

Nationalist Backlash against Foreign Climate Shaming

Research Note

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Draft 02/01/2021

Abstract

Should international pro-climate actors speak up against climate rogues? Or do foreign critics risk igniting nationalist backlash against global environmental norms? We explore naming and shaming dynamics in global climate politics by fielding survey experiments to nationally representative samples in Brazil. Our results confirm the theoretical expectation that nationalism moderates how mass publics react to foreign climate shaming: individuals who are highly attached to their nation are more likely to reject international criticism than their lowly attached peers. Yet, in contrast to theoretical expectations, we show that nationalist publics prefer to reject foreign criticism rather than virulently defy the critical message. Our findings hold irrespective of the source of criticism (that is, whether the critic is an allied nation or a geopolitical adversary), and the nature of the critical message (that is, whether the cue is couched in cosmopolitan language or not). These results sound a cautionary note on the belief that liberal internationalists should tread carefully so as not to unadvisedly unleash nationalist, neo-populist, or “antiglobalist” pushback. While pro-climate foreign critics may well bump up against nationalist sentiment in climate rogues no matter who they are or how they speak, the criticism will not necessarily fuel an all-out backlash against global environmental norms and institutions.

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1 Introduction

“Stop tearing down the forest. And if you don’t, then you’re gonna face significant economic consequences”, Joe Biden warned Brazil in a 2020 presidential debate.¹ Scholars and pundits alike have argued that foreign shaming can be a powerful policy instrument to drive target compliance with international norms. Exposing target behavior as shameful generates social and political costs for the non-compliant actor, thereby creating an incentive for compliance (Risse-Kappen et al. 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Simmons 2009). But what to say of the risk of igniting popular nationalist backlash among the public in the target state? While mass publics may on occasion respond to foreign shaming by expressing regret or a commitment to mend ways, under different circumstances they may well reject or even defy the criticism (Tingley and Tomz 2020; Terman 2019). This risk is particularly acute when the critical message elicits the sort of negative popular emotions that professional politicians are skillful to manipulate (Snyder 2020). Mapping the determinants of nationalist backlash against foreign climate criticism is urgent at a time scientists and pro-climate actors worldwide confront entrenched opposition to the mitigation of global warming.

This research note helps move the debate forward by experimentally testing public responses to international shaming in nationally representative samples in Brazil. For over three decades, deforestation rates in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest – a biome large and complex enough to affect climate patterns worldwide – have placed the country at the receiving end of international climate criticism (Viola and Franchini 2018). Successive administrations have struggled to curb deforestation in a context where politically influential actors derive significant economic advantages from cutting down the forest (Rochedo et al. 2018), and where policy is prone to special-interest capture (Mello and Spektor 2018). Brazil is a good case for studying the prospects of climate-related nationalist backlash because the domestic debate about compliance with international pro-climate norms has for decades been couched in terms of striving to retain some degree of sovereign autonomy in the face of an ever more intrusive international regime that the major industrial powers will not hesitate to bend to their own advantage (Hurrell 1992; Hochstetler and Keck 2007). In such context, foreign criticism espoused by political leaders from major industrial powers is bound to activate negative responses. The same goes for critical messages that are nominally cosmopolitan – highlighting the degree to which the Amazon forest is a legitimate concern not just for those states that exert sovereign rights over it but for all members of the international community.

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¹Savarese, Maurício. “Brazil president calls Biden’s Amazon comments ‘disastrous’.” Associated Press, Sep 30, 2020.

receiving end of international climate criticism (Viola and Franchini 2018). Successive administrations have struggled to curb deforestation in a context where politically influential actors derive significant economic advantages from cutting down the forest (Rochedo et al. 2018), and where policy is prone to special-interest capture (Mello and Spektor 2018). Brazil is a good case for studying the prospects of climate-related nationalist backlash because the domestic debate about compliance with international pro-climate norms has for decades been couched in terms of striving to retain some degree of sovereign autonomy in the face of an ever more intrusive international regime that the major industrial powers will not hesitate to bend to their own advantage (Hurrell 1992; Hochstetler and Keck 2007). In such context, foreign criticism espoused by political leaders from major industrial powers is bound to activate negative responses. The same goes for critical messages that are nominally cosmopolitan – highlighting the degree to which the Amazon forest is a legitimate concern not just for those states that exert sovereign rights over it but for all members of the international community.

In terms of timing, this is a particularly good historical juncture to investigate climate naming and shaming dynamics in Brazil. Although foreign criticism of Amazon deforestation goes back four decades, starting in 2019 criticism of Brazil’s climate policies reached new heights as wildfires accelerated the rate of deforestation and scientists warned of an impending tipping point from which the forest might not be able to recover (Lovejoy and Nobre 2019). The European Union suspended ratification of a major free trade agreement, and a handful of European countries, portfolio managers, consumer associations, and supermarket conglomerates threatened to boycott Brazilian exports (Canineu and Guajajara 2020). Calling the wildfires a global crisis, French president Emmanuel Macron harshly criticized the administration of Jair Bolsonaro, going on to tweet, “Our house is on fire”.² Those who expected this barrage of criticism to force Bolsonaro to reconsider his climate policies – least the critical message dent his domestic popularity – were soon frustrated. Rather than retreat from his anti-climate policies, Bolsonaro doubled down on them. A self-professed “antiglobalist,” Bolsonaro defied the criticism. Bolsonaro accused Macron of having a “colonialist mind-set” and using the “internal issue of Brazil and other Amazon countries” for personal political gain.³

Bolsonaro went on to deny climate change, defund environmental agencies, sack scientists and other experienced staff from office, and push new legislation to relax preservation, logging, and mining rules. To cap his reforms, he anchored the administration’s communication strategy on unrepentant nationalist rhetoric: appealing to the deep-rooted fear among Brazilians that foreign predators will do what they can to “internationalize” the Amazon riches, he denounced the alleged hypocrisy of industrial nations that meddle in Brazilian

²Chrisafis, Angelique. “Macron rebukes Bolsonaro over ‘extraordinarily rude’ comments about wife.” *The Guardian*, Aug 26, 2019.

³Breende, Aurelien and Megan Specia. “Dispute over Amazon Gets Personal for Bolsonaro and Macron.” *The New York Times*, Aug 26, 2019.

domestic affairs whilst ignoring global climate norms that affect their own material interests (Stuenkel 2019). Within months of taking office, Bolsonaro was making the case for his policies to the Amazon not merely as a way of exploiting natural resources for economic growth, but also as an imperative of national security. Unsurprisingly, with a new season of wildfires blazing additional tracts of the forest in early 2020, the president installed an “emergency committee” packed not with scientists, firefighters, or climate experts, but with his military top brass. The message was clear: his administration would show resolve not for putting out the fires, but for “protecting” the Amazon from the hostile denunciations of foreign powers. Throughout this process, Bolsonaro did not seem to worry about the potentially deleterious effect of foreign critical cues on his domestic standing.

In what follows we contribute to the scholarly understanding of how mass publics respond to international critical cues. We show that nationalist publics have a strong preference for rejecting foreign climate criticism, but not for either defying the critics or expressing regret over existing policy. These results hold irrespective of the identity of the shamer and the content of the critical cue. We also show that variation in (a) the source of criticism – that is, whether the critical message comes from a friendly nation or a threatening adversary, and (b) the nature of the critical message – that is, whether shaming is couched in cosmopolitan language that highlights the Amazon as a common good belonging to the whole of humanity or not – has limited effect on public opinion, even among the most nationalistic individuals. Together, these results sound a cautionary note on theoretical predictions about the role of international climate critics and their cues.

2 The Sources and Nature of Criticism

Scholars have argued that one key factor moderating the reception of international criticism is the source of the critical message. Terman (2019) posits that the originating source of the criticism matters along geopolitical lines, that is, whether the critic is a friendly nation or a geopolitical adversary. When critics are allies, targets consider their motivations genuine and sincere, leading to an increase in compliance. By contrast, when critics are adversaries, targets interpret the criticism as denigrating, raising fears of status threat and reducing the odds of compliance. Other work shows criticism from allies strikes a responding chord in the target state (Terman and Voeten 2018), while shaming accusations from an adversary can be ineffective in that they can trigger some pushback against the critic, especially in the context of nationalistic audiences (Terman 2019; Tingley and Tomz 2020).

Scholars have pointed to a second factor moderating the effects of international criticism on target states: the nature of the critical message. Previous research suggests that messages are more consequential when they are aligned with the values or ideologies of their target (Fielding and Hornsey 2020). Investigating the scope conditions under which shaming works best, for example, Kelley and Simons (2019) find that message alignment with the values of the target state’s citizens is an important variable to induce compliance. By contrast, others

have argued that much shaming in real-world situations fails to align with the dominant values of the target state. Snyder (2020) points to the dangers that inhere in framing critical messages in the language of cosmopolitanism when publics in the target state may be essentially nationalist, thereby interpreting liberal internationalist solutions as a threat to the security and autonomy of their national group. When shamers couch criticism in terms that are culturally alien to the target state, the risk is that national leaders will dismantle the shaming capacity of outsiders (Schweller and Pu 2011), exploiting the contest between outside shaming and in-group loyalty to bolster their own domestic legitimacy (Ward 2017). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt ever to test these insights experimentally.

3 Responses to Shaming

Expert literatures suggest that incumbents in target states who react to foreign criticism in competitive domestic political environments seek to attenuate the shaming effects on the publics they govern by adopting a range of possible responses. An incumbent’s ability to mitigate these effects, however, will depend on how these responses align with the foreign policy preferences of her supporters. To test this connection, we focus our attention on public support for four possible responses that a government might adopt in responding to naming and shaming: regret, rejection, defiance, or silence. Expressing regret seeks to reduce the damage of foreign criticism by admitting to past misdeeds (Lind 2011; Tomz and Tingley 2020), and promising to repair the situation in the future (Daase et al. 2016). In turn, rejection involves questioning the motivation of the shamer, and insisting that the critic is driven by obscure motivations (Tingley and Tomz 2020). Defiance implies a recommitment to non-compliant behavior in the future, amounting to the “net increase in the commitment to or incidence of norm-offending behavior caused by a defensive reaction to social sanctioning” (Terman 2019, 5). Lastly, targets of foreign criticism may adopt a defensive position by remaining silent, “in the hope that the storm will blow over” (Schroeder 1994, 117).

4 The moderating effects of nationalism

Since shaming is a subjective perception, different people will interpret and react to it in distinct ways (Terman 2019). We expect mass publics responses to foreign criticism to be moderated by nationalism because nationalist individuals are more likely to experience group-based criticism as a threat (Major and O’Brien 2005), considering their concern with group protection against outsiders (Kertzer and Rathbun 2015). Nationalism here is taken to be the degree to which individuals’ sense themselves to be tied to their nation – that is, an individual’s level of national attachment (Hermann 2017). We therefore expect that people who differ in their degree of national attachment will support different government’s responses to foreign shaming. But we also expect the direction of this effect to depend on the source of shaming and the nature of the critical message. The reason for this expectation

is that the individual-level distinctions between in-groups and out-groups that is so typical of nationalism will heighten the divide between allied and adversaries on the one hand, and cosmopolitan cues versus non-cosmopolitan cues on the other. Leveraging these insights, we lay out a number hypotheses for testing.

With regards to the source of shaming, we hypothesize that individuals ranking higher on a scale of national attachment will be more likely to express support for policies that defy and reject shaming accusations from a geopolitical rival than they would criticism coming from an allied state. Rebuttal responses should be more attractive to individuals that perceive the “out-group” shamer as potentially damaging to the nation. It follows that our first hypotheses for testing can be expressed like this:

H1: Individuals at higher levels of national attachment will be more likely to support a policy of defiance and rejection of shaming accusations from an adversary than from an ally.

Following the logic sketched above, nationalist individuals will more likely express regret over their state’s climate policies when criticism comes from an ally than when it comes from a geopolitical adversary. They will be more prone to recognizing mistakes and committing to repair the situation when the shaming originates from an allied critic. This occurs because “in-group” criticisms are seen as intended to preserve the positive group image in the eyes of outsiders.

H1a: Individuals at higher levels of national attachment will be more likely to support an expression of regret when criticism comes from an ally than when it comes from an adversary.

We expect individuals ranking high in national attachment to oppose any response to foreign criticism that involves keeping silent until the storm blows over, regardless of the identity of the shamer. After all, nationalist individuals tend to be highly sensitive to the threat potential represented by other nations (Hermann 2017), feeling a strong desire to react to criticism coming from outsiders.

H1b: Individuals at higher levels of national attachment will be less likely to support a policy of silence in the face of criticism, regardless of the identity of the shamer.

Turning to the nature of the critical message, we expect more nationalist individuals who are exposed to foreign accusations couched in liberal cosmopolitan language to be more prone to reject and defy the critical message than individuals at lower levels of national attachment. Cosmopolitan claims by outsiders may be easily interpreted by nationalist individuals “as a show of contempt, which risks triggering fears for the autonomy and security of the group” (Snyder 2020, 2).

H2: Individuals at higher levels of national attachment will be more likely to support a policy of defiance and rejection of shaming accusations when the criticism is couched in liberal cosmopolitan language than when no information about the nature of criticism is provided.

We have reason to expect that nationalist publics will be less likely to support expressions of regret in the face of liberal cosmopolitan criticism. When the nature of shaming runs counter to the core nationalist values that define their identity, these individuals are likely to adopt actions to retain the positive image of their nation, avoiding seeming guilty. By the same token, nationalist individuals are unlikely to support a response to foreign criticism that simply ignores the accusation. Together, these ideas lead to the following hypotheses:

H2a: Individuals at higher levels of national attachment will be less likely to support an expression of regret in the face of criticism couched in cosmopolitan language than when no information about the nature of criticism is provided.

H2b: Individuals at higher levels of national attachment will be less likely to support a policy of silence when the criticism is couched in liberal cosmopolitan language than when no information about the nature of criticism is provided.

5 Results

Experiment 1

To study whether and how the source of foreign shaming might induce compliance or result in backlash, in January 2020 we surveyed a sample of 2001 Brazilians. Respondents were recruited by the Datafolha Institute, which used quota sampling to be representative of the general population. These quotas were based on the following pre-treatment variables: age, education, gender, income, and region. As the appendix demonstrates (item A.2), the characteristics of the individuals are balanced across the treatment levels.

In our survey experiment, participants were asked about their level of national attachment. This dispositional measure is drawn from previous work on national identification (Hermann 2017). Pretreatment questions helped us distinguish between individuals with high and low levels of national attachment given that this characteristic is expected to produce in-group favoritism. After the pretreatment section, we tested public responses to different sources of foreign shaming over wildfires and deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. Respondents read a hypothetical situation in which Brazil suffered shaming accusations for mismanaging deforestation and wildfires in the Amazon. We then randomized the countries criticizing the Brazilian government over the Amazon wildfires, namely an ally and friend or an adversary. We adopted abstract terms to retract the identity of shamer in line with common practice in the literature on shaming (Terman and Voeten 2018; Terman

2019). Our selection of abstract terms is additionally motivated by the fact that it is hard to find real-world countries that are identical in all characteristics except our chosen unit of analysis (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007), given that public reactions to country attributes may vary unevenly among the population (Herrmann, et al. 1999). Had we identified the actors, we would run the risk that country features – rather than our main interest variable – may be driving our results. We also randomized all four possible reactions to these criticisms: silence, regret, rejection, and defiance. This resulted in a 2 (country) \times 4 (reactions) fully crossed-over experimental design. Having presented the scenario, we then asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the randomized reactions.

Our findings indicate that participants prefer to express regret over climate policy and reject the foreign shaming when criticism comes from an ally more than they do when criticism comes from an adversary, but the difference is relatively small in magnitude. Changing the source of criticism from a condition of adversary to ally, public preference for expressing regret and rejecting shaming increases by 5 per cent (p-value ≤ 0.1 , SE = 2.8 per cent) and 5.3 per cent (p-value ≤ 0.05 , SE = 2.3 per cent), respectively. We may conclude that shaming from allies increases the odds that publics will support policies that express regret, but the finding that the tendency to support rejection of the criticism also increases when the criticism comes from an ally remains theoretically puzzling for us. We find no evidence that the identity of the shamer interacts with a preference for defiance or for silence in the face of foreign criticism (for the full results see appendix, item A.3).

While these results express attitudes of the sample as a whole, shaming can produce distinctive results when seen in the context of in-group bias. To explore this possibility, we break down our results by levels of national attachment. This allows us to identify the individuals more likely to respond to foreign shaming according to the postulates in the hypotheses outlined above. The results in Figure 1 show that the source of shaming has little effect in mediating responses among more nationalist individuals, suggesting that nationalism trumps ally-versus-adversary dynamics as a predictor of public responses to foreign shaming. More nationalist individuals prefer to reject and defy shaming, and are less willing to express support for regret over their state’s climate policies regardless of the identity of the shamer. More specifically, a 1-unit increase in the national attachment scale predicts a 0.395 unit increase in support for rejection, and a 0.194 unit increase in support for defiance.⁴ These experimental results highlighting the role of nationalism expand previous observational research (Terman 2019), as well as work suggesting that the source of criticism may mediate public reactions to international shaming (Tingley and Tomz 2020).

⁴Overall, these results remain stable even when we run robustness checks for control variables such as education, income, gender, age, and religion. See appendix, item A.5.

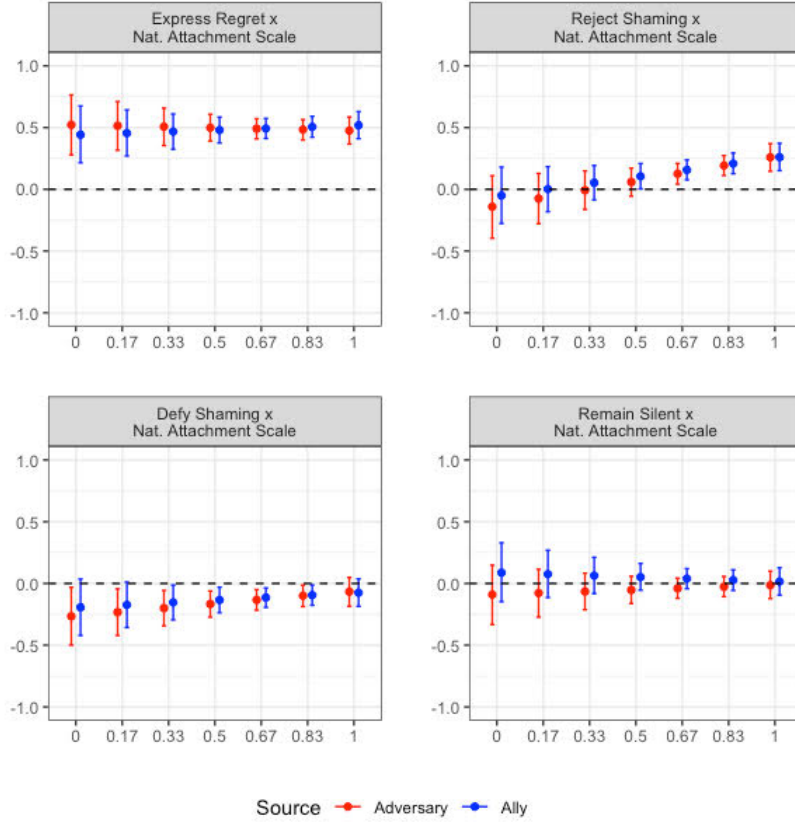


Figure 1: Effects of National Attachment Scale on Public Support for Responses to Foreign Shaming

Experiment 2

In order to test whether the nature of the critical message affects public attitudes to climate shaming, we administered a second experiment (N=2126). We varied whether foreign shaming over the Amazon wildfires was framed in cosmopolitan language – highlighting the relevance of this biome for humanity as a whole – or not. All other features were identical to the first experiment described above, including the range of possible responses to shaming that continue to vary in terms of regret, rejection, defiance, and silence, as well as a dispositional measure of national attachment.

We find that changes in the nature of the criticism leave the public unfazed. Whether the international critical cue is couched in cosmopolitan or not has no influence on preferences at an individual level (see appendix item B.3 for the full results). This holds even among those individuals ranking highest in a national attachment scale (Figure 2). Regardless of the nature of the criticism, such individuals tend to support policies that reject the criticism. So, while our findings support the notion that foreign climate criticism may backfire among nationalist publics, the results challenge the view that more nationalist individuals will double down on the existing policy more intensely than others when the

criticism is couched in cosmopolitan terms. Cosmopolitan or not, foreign criticism is likely to be met by nationalist publics with rejection.⁵

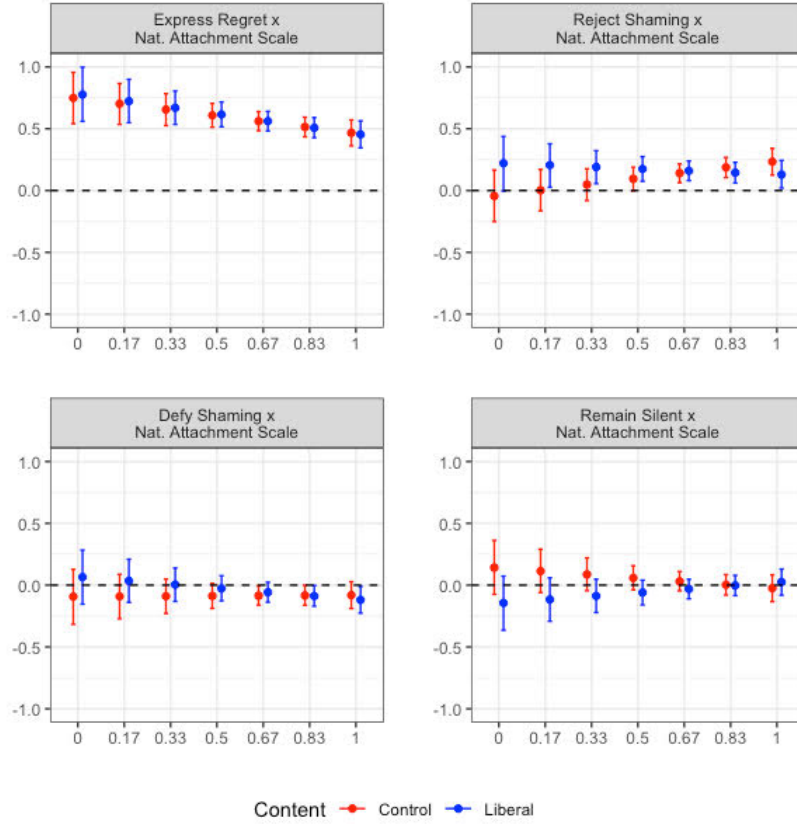


Figure 2: Effects of National Attachment Scale on Public Support for Responses to the Nature of Shaming Message

6 Discussion

Our results show that nationalism moderates how mass publics react to foreign climate shaming. We find that individuals who are highly attached to their nation are more likely to reject international criticism than their lowly attached peers. However, our findings suggest that, in the face of shaming by a foreign actor, highly nationalistic individuals are unlikely to defy the criticism. In our experiments, support for defiance is limited and concentrated on a small section of the public in experiment 1. The bulk of nationalist individuals in our sample support policies that reject the foreign criticism rather than policies that seek to double down on the existing anti-climate policy. This finding is highly relevant at a time when the international community confronts the challenges inherent to climate change. An example of defiant nationalist backlash against international climate criticism might be public support for an anti-climate leader who opts to abandon the Paris Accords. This bodes well for a world where international critical cues targeting national climate policies must

⁵As in experiment 1, these results remain stable even when we add controls for education, age, income, gender, and religion. For the results of robustness checks see appendix, item B.5.

coexist with the continued participation of these target states in international institutions, preventing the kinds of defection that would make an already fragile global environmental regime weaken further. We also find that nationalism shapes the pathway through which individuals respond to international critical cues irrespective of the source of the criticism and the nature of the critical message. Foreign climate critics are likely to bump up against nationalist sentiment, no matter who they might be or how they might choose to frame their criticism.

There are several plausible explanations for these findings. The finding that variation in the source of criticism has no detectable effect on public opinion might be explained by the fact that mass political judgment can under certain circumstances be mediated by low levels of generalized trust, influencing the extent which individuals trust other nations (Brewer et al. 2014). Given low levels of generalized trust among Brazilians, it might be the case that can Brazilians have a hard time distinguishing between the intentions of allies and adversaries. The finding that variations in the nature of the critical message do not affect public responses may point to the way individuals relate to foreigners more generally: in societies where mistrust of foreigners is high, individuals may reject criticism by non-nationals irrespective of the kind of language they speak. Indeed, recent polls suggest around half the Brazilian population do not trust foreigners (Haerpfer et al. 2020). Finally, one potential explanation for the results we find is that individuals were unable to understand our treatment stimulus due to their abstract character. Although it is often argued that abstract experimental designs elicit assessments of dependent variables that are less reliable than more concrete ones (Steiner et al. 2016), recent research shows there are fewer tradeoffs between abstraction and detail in experimental design than political scientists used to assume (Brutger et al. 2020). We are confident that the results are not caused by our experimental design.

7 Implications

Our findings have at least two relevant implications for the global community of activists, policymakers, and scholars working on issues of climate change. First, given that nationalism mediates how publics respond to international climate criticism, expect anti-climate leaders the world over to be tempted to manipulate their domestic publics via emotions like anger, resentment, and outrage against international meddling. Second, while these anti-climate leaders may succeed in getting their mass publics to rally around the flag in rejection of foreign criticism, it is not obvious that citizens will support policies to defy those who criticize their country’s environmental policies. The international community should not, therefore, preventively abandon naming and shaming as a legitimate tool to convey valuable information to publics worldwide about the appropriateness of their government’s response to global warming. The key challenge moving forward is finding pro-climate messages that successfully convey information in spite of the realities of nationalism and the backlash that foreign criticism is likely to induce.

The results presented in this note also open up the door to new questions for future research. If incentives to pursue pro-environmental action is contingent on the behavior of others (Tingley and Tomz 2014), how will publics in target states respond to foreign shaming by actors whose own environmental policies are evidently problematic? Furthermore, are there any types of critical language that stand a better chance of striking a responding chord with the public? For instance, what effect might criticism have that seeks to separate anti-climate elites from the citizenry by appealing to the latter’s sensibility to the distributive effects of climate change? (Aklin and Mildeberger 2020). These are valuable questions that future research would do well to explore.

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