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# Status Threat, Campaign Rhetoric, and US Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

Candidates for office frequently warn that the United States is falling behind its rivals. How does this rhetoric affect voters' perceptions of their commitment to action and, in turn, potential foreign policy outcomes? The study of status in international politics has blossomed over the past decade, including a recent turn to the origins and consequences of domestic concerns over national status and decline. I contribute to this research, arguing that candidates frequently employ status-threatening rhetoric on the campaign trail due to its emotional and identity-threatening appeal, but this rhetoric in turn significantly increases the public's expectation of action. As a result, status-threatening campaign rhetoric allows candidates to define issues as arenas for status competition but simultaneously increases pressure on leaders to follow through once in office with policies they can justify as status-saving. I support this theory with two survey experiments and a case study examining how Kennedy attached space exploration to status in the 1960 campaign, increasing domestic pressure to act once in office.

## Keywords

campaign rhetoric; decline; foreign policy; public opinion; status threat

## 1. Introduction

Americans are concerned about the United States' standing in the world. Fifty-three percent predict that China will overtake the United States as the world's main superpower in the next 30 years and 60% believe the United States will become less important in the world by 2050 (K. Parker et al., 2019). More Americans have said that the United States' position in the world has grown weaker than stronger over the past year in every American National Election Studies survey since 2002.

Candidates for office have long seized on the American public's worries over declining global status to criticize their opponents and bolster support for themselves and their policies. Donald Trump frequently pinned American decline on immigration, trade, international organizations, and a bureaucratic "deep state." But Trump is hardly the first American candidate for president to invoke status threat in his run for office; from John F. Kennedy's claims of gaps in missiles, education, and technology to Joe Biden's likening of China outspending the United States on infrastructure to falling behind in the "race for the 21st century," status-threatening rhetoric has gone hand-in-hand with American hegemony. Status-threatening rhetoric features prominently in campaigns in particular, with candidates ominously warning of national decline to paint their opponents as weak, unpatriotic, or apathetic in the face of American decline.

A wealth of recent scholarship has argued that status concerns, at the leader level, explain important outcomes in international politics like conflict initiation and escalation. Answering the call to examine the role of the domestic populace in the status literature (Dafoe et al., 2014), scholars have argued that revisionist leaders invoke status to gain a rhetorical advantage over their more moderate opponents in the public's eyes (Ward, 2017) and that the public punishes presidents for incidents that reduce national status (Powers & Renshon, 2023). While these scholars explored the advantages leaders gain from employing status rhetoric in office or how they get punished for status-altering events, I instead investigate the effects of status rhetoric on the campaign trail on the public's perception of commitment to action—as campaigns offer candidates a platform and significant media exposure to define their images and voice their arguments on the direction of the country.

I use *status-threatening rhetoric* to refer to rhetoric warning that one's country is occupying too low a rung or is on the verge of falling to a lower rung in global standing. I focus on how American candidates for office talk about national status and how that rhetoric affects public perceptions of their commitment to action. Because of the subjective nature of status, candidates might employ status-threatening rhetoric regardless of the presence or absence of various objective indicators of decline. Ralston (2022), for example, found that declinist rhetoric in the UK parliament spiked not when Britain's share of great-power GDP per capita was falling quickly, but instead when it was stagnant. As Miller (2016) argued, a rising power cannot solely be identified by its capabilities, but scholars must also examine domestic beliefs to investigate how leaders and members of a state perceive and discuss their own status and ambitions. This article's focus is therefore on the effects of status-threatening rhetoric on the campaign trail. References to falling behind, declining, losing prestige or standing, or faltering at the hands of rivals are common features of status-threatening rhetoric.

## 2. Argument

I argue that candidates for political office often opportunistically seize on the public's worries over perceived national decline through status-threatening rhetoric to criticize opposition and mobilize voters. Status-threatening rhetoric invokes negative emotions and helps leaders differentiate themselves from their predecessors and political opposition, enabling them to portray themselves as the candidate best suited to reverse the status decline. Campaigns offer candidates a platform to comment on the country's status and select which issues to tie to status competition. By playing on the public's fears over decline, I argue that leaders significantly increase the pressure on themselves from the public to follow through with action once in office, facing more domestic pressure than if they instead used a non-status message.

### 2.1. Why Do Candidates Use Status-Threatening Rhetoric?

Negative emotional appeals, like those inducing fear or anxiety, are effective at altering preferences and bringing people to action. Messages provoking negative reactions are especially effective because they elicit a strong psychophysiological response, causing them to not only affect the direction and strength of attitudes but also be well-remembered (Bradley et al., 2007). This finding has led scholars to write about the public's "negativity bias," or tendency to seek out and give more attention to negative stimuli (Johnston & Madson, 2022).

Status-threatening rhetoric is not only effective because of the emotions it evokes leading it to be more memorable but also because it primes a part of Americans' national identity. Perceived threats to American primacy constitute threats to a part of many Americans' identities, threatening the positive self-esteem they derive from their nationality. Candidates regularly try to make people believe that that part of their identity is under attack, with this warning of existential threat constituting a highly persuasive message (Klar, 2013). In the Supplementary File, I present survey data illustrating this connection between status and national identity.

The American exceptionalism and status literature offers support for the linkage between national identity and status. Restad (2014) encouraged scholars to understand American exceptionalism as an identity, extending beyond simple patriotism by centering concerns over the country's wellbeing in relative, rather than absolute, terms. Not only is it, to some extent, human nature to internalize social status within one's identity (Frank, 1985), but Americans are also highly competitive and often view threats to the United States' global standing as deeply emotional and existential threats to their need for self-esteem and positive identification, leading Fettweis (2018, p. 172) to argue that "Americans cling to their fears, making them a central part of the national identity."

Candidates also have an electoral incentive to frighten the public, in turn portraying their opposition as apathetic or incompetent in the face of decline. Although not specifically in reference to status, Richard Nixon once remarked that "People respond more to fear than love. They don't teach you that in Sunday school, but it's true." Bill Clinton once half-joked "Gosh, I miss the Cold War….I envy Kennedy having an enemy. The question now is how to persuade people they should do things when they are not immediately threatened" (both quoted in White, 2016). While incumbent candidates have the advantage of voters viewing them as more experienced (Druckman et al., 2020), status-threatening rhetoric can offer challengers a powerful emotional appeal to spin that experience as a negative, pinning national decline on the actions of the incumbent and their party.

### 2.2. How Does Status-Threatening Campaign Rhetoric Affect Leaders Once in Office?

Public-facing rhetoric has the power to define what constitutes the national interest and label different actors or issue areas as threats (Goddard & Krebs, 2015). Rhetoric regarding status during a campaign, in turn, can legitimate different issue areas as arenas for status competition between the United States and its competitors. The emotional attachment to national status makes status-threatening rhetoric a powerful message, but the criteria for what defines high status in international politics are socially defined, leaving candidates on the campaign trail significant power to mobilize Americans through status-threatening rhetoric on an issue area of their choosing.

By raising the salience of status threats for short-term political gain, candidates stake their image to action on the issue, raising the costs of not following through with action to combat said decline. Candidates who warn of status decline in a campaign but fail to follow through by making a splash of their own once in office risk being seen by the public as weak, unpatriotic, or incompetent, riling the public up with a powerful message only to let them down with their lack of action. Beyond just pursuing popular policies, leaders seek to craft an image of themselves as strong defenders of American security and status while casting their political opponents as "polite & orderly caretakers of America's decline," to use one recent example (Rubio, 2020). Candidates place a strong emphasis on cultivating a favorable image of themselves, whether that be as strong, status-saving, or any other image they seek to craft for political gain and their future legacy (Druckman et al., 2004). The public's preferences for certain images of candidates can even override their preferences on specific issues (Friedman, 2023).

As a result, I argue that status-threatening rhetoric has the power to create a strong emotional connection among the public between an issue area and status decline. In tying an issue area to status, because of this rhetoric's strong emotional and identity-threatening appeal, the candidate simultaneously sends a strong signal of their commitment to action.

## 3. Study 1: Status-Threatening Rhetoric and Heightened Perceptions of Action

I first conducted a pre-registered survey experiment in June/July 2023 to test whether status-threatening rhetoric increases public perceptions that a candidate will follow through once in office relative to non-status campaign rhetoric. I used Forthright Access to gather a sample of 2,283 American adults. Participants read a hypothetical scenario about a future presidential election in the United States and were randomly assigned to read about a candidate who emphasized in their campaign rhetoric needing to improve the United States military or technological innovation. In addition to random assignment to the military or technology treatment, respondents were randomly assigned to either read about a candidate who tied the issue to American decline or a control group, where the candidate voiced support for improving the military/technological innovation but made no reference to national decline. In neither condition did the candidate promise to take action, but they instead both remarked that they support working to improve American innovation in technology or military power.

Respondents were then asked to rate how likely they thought the candidate was to advocate for increased spending on the issue, successfully pass spending increases, and whether the rhetoric constituted a promise to increase spending in that area. Although the candidate in both the treatment and control groups did not promise any action, perceptions of rhetoric as promissory are important as promises imply a significantly stronger commitment to an issue than a non-promissory statement. Voters are highly skeptical of candidates pandering but they see promises as strong signals of commitment to following through (Bonilla, 2021).

### *3.1. Hypotheses*

My primary hypothesis is that status-threatening rhetoric leads to increased perceptions of commitment to action. Specifically, those receiving the status treatment will be more likely than those in the control condition to believe that the candidate will advocate for and successfully increase spending on the issue at hand. They will also be more likely than those in the control condition to interpret the candidate's rhetoric as a promise.

### 3.2. Results

Figure 1 displays the effects of the status threat treatment, relative to the control, on the likelihood that the candidate will advocate for increased spending on technological innovation/the military, successfully pass spending increases in the respective areas, and whether the candidate's rhetoric constituted a promise.

Assignment to the treatment condition, where the candidate tied an issue to status decline, for those in the technology condition, led to an increase from 53.5% in the control group to 56.1% in perceptions that the leader would successfully increase spending on technological innovation ($p < 0.10$) and an increase from 42.5% in the control group to 48.6% seeing the candidate's rhetoric as a promise ($p < 0.05$). Assignment to the treatment condition for those who read about the military led to an increase from 66.1% in the control group to 69.3% in the percent chance that the candidate would advocate for increased military spending ($p < 0.05$), an increase from 57.3% to 59.6% in perceptions that the candidate would successfully increase spending ($p < 0.10$), and an increase from 49.2% to 57.3% in perceptions of the candidate's rhetoric being promissory ($p < 0.01$). Although some effect sizes are modest, the significant findings consistent with the pre-registered hypothesis reveal that status-threatening rhetoric increases public expectation of action (see Druckman, 2022, p. 63).

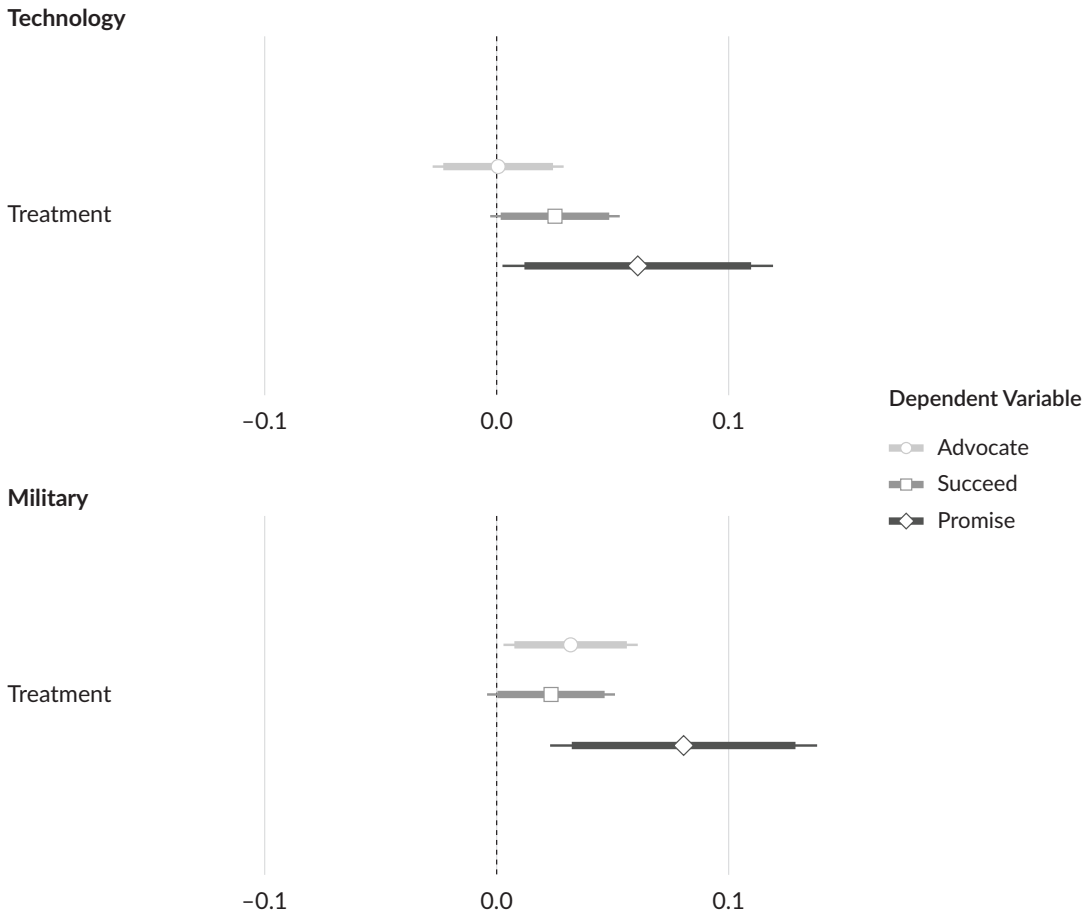


**Figure 1.** Treatment effects for Study 1. Note: Thinner error bars show 95% confidence intervals and thicker bars show 90% confidence intervals.

I also constructed a structural topic model using open-ended responses that asked respondents to explain why they did or did not expect the leader to follow through to analyze the most common reasons stated for the treatment and control group. While respondents in both the treatment and control group were equally likely to answer with a straightforward "because they said so," those in the treatment group were significantly less likely to reference failed promises or lying politicians than those in the control group, suggesting that respondents perceived the status threat treatment as more authentic than the control. Full results from the open-ended analyses can be found in the Supplementary File. Both the closed and open-ended data therefore suggest that tying an issue to status decline suggests a strong commitment to the public, similar to that of a promise.

## 4. Study 2: Can Excuses Get Leaders Out of Following Through on Status-Threatening Rhetoric?

Having shown that status-threatening rhetoric increases perceptions that a leader will follow through with action, I then followed Bonilla's (2021) blueprint and tested whether common excuses leaders use for inaction can mitigate the effects of not following through on the leader's image. To test this, I conducted a pre-registered survey experiment in September 2023 on a sample of 933 respondents from CloudResearch Connect.

I used the same status threat treatment text as in Study 1 for the technological innovation condition and examined three categories of excuses: pivoting to cooperation, diverting the status threat to another issue, and partisan attacks.

Pivoting to cooperation refers to backtracking on previous status-threatening rhetoric, instead saying that the issue the leader previously identified as a source of national decline should not be seen as an arena for global competition. For example, after realizing the value of pursuing cooperation in space with the Soviets, Johnson (1965) publicly confessed:

> It was really a mistake to regard space exploration as a contest which can be tallied on any box score. Judgments can be made only by considering all the objects of the two national programs, and they will vary and they will differ.

Diverting is where leaders attempt to pivot from the area they originally campaigned on to a new issue. Here, I test the transferability of status-threatening rhetoric between issues; specifically, if leaders can campaign on status threat in a particular area that they believe will be most effective for short-term political gain but then try to use the same status-threatening rhetoric to advocate for a different set of policies. Can they avoid the negative consequences of not following through on their initial rhetoric?

Finally, the partisan attack excuse is taken from Bonilla's (2021) set of excuses that leaders employ when they do not follow through on campaign promises. Leaders often try to seize on partisan animosity to deflect from their inaction, blaming the other party for obstructing a bill or designing poor legislation.

After randomly being assigned to read about a leader who followed through on their status-threatening rhetoric or did not follow through and used no excuse, pivoted to cooperation, pivoted to education or military spending, or used a partisan attack, respondents evaluated the leader on numerous traits and their legacy and electability.

### 4.1. Hypothesis

Although excuses for not following through might slightly mitigate the political damage of not following through on status-threatening rhetoric, I hypothesize that following through with action will result in significantly more positive evaluations of the leader than not following through and making an excuse. Additionally, there is also an exploratory component to this experiment, evaluating how various categories of excuses fare against one another for mitigating the damage leaders face for exacerbating the public's worries over a decline in a particular area and then failing to follow through with action.

### 4.2. Results

I find strong support for this hypothesis; several excuses do slightly mitigate the political fallout of not following through on status-threatening rhetoric, but respondents consistently rated leaders who followed through on their status-threatening rhetoric substantially better than those who did not follow through but offered an excuse. Figure 2 shows that leaders can find limited success in reducing the damage to their

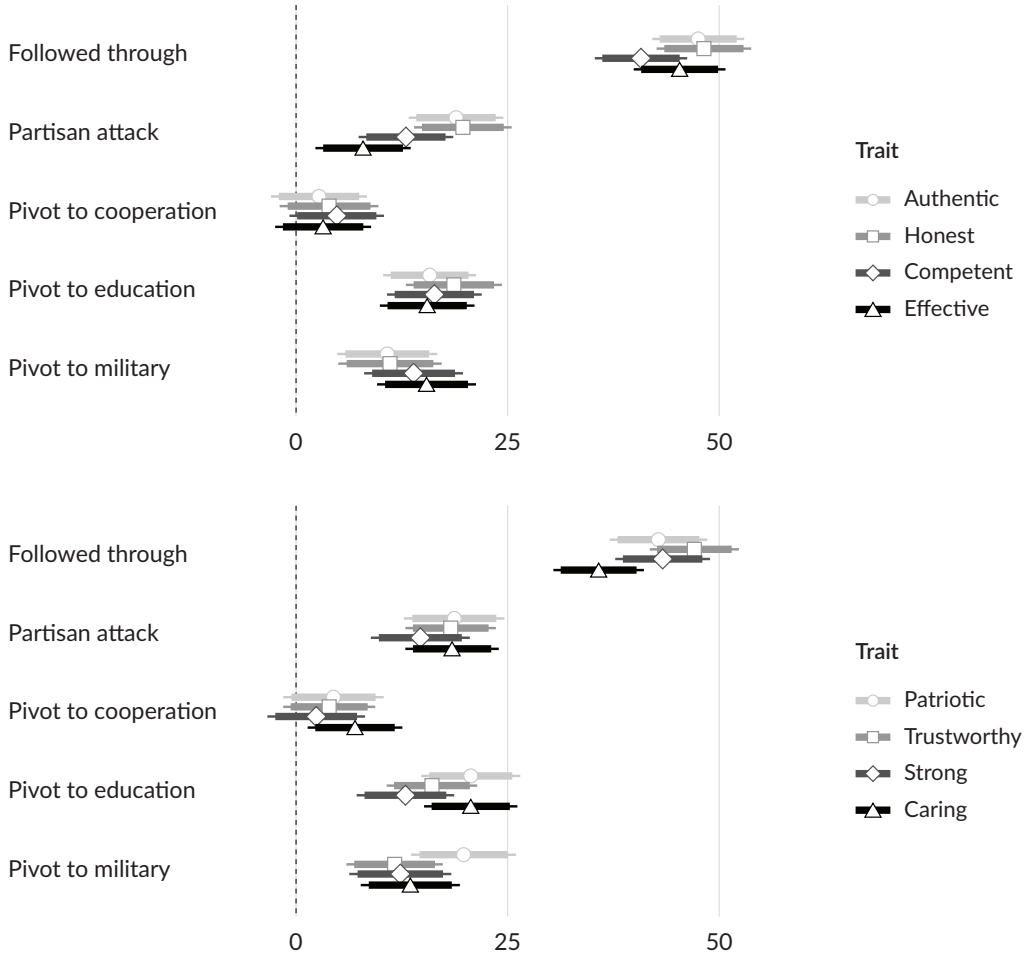


**Figure 2.** Experimental treatment effects on 0 to 100 ratings of how *well* (100) or *poorly* (0) various traits describe the leader. The reference group is leaders who did not follow through once in office and offered no excuse as to why. Note: Thinner error bars show 95% confidence intervals and thicker bars show 90% confidence intervals.

image by blaming the other party or pivoting the area really in need of funding to prevent American decline to another issue, although they still face a significant penalty for not following through on their status-threatening rhetoric.

Pivoting to cooperation, notably, did not lead to better results than making no excuse at all. Leaders who remark that they should not have regarded technological innovation as a competition between countries but should instead look to cooperate to achieve better results do not fare any better than leaders who make no excuse at all. Leaders who followed through, for example, were seen as 41 points stronger on a 0 to 100 scale than leaders who did not follow through but tried to pivot to a more cooperative stance.

These findings held for all other dependent variables, which included overall favorability of the leader, perceptions of the leader's re-electability, perceptions of the leader's future legacy, and views of the leader as genuine or as a liar. Results for additional dependent variables are available in the Supplementary File.

## 5. Study 3: Status Threat, Campaign Rhetoric, and Project Apollo

Having shown experimental evidence of status-threatening rhetoric increasing domestic expectations of action and that readily available excuses do not easily let leaders off the hook for inaction, I now turn to a case study to demonstrate how candidates tie issue areas to status on the campaign trail and how that messaging increases public pressure on them to act. By John F. Kennedy's (1962) own private admission, he was "not that interested in space" and repeatedly expressed concerns about the high costs of space exploration. Why then, did Kennedy spearhead Project Apollo, which at its peak, accounted for nearly 7% of federal discretionary spending? While Kennedy had several motives for investing in the Apollo program, including signaling high American status and system legitimacy to a foreign audience and being a devout Cold Warrior himself, I argue that he also faced significant pressure from his domestic audience because of the strength of his prior status-threatening campaign rhetoric that ingrained space exploration as an arena for status competition.

From my argument, I expect to see Kennedy repeatedly tie space exploration to status loss in messages to the domestic public and then later feel pressured into action by this rhetoric. On the former, I should see Kennedy employ status-threatening rhetoric, warning of the United States falling behind in his public-facing rhetoric, not just as one-off remarks but as a consistent part of his campaign strategy, revealed through campaign speeches and party strategy documents. On the latter part, consistent with the experiments, I expect to see Kennedy face significant public scrutiny should he attempt to walk back his status-threatening rhetoric and not take significant action. Because presidents are unlikely to admit that domestic politics played a role in their foreign policy decision-making, as it would appear that they put their own political interests above the national interests (Chavez, 2018, p. 147), I rely on primary sources, as well as analyses from journalists with close access to Kennedy and space historians who have analyzed the factors pushing Kennedy to invest in space exploration.

### *5.1. Priming and Amplifying Status Threat: Manufacturing the Sputnik Threat and the 1960 Campaign*

It was never inevitable that the American public would view space exploration as a defining battle for status between Cold War superpowers. Eisenhower was skeptical that space spectaculars would yield any lasting

international or domestic psychological boost (Logsdon, 1970, p. 16) and reportedly reacted positively to the news of the successful Soviet satellite launch, Sputnik, in October 1957, as he cared little for space spectaculars but had looked forward to a Soviet satellite setting a precedent for freedom of the skies for reconnaissance satellites (Lay, Jr., 1955).

Such a reaction was even shared by the American public in the immediate aftermath of Sputnik. Mead and Metraux (1957, quoted in Launius, 2010, p. 258) found that in the days immediately following Sputnik, just 13% of Americans believed the United States had fallen behind dangerously, with 82% saying the United States was either still at least even with the Soviets in science or was behind but would catch up. An "exceptionally small number" of Americans thought that the successful Sputnik launch was a surprise. A July 1959 RAND report conducted for NASA summarized Lubell's post-Sputnik polling and corroborated Mead and Metraux's findings, reporting "little evidence of public hysteria," that Americans did not initially view the Soviet success as threatening, and that Sputnik made them optimistic about future American successes in space (Goldsen, 1959, p. 6). Lubell (1957) later reported that he found it "especially striking" that the public initially echoed Eisenhower's rhetoric in their own views after Sputnik (quoted in Michael, 1960, p. 582).

However, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and other Democratic elites seized the opportunity to criticize the Eisenhower administration. Because of the deeply emotional and identity-threatening appeal of status-threatening rhetoric, Kennedy's messaging rattled many Americans. Rather than merely a preference for the United States to be ahead of the Soviet Union in science and technology, it was a need for many, posing a threat to the positive self-esteem they derived from calling themselves an American should the United States lose. Hardesty and Eisman (2007, p. 81) described how deeply this status threat disturbed American society, describing the fall of 1957 as "a season for renewed debate over national character and priorities." They continued, "many saw US culture as hedonistic, materialistic," while Russians seemed "highly disciplined, dedicated to science, intent on dominating the world." The worry of falling behind the Soviets caused many to re-evaluate their senses of self and country.

Kennedy continued his status-threatening rhetoric in the realm of space exploration into the 1960 campaign, running a coordinated campaign to incite fear and anxiety among the American public about the United States' declining status and crafting an image of himself as a young, strong, and patriotic leader who would return the United States to its rightful top place in the world. Kennedy and his advisors recognized that space exploration was an area where Kennedy could spin his youth as a positive and attack Eisenhower and Nixon on the grounds that "they have stood still in a world of rapid change" (Dymsza, 1960, p. 5a). A fact sheet of Democratic talking points during the campaign wrote that Kennedy's future legacy would be that "with a single-minded sense of purpose himself he gave his nation a renewed sense of purpose and faith in its future" and that Kennedy "helped to create a new determination in America to take the lead again in mankind's drive for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (JFK Library, 1960) Kennedy also featured this rhetoric prominently in each of the four televised debates with Nixon, remarking in the first: "I don't want historians, ten years from now, to say, these were the years when the tide ran out for the United States" (The Commission on Presidential Debates, 1960).

Kennedy repeatedly referenced a Gallup poll showing that citizens in nine of 10 countries surveyed thought the Soviet Union would overtake the United States militarily and scientifically by 1970. Kennedy referenced this same Gallup poll in 13 speeches across 11 states and in three of the four televised debates with Nixon,

all in a 51-day span between September and October 1960. Kennedy's constant mentions of this survey on the campaign trail reveal the extent to which he believed that Americans were concerned about losing primacy to the Soviets. Just 10 days before the 1960 election, two classified surveys of foreign public opinion prepared for the executive branch were leaked to the press showing that the United States' prestige throughout the world had declined at the hands of the Soviet Union during the Eisenhower presidency (Logsdon, 1970, p. 65). By constantly citing these polls to a clearly domestic audience—not in major international addresses but instead in states including Maine, Michigan, Idaho, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Illinois, and Indiana, and leaks to the press—it is apparent that although the contents of the surveys showed that an *international* audience saw the Soviet Union as likely to overtake the United States, Kennedy was warning of status decline to persuade his *domestic* audience.

### *5.2. Kennedy's Attempts to Tone Down Status-Threatening Rhetoric and Pivot to Cooperation in Office*

Despite Kennedy's insistent warnings to the public that the United States was falling behind the Soviet Union in science and technology while the Eisenhower administration sat idly by, Kennedy quickly shifted his rhetoric upon taking office. In his inaugural speech, Kennedy (1961a) advocated for cooperation with the Soviet Union in science, rather than competition, declaring: "Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce." In his first State of the Union address, Kennedy (1961b) stated that "both nations would help themselves as well as other nations by removing these endeavors from the bitter and wasteful competition of the Cold War."

However, on April 12, 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to journey into outer space. This came as no surprise to Kennedy or those in his administration, as they had known a Soviet manned flight to space was imminent (Sidey, 1964, p. 111). Kennedy (1961c), as a result, responded with a statement acknowledging the Soviet success but tried to display a sense of calmness to the American people. Kennedy congratulated Khrushchev and said that: "we expect to hope to make progress in this area this year ourselves." Kennedy's answers to questions in this regard were stoic and direct: "As I said in my State of the Union," Kennedy (1961d) responded to a reporter, "the news will be worse before it is better, and it will be some time before we catch up."

Hugh Sidey (1964, p. 114), a journalist with close access to Kennedy, wrote about Americans' disdain for Kennedy's calm reaction:

> For those who remembered the flaming days of John Kennedy's campaign for the presidency, the impatience with which he treated the question of our role in space, his answer was disturbing and the pervading calm with which the current Moscow news was accepted in the White House, while the rest of the world marveled, seemed hardly in the spirit of the New Frontier.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* both ran several columns chastising Kennedy, with writers including Schwartz (1961) criticizing Kennedy for betraying the image of a "young, active, and vigorous leader of a strong and advancing nation" that he had presented on the campaign trail. Another *New York Times* column from Baldwin (1961) attacked Kennedy for lacking the urgency and vision required to compete with the Soviet Union, a criticism similar to those Kennedy directed at Eisenhower and Nixon during the campaign.

Rep. James Fulton, during a Committee on Science and Astronautics hearing on April 13, pressed Kennedy administration officials on the urgency of the space program, voicing "the desire of the American people that we move from second into first position in the exploration of space" (U.S. House of Representatives, 1961). Rep. Alphonzo Bell Jr. similarly stated that "the people of the United States are demanding that this country pass Russia and become No. 1 in space" (U.S. Congress, 1961, p. 8838). One space administrator, who Logsdon (1970, p. 158) later identified as NASA Deputy Administrator Hugh Dryden, remarked that if Kennedy failed to issue a stronger response, he "could lose the 1964 election over this" (Sidey, 1964, p. 118).

Toning down the rhetoric in favor of a more cooperative or less expensive policy proved politically infeasible in the face of domestic pressure. To Kennedy, Sidey (1964, p. 99) reported: "watching and guiding national opinion was part of his job." Sidey explained that Kennedy obsessed over media coverage of him, writing: "every word, every phrase was absorbed, tested for its friendliness, dissected and analyzed with scientific precision, to detect the degree of approval or disapproval. Even at moments of crisis he would not ignore words about himself."

Frequent status-threatening rhetoric in the realm of science and technology in the 1960 election did not *force* Kennedy to pursue a manned mission to the moon, but his persistent seizing on worries of status decline took inaction off the table. Kennedy therefore looked anywhere he could, within the realm of science and technology policy, where he could make a splash. Kennedy's science advisor, Jerome Wiesner (1961), said that Kennedy pressed him for *something* visible in the way of science policy, whether that be a manned lunar mission or "something that is just as dramatic and convincing as space" (quoted in Logsdon, 1970, p. 111). Needing clear action to uphold the image he was attempting to cultivate, Logsdon (1970, p. 158) concluded: "from the standpoint of presidential politics, the pressures on Kennedy to take some fairly drastic action in response to the Gagarin flight were strong."

### *5.3. Kennedy's Post-Gagarin Reversal and the Theatrics of Status Politics*

On April 14, 1961, Sidey was unusually invited to sit in on a meeting of key officials to discuss the public perception that the United States was losing the space race. With Sidey observing and taking notes for his story, Kennedy begged those in the room to identify any area in space where the United States could achieve a victory over the Soviet Union. Kennedy questioned his advisors: "Is there any place where we can catch them? What can we do? Can we go around the moon before them?" Kennedy pleaded: "If somebody can just tell me how to catch up. Let's find somebody—anybody. I don't care if it's the janitor over there, if he knows how" (Sidey, 1964, pp. 122–123). Sidey described a frantic picture of Kennedy in the meeting, slumped and teetering in his chair, running his hands through his hair, tapping his teeth with his fingernails, and fidgeting with the rubber sole of his shoes while demanding answers from his advisors. Space historian Day (2005) summarized this meeting and the unusual presence of a journalist at it, writing: "Clearly Kennedy and Sorensen had an agenda—to get Sidey to portray the President as concerned about the Gagarin flight, engaged in the issue, and searching for an appropriate response."

Ultimately, Kennedy announced in May his intention to land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth before the end of the decade. Kennedy subsequently reignited his status-threatening campaign rhetoric, tying space exploration to status and promising to work, with the sacrifice of the American people, to get the United States back in the race.

However, theatrics to journalists, a shift in rhetoric, and a bold announcement were not enough to ease Americans' anxieties about falling behind the Soviet Union. In a 1962 poll, a plurality of Americans reported that the US's prestige was lower than it was when Kennedy took office, with only 17% stating that Kennedy was fulfilling his campaign pledge to increase the US's prestige. The same poll revealed that despite 79% responding that Kennedy was doing a good job strengthening national defense, just 44% felt Kennedy was doing a good job winning the Cold War with Russia, and only 3% believed he was doing a very good job (Opinion Research Corporation, 1962). The public continued to hold Kennedy to a high standard of demonstrating concrete achievements in space, and this public pressure was important for getting Kennedy and Congress to support such an expensive program.

Space historians similarly agree that Kennedy felt domestic pressure to act in space. Wiesner had cautioned Kennedy against using hyperbole when discussing manned spaceflight, as Wiesner, like Kennedy, personally rejected the idea that manned spaceflight ought to be the administration's highest priority scientific endeavor. Despite Wiesner's warnings, Launius (2004, p. 2) wrote that Kennedy "recognized the tremendous public support arising from this program and wanted to ensure that it reflected favorably upon his administration." Although Kennedy was concerned with the program's high costs, Logsdon (1970, p. 105) argued, he saw inaction as politically unfeasible, believing "the international and domestic penalties of doing so were unacceptable." This domestic infeasibility, I argue, was not foreordained, but was instead the product of Kennedy legitimating space exploration as an arena for status competition in the 1960 campaign, increasing the public's expectation of significant action.

To appease the public's need for action to revive American status, Kennedy had to show tangible results. Kennedy did this primarily through massive increases to the space budget and broadcasting these increases and any achievements made in space to the domestic public. Kennedy (1961e) ramped back up the status-threatening rhetoric, stating after a trip to Europe that Khrushchev "believes the world will move his way without resort to force" and "stressed his intention to outdo us in industrial production, to out-trade us, to prove to the world the superiority of his system over ours." However, Kennedy remarked his belief that "time will prove it wrong." Kennedy held press conferences and ceremonies for American astronauts and continued his status-threatening rhetoric at rallies, resuming his remarks that policies of the 1950s set the United States back, but he was working to fix that.

When Kennedy once again floated the idea of cooperating with the Soviets in space in 1963 after being confronted with the program's steep and rising costs, the idea was unable to gain any traction. Kennedy helped lead the charge to tie space exploration to status threat in the 1960 campaign, tying action in space to his image, which years later made inaction or pivots to more cooperative policies politically impracticable.

One potential counterargument is that Kennedy was concerned over American status, but to an international audience, not a domestic one. Making this argument, Musgrave and Nexon (2018) cited public opinion data showing that the Apollo program was not initially popular domestically, suggesting therefore that domestic public pressure played a limited role in Kennedy's decision-making. Indeed, survey evidence validates this view; multiple polls found that the American public was skeptical of an expensive space program. A June 1961 Gallup poll, for example, found that more Americans opposed than favored a 7-to-9-billion-dollar plan proposed to Congress to send a man to the moon. The same poll, however, revealed the persuasive power of framing space policy as a competition with the Soviet Union, with 72% responding that it was important for

the United States to be ahead of Russia in space exploration and 51% saying it was very important (Gallup Organization, 1961). Like Kennedy, the American public was concerned with the steep costs of the space program, but falling behind the Soviets in space was simply not an option for them.

In the midst of the space race, Van Dyke (1964) argued that pride—at the levels of the public, the media, the executive branch, and Congress—more than security, economic gains, scientific benefits, or signaling prestige to the rest of the world, was motivating the US space program. However, it was never foreordained that the American public would view space exploration as a competition between global rivals. Rather, it was campaign rhetoric that helped make it so.

## 6. Discussion

These three studies reveal two different perspectives on the effect that emotionally powerful status-threatening rhetoric has on perceptions of follow through and the barriers leaders face to inaction. Study 1 shows that the powerful appeal of status-threatening rhetoric leads to heightened expectations of action once in office. Study 2 shows that common excuses can only slightly mitigate the reputational damages of inaction, finding particularly that leaders who campaign on status-threatening rhetoric and then pivot to a more cooperative tone once in office fare no better than leaders who do not follow through and make no excuse at all.

The case study of Kennedy and Project Apollo shows this mechanism from the perspective of the leader, revealing that elected officials are aware of the costs of not taking action to revive US status in an issue area where they had previously invoked status-threatening rhetoric, whether they intentionally or unintentionally constrained themselves into such a position. Kennedy routinely warned of the Soviets outcompeting and overtaking the United States in the realm of science and technology, legitimating space exploration as an arena for status competition and raising the public's expectation that he would follow through with status-saving action. When Kennedy softened his competitive rhetoric in response to a major Soviet accomplishment, he quickly felt domestic pressure to fight harder against the status decline he warned about so fervently in the campaign.

Further research is needed to investigate for which issue areas status-threatening rhetoric is more or less effective and the types of policies associated with status threat, but the status literature offers several possibilities. First, status-threatening rhetoric might increase the public's appetite for reactionary or norm-breaking policies (C. S. Parker & Lavine, 2024) or preference for "strong" candidates willing to break or bend the rules (Ionescu et al., 2024). This coheres with arguments in the status literature at the leader-level, which posit that status uncertainty or dissatisfaction leads to more aggressive and risk-acceptant behavior (Renshon, 2017; Volgy et al., 2014). As such, just like how status-concerned leaders might turn to aggressive policies, the public might also pressure leaders who campaign heavily on status-threatening rhetoric into more belligerent actions.

However, it is also possible that the types of action candidates pressure themselves into from status-threatening rhetoric might be costly or risk-acceptant but not belligerent. The Kennedy case study provides an example of this. Not only did the Apollo program consume a large part of the federal budget, but Kennedy also risked significant embarrassment if a test failed, the program fell too far behind schedule, or an

astronaut died. Status-threatening rhetoric might therefore also pressure leaders into some sort of significant action, potentially in the way of expensive policies, or conspicuous consumption (Gilady, 2018), in areas like science, infrastructure, or elsewhere, rather than aggressiveness.

Further research should also investigate the variation in which candidates and leaders employ status-threatening rhetoric. Does status-threatening rhetoric appear more frequently when the United States is in periods of relative material decline or does Ralston's (2022) finding that declinist rhetoric is not correlated with objective measures of decline in the UK extend to the United States? I have also suggested that candidates challenging the incumbent party are more likely to employ status-threatening rhetoric, but further research is needed to explore the types of candidates most likely to employ this messaging.

## 7. Conclusion

Leaders, scholars, and citizens alike would be wise to understand the connection between rhetoric and policy outcomes, noting the increased commitment that status-threatening rhetoric holds leaders to and the potential costs to their image should they be perceived as inactive in the face of decline. When American politicians campaign on status-threatening rhetoric, inciting fear and anxiety over the United States falling behind, they pull on the strings of a core part of many Americans' national identity. To warn of national decline is to threaten many citizens' senses of self, given the extent to which status has become ingrained in American national identity. But although doing so might yield benefits at the polls, it also increases the public's expectation that the leader will follow through with action that they can justify to the public as helpful to reverse the ominous trend of decline. Rather than empty campaign rhetoric, leaders' reliance on status-threatening rhetoric therefore has the power to alter the set of politically viable foreign policies, making it an important topic of study for political psychologists and international relations scholars alike.

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### Data Availability

The data is available upon request from the author.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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