Has Trump Damaged the U.S. Image Abroad? Decomposing the Effects of Policy Messages on Foreign Public Opinion

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Abstract
The U.S. President Donald Trump has frequently made foreign countries central to his political messages, often conveying animosity. But do foreign citizens react more to the speaker of these messages—Trump himself—or their content? More generally, when people are exposed to messages sent from foreign countries, are their attitudes influenced by information heuristics or information content in messages? Although related studies are abundant in the literature of American public opinion, these questions are not fully examined in the literature of foreign public opinion. To address them, we used Japan as a case and fielded a survey experiment exposing citizens to U.S. policy messages that varied by source, policy content, and issue salience. Results suggest that while the source cue (Trump attribution) causes negative perceptions of the U.S., the policy content (cooperative vs. uncooperative) has a larger effect in shaping opinion of the U.S. Furthermore, analysis of interaction effects shows that only when U.S. policy approach is uncooperative does the Trump attribution have significantly negative and large effects. We conclude that foreign citizens rely more on policy content in transnational opinion formation—an aspect that past research in this area has overlooked. Substantively, these findings may demonstrate that even under a presidency that has alienated foreign countries and seemingly undermined U.S. stature in the world, foreign opinion toward the U.S. does not hinge entirely on its political leader. In short, Trump has not irreparably damaged the U.S. image abroad.

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Introduction

Observing worldwide anti-Iraq-war demonstrations in 2003, the New York Times once stated, “[T]here may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion”.¹ With expanded media coverage of protests on international issues, such as wars, trade conflicts, and human rights, as well as the increased availability of cross-national opinion surveys, global public opinion has become an important topic in scholarly research over the past decade (e.g., Dragojlovic 2013; Goldsmith et al. 2005; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; Holsti 2008; Katzenstein and Keohane 2007; Walt 2006). Based on empirical analysis, some of these studies show that the image of a foreign country in the minds of ordinary people can bring about policy changes and influence the outcomes of international relations (Datta 2009, 2014; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012), an idea often understood in terms of how much “soft power” a country holds in relations with foreign countries (Nye 2004).

But how is the image of a foreign country itself shaped? Specifically, when people are exposed to policy messages sent from foreign countries, are their attitudes influenced by information heuristics, such as message sources, or by the actual policy content of these messages? Although related studies are abundant in the literature of American public opinion, these questions are not fully examined in the literature of transnational public opinion. There are some studies estimating the determinants of foreign public opinion. For example, Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009) examine the impacts of U.S. leaders’ visits to foreign countries on public opinion about the U.S. in these countries, and Goldsmith et al. (2014) examine the impacts of U.S. foreign aid on public opinion about the U.S. in aid-recipient countries. In a recent article, based on randomized experiments, Balmas (2018) shows that information about behaviors and personal characteristics of a foreign leader affects the images of the portrayed leader’s country and people. But little research evaluates the impacts of policy statements on foreign public opinion and, more importantly, decomposes various elements contained in such statements. Schatz and Levine (2010) and Dragojlovic (2011) present some relevant evidence based on randomized experiments, but focus on message source and do not manipulate message content. Their studies, which were fielded under the previous administrations, also do not help us

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¹ Patrick E. Tyler, “Threats and Responses: News Analysis; A New Power In the Streets.” The New York Times, February 17, 2003. https://nyti.ms/2oqFXOI (last accessed: July 5, 2018).
understand foreign public reactions to U.S. policy messages during a new presidency, that of Donald Trump.

The election of Trump has provided a new context, and thus new questions to researchers. Throughout the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, Trump often made international relations and foreign countries central to his political messages. The now-president’s rhetoric largely conveyed animosity, representing a clear divergence from the prior Obama administration. At different moments in his political career, Trump questioned the NATO alliance; took issue with previous U.S. support for allies, such as Germany and South Korea; suggested Japan and South Korea use nuclear weapons as a way to relieve the U.S. of its burdens; described China as an enemy; and generally depicted foreign countries as exploiting and dumping their problems on U.S. citizens.\(^2\) Statements such as these can potentially influence not just American public opinion, but also the attitudes of foreign individuals in countries targeted by Trump.

Therefore, an important question given the paucity of literature on global public opinion, as well as on this new international context with Trump, is whether foreign citizens’ reactions to Trump’s policy messages, which often carry hostile tones, are influenced more by the speaker of the messages—Trump himself—or the content of the messages. In response to increasingly acute criticisms by the media, Trump himself offered an answer to this question, as quoted at the beginning of this paper.\(^3\) Does his claim gain empirical support? Would foreign citizens respond differently when the exact same policy statement is made by someone else? To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined these questions. In fact, given Trump’s unusual characteristics as the U.S. president, we consider our focus on Trump as an ideal “most likely” (e.g., Rohlfing 2012, Chaps. 3 and 8) case for where powerful source cue effects on foreign public opinion might emerge. Through this inquiry, therefore, we hope to make broader contributions beyond just understanding the effects of Trump specifically.

To address our questions of interest, we fielded an online randomized survey experiment in Japan. Japan serves as an interesting case for two reasons. First, Japan is one of the countries that Trump frequently made a part of his presidential campaign focus (in his platform, policies, speeches, etc.).\(^4\) Second, Japan has had positive relations with the U.S. in terms of policy cooperation with the U.S.,\(^5\) and in terms of public opinion concerning the U.S (Wike et al. 2016). This makes for a

\(^2\) “Donald Trump on Foreign Policy: 2016 Republican nominee for President, 2000 Reform Primary Challenger for President.” On The Issues, last updated on March 3, 2018. http://www.ontheissues.org/2016/Donald_Trump_Foreign_Policy.htm (last accessed on July 5, 2018).

\(^3\) Dan Merica, Jeremy Diamond and Melissa Gray, “Trump speaks with Macron amid mounting tensions with North Korea.” CNN Politics, updated 4:37 PM ET, Saturday August 12, 2017, http://cnn.it/2fzGO L3 (last accessed on July 5, 2018).

\(^4\) Donald Trump, On The Issues, last updated on June 15, 2017. http://www.ontheissues.org/Donald_Trump.htm (last accessed on July 5, 2018).

\(^5\) Bruce Stokes, “How Strong Is the U.S.-Japan Relationship?” Foreign Policy, April 14, 2015. http:// foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/14/united-states-japan-relationship-poll-washington-tokyo/ (last accessed: July 5, 2018).
country suitable for assessing whether Trump’s policy statements potentially constrain or maintain U.S. relations with foreign countries, through changing foreign citizens’ attitudes.⁶

In our survey experiment, we exposed Japanese study participants to a short statement that varied by two main attributes, source cue and policy content, and an additional attribute, issue salience, after which we measured participants’ perceptions of various aspects of the U.S. The results of our statistical analysis suggest that while the source cue (i.e., attribution to President Trump, as compared to an anonymous Congressman) causes some negative attitudes, the policy content (i.e., uncooperative policy as compared to cooperative policy) has the largest effect in worsening opinion of the U.S.⁷ Furthermore, analysis of interaction effects shows that the Trump attribution has no statistically discernible effect when the policy content is cooperative. By contrast, the Trump attribution effect is much larger when the policy message is hostile. These findings imply that, at least in the case of Japan,⁸ foreign opinion toward the U.S. does not unconditionally hinge on its political leader. By extension, they suggest that Trump has not irreparably damaged U.S. image abroad. Based on these results, we conclude foreign citizens may rely more on policy information in transnational opinion formation—an aspect past scholarly research in this area has overlooked.

Transnational Effects of Cues Versus Policy Content

This section introduces two bodies of the relevant literature. We then piece them together, and discuss our expectations.

Message Cues and Policy Content

Our study is motivated by the extensive literature on the persuasiveness of policy messages and their influence on public opinion formation. Much of this work centers on assessing the relative strength of associated cues—“piece[s] of information that allow individuals to make inferences without drawing on more detailed knowledge” (Druckman et al. 2010)—and the actual content of a message in shaping opinion. Among different types of cues, the source of a message has been widely recognized as one of the most influential and prevalent heuristics (Nicholson 2012), particularly when a political elite constitutes this source (Zaller 1992). Scholars conceptualize elite cues as having the power to persuade politically like-minded citizens, but also as having

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⁶ An alternative would be to choose another country with a larger share of citizens with anti-U.S. sentiment. But with an assumption that Trump’s rhetoric tends to decrease, rather than increase, foreign individuals’ favorable attitudes toward the U.S., choosing such a country in a study could suffer from a “floor” effect.

⁷ As we introduce later, these effects are independent of issue salience, which has largely insignificant independent or moderating effects on Japanese people’s attitudes toward the U.S.

⁸ We discuss a potential concern about the use of Japan as a case in the concluding section and introduce additional results of statistical analysis to address this.
dissuasive effects on non-like-minded people (Gilens and Murakawa 2002). Nicholson (2012) offers an example of this phenomenon, finding that policy statements attributed to a political elite with a disagreeable political background creates a negative reaction among citizens when they form their opinion (e.g., Democratic voters reacting negatively to a Republican politician’s policy statement).

Another important aspect of policy messages is of course the content and direction of these messages. While studies applied in the context of transnational opinion formation are limited, as we noted earlier, numerous studies on American opinion formation contrast the strength of elite source cues vis-à-vis that of policy information. Much of political science research views elite cue reliance in the interpretation of a policy message as predominating over consideration for that message’s content (Berinsky 2007; Cohen 2003; Iyengar and Valentino 2000). A compelling recent test of this issue, for example, suggests cues in messages from U.S. legislators (i.e. elites) substantially influence mass opinion while policy considerations have little role (Broockman and Butler 2017). In contrast to the dominant strain of findings on this subject, however, Bullock (2011) argues that exposure to substantial information about a policy results in policy content having a stronger influence on public opinion than elite cues do.

The strength of a message can also depend on whether it contains threatening information for individuals. In the context of priming different political and social identities, Klar (2013) demonstrates how messages that contain threatening policies for these identities have particularly persuasive effects on their political preferences (also as described by Busby et al. 2017). Along similar lines, Brader (2006) describes a process by which new incoming information—when perceived as threatening—interrupts usual reliance on political predispositions for judgment. Instead, individuals increase their attentiveness and consider this threatening information more closely. It has also been shown that people are more likely to change their political preferences when confronted with threatening changes that could come about in the future (Miller and Krosnick 2004). Nevertheless, no study has examined how threatening foreign policy messages—such as the ones often made by Trump—would affect opinion of citizens in targeted countries.

Finally, issue salience has been discussed for many decades as a key concept for understanding citizens’ political attitudes and their choices of parties or candidates (e.g., Aldrich et al. 1989; Miller et al. 2016; Rabinowitz et al. 1982). When it comes to the debate over how much people rely on heuristics as opposed to how much they react to policy information, Ciuk and Yost (2016) show that people are more likely to incorporate policy content for a high salience issue. For a low salience issue, on the other hand, people rely more on cues. This finding, along with a similar one from Arceneaux (2008), motivates the manipulation of issue salience—in addition to source cue and policy content—in our experiment studying transnational opinion formation.

Transnational Opinion Formation

Much of the knowledge about the effects of source cues and message content has evolved in the context of American politics. We seek to build on this past research,
extending some of the key aspects of the debate to a transnational context. A few directly related past studies offer some insight and direction.

Schatz and Levine (2010) investigate foreign public opinion of the U.S. in terms of public diplomacy. Specifically, in a survey experiment conducted in two Central Asian countries, they treated individuals with different messages and experimentally manipulated their source. They find more negative opinions about the U.S. when respondents read a statement attributed to President George Bush, who had a broadly negative public perception—and thus low level of credibility—during his presidency. This study underscores the importance of source credibility in messages and reliance on source cues for opinion formation in a transnational context.

Similarly, Dragojlovic (2011) examines foreign public opinion toward the U.S. in Canada during President Barack Obama’s presidency, manipulating source attribution in issue statements presented to survey respondents. The attribution to Obama causes participants to express more positive feelings toward the U.S., owing to the effects of positive source credibility. The study provides further evidence of source cue influence in shaping transnational opinion and the dependence of this influence on perceived credibility. The same potency of source cues is also established in contexts that do not include an American political elite, as Dragojlovic (2013) shows similar effects when issue statements attributed to German and French political leaders are presented to Canadian respondents.

Drawing on these studies, most recently, Balmas (2018) undertook online survey experiments in Israel and the U.S., in which the contents of a fictitious news article about a foreign leader were randomized. Specifically, similar to Schatz and Levine (2010) and Dragojlovic (2011), Balmas (2018) manipulated the object of the news (Angela Merkel, Tayyip Erdogan, or Benjamin Netanyahu, vis-à-vis a fictitious citizen). In addition, she manipulated the tone of news content, either describing a leader as having positive characteristics (e.g., trustworthy and warm) or negative characteristics (e.g., untrustworthy and cold). The results show the psychological effects of personal projection; namely, study participants’ assessment of a foreign leader influences their images of the portrayed leader’s country and people.

While instructive for understanding the effects of source cues or a prominent “exemplar” (Balmas 2018) in various transnational contexts, no study on transnational opinion formation has attempted to identify the effects of source cues and the effects of policy content separately. Indeed, Balmas (2018) explicitly designed her experimental treatments to avoid referring to the leader’s foreign policy. Moreover, no study has directly examined whether foreign citizens react more to the information source or the message content when the new president, Trump, sends messages to foreign countries.

**Theoretical Expectations**

With these bodies of literature and the specific context in which our experiment was administered (i.e., Japanese public opinion toward the U.S. under the Trump administration) in mind, we developed some theoretical expectations.
First, given existing evidence of a predominantly unfavorable Japanese view toward Trump (e.g., Wike et al. 2016), we expected that Japanese citizens would perceive a policy message attributed to Trump as a strong negative, non-like-minded source cue. If public opinion formation in Japan follows a similar structure as the one in the U.S. (Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Nicholson 2012) and the dynamic found in past transnational opinion research (Dragojevic 2011; Schatz and Levine 2010), this negative source cue should strongly shape Japanese opinion toward the U.S. Specifically, it should make their attitudes toward the U.S. more negative.

Figure 1 provides some evidence to support this. The data come from questions included in the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project. While this large-scale project covers many countries around the world, this figure specifically shows the results of surveys fielded in Japan. The left panel is based on a question about favorable/unfavorable opinion of the U.S., while the right panel is based on another question asking confidence in the U.S. President. As we noted earlier, and as other studies (e.g. Wike et al. 2016) point out, Japanese citizens’ general attitudes towards the U.S. tend to be high compared to many other countries. Nevertheless, when it comes to the U.S. President, their attitudes clearly fluctuate. The percentage of Japanese study participants who do not have much confidence or no confidence at all in the U.S. President ranged from 25% to 35% during the last three years of the George W. Bush Administration. This percentage was substantially higher, ranging from 60% to 85%, when Barack Obama was the President. It then sharply dropped from 78% in 2016 to as low as 24% in 2017 after Donald Trump assumed the presidency. For our study, it is important to note that the Pew Global Attitudes Project’s question about confidence specifically mentions the full name of the U.S. President. Therefore, the 2017 sharp drop in Japanese confidence in the U.S. leader seems to suggest that the leader—Trump—source cue is particularly pronounced in the mind of Japanese citizens and thus is likely to have a strong dissuasive impact on their opinion of the U.S. more generally. Needless to say, however, we cannot make any causal interpretation based only on the patterns shown in Fig. 1.

Second, in light of Trump’s past hostility toward Japan, policy content—made up of cooperative or uncooperative policy messages that imply positive or negative consequences to Japan—should figure into Japanese public opinion toward the U.S. This may be especially true given that Trump’s (mostly) antagonistic rhetoric toward Japan departs sharply from Obama’s more cooperative approach. Past studies reveal the influence of threatening information on political attitudes, which is particularly strong when study subjects consider a future threat (Brader 2006; Miller and Krosnick 2004)—for example, hostile actions Trump may take toward Japan in the near future.

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9 The aggregate data are downloadable from their Global Indicators Database, http://www.pewglobal.org/database/ (last accessed on March 14, 2018). See their website for exact question wordings.

10 Compared to Trump’s statements during the campaign period, his statements toward Japan after becoming the president may seem less hostile. This change, if any, and its impact on any change of Japanese public opinion are subjects for future research.
Finally, issue salience should be another variable factoring into transnational public opinion. Existing literature shows that issue salience moderates the impact of foreign public opinion on foreign policy decisions; specifically, it moderates the relevance of cues vs. policy information when people shape their political attitudes (Arceneaux 2008; Ciuk and Yost 2016). Given this literature, we manipulated issue salience independently from our other two main factors to investigate how issue salience would interact with the source cue treatment (i.e., the attribution to Trump) and influence Japanese public opinion.

Experimental Design

To test the theoretical expectations discussed in the previous section, we designed an online randomized survey experiment and administered it in Japan from April 26 to May 2, 2017 on CrowdWorks, a crowdsourcing marketplace in Japan similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk where participating workers complete tasks for monetary compensation. A total of 3,198 Japanese citizens of voting age (at least 18 years old) completed the survey.

Treatment Variables

After an initial set of questions about survey-takers’ political attitudes, participants were randomly assigned with equal probability to one of eight treatment conditions, which involved reading a two-sentence policy message. While Bullock (2011) uses substantial content size for his treatment message (newspaper articles with 627–647 words) and demonstrates its significant consequences, our messages are shorter, amounting to roughly 40 words each. An advantage of Bullock’s construction,

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11 The entire survey is described in English here, but was translated into and appeared in Japanese for respondents. The original survey data, a complete set of computer scripts in R, and the survey questionnaire (in Japanese) are available at one of the authors’ dataverse, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/SVXPSO.
12 This survey experiment was approved by Dartmouth College’s Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (ID: STUDY00030273) and preregistered at Evidence in Governance and Politics (ID: 20170428AA), https://egap.org/registration/2488. Past studies show that CrowdWorks is a valid platform for recruiting subjects for behavioral and cognitive research (Majima et al. 2017; Majima 2017), offering support for our use of it in this study. However, the resulting sample does differ from Japan’s adult population in terms of key demographic variables. As Table A.1 in the Supplementary Materials shows, our sample includes participants who are younger and more well-educated than the population, and has higher percentages of participants who are female and from higher income households. In the Supplementary Materials, we show the results of testing the three hypotheses with post-stratified sampling weights and discuss some implications.
13 In an initial test run of the survey experiment, we paid 54 Japanese Yen to the first 100 respondents. We increased the amount to 86 Japanese Yen for the remainder of the respondents after observing a slow pace with the initial lower compensation. We excluded 13 participants who did not answer a question about income and/or answered “other” to a question about education to make the weighted and unweighted data comparable. The results including these participants (in unweighted analysis) are only marginally different from the results presented in this paper.
14 We use these questions for further exploratory analyses, a balance check, and robustness tests. For these results, see the Supplementary Materials.
which contains detailed and unambiguous messages, is that it could administer the policy information treatment to subjects more strongly. Yet, as other scholars (e.g., Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014) note, given that people are more commonly exposed to relatively brief policy information such as through news article excerpts or headlines, presenting a shorter message in our experiment grants a greater degree of external validity. This is particularly relevant in our study because Trump sends messages to global audiences through his tweets, which can be only up to 280 characters. 

The message manipulated in our experiment varies by source cue (Trump or an anonymous U.S. Congressman), policy content (cooperative or uncooperative), and issue salience (security, high salience; or educational/cultural exchange programs, low salience):

**Cooperative × Exchange Program** “[U.S. President Donald Trump / A U.S. Congressman] stated the U.S. should strengthen educational and cultural exchange programs with Japan and applauded past U.S. budget spending to promote mutual understandings with these countries. He also said that such programs should foster trustful relations with foreign countries.”

**Cooperative × Security** “[U.S. President Donald Trump / A U.S. Congressman] stated that the U.S. should help Japan with paying for its own protection and applauded past U.S. defense spending for the protection of Japan. He also said the U.S. should maintain defense cooperation with Japan.”

Moreover, the length of our treatment materials is comparable to that in other studies (e.g., Cohen 2003; Ciuk and Yost 2016). If anything, as Bullock (2011) himself notes, his use of fairly long policy statements represents more of an exception in this literature.
Uncooperative × Exchange Program: “[U.S. President Donald Trump / A U.S. Congressman] stated that the U.S. should abolish educational and cultural exchange programs with Japan and denounced past U.S. budget spending to promote mutual understandings. He also said that the country’s budget should rather be used for American people.”

Uncooperative × Security: “[U.S. President Donald Trump / A U.S. Congressman] stated that Japan should pay entirely for its own protection and denounced past U.S. defense spending for the protection of Japan. He also said that the U.S. should not get involved in Japan’s defense policy.”

The statements used in our experiment, particularly those with uncooperative policy content, were slightly altered but still based on actual statements made by Trump during his presidential campaign,16 or constructed from other pertinent information such as language used in a budget proposal from his administration.17 In other cases, the statements are tied to actual statements but modified; specifically, for changing a statement from an uncooperative policy approach to a cooperative one.

Some further justifications and explanations for our treatments are in order.

Source Cue Treatment Construction

Two factors motivated our selection of an anonymous “U.S. Congressman” as the appropriate comparison case to Trump in designing the source cue treatment. First, we attempted to produce a generic baseline politician that would not prime any pre-existing positive considerations (e.g., through the use of former President Barack Obama) or negative ones. This serves to better isolate the effect of Trump. Second, we aimed to minimize connections to Trump (e.g., the Vice President Mike Pence, or any leader of the Republican Party) to reduce the potential for respondents to think of Trump when we do not want them to do so in this source cue control condition. Our comparison choice makes it clear that it is a political figure distinct from the presidency but still from the U.S. Using the U.S. administration, president (without Trump’s name), leader, or other non-presidential politicians still associated with the current presidency could result in survey-takers conflating this figure with Trump and therefore undermine the experimental manipulation.18

16 “Trump v Clinton on foreign policy.” Kim Ghattas, BBC News, Washington. May 8, 2016. http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-36232271 (last accessed on July 5, 2018).
17 “America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again.” Office of Management and Budget. 2017. https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/omb/budget/fy2018/2018_blueprint.pdf (last accessed on July 5, 2018).
18 One possible concern was that our use of Trump vs. a U.S. congressman would motivate participants to consider the difference between the presidency and the Congress in the policy-making process. If participants knew the detailed process of policy-making under the U.S., their attitudes toward the U.S. might be influenced by this difference. But we argue that this is unlikely, because average Japanese people do not fully understand the different roles that the two branches in the U.S. federal government play in the foreign policy-making process.
Tone Versus Content of Policy Messages

We did not further decompose the effect of policy content into the effect of a tone and the effect of specific policy content, because when a policy is cooperative (uncooperative)—namely, when study participants are likely to perceive that a policy will have a positive (negative) impact on their country—it is unlikely that the policy message is delivered with an uncooperative (a cooperative) tone. We could have designed treatments with a more neutral tone with varying direction, but such treatments could have made the content of a policy and its consequences more ambiguous. More importantly, Trump’s policy statements tend not to be neutral. For these reasons, our use of treatments with either cooperative or uncooperative policy content seems justifiable from a perspective of external validity.

Validity in Source Cue × Policy Content Treatments

In our design, we included the Source Cue × Policy Content interaction to examine whether the effect of Trump attribution is conditional on uncooperative policy content. Some might view one of the resulting combinations—Trump attribution and cooperative policy—as a non-credible vignette for survey-takers, which could undermine the experiment’s validity. This represents a potential issue with our experimental design, in which participants were asked to read a short hypothetical policy message but still expected to reflect a plausible real world scenario. However, patterns in Trump’s actual rhetoric should relieve much of this concern.

A few months before fielding our experiment, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Trump in a meeting that made international news and received much attention in Japan.19 The New York Times, for example, reported that Trump pledged close security cooperation with Japan, and during this visit, Trump said the following: “We are committed to the security of Japan ... and to further strengthening our very crucial alliance.” This exemplifies cooperative messages from Trump toward Japan having occurred in the real world. Japanese individuals can still overwhelmingly view Trump and his messages with disdain, as public opinion data would indicate (e.g., Wike et al. 2016), but they may also recognize that he can take either hostile or friendly stances toward Japan. Furthermore, this inconsistency in Trump’s policy approach toward Japan fits well with his known history of vacillating on several policy areas,20 a habit that the public (in and outside the U.S.) may observe.

A related concern is that uncooperative U.S. policy messages—even from an anonymous source—could evoke images of Trump for Japanese individuals in a way that makes the two treatments, Source Cue and Policy Content, inseparable in the minds of study participants. If this were true, then Japanese citizens should react to

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19 “In Welcoming Shinzo Abe, Trump Affirms U.S. Commitment to Defending Japan.” Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Peter Baker, The New York Times. February 10, 2017. https://nyti.ms/2kWRSmE (last accessed on July 5, 2018).

20 “The 141 Stances Donald Trump Took During His White House Bid.” Jane C. Timm, NBC News. November 28, 2016. http://nbcnews.to/1MAY10z (last accessed on July 5, 2018).
an uncooperative message in a similar manner regardless of whether the messenger was explicitly mentioned as Donald Trump or an anonymous congressman. But this is an empirical question, which we examine in the “Results” section.

**Explanation of Issue Salience Manipulation**

Accounting for issue salience in studies of the relative strength of source cues and policy content is difficult because salience largely cannot be manipulated at the level of individual study participants (but see Mullinix 2016). Instead, we can only manipulate issue areas with varying levels of importance to national political debate as, for example, Arceneaux (2008) does effectively. Along similar lines, as Ciuk and Yost (2016) describe, we can assume that some issues are “hot” on the political agenda and receive more attention than others. On these high salient issues, as compared to lower salient ones, individuals are more often exposed to relevant information and thus retain more considerations about the issue in recent memory when probed for their opinion (Zaller 1992).

In our experimental design, national security represents an issue at the center of public attention in Japan. For example, security policy played a key role in Japan’s recent 2017 election, with Prime Minster Abe making his national security track record central to his campaigns. 

21 While U.S.–Japan exchange programs are not entirely unknown among Japanese citizens, it is highly unlikely that they match national security issues in the space they occupy in the national “political agenda.” Therefore, we argue that our manipulation of issue salience should be effective in terms of general prominence in national attention and discourse.

We also note that our study in Japan coincided with a period of heightened security concerns in the East Asian region, with rhetoric from the U.S. escalating possible conflict. 

22 Not only should the issue of security become further salient for our study’s subjects, but it should also carry a negative connotation in the context of Japanese evaluations of the U.S. Thus, all else being equal, exposure to the U.S. taking a position on security—compared to taking a position on a less salient issue like exchange programs—should engender more negative Japanese views of the U.S. given these recent U.S.-security considerations in memory.

**Outcome Variable**

The outcome variables are based on responses to questions about perceptions of the U.S. To capture the multidimensional aspects of the U.S. image in the minds of foreign individuals, we asked four questions using five-point, bipolar Likert scales: “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of [the United States, United States

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21 “Shinzo Abe won big on Sunday. This is what it means for Japan’s national security policy.” Michael Green and Zack Cooper, Washington Post. October 25, 2017. [http://wapo.st/2yNY3zU?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.49ef44ef2665](http://wapo.st/2yNY3zU?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.49ef44ef2665) (last accessed on July 5, 2018).

22 “Trump Warns That Major, Major Conflict With North Korea Is Possible.” Gerry Mullany, The New York Times. April 27, 2017. [https://nyti.ms/2qeRXIM](https://nyti.ms/2qeRXIM) (last accessed on July 5, 2018).
foreign policy toward Japan, Americans, or Donald Trump?" The same scale ensures consistency and ease of comparison across all the outcome variables. This type of survey question about favorability has been regularly asked in one of the most prominent global public opinion surveys, the Pew Global Attitudes Project. Because we are interested in capturing general attitudes toward the U.S. among Japanese citizens, we use a composite index created from averaging the four questions, which encapsulates the different dimensions of foreign opinion toward the U.S. The pairwise correlation coefficients between each question scale are all positive and range from 0.23 to 0.50. Given that these are all in the same direction and moderately correlated, we consider averaging across the four variables to be a sensible approach.

In additional analysis, we examine these four perception variables independently, present all the results in the Supplementary Materials, and summarize them in “Results” section. We are reluctant to delve further into this inquiry because we do not have good theoretical expectations for the effects on specific attitudes toward the U.S.

**Hypotheses**

In our statistical analysis, we use the degree of unfavorability as our outcome variable, \( y \), ranging from 1 (most favorable) to 5 (most unfavorable). There are three dichotomous treatment variables: Source Cue takes on a value of 1 for a Trump attribution and 0 for a U.S. Congressman attribution, Policy Content takes on a value of 1 for uncooperative policy content and 0 for cooperative policy content, and Issue Salience takes on a value of 1 for a security issue and 0 for an exchange program issue. Given these variables, we test three preregistered hypotheses using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. Below, we introduce two main hypotheses. The third hypothesis and the results of testing it are presented in the Supplementary Materials.

The first hypothesis is based on a simple additive model:

**Hypothesis 1** In an additive model, \( y = b_0 + b_1 \cdot \text{Source Cue} + b_2 \cdot \text{Policy Content} + b_3 \cdot \text{Issue Salience} + \epsilon \), the estimated coefficients for the three treatment variables, \( \hat{b}_1, \hat{b}_2 \), and \( \hat{b}_3 \) are all positive (where, again, higher values on the outcome correspond to more negative views).

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23 Favorability towards the U.S.—the broadest perception of the four—was always asked first. The other three questions appeared in random order to minimize question order effects.
24 “Global Indicators Database.” Pew Research Center. [http://www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org) (last accessed on July 5, 2018).
25 In addition, the Cronbach’s alpha, which measures how closely these four measures are related, is 0.71. This serves as further justification for our decision to collapse these four different measures into a uni-dimensional scale.
The source cue effect ($b_1$) is motivated by existing evidence pointing to unfavorable Japanese views toward Trump, and the importance of source cues and associated source credibility level (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007; Nicholson 2012; Wike et al. 2016). When Japanese study participants have this source cue available, their negative attitudes toward Trump should be more likely to be activated and consequently affect their opinions toward the U.S.

The policy content effect ($b_2$) draws from past research showing the potency of threatening messages and information for shaping public opinion (e.g., Klar 2013; Brader 2006; Miller and Krosnick 2004). Thus, those who are exposed to an uncooperative statement (relative to those exposed to a cooperative statement) are more likely to express greater unfavorability toward the U.S.

The issue salience effect ($b_3$) is informed by past research showing that issue salience is relevant in the study of foreign public opinion (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012). We examine the effect of issue salience itself as an exploratory check, as no study has tested whether it has an independent effect on public opinion. Because the study was undertaken after Trump became the U.S. president and international security issues under his presidency have often had negative connotations, we expected that study participants would tend to build some negative images of the U.S. when they were exposed to information about this contentious topic, regardless of direction of the policy content. Similarly, as discussed in “Treatment and Variables” section, U.S.—security rhetoric around the time of our experiment should lead to more negative Japanese reactions in this domain. Thus, exposure to a U.S. figure taking a position on this fraught issue could possibly move opinion. However, existing research suggests that it is more relevant as a moderator.

We also estimated a two-way interaction model, in which the main variable of our interest—Source Cue—is interacted with the two other treatment variables:

$$y = c_0 + c_1 \cdot \text{Source Cue} + c_2 \cdot \text{Policy Content} + c_3 \cdot \text{Issue Salience} + c_4 \cdot \text{Source Cue} \cdot \text{Policy Content} + c_5 \cdot \text{Source Cue} \cdot \text{Issue Salience} + \epsilon,$$

where the estimated coefficients for the two interaction variables, $c_4$ and $c_5$, are nil, while $c_1$ is positive.

Although some studies suggest interactions of various factors shape American (Ciuk and Yost 2016) and foreign (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012) public opinion, in the context of our study, the effect of Trump attribution is expected to be so strong that it does not vary across type of policy content or issue area. This means that the average level of unfavorable attitudes is indistinguishable between Trump × Security and Trump × Exchange Program conditions. Similarly, the average should not be different between Trump × Uncooperative and Trump × Cooperative conditions. In other words, the source effect of Trump attribution outweighs all other factors.

Strong past evidence of people predominantly relying on source cues over policy content in opinion formation (as summarized by Bullock 2011) motivates this hypothesis. Moreover, the sharp drop in the percentage of favorable attitudes toward the U.S. president in 2017, as described in “Theoretical Expectations” section, further suggests an especially powerful Trump influence on Japanese opinion.
Although more recent work in American politics argues for a stronger effect of policy content, strongly negative images of Trump in the minds of Japanese people (Wike et al. 2016) led us to believe that the source cue and its credibility would be overwhelmingly important for Japanese opinion formation.

Results

The second column of Table 1 shows the results of testing Hypothesis 1 based on the additive regression model. Our hypothesis mostly receives support. The Trump source cue (Source Cue) makes Japanese people’s perceptions of the U.S. significantly more unfavorable. Specifically, it increases the unfavorability score by 0.08 points and this effect is significant at the 0.01 level. As expected, this suggests that respondents use the source of a message they read and associated credibility level—which is presumably negative for Trump—for forming their opinion on the U.S. (Chong and Druckman 2007; Schatz and Levine 2010). This result can also be understood in terms of the Trump attribution functioning as a potent negative cue for swaying foreign public opinion (Nicholson 2012). That said, the substantive effect is not particularly large, covering only 2% of the range of the dependent variable, which ranges from 1 (Most favorable) to 5 (Most unfavorable).

The Policy Content treatment produces a substantively much larger and highly significant effect. Relative to a cooperative policy content, on the same five-point scale, an uncooperative statement increases unfavorable views toward the U.S. by 0.32 points, and this effect is significant at the 0.001 level. The average difference between cooperative and uncooperative policy content covers 8% of the outcome’s scale, four times as much as the source cue effect does. Again, this is consistent with our expectations based on literature from American politics. Japanese citizens respond strongly to the policy approach expressed in the American messages they receive (Bullock 2011). Our empirical analysis itself does not show the specific mechanism at play. But given our treatment construction (i.e., a statement that the U.S. should abolish educational and cultural exchange programs with Japan, or a statement that Japan should pay entirely for its own protection without help from the U.S. on a threatening issue), we infer that Japanese people perceive a message with uncooperative policy content as a threat to their (national) identity (such as described by Klar 2013) or to their well-being through future policy changes (Miller and Krosnick 2004).

In contrast to these significant increases in unfavorable U.S. perception from the source cue and policy content treatments, the treatment for Issue Salience has little effect. Relative to the low salience issue baseline that contained information about educational and cultural exchange programs, the high salience security issue treatment does not cause any change in Japanese opinion. The effect is small (− 0.02) and not significant at the conventional level.

Next, the third column of Table 1 shows the results of testing Hypothesis 2 based on the two-way interaction model. We observe several intriguing results. First, the effect of Trump attribution in the baseline conditions (i.e., the estimated coefficient
for Source Cue without an interaction with the other treatment variable) is small (0.03 points) and not significant at the 0.05 level. This suggests that contrary to our expectation, when Japanese people are exposed to a cooperative policy statement (baseline) on exchange programs (baseline), even when it is made by Trump, their attitudes do not move (as compared to a statement made by an anonymous U.S. Congressman).26

Second, and most importantly, the interaction of Trump attribution and uncooperative policy (Source Cue × Policy Content) moves Japanese U.S. perception an additional 0.19 points in the more unfavorable direction, as seen in the third column of Table 1. This effect is significant at the 0.001 level, and covers about 5% on the outcome scale. This result breaks with our hypothesis. The impact of the Trump attribution on people’s unfavorable attitudes is amplified when it comes to an uncooperative policy statement. Therefore, the presence of a Trump source cue effect is conditional on policy content. We interpret these results as evidence of Japanese individuals’ strong reaction to the content of policy messages, suggesting they

The interaction model includes two other non-interaction terms. Although these coefficient estimates are not our main interests, they also warrant inspection. The effect of an uncooperative policy message given the baseline conditions is large (0.22 points) and highly significant (p < 0.001). This means that people become more unfavorable toward the U.S. when they are exposed to an uncooperative (baseline) policy statement made by an anonymous U.S. Congressman (baseline). The effect of exposure to a salient issue (national security) given the baseline conditions is small (0.03) and insignificant at any conventional level. This is consistent with the results based on our additive model.

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Table 1 Results of Regression Analysis

| Model for | Hypothesis 1 | Hypothesis 2 |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| Constant  | 2.771***     | 2.793***     |
|           | (0.026)      | (0.032)      |
| Source cue| 0.078**      | 0.033        |
|           | (0.026)      | (0.045)      |
| Policy content | 0.320***     | 0.225***     |
|           | (0.026)      | (0.036)      |
| Issue salience | −0.025      | 0.025        |
|           | (0.026)      | (0.036)      |
| Source cue × policy content | 0.189***     |             |
|           | (0.051)      |             |
| Source cue × issue salience | −0.099      |             |
|           | (0.051)      |             |
| Observations | 3198        | 3198        |
| Adjusted R² | 0.048        | 0.053        |

The standard errors are in parentheses. The outcome variable is the composite index of unfavovability toward the U.S. ranging from 1 (“Most favorable”) to 5 (“Most unfavorable”).

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001 (two sided)
incorporate the clear positive or negative policy implications that the statements convey to form their opinion toward the U.S. This result also offers support for the credible separation of message content and message source, which we discussed earlier.

Table 1 also shows that the marginal effect of Trump attribution and security issue (Source Cue × Issue Salience) is negative rather than positive (−0.10 points). When policy content is cooperative (baseline), compared to a statement made by a U.S. Congressman (baseline) on educational and cultural exchange programs (baseline), opinion becomes more favorable toward the U.S. when a policy statement on security is made by Trump. This may sound like a counterintuitive result, but it is only marginally significant at the 0.10 level and so not especially strong. Therefore, we are inclined to conclude that contrary to the claim made by Ciuk and Yost (2016), issue salience does not work as a moderator.27

Figure 2 shows the marginal effects of Trump attribution under each of the 2×2 conditions. Specifically, we calculated the predicted average unfavorability scores for all 2×2×2 conditions based on the linear combinations of estimated regression coefficients. We then took the differences between Source Cue = 1 (Trump) and Source Cue = 0 (U.S. Congressman) given the values for Policy Content and Issue Salience, and then tested their statistical significance. The numbers above the bars are the estimated average treatment effects of Trump attribution. The numbers in parentheses are F statistics, and the effects that are statistically significant at the 0.05 level are denoted by significance stars. Because our primary focus is the Trump attribution, conditions with Trump as the source are highlighted with a gray bar.28

The figure clearly shows that the Source Cue effects are statistically significant only when the policy content is uncooperative. The source cue effect is the largest when a policy message is uncooperative on exchange programs. This is perhaps not necessarily a puzzling result given the extensive literature on “negativity bias” (e.g., Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Levin et al. 1998). A surprising message that the U.S. should abolish the successful U.S.–Japan exchange programs induces strongly negative feelings toward the U.S. among Japanese people when the message is delivered by Trump (as compared to an anonymous congressman). The effect is stronger than the effect of an uncooperative message on security issues, which still increases unfavorable attitudes toward the U.S. In any case, the strongest and most consistent result from Fig. 2 is the predominance of policy content in shaping opinion.

27 The study by Ciuk and Yost (2016) suggests the importance of looking at another interaction—that of issue salience and policy content. Because estimating all interaction effects with a focus on issue salience was not our main research interest, we did not preregister a hypothesis on this additional interaction. But the results of running a model with an interaction of Policy Content and Issue Salience show that the interaction is in fact insignificant. This result is contrary to the finding in Ciuk and Yost (2016). One might expect that uncooperative policy on a charged issue like security would motivate people to consider policy implications more closely, compared to a less strained area like exchange programs. Nevertheless, Japanese respondents react equally to cooperative or uncooperative policy statements regardless of issue area. This suggests that U.S. image abroad can suffer (or improve) from policy directions taken in several issue domains, regardless of their importance to international debate.

28 The same is done for all figures in the Supplementary Materials.
Robustness Tests

Using some additional pretreatment variables included in our survey, we undertook further exploratory analyses and robustness checks. Overall, we find little treatment effect heterogeneity. Our results are also robust to the attentiveness of study participants, though we identify some nuanced differences when we use post-stratification weights based on demographic variables. See the Supplementary Materials for these results.

Results with Individual Response Questions

Finally, we briefly discuss how these results vary across the different aspects of the U.S. on which Japanese individuals expressed opinions. As mentioned in “Outcome Variable” section, participants indicated their U.S. favorability on four dimensions. We have thus far used the average of these scores as our outcome variable. Figures A.3, A.4, and A.5 in the Supplementary Materials show the results of testing our hypotheses using these four response questions individually. They reinforce, and add some nuance to, our main findings from the sections above.

On Hypothesis 1, small but significant source cue effects and null issue salience treatment effects hold across the individual outcome variables, though interestingly the attribution to Trump does not worsen unfavorability of “Americans” among Japanese people. The policy content treatment effects are all significant on these variables, but their effect magnitudes vary in an important way: the perception of the U.S. as a whole and perception of U.S. policy toward Japan capture much larger effects compared to the other two outcome variables measuring attitudes toward people and its leader. Greater movement on these perceptions of the entire country and policy is notable given arguments that these images are the most consequential in transnational opinion’s potential impact on foreign relations (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2018).

With regard to Hypothesis 2, the source cue effects for either of the cooperative policy messages are significant for five of eight outcomes but vary in direction; for example, a cooperative message from Trump actually improves Japanese
perceptions of Americans. The effects are, however, small as in our main analysis (Fig. 2). By contrast, for either of the two uncooperative policy messages, the source cue effects are large and significant for every outcome except perceptions of American people. This is perhaps an interesting and important finding worth investigating further. Although the attribution to Trump in an uncooperative policy message tends to induce negative attitudes toward the U.S. as a country, its policy, and its leader, it does not affect Japanese people’s attitude toward American people.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to measure the impact that the nascent Trump presidency could have on foreign public opinion toward the U.S., using Japan as an important case. To this end, we administered a survey experiment and presented policy statements that varied by source cue, policy content, and issue salience to Japanese individuals, whose subsequent opinions on several dimensions of perceptions of the U.S. were recorded. We find that the policy content treatment—whether a statement expressed a cooperative or uncooperative policy approach—has the strongest and most consistent effects in influencing Japanese opinion of the U.S. Most importantly, our analysis of an interaction model shows that a significant negative source cue effect—from a statement made by Trump relative to one made by an anonymous U.S. Congressman—is present only when the policy content is uncooperative, making it conditional in nature.

Because our work concerns just one country, policy content’s predominance over source cues may not extend to the rest of the world. As a country with one of the highest levels of education, citizens in Japan may have greater political knowledge and sophistication—and perhaps a greater ability to make use of, and react to, policy details when interpreting a policy message—than citizens in most other countries do. Nevertheless, we find that the strength of the average policy content treatment effect does not differ by levels of education (see A.8 and A.9 in the Supplementary Materials). Therefore, Japan’s high level of education and likely high level of political knowledge do not necessarily preclude us from making general claims.

Broadly speaking, our findings have two important implications. Theoretically, our study extends the American politics literature on information-driven versus cue-driven opinion formation (e.g., Cohen 2003; Bullock 2011) to a transnational domain. The results point to greater consideration for policy content than reliance on source cues when individuals form their opinion about another state, a dynamic that past transnational public opinion research had not discovered.

The design of our experiment itself also bears importance for the literature on global public opinion moving forward. As we noted earlier, past research in this area is limited in decomposing the effects of transnational messages. Previous work found elite source cue effects on opinion (Schatz and Levine 2010; Dragojlović

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29 “OECD Chart: Population with tertiary education, 25-34 year-olds / 55-64 year-olds, % in same age group, Annual, 2016,” available at https://data.oecd.org/chart/5dV1 (last accessed July 5, 2018).
2011), but these effects’ conditionality in light of other message contents remained largely untested. As this study shows, varying different aspects of transnational messages is crucial for better contextualizing the strength of source cues, such as message attribution to a president. Similar experimental manipulations—and greater focus on consideration of policy information—should be explored in this field. More broadly, extension of similar policy message exposure to other foreign publics will be especially valuable for generalization and further understanding of transnational opinion dynamics.

Beyond contributions to the aforementioned scholarly debates, we believe that this study has substantive implications concerning international relations. Given that our survey experiment was conducted just months after Trump’s inauguration as the President of the U.S., our finding that the mere addition of Trump’s name to a policy message moves foreign opinion about the U.S. could be consequential for how global public opinion reorients itself toward the U.S. during this new presidency. By extension, in light of the soft power framework of Nye (2004), this could shape international relations in a negative way for the U.S.

On the other hand, the established conditionality of source cue effects on policy content in a message is instructive. This result suggests that not sending excessively and unnecessarily hostile messages and taking more cooperative stances by the U.S. can still possibly ameliorate foreign public opinion of the U.S. regardless of who the U.S. leader is. In other words, the Trump source effect is not as strong as we expected (and laid out in our second hypothesis); foreign opinion does not hinge entirely on a leader in a way that the U.S. has lost all claim to soft power with Trump in office. If our case of Japan is any indication, Trump’s damaging effect on the U.S. international image might not be as irreparable as many in and outside of the U.S. believe it to be.

Finally, it is also worth noting—as the inconclusive findings related to the issue salience treatment would imply—that policy content can affect perceptions of the U.S. no matter the importance of an issue in international relations. Slights of any kind (whether about national security concerns or less important issues, such as cultural and educational exchange programs) can conceivably influence foreign opinion of the U.S. by a large amount. As Henry Ford once said, “There are no big problems, there are just a lot of little problems.” This is perhaps also true in a country’s efforts to maintain and improve its perception among foreign publics.

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