama approval.
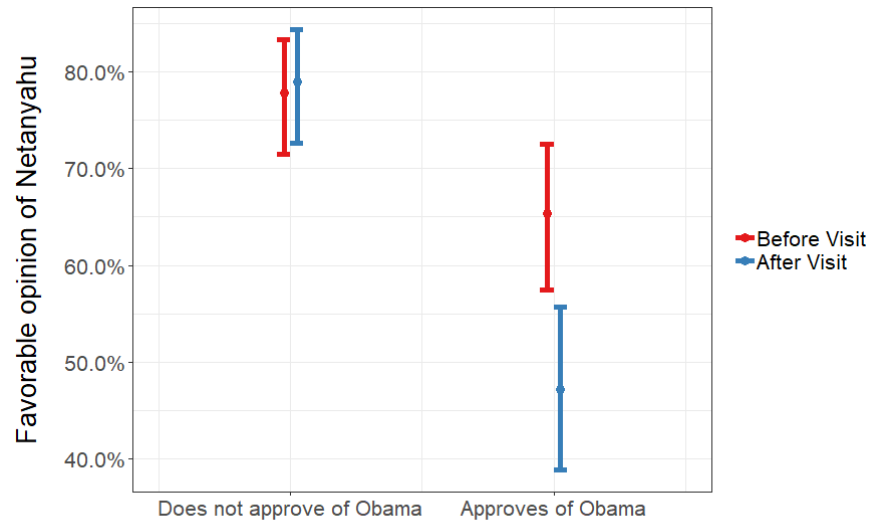
Americans that did not approve of Obama did not change their favorability towards Netanyahu following his speech, while Americans that approved of Obama decreased their favorability rating of Netanyahu by 17.1% ($p < 0.05$). Marginal effects from Model 5, Table B2 of the appendix.

Office and refusing to meet with Netanyahu on the grounds that it would be inappropriate to do so within weeks of the Israeli election.

Most importantly, Netanyahu's speech "injected a degree of partisanship" into US-Israeli relations, as National Security Advisor Rice noted at the time. While Americans were historically united in their preferences that the US focus pressure on Palestine rather than Israel in the conflict, Democrats have become more supportive of the US taking a neutral role, putting pressure on Israel, and using sanctions to oppose Israeli settlements (Waxman and Pressman, 2021).[25] Net sympathy for Israelis vs. Palestinians among Democrats dropped from +36% in 2013 to +19% in 2015, and has continued to drop since then, down to a low of -3% in 2020.[26] While Netanyahu's speech did not originate this polarization, it did

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[25]See also Shibley Telhami. "Changing American Public Attitudes On Israel/Palestine: Does It Matter For Politics?" The Project on Middle East Political Science.

[26]Lydia Saad. "Key Trends in U.S. Views on Israel and the Palestinians" Gallup. March 19, 2021.

accelerate and solidify it. In this way, he contributed to the schism which today allows promi-
nent Democratic politicians to openly criticize Israel on human right records and support
withholding aid in response to Israeli settlements.

Israeli reaction

Israeli voters were also exposed to extensive media coverage of Netanyahu's speech. For
example, Israel's most widely read newspaper, Israel Hayom featured the speech on their
front page each day from March 1st to March 5th, in addition to lengthy articles inside the
publication discussing the event.[27]

The American backlash and the potential long-term costs of the speech were frequently
highlighted in Israeli media. Former Ambassador to the US Michael Oren noted that the
format of the speech created a "crisis" with the US, and Former President Simon Peres said
"for the first time, there is a spat with a US administration because Israel is interfering with
American policies."[28] Former Mossad Director Meir Dagan decried the speech as risking
the diplomatic benefits that Israel received from the United States: "The Americans hold
the [UN Security Council] veto umbrella over us, and if there is a clash, the umbrella could
disappear."[29] Additionally, the media coverage frequently noted that by antagonizing the
Obama administration, the speech would increase polarization towards Israel within the
American public. Labor Party member Erel Margalit said "Netanyahu 'stated good purposes'
by arguing that Israel should not be a partisan issue in U.S. politics, but ... he's achieving

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[27]Israel Hayom is a right-leaning publication that is seen as generally supporting Netanyahu.

[28]Ben Hartman. "Netanyahu to blame for security failures, worsened relationship with US, former Mossad
Chief says." March 11, 2015. Jerusalem Post. The Jerusalem Post is considered to be center-right.

[29]Lahav Harkov. "Dagan: Netanyahu causing Israel strategic harm on Iran nuke issue." March 1, 2015.
Jerusalem Post

the opposite."'[30] Even articles that praised the speech acknowledged the "diplomatic fallout that such a polarizing Congressional speech would engender."[31]

Although the speech drew significant condemnation in Israel due to the potential loss of US support, some viewed this cost as being helpful to Netanyahu. A commentator in the Jerusalem Post said: "Every attack by US officials further solidifies his claim that he is the only Israeli leader willing to do whatever it takes to prevent a Shi'ite bomb."[32] In an interview with Israel Hayom, Netanyahu highlighted that he was willing to pay a cost with the United States and emphasized that this distinguished him from his opponents: "A prime minister in Israel must be able to stand up even to our closest ally and tell the truth. The question you should be asking is not of me but of those Israelis who don't stand up to this danger and don't support this stance."[33] Netanyahu's campaign ads also featured the speech and compared Netanyahu to Israel's former Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, who initiated the Six Days War in 1976 in opposition to US preferences.

Survey data indicate that there was a small net increase in Israeli public support for Netanyahu and his Likud party immediately following his trip to the US. However, Netanyahu's campaign strategy depended on mobilizing a very specific constituency: voters for right-wing parties with whom he planned to form a coalition. To examine whether Netanyahu achieved this goal, I compare individuals surveyed by the 2015 Israel National Election Study (INES) immediately before and after Netanyahu's speech (Shamir and Rahat, 2017).[34] The outcome

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[30]Joshua Keating. "Senior Member of Israel's Labor Party: Netanyahu Is Damaging Israel's National Security." March 3, 2015. Slate.

[31]"Jerusalemites express overwhelming support for Netanyahu's speech." March 3, 2015. Jerusalem Post.

[32]Ilan Manor. "Obama and Netanyahu: A mutually beneficial crisis?" The Jerusalem Post. March 2, 2015

[33]Israel Hayom. March 3, 2015., quoted in William Saletan. "Two-Faced Bibi." Slate. March 09, 2015.

[34]I use March 3rd as the cutoff for the analysis. Netanyahu's speech and Obama's objections were covered in the news beforehand, but attention to the event intensified dramatically on the day of the speech. For example, Google searches for "Netanyahu" increased to approximately thirty times the previous baseline in

measure is whether a respondent supports a coalition led by Netanyahu's Likud party. I focus on differential changes in support among respondents who voted for the right-wing coalition parties in 2013: United Torah Judaism, Shas, and Jewish Home.[35]

Figure 3 shows the marginal change in support for a Likud-led coalition among these right-wing party supporters after Netanyahu's speech, compared to voters who supported Likud or a different party in 2013.[36] As predicted, there was a large increase in support for a Likud-led coalition among right-wing Israelis following Netanyahu's speech. To put it simply, Netanyahu's speech was successful in mobilizing support for his coalition precisely among the hawkish, right wing voters he needed to win over. The effects are strongest when comparing responses from the four days immediately before and after the speech (March 1-4) but remain significant ($p < 0.1$) when expanding the sample to a 12-day window (Feb 25-March 8).[37]

The INES survey also allows for a test of several attitudinal outcomes consistent with the logic of strategic antagonism. First, strategic antagonism requires that the key domestic constituency recognizes (and is willing to pay) the cost of the backlash. Although the survey did not ask this question directly, it did ask whether respondents agreed that "Israel should

the US, and Israeli searches for the term "Congress" spiked to fives times the volume of the previous day (Appendix figures 5 and 6). Anticipation effects should bias against seeing a significant effect, and the results are robust to excluding responses from March 2nd.

[35]All three of these parties ultimately joined Netanyahu's coalition along with the centrist party, Kulanu.

[36]I use a probit regression where the dependent variable is support for a Likud-led coalition and the key independent variable is an interaction between whether the respondent voted for a right-wing coalition party in 2013 and an indicator for whether they were surveyed after the speech. See Appendix D for a detailed discussion of the analysis, demographic controls, the full regression tables, and robustness checks.

[37]See appendix Table C3. The longer time window can help establish the persistence of the effect, but is less preferable from a causal inference standpoint due to potential bias introduced by other salient events that occurred during the survey. For example, on March 6th, a newspaper published a document claiming to show Netanyahu offered significant concessions to Palestinians in 2013 negotiations, potentially undercutting his right-wing support.

Figure 3: Change in support for a Likud-led coalition among right-wing party supporters following Netanyahu's speech
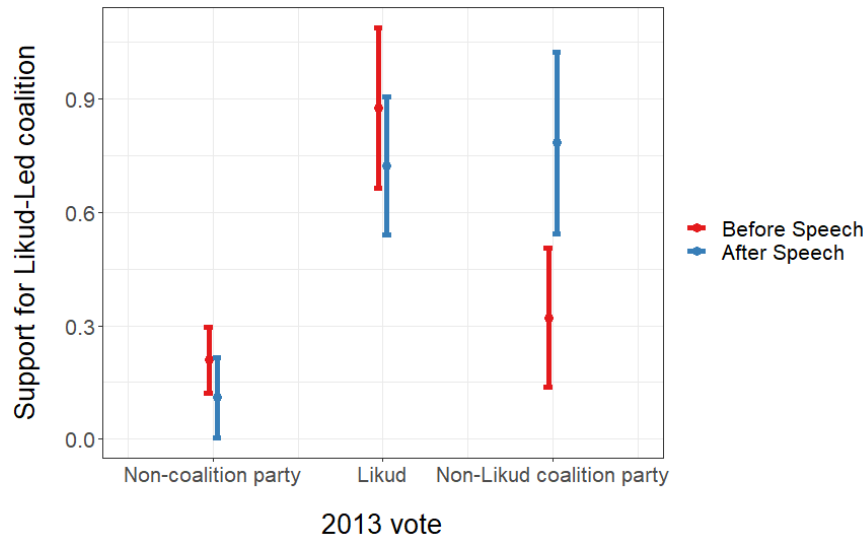
Israelis who voted for a right-wing coalition party in 2013 increased their support for a Likud-led coalition in the period following Netanyahu's speech ($p < 0.05$). Marginal effects from Appendix Table C2.

do what is best for its security, even at the price of a confrontation with the American administration." I find that Israelis who voted for a right-wing coalition party in 2013 were significantly more likely to strongly agree that Israel should protect its security at the risk of confrontation with America.[38] This also suggests that Netanyahu's right-wing constituency perceived a tension between their goals and the preferences of the United States. Second, a core mechanism of my argument is that Netanyahu used strategic antagonism to signal his commitment to the security preferences of right-wing Israelis. To evaluate this mechanism, I look at whether the speech affected right-wing respondents' belief that the Likud leadership would "deal with Israel's foreign affairs and security issues best." Indeed, right-wing coalition party supporters differentially increased their support of this statement after Netanyahu's speech ($p < 0.1$).[39]

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[38]See appendix Table C5.

[39]See appendix Table C7. When demographic controls are included, the effect narrowly misses significance (p = 0.13). This result might be weaker because respondents were presented with a binary choice about who would better protect their security interests between Netanyahu and a left-wing coalition.

Netanyahu's goals

In this section, I consider several alternative motivations that may have compelled Netanyahu's actions. As previously mentioned, I do not claim to be able to definitively rule out these alternative motivations. I also do not claim that strategic antagonism was Netanyahu's only motivation – in the complex world of international and domestic politics, actors respond to an array of overlapping incentives. Still, the available evidence suggests that domestic motivations loomed large and that strategic antagonism was an important element in understanding Netanyahu's overarching strategy.

Some observers view the speech as a sincere effort to galvanize American opposition to the Iran deal. However, the agreement with Iran was already highly politicized and salient in the US, making it unlikely that cues from a foreign leader, no matter how credible, would have an effect on American public opinion (Zaller, 1992). Moreover, because Obama was set to implement the agreement through executive action, there was little to gain from mobilizing Republicans.[40] If anything, Netanyahu's speech appeared to unify moderate, pro-Israel Democrats behind Obama. Netanyahu also had little to gain by galvanizing long-term Republican opposition to the Iran agreement. It was well understood that the Republican party strongly opposed the Iran deal well before Netanyahu's speech, and leading candidates for the Republican nomination were already campaigning on either scraping or re-working the deal if elected.[41]

We might ask whether the goal of the speech was to generate a "rally 'round the flag" effect in Israel. However, the pattern that scholars usually associate with the rally effect is the unification of public and elite support behind the leader in response to an immediate

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[40] At the time, the best strategy Congressional Republicans had to undermine the President's negotiations was a bill levying new sanctions on Iran. However, overcoming a Presidential veto required 67 Senate votes and Republicans only held 54 seats.

[41] Julian Borger. "Race to sign Iran nuclear deal before Republican takeover of Congress." November 25, 2014. The Guardian.

crisis (Groeling and Baum, 2008). Far from unifying public support behind his cause, the speech exacerbated tensions and faced a polarized response among Israeli elites and the media. Additionally, perhaps Netanyahu's ability to secure an invitation to address a joint session of Congress signaled his diplomatic competence. If this was his goal, it is unclear why he would use the speech to aggressively antagonize Obama and the Democrats. Instead, once he secured the invitation, he could have used more "diplomatic" rhetoric, like he did during his 2011 speech to Congress.

Alternatively, Netanyahu may have been trying to gain favor by satisfying a desire for retribution against a target of resentment (Lickel et al., 2006), or he may have been trying to foster a "tough" image (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). These mechanisms could work in tandem with strategic antagonism, but, if they had been Netanyahu's primary goals, there existed better audiences to whom he could have addressed the speech. For example, by antagonizing the European countries who were also party to the Iran negotiations, Netanyahu could have satisfied at least as much resentment from his constituency and looked just as tough, while paying fewer costs in terms of future cooperation.

Finally, Netanyahu's own framing of the speech to the Israeli public is consistent with what would be expected by strategic antagonism. As one columnist noted, Netanyahu "campaigned on his defiance" of the US.[42] There were no formal debates between the candidates, but Netanyahu spoke with his primary opponent, Isaac Herzog, during a brief, high-profile, television appearance, only three days before the election. Herzog criticized Netanyahu's aggressive approach for costing Israel support on the Iran issue from global audiences. Netanyahu responded by focusing on how his approach signaled that he was the only candidate who was committed to standing up to international pressure to compromise on Iran. He argued that even though Herzog and his likely coalition partners were currently opposed to the Iran deal, if they won the election they would "capitulate to any dictates [of the international community]. They can't stand up to [them]. He says he cares for Israel's security but when

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[42]William Saletan. "Two-Faced Bibi." Slate. March 09, 2015.

he faces the test, the prime minister must say a simple word [to international pressures]: No."[43] In other words, rather than trying to minimize the costs, he used the costs as a way to highlight his commitment to the stance of right-wing voters.

5 Conclusion

Far from being a mere error in judgment, provoking a foreign backlash can in fact be a deliberate and beneficial strategy. When the backlash comes from a foreign actor whose support is valuable to the leader's international goals and whose preferences are opposed to the preferences of a key domestic constituency, this backlash can be a costly signal of the leader's commitment to the domestic constituency's preferred policy. To be clear, there are times when it is more likely that leaders desire to persuade a foreign actor, incorrectly estimate that audience's response, and accidentally provoke a backlash. However, many of the actions leaders take that result in a foreign backlash are clearly antagonistic and result in responses that seem easily predictable. In order to better explain these actions, it is useful to understand the mechanism through which they can benefit the leader. Clarifying the mechanism behind this phenomenon has broader applications. Diplomatic campaigns played out on the global stage can be leveraged to signal to interested international actors beyond the domestic audience. For example, a leader may attempt to provide reassurance to an alliance partner by evoking a backlash from an adversary to the alliance. A leader could also use a costly foreign backlash to signal resolve in a negotiation with an adversary. For example, when President Bush campaigned internationally to gain support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, his aggressive stance was off-putting to publics in Germany and France. By paying the cost in public approval from French and German audiences, Bush may have increased the Iraqi evaluation that he was committed to an aggressive policy.

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[43]Itamar Sharon. "Netanyahu, Herzog hold brief, bitter, impromptu TV debate." March 14, 2015. The Times of Israel.

Strategic antagonism can take a number of different forms. For example, it can be a short-term strategy to cater to a domestic group by alienating a foreign actor with a single, dramatic action. Alternatively, it can take the form of a longer-term behavior, taking many actions to build an overall strategy of alienating valuable foreign actors to cater to domestic preferences. For example, scholars have noted that since 2016, Chinese diplomats have shifted dramatically towards aggressive diplomatic rhetoric, known as "wolf warrior diplomacy." This has been received negatively by international observers, and, over time, decreased public opinion of China and increased expectations of Chinese aggression.[44] Consistent with the logic of strategic diplomacy, Chinese diplomats who implement the strategy frequently call attention to (and loudly denounce) instances of foreign criticism in response to their statements. Domestic nationalists want the CCP to keep a strong foreign policy and leverage its strength against Western opponents, and commentators note that using aggressive language and highlighting foreign criticism is useful to the CCP in shoring up its domestic image mong a widely nationalistic public.

With the rise of populism around the globe, the use of strategic antagonism may become an even more fruitful tool as leaders try to signal their "outsider" credentials and convince voters that they do not conduct "politics as usual." For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban alienated the European People's Party by attacking the EPP-affiliated European Commission President in his 2019 domestic campaign. This lost him the political cover and legitimacy of allies in the EU, where Hungary had hoped to benefit from billions in aid from the Coronavirus stimulus package. However, the move won Orban domestic support, where Euroskepticism is popular and Orban relies on his image as a "European renegade."[45]

The intended audience or policy spectrum may vary, but the underlying conditions necessary for this strategy to be both possible and wise are the same: the leader must be able

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[44]Doug Bandow. "How the U.S. Benefits From 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy." October 15, 2020. Cato.

[45]Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Benjamin Novak. "Hungary's Ruling Party Breaks With Conservative E.U. Allies That Shielded It." March 3, 2021. New York Times.

to draw attention of the foreign actor, the cost of the foreign backlash must be sufficiently large to be a credible signal but not so large to dissuade any leader from paying it, and the preferences of the intended audience must be opposed to that of the alienated foreign actor. Diplomacy is a multifaceted tool. In order to better understand it, we must examine the motivations behind strategies that stray from leaders' stated intent. The theory presented here implies that a leader's ability to evoke a reaction from a foreign actor can be valuable even if they do not persuade that actor. Diplomacy may be "cheap" at first glance, but when the response is costly, a leader can transform their cheap diplomatic trip into a strategic domestic victory.

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