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Abstract

Do international shaming efforts affect citizens' support for government policies? While it is a frequent claim in the literature that shaming works through domestic politics, we know little about how and when international criticism affects domestic public opinion. We address this question through an originally designed survey experiment in Sweden, which (i) compares the effects of international shaming in two issue areas—human rights and climate change, and (ii) tests whether government responses to criticism moderate the impact of shaming. Our main findings are fourfold. First, we find substantial effects of international shaming on domestic public opinion. These effects hold across both issue areas and irrespective of whether citizens support government parties or not. Second, human rights shaming has a stronger impact on citizens' support for government policies than climate shaming. Third, shaming is most effective among citizens who are more supportive of climate action, human rights, and international cooperation. Finally, our findings are mixed with respect to the effect of government responses. While government responses do not moderate the effects of human rights shaming, they seem to mitigate the effects of climate shaming.

Keywords

climate change, human rights, international organizations, shaming, public opinion

Disciplines

Environmental Studies | International Relations | Political Science

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THE DOMESTIC IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL SHAMING

EVIDENCE FROM CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract Do international shaming efforts affect citizens' support for government policies? While it is a frequent claim in the literature that shaming works through domestic politics, we know little about how and when international criticism affects domestic public opinion. We address this question through an originally designed survey experiment in Sweden, which (i) compares the effects of international shaming in two issue areas—human rights and climate change, and (ii) tests whether government responses to criticism moderate the impact of shaming. Our main findings are fourfold. First, we find substantial effects of international shaming on domestic public opinion. These effects hold across both issue areas and irrespective of whether citizens support government parties or not. Second, human rights shaming has a stronger impact on citizens' support for government policies than climate shaming. Third, shaming is most effective among citizens who are more supportive of climate action, human rights, and international cooperation. Finally, our findings are mixed with respect to the effect of government responses. While government responses do not moderate the effects of human rights shaming, they seem to mitigate the effects of climate shaming.

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Because global agreements often lack enforcement mechanisms that can induce compliance when states violate rules, international organizations (IOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often resort to shaming as a deliberate strategy to induce compliance. Shaming exposes and condemns the discrepancies between a target government's commitments and its actual behavior. It is a classic strategy in the promotion of human rights (Murdie 2012; McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015; Koliev and Lebovic 2018) and nowadays an integral component of global initiatives, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change. This paper seeks to answer two questions: Do international shaming efforts affect citizens' support for government policies? If so, under what conditions do citizens react to international shaming?

A growing body of research examines the mechanisms whereby shaming may affect state behavior (Davis et al. 2012; Murdie 2012; Ausderan 2014; Franklin 2015; Kelley and Simmons 2015; Allendoerfer, Murdie, and Welch 2020; Kahn-Nisser 2021; Koliev, Sommerer, and Tallberg 2021; Koliev and Lebovic 2021). It is a frequent claim in this literature that shaming works through domestic politics (Keck and Sikkink 1998), as decision-makers adjust state behavior in fear of being punished by public opinion (Davis et al. 2012; Franklin 2015; Jacquete and Jamieson 2016). For example, Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz (2012) show, using observational data from 68 countries, that citizens' support for their respective governments decreased by 10 percentage points following human rights shaming by international NGOs. Similarly, Tingley and Tomz (2021) find in a survey experiment fielded in the United States that shaming by foreign countries shifted public support in favor of compliance with the Paris Agreement on climate change—under favorable conditions, with as much as 21 percentage points. Other studies suggest that shaming instead may be counterproductive and generate a public backlash. For instance, Gruffydd-Jones (2019) find in a survey experiment that US shaming of the Chinese government's respect for women's rights was counterproductive, as it increased public support for the government's policies. In all, whether and how domestic public opinion is responsive to international criticism is still an open question.

In this research note, we present experimental findings from Sweden that speak to the conditions that lead international shaming to affect public support for government policies. Our analysis is novel in several respects. First, we adopt a comparative design that evaluates the effects of shaming in two issue areas—human rights and climate change—breaking with a conventional focus on single policy areas. Second, to capture international efforts to shame countries, we focus on shaming by IOs and NGOs, whereas earlier experimental research exclusively examines shaming by states (Tingley and Tomz 2021) or Amnesty International specifically (Ausderan 2014). Finally, we move beyond simply looking at effects of shaming (Davis et al. 2012; Gruffydd-Jones 2019) to also consider how government responses to

shaming affect the impact on public support, building on earlier efforts (Benoit 1995; Tingley and Tomz 2021; Williamson and Malik 2021).

Our main findings are fourfold. First, the results indicate substantial effects of international shaming on public opinion. These effects hold across both policy areas and irrespective of whether citizens support government parties or not. Second, human rights shaming has a stronger impact on citizens' support for government policies than climate shaming. We attribute these differences in effects to the varying degree of polarization within the human rights and climate change issue areas. Third, shaming is most effective among citizens who are more supportive of climate action, human rights, and international cooperation. This suggests that international shaming is most likely to work in countries and societal groups where support for cooperation is already extensive. Finally, our findings are mixed with respect to the effect of government responses. While neither rebuttals nor regrets appear to moderate the effect of shaming in the area of human rights, they seem to mitigate the effects of shaming in the area of climate change.

We proceed by describing the design of the survey experiments, followed by a presentation of the results. Finally, we offer our conclusions and suggest three pathways for future research.

Experiments

To assess the impact of shaming on public support for government policies, we embedded two experiments in an original online survey, administered February 4–20, 2020, to a nationally representative sample in Sweden. We selected Sweden since the country offers favorable conditions for evaluating the domestic mechanism of shaming: a society in strong support of ambitious human rights and climate change policies, and a government that aspires to international leadership in both areas. As Keck and Sikkink (1998, pp. 28–29) theorize in their work on the boomerang model of transnational pressure politics, characteristics such as an international aspiration and a strong civil society should make governments particularly sensitive to shaming. If international exposure and counter-rhetoric by a government have effects on public support, it should be observable under these conditions. We focus on two issue areas, human rights and climate change. The comparative design of our survey enables us to compare the impact of shaming within the two different issue areas. International shaming has long been viewed as a key influence strategy within the human rights area (Brysk 2018). We know less about the effects of shaming on public support for climate action. The costs of compliance within the climate change area may be perceived as particularly large, and recent studies indicate that climate change as a topic has become more polarizing over the past few decades (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

To implement the survey, we relied on an online panel from the well-reputed survey company Ipsos. Ipsos uses targeted quota sampling with the aim of achieving representative samples at the end of the fieldwork. The sample of 500 respondents, recruited through phone based on a random population sample, was matched to the full population of Sweden using gender, age, and region. Participants received a small monetary incentive for their participation (see [Supplementary Material table S1](#) for the detailed information about the sample). All analyses using these data are unweighted.

In the first experiment, we assessed the impact of shaming with regard to the Paris Agreement on climate change, and in the second experiment, with regard to the United Nations' Convention against Torture (UNCAT). The Paris Agreement, concluded in 2015, is a landmark agreement in the international efforts to combat climate change, while the UNCAT, adopted in 1984, is a cornerstone of the international human rights regime. Governments that fail to respect these agreements attract criticism by NGOs, IOs, and states. We randomly assigned respondents to groups that received different experimental treatments, and a control group that did not receive any treatment. To reduce the risk of spillover effects between the experiments, the order of the experiments was block randomized for each respondent.

Each experiment was preceded by a short introduction, describing the Paris Agreement (or the UNCAT) and Sweden's ratification. Respondents were then allocated into one of four groups. The first treatment group received a vignette describing how IOs and NGOs have criticized the Swedish government for failure to comply with the Paris Agreement (as described in [table 1](#)) or the UNCAT ([table 2](#)). We combine criticism by IOs and NGOs in the same treatment as a way of evaluating whether shaming by non-state actors may affect public support, just as shaming by state actors has been found to do ([Tingley and Tomz 2021](#)). The second and third treatment groups received the same vignettes, but also information on the Swedish government's response. The purpose was to assess whether counter-rhetoric by a government may soften or even undo the negative impact of international shaming ([Benoit 1995](#)). In the second treatment, the Swedish government therefore rejected the allegations as unreasonable and incorrect, while in the third treatment, it expressed regret and an intention to rectify its behavior.

To strengthen the credibility of the vignettes, we used realistic scenarios inspired by actual criticism reported in Swedish news media. In the case of the Paris Agreement, the vignettes were inspired by NGO criticism that Sweden violates the Paris Agreement by selling off rather than closing down coal assets ([Boeve 2016](#)). In the case of the UNCAT, the vignettes were inspired by UN criticism that Sweden violates the treaty through its policy regarding juvenile detentions ([The Local 2014](#)).

Table 1. Experimental design for experiment 1: the Paris Agreement

Group	Vignettes	N
Intro	Sweden has ratified the Paris Agreement, which aims to limit the global temperature increase to a further 1.5 degrees Celsius. To decrease the temperature and mitigate the impact of climate changes, governments who have ratified the agreement need to introduce policies that significantly reduces their emissions.	500
Control	Overall, do you support or oppose the Swedish government's climate policies? 0 (strongly oppose) – 10 (strongly support)	125
Treatment 1 (shaming)	The UN and international INGOs have recently reviewed the Swedish government's national climate action policies and concluded that the policies are not in compliance with the Paris Agreement, which is supposed to reduce greenhouse emissions that increase global warming. They say that the Swedish government's current policies will not reduce the greenhouse emissions. In their official press release they say: " <i>It is a disappointment that Sweden does not live up to their international commitments and promises. We urge the government of Sweden to reconsider its stance and introduce more ambitious reforms in line with the Paris Agreement.</i> "	125
Treatment 2 (rebuttal)	The government of Sweden responded to this criticism by saying that Sweden already has one of the most ambitious climate change policies and will remain a leading country in this regard. The government rejected the allegations as unreasonable and incorrect.	125
Treatment 3 (regret)	The government of Sweden responded that they are taking seriously the criticism and will consider additional climate change measures to bring Sweden back into compliance with its commitments.	125

Table 2. Experimental design for experiment 2: the UN's Convention against Torture

Group	Vignettes	N
Intro	Sweden has ratified the United Nations' Convention against Torture, which is a global human rights treaty that forbids countries to use torture and other acts of cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment. As each country that has ratified the convention, Sweden is obliged to take measures in line with the convention.	500
Control	Overall, do you support or oppose the Swedish government's climate policies? 0 (strongly oppose) – 10 (strongly support)	125
Treatment 1 (shaming)	The UN and international INGOs have recently reviewed the Swedish government's human rights policies and concluded that the governments' policies are not in compliance with the United Nations' Convention against Torture. They say that the Swedish government is violating the human rights convention through their practices at the juvenile detention centers: <i>"Sweden has repeatedly breached the UN Torture Convention, which states that individuals under the age of 18 should not remain in isolation for more than 22 hours in any 24-hour period. This behavior is cruel, and we urge the government of Sweden to reconsider its stance and abolish this policy."</i>	125
Treatment 2 (rebuttal)	The government representatives of Sweden responded to this criticism by saying that Sweden has already has one of the most ambitious human rights policies and will remain a leading country in this regard. The government rejected the allegations as unreasonable and incorrect.	125
Treatment 3 (regret)	The government representatives of Sweden responded that they are seriously considering the criticism and will think of necessary measures to bring Sweden into compliance with its commitments.	125

The treatments were followed by a question tapping the respondent's support for the Swedish government's climate (or human rights) policies, measured on a scale from 0 (strongly oppose) to 10 (strongly support). The control group moved straight from the introduction of the respective case to the question of support for the government's policy.

The two experiments were preceded by questions measuring a respondent's pre-treatment opinions regarding a number of issues: human rights, cooperation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, international cooperation, refugees, and the Paris Agreement. In addition, the survey included an attention check, placed in between the two experiments. Finally, the survey included questions intended to measure a respondent's media consumption, generalized trust, confidence in the Swedish government, left-right ideology, party identification, and preexisting attitudes toward climate action, human rights, and international cooperation. Ipsos provided further background information on each respondent regarding gender, education, region, and age.

Results

Figure 1 presents the average level of support for the government's policies on climate change and human rights in the control group and the three treatment groups. We find strong evidence that international criticism has a negative impact on government support in both issue areas. The effects are particularly strong in the area of human rights.

The average support for the Swedish government's climate policies in the control group is 6.2 on the scale from 0 to 10. Among respondents in treatment group 1, who received a vignette describing how IOs and NGOs have criticized the Swedish government for failure to comply with the Paris Agreement, the corresponding level of support is 4.9. The difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and indicates that international criticism made citizens less likely to approve of the government's climate policies.

The average support for the Swedish government's human rights policies in the control group is a staggering 8.3. In comparison, the average support for the government's human rights policies in treatment group 1, receiving the vignette with international shaming, is 6.0. The difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and shows that allegations by IOs and NGOs that Sweden had violated human rights had a clear impact on public support for the government's policies.

Next, we examine whether the effects of shaming are moderated by how the target government responds to the allegations. If this were the case, we should see a statistically significant difference between the average support in treatment group 1 (shaming) and the average support in treatment groups 2 (shaming + rejection) and 3 (shaming + regret). We find mixed support for this expectation across the two issue areas. In the case of human rights

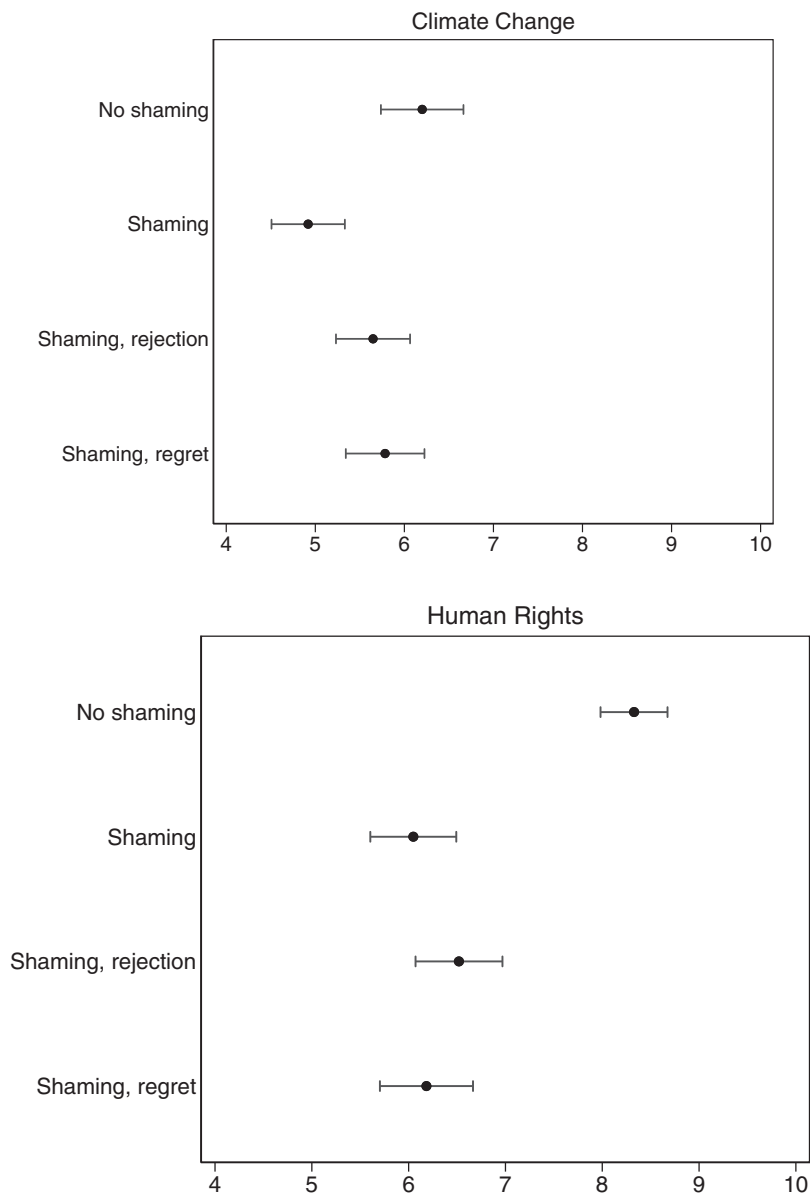


Figure 1. Average support for government policies with 95 percent confidence intervals.

(lower graph in [figure 1](#)), the effects of government responses are not statistically significant. This finding indicates that governments accused of violating human rights cannot neutralize the consequences of that criticism through counter-rhetoric. However, in the case of climate change (upper graph in [figure 1](#)), the substantial difference in the magnitude of the treatments suggests that the government response (regret) can mitigate the impact of shaming.

As an extension, we also consider whether the effects of shaming vary depending on partisan identification. The expectation would be that shaming generates more negative reactions among citizens who support parties not in government than among citizens who support parties in government. [Figure 2](#) reports the findings from this subgroup analysis.¹

For supporters and opponents of the current government, international shaming has a negative impact on public support for the government's policies on climate change and human rights, consistent with the aggregate result in [figure 1](#). However, when comparing the impact of shaming across the two groups, we do not find a consistent pattern. In the case of climate change (upper graph in [figure 2](#)), supporters of nongovernment parties are moved less by shaming than supporters of government parties, possibly because they were already disillusioned with the government's policy. In the case of human rights (lower graph), the pattern is the reverse, as supporters of nongovernment parties are moved more by shaming than supporters of government parties. It also appears that partisan identification matters for the mitigating effect of government responses in the area of climate change. Among supporters of the government party, such efforts by the government to counter criticism through rejection or regret reduce the negative impact of shaming. In contrast, no such effects are visible among those who oppose the party in office.

As an additional extension, we perform subgroup analyses based on citizens' preexisting attitudes toward human rights, climate action, and international cooperation. The expectation is that shaming will be effective when citizens already care about an issue and support international action. Our subgroup analyses provide support for this expectation, showing that shaming has greater effects among those individuals who display stronger support for climate action, human rights issues, and international cooperation ([Supplementary Material figures S7–S10](#)). These findings are consistent with other research indicating that citizens are more receptive to elite communication when they are already supportive of cooperation in a particular area ([Dellmuth and Tallberg 2022](#)).

1. The parties in government (February 2020): the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party. The parties not in government: the Moderate Party, the Sweden Democrats, the Christian Democrats, the Centre Party, the Liberals, and the Left Party.

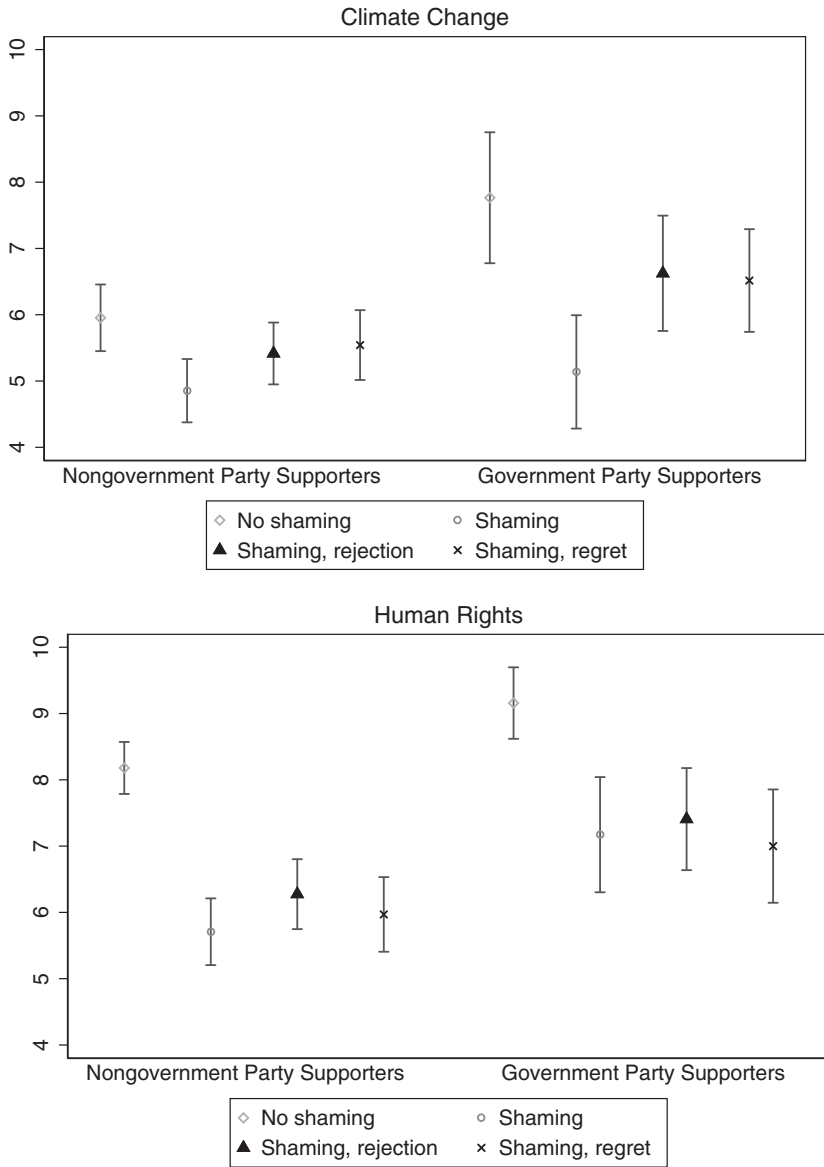


Figure 2. Average support for government policies among nongovernment party supporters and government party supporters.

We also checked the balance in treatment assignment across three respondent characteristics: confidence in government, support for human rights, and support for mitigating greenhouse emissions. Our experimental groups are balanced with respect to support for human rights and environmentalism, as well as confidence in government and important demographics, at conventional levels of statistical significance (Supplementary Material table S2). Moreover, we reanalyzed the results from figure 1 only using the answers of those respondents who passed the attention check. The results remain substantially robust (Supplementary Material table S4).

Discussion

This article explored if and when international shaming affects citizens' support for government policies. The results of survey experiments offer support for the idea that public opinion is responsive to international criticism. First, shaming by NGOs and IOs affects domestic support for government policies, irrespective of whether citizens support government parties or not to start with. Our findings extend earlier research identifying similar effects in the context of criticism from other states (Tingley and Tomz 2021).

Second, the effects of shaming are stronger in the area of human rights compared to the area of climate change. This result underlines the importance of comparison and suggests that shaming is a particularly useful tool for combating human rights violations. One reason might be the lower level of polarization in this issue area, as most people find human rights violations lamentable, while public opinion on climate change is still divided. Indeed, our respondents display strong support for human rights, while the support for climate action is more divided (Supplementary Material figures A5 and A6). Another reason might be that human rights violations evoke stronger emotional reactions than noncompliance in other areas of global governance (Bracic and Murdie 2019).

Third, shaming is most effective among citizens who are more supportive of climate action, human rights, and international cooperation. Since these citizens are more committed to the causes of climate action and human rights, and to cooperation as a means of problem-solving, they are also more likely to be upset by revelations of government noncompliance. In contrast, citizens who care little about these issues are also less likely to respond to exposure of government wrongdoings. These findings suggest that international shaming is most likely to work in countries and societal groups where support for cooperation is already extensive.

Fourth, our findings are mixed with respect to the effects of counter-rhetoric by governments: while neither rebuttals nor regrets appear to moderate the effects of shaming in the area of human rights, they seem to mitigate the effects of shaming in the area of climate change. Again, differences in

the degree of polarization might matter. When governments formulate responses that counter criticism on climate policy, people on the more climate-skeptical end of the spectrum are likely to latch on to this defense as a way of resisting adjustment of their opinions. In addition, we found that the effectiveness of government counter-rhetoric on climate change varied with the partisan identification of citizens: only supporters of the party in government responded positively to such rebuttals and regrets.

While this study advances novel evidence on the effects of international shaming, we should also recognize its limitations. By focusing on Sweden, we maximized the likelihood of finding strong effects of shaming and counter-rhetoric by a government. Few other countries combine a society as strong in support of human rights and climate action and a government that aspires to international leadership in both areas. Though some studies argue that shaming is likely to be most effective in authoritarian states (Hendrix and Wong 2013), it would not be surprising if weaker effects of international shaming were recorded in countries with less fortuitous conditions.

Another potential concern is whether our experimental findings capture real-world effects of shaming or merely temporary survey response effects. We are cautiously optimistic on this issue. First, the large effects recorded in the experiments in response to just a single exposure indicate that public opinion is highly responsive to international criticism and that we can expect shaming campaigns in the real world, involving repeated exposure, to yield effects as well. Second, results from observational studies of shaming suggest that effects may occur under real-world conditions as well (Davis et al. 2012); hence, it is not unreasonable that our strong experimental findings mimic real changes in public opinion in response to international criticism.

We close by suggesting three pathways for future research. First, studies should examine how international shaming affects public opinion in non-democracies, as the effectiveness of shaming may vary depending on regime type (Hendrix and Wong 2013; Gruffydd-Jones 2019; Koliev 2020). Second, future research could separate and compare the effects of shaming by NGOs and IOs, as well as other rhetorical strategies on the part of these non-state actors, such as a combination of shaming and praising (Kahn-Nisser 2021). Finally, future research should examine how shaming affects the perceptions of elites, such as politicians and other leaders in government and society.

Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TMUSXC>.

Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfac026>.

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