Framing Layoffs:
Media Coverage, Blame Attribution, and Trade-Related Policy Responses

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Abstract: Who is to blame when factories close or when there are mass layoffs? Whether it be the closing of an auto plant or the threatened off-shoring of the Carrier furnace factory, media reports frequently incorporate justifications – or frames – that provide context about the closure or layoffs. The most common frames often include foreign competition and trade policy, costly government policies, changing market conditions, or exogenous events such as the Covid-19 pandemic. We argue that such frames alter who the public holds responsible, which shapes the incentives of politicians while also affecting the public's preferred policy responses. We test the effect of media frames on the public's blame attribution and subsequent policy preferences using a survey experiment about General Motors factory closings in the United States and Canada. The results from a sample of almost 6,000 respondents in the US and Canada show that the public is quick to shift blame to the government, reducing blame to the company. We find that the media frames significantly shift support for trade policy in both countries, but the frames do not have an effect on domestic public assistance programs such as unemployment benefits or retraining and education programs.

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1 Introducton

In late 2018, General Motors (GM) announced the planned closure of five production plants, igniting a Twitter storm from President Trump and attempts by both the government and GM to attribute blame away from themselves. Preventing U.S. factory closings had been a prominent plank of the President's campaign. Early in his Presidency, Trump had claimed personal responsibility for negotiating with United Technologies to reverse the plan by subsidiary Carrier to move furnace production from Indiana to Mexico, which would have cost 1,400 American jobs. Standing on the Carrier factory floor in Indianapolis, President Trump declared that his administration's policies would save more jobs by saving American manufacturing: "These companies aren't going to be leaving anymore," he said. "They're not going to be taking people's hearts out."[1] In 2017, in a rally in Youngstown, Ohio, Trump repeated the claim, telling workers, "Don't move. Don't sell your house." A year later, GM's announcement of plans to close the Youngstown Assembly and other plants raised questions about the success of Trump's policies, particularly the increased tariffs on steel and other imports and the renegotiation of trade agreements such as NAFTA.

At the time, and repeatedly for the next 18 months, Trump lashed out at GM, blaming GM and its CEO Mary Barra for failing to keep the factories open. Union leaders agreed and called GM's calculations callous, citing concessions made during GM's bankruptcy proceedings in 2011 and 2015. They emphasized "GM's production decisions, in light of employee concessions during the economic downturn and a taxpayer bailout from bankruptcy, puts profits before the working families of this country whose personal sacrifices stood with GM during those dark days."[2] While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Tweets were more measured in expressing disappointment in GM,[3] the Canadian press excoriated GM and both current and former governments. In contrast, GM and CEO Barra generally framed plant closings in terms of adjusting to new market conditions and

[1] Tony Cook, "Trump campaigned on saving jobs at Indianapolis' Carrier plant. This is what it's like now," Indianapolis Star, October 30, 2020. https://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2020/10/30/trump-campaigned-saving-jobs-carrier-what-its-like-there-now/6010437002/

[2] Jamie L. LaReau, Detroit Free Press. "General Motors to close Detroit, Ohio, Canada plants," Nov. 26, 2018 — Updated 7:11 a.m. ET Nov. 27, 2018. https://www.freep.com/story/money/cars/general-motors/2018/11/26/ontario-plant-closure/2112539002/

[3] Justin Trudeau @JustinTrudeau "GM workers have been part of the heart and soul of Oshawa for generations - and we'll do everything we can to help the families affected by this news get back on their feet. Yesterday, I spoke with @GM's Mary Barra to express my deep disappointment in the closure."

cutting costs, [4] although Trump claimed that, behind closed doors, Barra blamed the auto unions.[5] Other politicians, such as Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, jumped into the fray, citing Trump's failure to negotiate a strong enough replacement to NAFTA; and some industry experts cited the increased costs of Trump's new tariffs, which cost GM $493 million in the first quarter of 2018 alone.[6]

This circle of finger-pointing became amplified in the media coverage. While some outlets carried the bare bones news of the announcement, others incorporated Trump's, GM's, and unions' framing to varying degrees. Local press – such as the Detroit Free Press – included greater detail about workers' and the unions' responses (UNIFOR in Canada and the UAW in the United States). In contrast, financial and industry news sources tended to focus on GM's savings and the role of government policies. More political outlets focused on the arc between Trump's initial promises to save American jobs to the closure of iconic factories. Canadian paper's similarly covered not only the local job losses but the political backlash against federal policies and both the Conservative Party for decisions during the 2008 bailout and the Liberal Party in power at the time of the factory closing announcement.[7]

Does it matter who the public blames for the loss of these jobs? The absolute number of lost jobs in each case, while devastating for the individuals and their communities, was nationally relatively small: 2,900 in Ontario (Oshawa Assembly), 1,877 in Michigan (Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly and Warren Transmission Operations), 1,618 in Ohio (Lordstown Assembly), and 310 in Maryland (Baltimore Operations). During the fourth quarter of 2018 – at the time of the announcement – U.S. private-sector establishments had gross job gains of 7.7 million and gross job losses of 6.9 million, according to the Bureau of Labor Management. A net gain of 814,000 jobs (90,000 in manufacturing)

[4] In GM's announcement, Barra said "The actions we are taking today continue our transformation to be highly agile, resilient and profitable, while giving us the flexibility to invest in the future. We recognize the need to stay in front of changing market conditions and customer preferences to position our company for long-term success." (November 26, 2018).

[5] Donald Trump "Just spoke to Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors about the Lordstown Ohio plant. I am not happy that it is closed when everything else in our Country is BOOMING. I asked her to sell it or do something quickly. She blamed the UAW Union — I don't care, I just want it open!" Twitter. March 17, 2019.

[6] Mark Guenberg, "GM Job Cuts, Plant Closures Betray Workers, Contracts." USW December 2, 2019. https://m.usw.org/blog/2018/gm-job-cuts-plant-closures-betray-workers-contracts

[7] For example, Joe Warmington, "GM Oshawa closure proof government bailouts don't work: O'Leary" Toronto Sun. November 28, 2018 https://torontosun.com/news/local-news/gm-oshawa-closure-proof-government-bailouts-dont-work-oleary.; Tonda MacCharles "GM plant closure stirs questions about massive 2009 government bailout," Toronto Star. November 27, 2018 https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2018/11/26/gm-plant-closure-stirs-questions-of-massive-2009-government-bailout.html

compared to the 3,805 GM predicted U.S. job losses.[8] In Canada a net gain of 109,100 jobs (8,000 in manufacturing) in the fourth quarter of 2018 offset the 2,900 expected Canadian job losses from the Oshawa Assembly closure.[9] Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0022-01 Labour force characteristics by industry, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality (x 1,000)

Yet, for those not directly involved, factory closings can serve as an assessment of a politician's economic competence. The tradition of politicians standing in front of a closed factory promising to do better than prior administrations is longstanding. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, against a backdrop of the closed mill his father had worked at, John Edwards blamed "bad government and corporate greed."[10] For an incumbent President, such closures can become fodder for retrospective voting – i.e., when voters reward or punish the incumbent for a past record – and as such create an incentive for politicians to shift blame from government , specifically their own policies. Corporations similarly face market incentives to be viewed as competent managers and frame layoffs as reasonable responses to external forces such as changes in the market and government policies. The recent COVID pandemic and resulting layoffs have heightened the salience of these issues, as debates have continued over the expected role of government relative to the responsibilities of corporations in economic downturns. In just one month – April 2020 – U.S. manufacturing employment dropped by 10% (1.3 million), and overall non-farm employment dropped by 20.5 million according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics,[11] and the number of firms decreased approximately 6% compared to 2019.[12] How the public attributes blame for such layoffs plays a role in shaping the political consequences and policy responses to mass layoffs.

We consider how this fight to attribute blame resonates with the public and influences preferences for related welfare and trade policies. Prior research has shown both news and political media's ability to influence preferences when factory closings are directly related to trade policies (Guisinger, 2017). Yet, in such prior work, the intermediate step of adjudicating blame is generally provided,

[8]Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, The Economics Daily, 9 out of 13 industries had net job gains in the fourth quarter of 2018 on the Internet at https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2019/9-out-of-13-industries-had-net-job-gains-in-the-fourth-quarter-of-2018.htm (visited January 22, 2021).

[9]Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0287-01 Labour force characteristics, monthly, seasonally adjusted and trend-cycle, last 5 months

[10]John Edwards. 2008. "Born". https://www.c-span.org/video/?202523-2/edwards-campaign-ad

[11]Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. News Release. May 8, 2020 (corrected September 23, 2020). www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_05082020.pdf

[12]https://www.ibisworld.com/industry-statistics/number-of-businesses/manufacturing-united-states/

assumed, or ignored. In this paper, we focus on the decision pathway: first, the conditions under which the public will assign blame and the extent to which blame-shifting influences domestic and international policies to mitigate the effects of factory closings. In doing so, we draw together two distinct literatures – blame attribution and individual level policy preferences. We argue that the common frames provided in newspaper reports of factory closings serve to influence the public's attribution of blame as well as their preferences for policies to mitigate the effects of factory closures.

2 Blame attribution and policy outcomes

Factory closings lie at the intersection of government and market responsibility. Shifting expectations of the role of the government and commercial actors (Hacker, 2006) have created the opportunity for blame deflecting, and the media offers a forum to do so. Politicians and non-political actors project their preferred frames through the media and, in doing so, influence the public's policy preferences (Meyer, 2002; Gavin, 2010). While corporations make the decision to close down a factory, the description of the environment in which they do so may absolve itself and incriminate the government and other actors.

Arguing that factory closings are a response to government actions can serve not only to shift blame away from the corporation to an identifiable alternative decision-maker, but also to increase pressure to move towards preferred policies. In the U.S., since the early debates over NAFTA, the government's trade policies have repeatedly received blame for allowing firms to shift U.S. manufacturing jobs abroad through outsourcing and for failing to protect U.S. corporations from unfair foreign strategies (Guisinger, 2017). Yet, the reverse can also be true. For example, during testimony over the Bush steel tariffs, one union representative complained that the tariffs imposed to keep U.S. steel plants open threatened his own job at a steel drum factory because of the increased costs.[13] The Trump Administration's trade wars and use of Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act to impose new tariffs on steel (25 percent) and aluminum (10 percent) on the grounds of a security threat revived arguments that trade limits can threaten rather than protect some domestic manufacturing. In the case of the General Motor's factory closings, the media ran some stories blaming higher tariffs – new tariffs raised GM's costs of production, making some product lines

[13]Testimony of Gordon Jones. Trilla Steel Drum Corporation. Hearing on Unintended Consequences of Increased Steel Tariffs on American Manufacturers before the House Committee on Small Business, July 23, 2002.

unprofitable – and also stories that blamed the lowering of tariffs – trade agreements had left U.S. auto workers vulnerable to outsourcing and foreign competition. In both cases, such reporting employed framing that shifted blame to poor government policies.

A common alternative frame avoids specific decision-makers altogether, describing a company as reacting to market forces and changes outside of a corporation's control, such as adjustments to new technologies or an external (exogenous) crisis. The Global Financial Crisis provided such a backdrop to the U.S. government's bailout of the auto industry in 2008. In the last decade, industry analysts point to the disruptive nature of the rapid technological shift to electric and self-driving cars as necessitating a restructuring of the industry. More recently, the global Covid-19 pandemic disrupted global supply chains and consumer demands. In the case of the General Motor factory closings, the media highlighted the outdated nature of the particular factories and vehicle lines to be closed and the difficulties the pandemic has generated for the auto industry as a whole.

Analysis of the "most relevant" 100 articles in U.S. newspapers in the 3 months from the GM closing shows that the headlines linked the factory closings to politicians and thus to the government in almost a third of all articles whereas the headline linked the closing to market forces only 6 percent of the time. In contrast, in the article text, market forces were the most dominant frame (54 percent of all articles) followed by problems with GM (45 percent of all articles) and choices made by the Government (27 percent of all articles). [Additional U.S. analysis and Canadian analysis to be added here later.]

We argue that by influencing which decision-makers are viewed as responsible, these common frames should influence the public's support for ameliorating government policies. As Iyengar (1994) noted, the media's ability to frame responsibility influences the public's understanding of the causes and solutions to social problems. Given our focus on factory closing and layoffs, we consider three forms of national response: 1) worker-based programs supplementing income, 2) worker-based programs that support retraining, and 3) changes in trade policy to support domestic manufacturing. Each type of policy has been used extensively in the past with the goal of either assisting workers who have been laid off or of protecting industries and workers from forces leading to layoffs. The first two types of policies exist in both Canada and the United States, with unemployment benefits existing in various forms, and through specific programs where workers facing trade-related unemployment are eligible for additional unemployment benefits. Similarly, both countries' political discourse routinely frames trade policy as supporting or hurting domestic industries, although, in

the public sphere, concerns about liberalization tended to outweigh concerns about excessive tariffs until President Trump, very publicly, initiated a series of new tariffs via executive orders.

Prior work on company closings suggests that journalists' presentations can shift the public's blame attribution. In the period after the Global Recession, Williams, Davidson, and Yochim (2011) found that journalists' anthropomorphization of companies (i.e., the use of a death metaphor) deflected blame attribution from the corporations themselves towards the government, the economy, and consumers, although the effect was moderated by individuals' exposure to economic-focused media. While such effects are interesting, we are particularly concerned with the effects of how the media's portrayal of different frames of responsibility shape public blame attributions and support for public policies.

Furthermore, we evaluate both the process of blame attribution and then policy preferences because prior work suggests that media coverage of layoffs could be a double-edged sword. Iyengar and Kinder (2010) found that when the news highlights negatively affected societal actors and individuals specifically, a more 'vivid' (their term) presentation can diminish support for a national response to the cause of the affliction. In other words, the more readers know about the specifics, the less likely they are to view this problem as a general one to be solved by national-level policies, and the more likely they are to consider the problem unique to those involved. As a result, information about factory closings may serve to decrease rather than increase support for policy solutions. A second reason for considering blame first and then policy preferences is that prior work has argued that groups not perceived as responsible for their need of government assistance are more likely to receive sympathy (Kluegel and Smith, 2017; Harell, Soroka, and Iyengar, 2013). In the case of the GM factory closings, if the framing moves blame away from the company and its workers, we should expect to see more support for policies supporting the industry and its workers, whereas when the blame is on GM, we would expect less support.

We expect that blame attribution plays an important role in shaping policy preferences and influencing policy makers, given the role of attribution in the retrospective voting literature. For scholars of retrospective voting (e.g., (Key et al., 1966; Fiorina, 1981; Peffley, 1984; Ferejohn, 1986; Healy and Malhotra, 2013; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000, 2013), a fundamental assumption is that voters link outcomes to incumbent politicians. Yet, this simple assumption spans a complex process by which voters must acquire information about outcomes, value those outcomes relative to other outcomes, and assess actors' contributions to (or responsibility for) those outcomes. Much of

the debate has focused on the latter action – assessing actors' contributions with scholars considering the role of partisanship. Evidence suggests that voters in general link overall economic performance to a country's incumbent leaders (Hibbing and Alford, 1981; Peffley, 1984; Whitten and Palmer, 1999; Karyotis and Rüdig, 2015), but responses to specific events provide greater opportunity to deflect blame, in part due to potential observability of different government (and non-government) actors' responses. Given potential heterogeneity in political sophistication, the clarity of context is an important factor in allowing individuals to adjudicate blame (Stiers, 2021). For example, in studying blame attribution for the U.S. governments' failures after Hurricane Katrina, Malhotra and Kuo (2008) found that while respondents' uninformed response was to blame the opposition party, but when provided information about job titles, respondents partitioned blame according to job responsibilities instead. Similarly, where the intersection of states', international organizations', and non-governmental organizations' responses to the Darfur crisis created uncertainty, Ecker-Ehrhardt (2010) argues that the media coverage served to allocate responsibility and promote specific policies.

In summary, we expect that the framing of the reason for a factory's closing should first influence the allocation of blame, and will also shape policy preferences. We proceed by testing the effects of media framing of auto plant closings on blame attribution and preferences over a range of government policies using a survey experiment fielded on diverse national samples in the United States and Canada. We then present the main effects of our treatments, followed by an analysis of whether prior exposure to news on the plant closings attenuates the effects of our media framing treatments. We find that different frames have a strong effect on blame attribution and trade policy preferences, but the frames do not affect public preferences for worker-support policies such as unemployment benefits or education and retraining programs. We conclude with a discussion of the policy implications and consider extensions for future research.

3 Research Design

To test how media coverage shapes public perceptions of accountability and policy responses to mass layoffs, we employ a survey experiment fielded on diverse national samples in the United States and Canada. The advantage of using a survey experiment, as opposed to observational data from public opinion polls, is that it allows us to randomly assign different media frames to respondents, so we can measure the causal effect of different justifications for mass layoffs and the effect of those

justifications on blame attribution and policy preferences.

We fielded our study with the survey firm Dynata in the summer of 2020, which was in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research examining the effects of the pandemic on survey quality and generalizability find that respondent attentiveness declined during the pandemic among online sample populations (Aronow et al., 2020), and thus researchers should employ attention or quality checks to ensure they are analyzing quality responses. However, Peyton, Huber, and Coppock (2020) find that results from studies conducted during the pandemic consistently replicate studies conducted pre-pandemic, though some treatment effects are smaller, suggesting that studies during the pandemic are more likely to yield conservative estimates. In an effort to ensure data quality, we follow the advice of Burleigh, Kennedy, and Clifford (2018), blocking respondents from participating if they were located outside of our sample country (US or Canada) or were flagged for using a Virtual Private Server (VPS). We also checked the quality of respondents based on a free response question prior to our study. Respondents who wrote gibberish or who entered a response that was unresponsive to the prompt were deemed to not be paying attention and were dropped from the sample. This process yielded a sample of about 6,000 respondents who consented to the research, passed our quality checks, and completed our study.

Our study was fielded with Dynata because it allows us to reach a diverse sample of respondents and is frequently used in social science research.[14] Dynata recruits respondents using an online opt-in method, after which respondents are randomly selected for survey invitations using population targets, which yields diverse national samples. Our samples were designed to reflect the national population based on education, income, education, and gender.[15] The demographics for the United States and Canadian respondents are reported in the appendix, section 6.1.

To test the effects of media coverage on blame attribution and policy preferences related to mass layoffs, our study first informed all respondents that they would "read a news report about developments in the auto industry and then be asked your opinion on the situation." Each news report was based on actual media coverage and public statements that had been reported in the news. Respondents were randomly assigned to either the control condition or one of four treatment conditions. For all conditions, the news report included a bold headline announcing "General Motors

[14]For examples of recent publications using Dynata (formerly Survey Sampling International), see Brutger (2020), Brutger and Kertzer (2018) and Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo (2013).

[15]For the Canadian sample, education was ommited as a population target due to sampling limitations.

to close U.S. and Canadian plants."[16] The headline was followed by an image of the Lordstown, Ohio General Motors plant for the U.S. respondents and a picture of the Oshowa, Ontaria General Motors plant for Canadian respondents.[17].

The control condition for the experiment, which also was the base text included in all treatment conditions, is as follows:

Control:

> General Motors made a major announcement on Monday saying it will close numerous assembly plants, including Lordstown in Ohio and Oshawa in Ontario. The plan will help save the company $6 billion, according to GM.
>
> Thousands of jobs are at stake, with at least 1,500 people set to lose their job at each plant. According to a spokesperson for GM, the plants will be unallocated, which means they will no longer produce vehicles in those plants. Vehicle lines made at the targeted facilities will be terminated.[18]

Respondents who were assigned to the treatment conditions read the same initial text as those in the control condition, but were provided additional text that framed the layoffs as being related to *changing market conditions*, *tariffs being harmful*, *tariffs being beneficial*, or *the pandemic*. The full text for each is provided below.

Market conditions:

> The move comes as consumers are abandoning traditional passenger cars in favor of alternative makes – if they're buying vehicles at all. General Motors has more ability to build cars than people want to buy, and especially for traditional passenger cars.
>
> GM plans to invest in electric vehicles and self-driving cars, industries of the future, instead of cars like the Chevy Impala that evoke memories of the past. GM wasn't able to sell enough vehicles to keep these lines profitable. If the company doesn't take bold steps to address the new auto market, then more jobs will be at risk. GM faces many challenges and the shift in consumer demand doesn't help.

Tariffs bad:

> The move comes as new U.S.-initiated tariffs on imported goods have increased material costs for some U.S. industries. The recently imposed tariffs of 25 percent on imported

[16] The order of "U.S and Canadian" was such that "U.S." was listed first for U.S. respodnents and "Canadian" was listed first for Canadian respodnents.

[17] The images for each study are displayed in the appendix, section 6.2

[18] Expected job losses were higher at Oshawa (2,900) than Lordstown (1,618), but we used the floor of "at least 1,500" to ensure our treatments were consistent across the U.S. and Canadian surveys.

steel and 10 percent on aluminum have been identified as a key business challenge. Already enacted tariffs on imported aluminum and steel have cost GM $1 billion in 2019. These immediate cost increases led to a reassessment of production strategy.

Someone familiar with the decision noted that raising tariffs increases costs significantly for the auto industry and threatens thousands of jobs. GM wasn't able to sell enough vehicles to keep these lines profitable. If the company doesn't take bold steps to address rising costs from tariffs, then more jobs will be at risk. GM faces many challenges, and higher tariffs on materials don't help.[19]

Tariffs good:

The move comes as the industry faces increased competition from foreign imports. Lowered tariffs as part of international trade agreements have been identified as a key business challenge, with sales of foreign cars in the U.S. increasing 14.2% since 2014. This recent surge in foreign competition led to a reassessment of production strategy.

Someone familiar with the decision noted that lowering tariffs increases competition from auto imports and threatens thousands of jobs. GM wasn't able to sell enough vehicles to keep these lines profitable. If the company doesn't take bold steps to address increased competition, then more jobs will be at risk. GM faces many challenges, and lower import tariffs don't help.

Pandemic:

The move comes as the industry faces the economic impact of coronavirus. A global recession and decreased consumer demand could mean millions of fewer vehicles sold this year compared to earlier projections. The projected fall in sales as well as uncertainty about a potential government stimulus has led to a reassessment of production strategy by GM.

GM plans to restructure its production lines and factories. GM wasn't able to sell enough vehicles to keep these lines profitable. If the company doesn't take bold steps to address the global recession, then more jobs will be at risk. GM faces many challenges and the pandemic doesn't help.

After reading the news story, respondents were presented with a bulleted summary of the story and were then asked to answer a series of questions about the layoffs. To assess blame attribution, we asked respondents "which of the following most closely resembles your thoughts about why the factories are closing?" Respondents could select from "Government policies failed," "General Motors management failed," or "Other reasons." We also asked respondents about their attitudes toward various types of government policies, which allows us to measure how different media frames of the

[19]In the tariff treatments, the text shown specifies "Someone familiar with the decision noted..." In the full study, the information provider was randomly assigned from a variety of potential cue givers, which the authors analyze elsewhere.

layoffs shape public support for policy responses. Specifically, we asked "Do you favor or oppose [the United States / Canada] reducing its barriers to trade?" Response options were on a five-point scale from "strongly favor" to "strongly oppose" with higher values corresponding to supporting reduced barriers to trade. We also asked respondents "Which of the following do you believe should be available to laid off G.M. workers?" Respondents were provided a list of options that were asked to check "yes" or "no" for whether each should exist. The responses were aggregated into two variables. The first measures support for wage-supplement policies, specifically unemployment benefits or wage supplements.[20] The second measures support for retraining and education programs. Each set of responses was summed and rescaled from zero to one for ease of interpretation, with zero representing low support and one representing high support. Taken together, these measures let us evaluate how different justifications for the auto layoffs affect public blame attribution, and subsequently how those justifications alter support for trade and government assistance policies, which are the most common and visible public policy tools used by the government to support domestic workers.

4 Results

We proceed through our analysis in three steps. First, we report the blame attribution from the control condition, which allows us to establish a clear baseline of how the public perceives the factory closing and associated layoffs. We then report the effects of our treatments for the full sample, followed by a brief examination of whether American and Canadian publics respond similarly and a discussion of how respondents self-reported consumption of news about the auto layoffs moderates the treatment effects. Lastly, we analyze how the treatments shape public preferences for trade policy. Our results show that public blame is significantly shaped by media frames, especially amongst those who were not already following the auto layoff story in the news. Furthermore, we find that the public's support for trade policy also shifts with different media frames, though we do not find that the media frames affect support for government assistance policies.

Analysis of the control group shows that the public is divided over whom to blame for auto layoffs. Using the responses from the baseline control condition, as shown in Figure 1, we find that 31.9 percent of respondents blame the government, 40.8 percent blame General Motors, and 27.4 percent blame something else. These results are similar across the US and Canadian respondents. For

[20] The full question wording is shown in the appendix, section 6.3.

example, among the US respondents, 32.9 percent blame the government and among the Canadian respondents 30.9 percent blame the government. Although the blame is split, in both countries General Motors receives the highest share of the blame from the public, with the government receiving the second largest share of the blame.

Figure 1: Baseline Blame Attribution

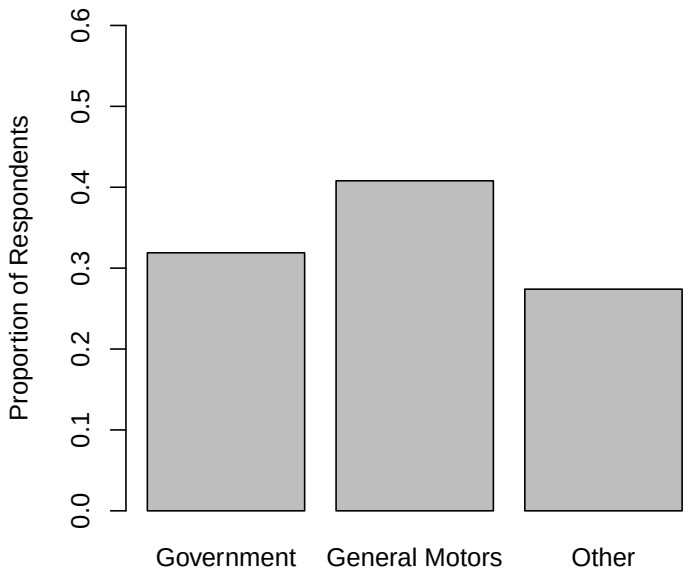


Figure 1 displays the proportion of respondents who attribute responsibility for the factory closing to the government, General Motors, or "other" in the control condition.

We now turn to the focus of our study, which is how media coverage affects blame attribution for the auto layoffs. The average treatment effects for the full sample are presented in Figure 2. The most striking results are for the two tariff treatments. Both the Tariffs Good *and* Tariffs Bad treatments result in more respondents blaming the government. The largest treatment effect in our study is from the Tariffs Bad treatment, which results in 27 percent more of the respondents blaming the government ($p < 0.01$), but the Tariffs Good treatment also has a strong effect, increasing blame to the government by about 16 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). In each of these treatments it appears that the mention of government tariff policies and the argument that they have hurt the auto industry – regardless of whether this is due to increased international competition from lower tariffs

or due to higher costs of materials like steel – resonates with the public and shifts blame to the government. The clear beneficiary from both of these framings is General Motors, with 18 percent fewer respondents blaming them in the Tariffs Bad treatment ($p < 0.01$) and 7 percent fewer in the Tariffs Good treatment ($p < 0.01$).

Consistent with the results from the tariff treatments, we find that *any* of our explanations about layoffs appear to help General Motors receive less blame. The treatment effects on public blame of GM are all negatively signed and, with the exception of Market Conditions, each is significant at $p < 0.01$. While the public does not generally think well of large corporations (Public Affairs Council, 2015), our results show blame can be easily diverted from the company conducting layoffs to the government or others through media messaging. This suggests that additional coverage of mass layoffs, which almost always includes an explanation for why companies are conducting layoffs, are likely to reduce blame to the company while shifting the public's ire to other factors.

Perhaps the most surprising results from our study are the effects of the Pandemic treatment. Like the tariff treatments, the Pandemic treatment reduces blame to GM, but it has no effect on blame to the government. This means that the public is not holding the government responsible for auto layoffs attributed to the pandemic, and yet the public is, at least partially, willing to let GM off the hook, with 12 percent fewer respondents blaming GM in the pandemic treatment ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that the government is somewhat insulated from public blame due to layoffs associated with the pandemic.

For the preceding results, we also analyzed whether American and Canadian respondents reacted differently to the treatments, which we tested by interacting the treatments with an indicator for whether the respondent was in the US study or not. The full results are reported in Table 2 of the appendix. The only significant interaction is for the Tariffs Bad treatment on the measure of blame for GM. The effect of the Tariffs Bad treatment was negative and signifiant for both the US and Canadian sample, with the effect among Canadians resulting in 23 percent fewer respondents blaming GM, but the effect of the Tariffs Bad treatment was significantly smaller among Americans, with the treatment resulting in 12 percent fewer respondents blaming GM in the US sample. Other than this one difference, no other treatments had significantly different effects for Canadians or Americans.[21]

[21] Significance in this case is defined as $p < 0.05$.

Figure 2: Framing Treatment Effects

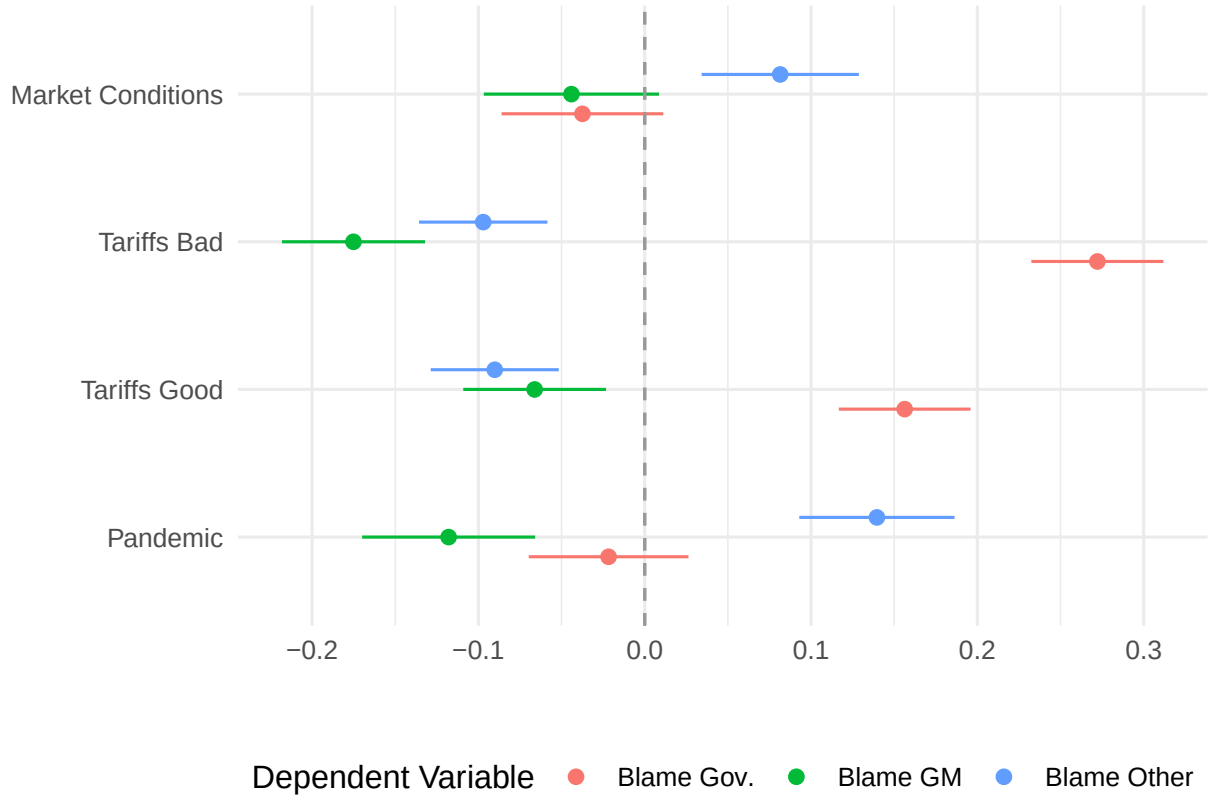


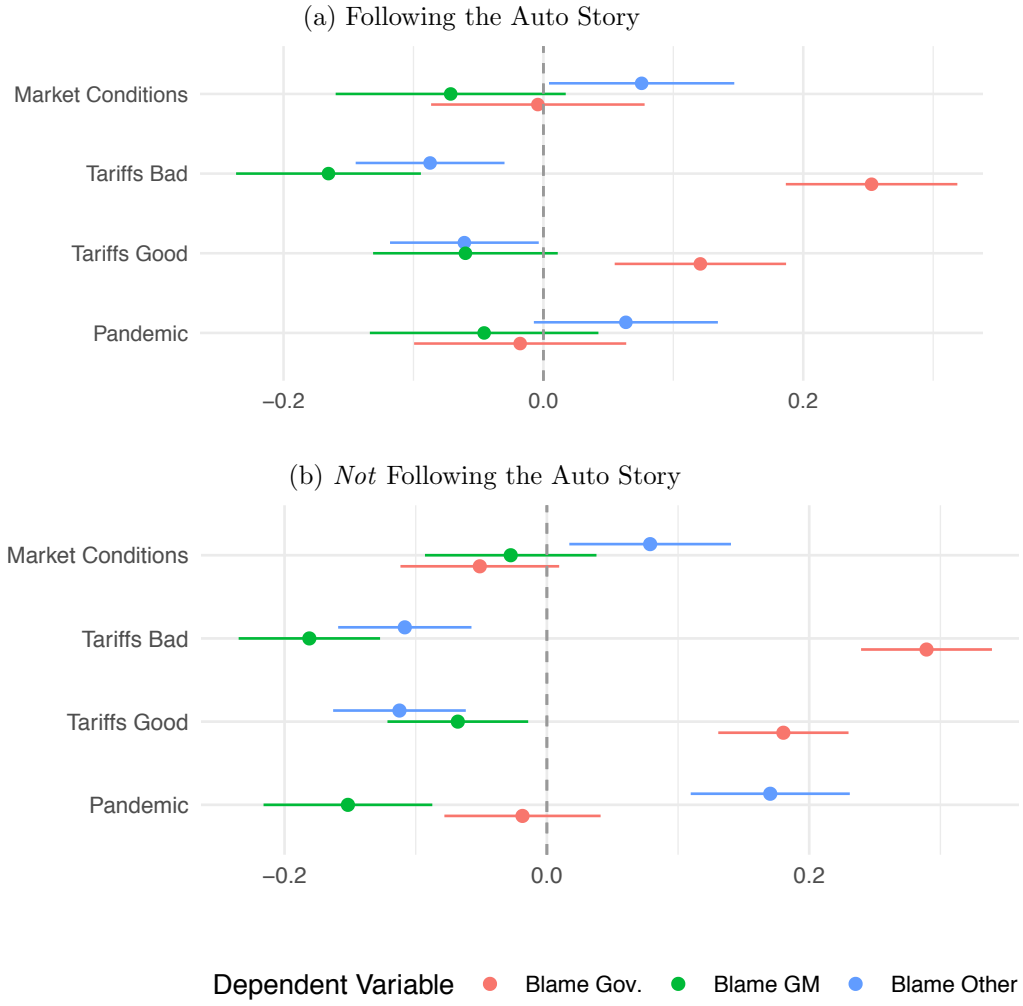
Figure 2 displays the treatment effects on the proportion of respondents blaming the government, General Motors, or "other" for the full sample. The figure contains the average treatment effects and 95 percent confidence intervals from a series of OLS regressions run for each blame variable.

4.1 Testing Heterogeneous Effects among those (Not) Following the News

We next consider whether our media framing treatments have differential effects among those that are, or are not, following the news. Specifically, we asked respondents "Were the GM plant closings a story that you had followed in the news?" In our sample, 37 percent of respondents reported that they had been following the story about GM plants closing. Our expectation is that respondents who had actively been following the story would have stronger priors about who was responsible for the layoffs, and thus we would expect our treatments to have a smaller effect among those already following the story. Consistent with our expectations the effect sizes are generally smaller amongst those fallowing the news, which is shown in Figure 3. The effect sizes are generally smaller in panel (a), for those following the auto story, than for panel (b), those not following the story. Even though

the differences in effect sizes between those following and not following are in the expected direction, they are not significantly different for most treatments, as showing in Table 3 of the appendix. However, the differences are signifiant for the Pandemic treatment, with those not following the news significantly more likely to blame "other" and those following the news somewhat more likely to blame GM.

Figure 3: Treatment Effects for those (Not) Following the News



Note: Figure 3 displays the treatment effects on the proportion of respondents blaming the government, General Motors, or "other." Panel (a) is consists of those who self-reported they were *not* following the auto story and panel (b) consists of those who self-reported they were following the auto story. Each effect is calculated running a separate model for that dependent variable.

4.2 Support for Trade and Government Assistance Policies

We now turn to the question of how media frames affect support for policy choices. We begin by testing whether the media frames about the factory closings affect respondents' support or oppose reducing barriers to trade. We focus on trade policy since politicians repeatedly turn to trade policy as a tool to protect American workers and foreign competition is often blamed for the demise of US production. During the 2016 election, both Republicans and Democrats derided government policies that "shipped jobs overseas" and promised trade policy that would protect American jobs. Tammy Duckworth, a former Illinois Representative running for Senate campaigned with a series of ads focused on lost manufacturing jobs, including one starting with a photo of the factory from which her father was laid off and discussing her family's subsequent reliance on food stamps.[22] In Ohio, rival candidates Rob Portman and and Ted Strickland took turns accusing each other of supporting policies that resulted in closures. In one ad filmed against a backdrop of an abandoned factory, the narrator opens by saying "Looks like Rob Portman sure knows how to clear out a factory" and continues by claiming Portman's policies promoted moving jobs oversees due to his support for preferential trade agreements.[23]

The results show that both tariff treatments shift support for trade policy, and they do so in opposite directions, as expected. By contrast, neither the Market Conditions or Pandemic treatments have any effect on trade support as we discuss below. The results for trade support are displayed in Figure 4. The Tariffs Good and Tariffs Bad treatments generate mirror image shifts in preferences, although they differ slightly in strength of significance. The Tariffs Good treatment, which emphasizes that reducing tariffs increases foreign competition, significantly decreases trade support on the five-point scale (-0.09, $p = 0.05$). The effect in substantive terms is a 3 percent decline in support for liberal trade policies.[24] By contrast, we find that the Tariffs Bad treatment has a similarly sized, but positive, effect on the five-points scale (0.08, $p = 0.08$). The substantive effect of the Tariffs Bad treatment is a 5.1 percent increase in support for liberal trade policies ($p = 0.02$). When we include controls for individual-level factors known to shape attitudes toward trade, the effects of the both tariff treatments are significant with p-values less than 0.05.[25] Neither effect size would support an

[22] Political TV Ad Archive. https://archive.org/embed/PolAd_TammyDuckworth_d9xbn

[23] Political TV Ad Archive. https://archive.org/embed/PolAd_RobPortman_nr7vb

[24] Respondents are counted as supporting liberal trade policies if they selected "somewhat" or "strongly" favoring reducing barriers to trade.

[25] Controls are reported in Figure 4, which include factors that shape attitudes toward trade such

interpretation that a single news article dramatically transforms individuals' preferences for trade. But rather, in light of other numerous determinants of preferences, including current partisanship on trade, they support an interpretation that cumulative interaction with such frames may over time influence individuals preferences.

Figure 4: Effects on Trade Support

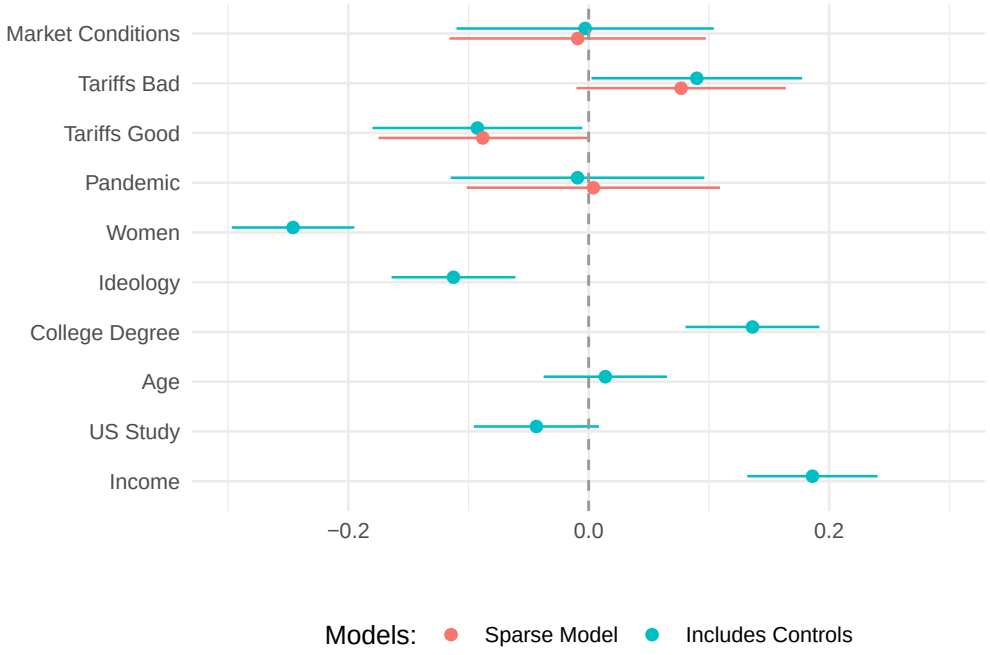


Figure 4 displays the treatment effects on the proportion of respondents who support reducing barriers to trade. The figure contains the average treatment effects and 95 percent confidence intervals from OLS regressions.

We next examine the effects of media frames on support for worker-focused government policies, such as wage-support programs or retraining and education programs. In contrast to the effects of our treatments on support for trade, we do not find that the treatments have a significant effect on support for other government policies, as shown in Figure 5. In fact we find remarkably stable null results, which are also robust to inclusions of a broad range of controls that are likely to shape attitudes toward government assistance programs, as shown in Figure 8 of the appendix. We do find that that respondents differ in their support for policies based on whether they were in the US sample or the Canadian sample, with Canadians more likely to support government assistance

as education, gender, income, age, and ideology (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001).

programs. Our results also show that such policies are preferred by liberals and those who are older, but even when controlling for such factors the treatments have no effect.

Figure 5: Effects on Support for Government Assistance Programs

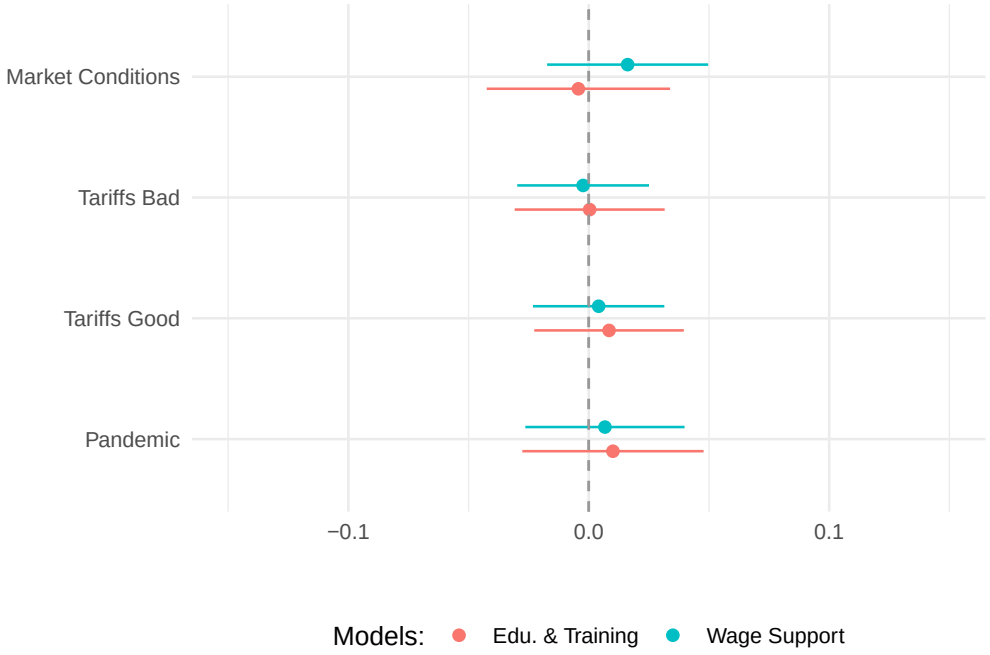


Figure 5 displays the treatment effects on whether respondents believe there should be government programs for education and training for workers who lose their jobs and also whether there should be wage supplement programs for workers. Each dependent variable is scaled from zero to one. The figure contains the average treatment effects and 95 percent confidence intervals from a series of OLS regressions run for each dependent variable.

The finding that media framing has a significant effect on support for trade policies, but no effect on support for domestic worker-assistance policies has a number of implications. First, it suggests that politicians are acting strategically when they repeatedly turn to trade policy as a policy response factory closings or layoffs. We find that the public is quick to blame the government when media reports draw connections between trade and layoffs in the manufacturing sector, which they frequently do. The results also show that the public is swayed by such reporting, which shifts their attitudes toward trade policy. Thus, politicians who are concerned about being blamed for poor government policies, as retrospective voting models predict, can respond to public preferences by publicizing their trade policies that benefit domestic workers and companies.

Our results also suggest that the public has more entrenched views toward domestic government assistance programs, such as unemployment benefits and worker training programs. We found it

somewhat surprising that even the Pandemic treatment did not generate increased demand for wage-support policies. This result, combined with the finding that the government does not receive additional blame in when layoffs are attributed to the pandemic, suggests that the government and individual politicians are somewhat insulated from blame and public pressure for increased government assistance from reports of specific factory closings and layoffs.

5 Conclusion

Just days after GM's announced closure, the online news magazine *Politico* exhorted it's readers "Don't just blame Trump for GM's Layoffs – Blame GM."[26] This paper provided a test of whether media framing of factory closures shifts blame attribution and alters trade-related policy preferences of voters. We found that commonly occurring frames used by media sources - particularly the "tariffs good" and "tariffs bad" frames - not only shifted blame but also had roll over effects on some, but not all, trade-related policy preferences.

While shifting the blame to the government for trade policies resulted in matching shifts in preferences over trade policies, no frame influenced preferences for government assistance for affected individuals. While Iyengar and Kinder (2010) found that more detailed portrayals of sympathetic individuals benefiting from social programs actually decreased support for national solutions, that dynamic should not work similarly for tariff-based and non-tariff based policies. In the future, we would like to consider the mechanisms that lead to changed preferences on tariff policies but not worker assistance. Several possible explanations for this pattern immediately suggest themselves: individuals may prefer to fix the perceived source of the problem rather than mitigate the end result; trade policies may be seen as narrowly targeted and welfare-based policies too broad; or, perhaps changing "external" policies may be deemed more desirable than altering purely domestic ones. Our experiments should provide a framework and a set of treatments for testing these mechanisms.

At the beginning of this project, we expected more difference between the Canadian and U.S. samples, particularly since GM is an American firm and thus Canadians could have blamed both their own and the U.S. government for the outcome. The similarity in results suggests that the nationality of the parent company may matter little when people are considering factory closings.

[26] Jaime Lincoln Kitman, "Don't Just Blame Trump for GM's Layoffs—Blame GM," November 29, 2018. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/29/generalmotorstrump-layoffsfactories-autoindustry222696

Given the increasingly global nature of supply chains, the relative lack of importance placed on corporate headquarters suggests a sophisticated calculation by voters that should be explored more deeply and in other contexts.

Future research should also consider heterogeneity across individuals - particularly in terms of class and trade-related employment. In many models of trade, voters are grouped in coarse blocs (e.g., high or low skill; exposed to or sheltered from international trade), but findings not currently included suggest that class-cues found in more electoral politics also play an important role in shaping attitudes about trade policy.

The frames we used in our experiment were the most commonly observed in the media coverage, but they are not the only possible or theoretically interesting ones to test. In collecting media stories, we observed: GM and other industries shifting blame towards the government; counter arguments about the corporations' culpability due to leadership choices – in this case, either over mismanagement or excessive focus on stock market perceptions; and, also the unions' responsibility in high costs. It is possible that an anti-union frame (which was rare but still present in some media) would have resulted in the reverse finding - diminished support for government assistance programs and null results for the trade policy preferences.

As the Biden Administration rolls out it's new "worker-centered" trade policy,[27] the issue of "who's to blame" is back in the news. Our results suggest that while framing may further polarize Americans and Canadians position on trade it will do little to increase support for those affected.

[27]Bob Davis, Biden Team Promises New Look Trade Policy," *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2021

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6 Appendix

6.1 Sample Demographics

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Demographic	Canadian Sample	US Sample	U.S. Population
Age 18 to 24	0.088	0.096	0.132
Age 25 to 39	0.251	0.232	0.266
Age 40 to 59	0.346	0.333	0.325
Age >50	0.315	0.340	0.293
Female	0.512	0.531	0.510
Household income $0 to $50,000	0.336	0.426	0.371
Household income $50,001 to $100,000	0.361	0.322	0.288
Household income $100,001 to $150,000	0.181	0.135	0.156
Household income >$150,000	0.122	0.117	0.185
Attended college	0.690	0.491	0.611

Note: Table 1 reports the sample demographics for the for the US and Canada, with a comparison to the U.S. population. Population data is from the Census Bureau and are for 2019 for age, gender, income, and education.

6.2 Survey Instrument Images

The news story displayed to respondents began with the headline followed by an image of the auto plan. The images displayed to the US and Canadian respondents study are shown below.

Figure 6: Image Displayed to US Respodnents

Figure 7: Image Displayed to Canadian Respodnents

6.3 Government Assistance Questions

To measure support for different types of government assistance programs, respondents were asked the following:

> Types of federal and local government assistance for laid off workers vary. Which of the following do you believe should be available to laid off G.M. workers?

The response options included a list of the following programs, and respondents were asked to select yes or now for each program under the heading "Programs that Should be Available".

> Job training
>
> Education support inc. tuition
>
> Unemployment be benefits
>
> Wage supplements for workers unable to find equivalent wages

The first two options ("job training" and the "education support") were aggregated into a single measure of support for retraining and education programs. The variable was scaled so 0 = neither should exist, 0.5 = one of them should exist, and 1 = both should exist. The last two options ("unemployment benefits" and the "wage supplements") were aggregated into a single measure of support for wage-supplement policies, which were rescaled in the same manner as the first set of measures.

6.4 Effects among US and Canadian Samples

Table 2 tests whether there are significant differences in treatment effects across the US and Canadian samples. We do not find that respondents in the two countries respond significantly differently. The only interaction that approaches traditional levels of significance is for respondents in the US study exposed to the Tariffs Bad treatment for the dependent variable of blaming the government ($p = 0.06$).

6.5 Hetergogenous Effect for those (Not) Following the Auto Story

We interacted out treatment effects with whether respondents self-reported that they had been following the story of the GM factory closings. We find that those following the story generally

Table 2: Testing Heterogeneous Effects for US and Canada

	Blame Gov.	Blame GM	Blame Other
Market Conditions	−0.010	−0.048	0.058*
	(0.034)	(0.037)	(0.033)
Tariffs Bad	0.308***	−0.226***	−0.082***
	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.027)
Tariffs Good	0.164***	−0.074**	−0.090***
	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.027)
Pandemic	−0.027	−0.102***	0.129***
	(0.034)	(0.037)	(0.033)
US Study	0.055	−0.097**	0.042
	(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.034)
Market Conditions * US Study	−0.057	0.007	0.050
	(0.050)	(0.054)	(0.048)
Tariffs Bad * US Study	−0.076*	0.107**	−0.032
	(0.041)	(0.044)	(0.039)
Tariffs Good * US Study	−0.017	0.018	−0.001
	(0.040)	(0.044)	(0.039)
Pandemic* US Study	0.011	−0.033	0.022
	(0.049)	(0.053)	(0.048)
Constant	0.157***	0.552***	0.291***
	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.024)
Observations	5,983	5,983	5,983
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

had smaller treatment effects than those not following the story, but the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant for most interactions. The interactions are statistically for the Pandemic treatment.

Table 3: Hetergogenous Effect for those (Not) Following the Auto Story

	Blame Gov.	Blame GM	Blame Other
Market Conditions	−0.051	−0.028	0.079***
	(0.031)	(0.034)	(0.030)
Follow Story	0.047	0.071*	−0.117***
	(0.036)	(0.039)	(0.035)
Tariffs Bad	0.289***	−0.181***	−0.108***
	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.025)
Tariffs Good	0.180***	−0.068**	−0.112***
	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.025)
Pandemic	−0.019	−0.152***	0.170***
	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.030)
Market Conditions * Follow Story	0.047	−0.044	−0.003
	(0.052)	(0.056)	(0.050)
Tariffs Bad * Follow Story	−0.037	0.016	0.021
	(0.042)	(0.045)	(0.040)
Tariffs Good * Follow Story	−0.059	0.008	0.052
	(0.042)	(0.045)	(0.040)
Pandemic * Follow Story	0.001	0.106*	−0.107**
	(0.051)	(0.055)	(0.049)
Constant	0.165***	0.479***	0.356***
	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.022)
N	5,954	5,954	5,954

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

6.6 Effects on Government Policies with Controls

Figure 8: Effects on Support for Government Assistance Programs

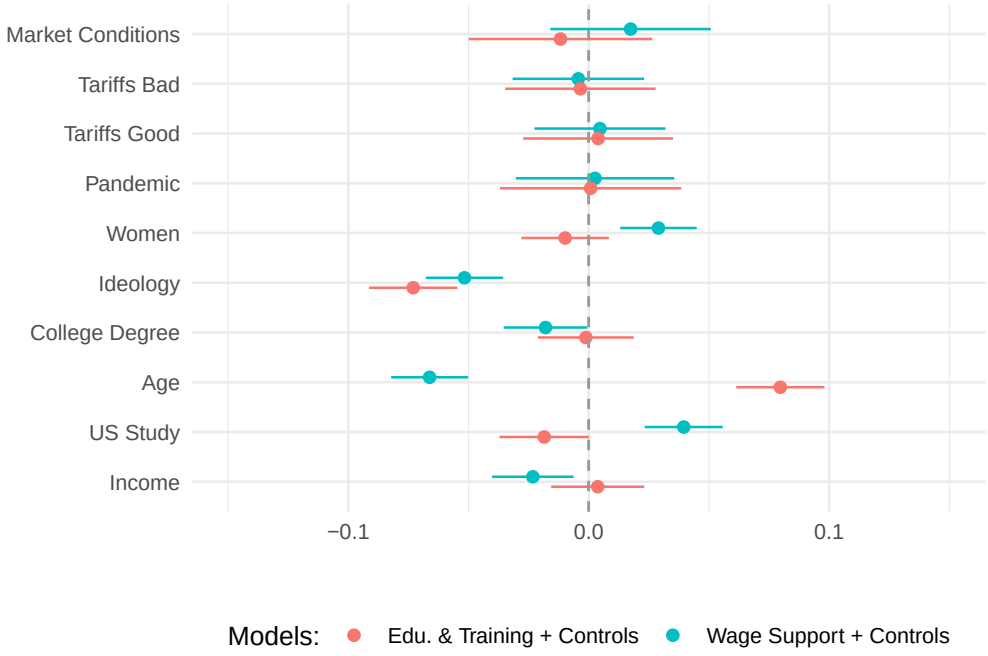

Figure 8 displays the treatment effects on whether respondents believe there should be government programs for education and training for workers who lose their jobs and also whether there should be wage supplement programs for workers. Each dependent variable is scaled from zero to one. The figure contains the average treatment effects and 95 percent confidence intervals from a series of OLS regressions run for each dependent variable.