Selling Iran
Prospect Theory and the Campaign to Frame the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

This paper uses Kahneman and Tversky’s prospect theory to examine the cases made for and against ratifying any agreement made between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5+1 group (consisting of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council; China, France, Russia, UK & US, plus Germany) to limit Iran’s nuclear capabilities. Prospect theory states that outcomes that are considered certain are over-weighted when compared to outcomes that are merely probable. Our argument, following along the lines of earlier analyses of the framing and selling of the Oslo Accords and Good Friday Agreement, is that the Obama Administration’s attempts to persuade both members of Congress and the public to support any such agreement will be more likely to succeed if they focus on the ‘costs of the alternative’ (i.e.: that ratifying an imperfect deal will be a better outcome than having Iran push forward with development of a nuclear weapon). We will use a multi-method analysis to examine narratives in support of and opposed to any proposed agreement as well as how these frames impact public opinion directly and Congressional members both directly and indirectly through public opinion.

Landon E. Hancock, Ph.D.
Center for Applied Conflict Management
Dept. of Political Science
Kent State University
lhancoc2@kent.edu

Lisa Hager, ABD
Dept. of Political Science
Kent State University

Oindrila Roy, Ph.D.
International Relations Program
Cottey College

Michael J. Ensley, Ph.D.
Dept. of Political Science
Kent State University

Prepared for the International Studies Association Conference
March 15th – 19th, 2016
Atlanta, GA

Draft: Not for Citation without Permission.
Introduction

For many years the United States has been concerned that the Islamic Republic of Iran would develop and deploy nuclear weapons. There are many reasons for this fear, stemming back to the souring in relations with the Islamic Revolution as well as concerns about Iran’s status as a regional power in the Middle East and its hostile relations with some of the US’ more steadfast allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia.

For its part the Islamic Republic had always argued that it had no interest in developing nuclear weapons, but that it had every right as a sovereign state to develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes. The US and its allies were skeptical of the first claim and there were some in the US establishment that rejected the second. However, even so, the Obama Administration decided to engage in international negotiations with Iran in an attempt to rein in its nuclear program, halt the enrichment of uranium and plutonium, and curtail its research activities in exchange for the removal of economic sanctions on the country.

The tale of those negotiations would surely be a fascinating example of international negotiation at its finest. However, that is not the goal of this paper, instead we plan to examine the process by which the Obama Administration shepherded the resultant Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) through a skeptical Congress, preventing rejection of the agreement and assuring the adoption of what many see to be President Obama’s signature foreign diplomatic achievement.

We argue in this paper that the Administration and its allies hinged their lobbying strategy upon the tents of Kahneman and Tversky’s prospect theory by arguing not that the agreement was perfect, and not just that it was the best option available in an imperfect world, but that it, in fact, that it was the only option available, other than an unthinkable turn toward a military action that would be sure to be costly and would be less certain of curbing Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Prospect Theory & the JCPOA

What makes a person take a risk and vote to support an agreement with an uncertain future? Kahneman and Tversky’s (1979) prospect theory focuses on the connection between the framing of choice and the decision selected; finding that when the preferred choice was framed as a possible gain, most respondents selected the alternative to minimize risks. However, when the preferred choice was framed as an alternative to a more certain loss, most selected the preferred choice. This behavior is known as
the *certainty effect*, meaning that when faced with gains “people overweight outcomes that are considered certain, relative to outcomes that are merely probable” (Kahneman and Tversky 1979, 265). Because people overvalue losses, the certainty effect means that they will engage in more risk to avoid losses viewed as certain than to secure gains viewed as merely probable (Masters 2004, 705).

Levy’s (1992) application of prospect theory to international relations emphasizes the need to understand the role of reference points; which people tend to use to evaluate gains and losses rather than overall costs or benefits. This means that the shaping of policy can be affected by the framing of reference points in order to promote the preferred policy choice over other alternatives (Maoz 1990, 89). It is this use of decision frames that provides the utility of prospect theory for examining the impact of framing on decision-makers in specific cases. Examples of this kind of work include Bueno de Mesquita et. al. (2001), Farnham (1992), Masters (2004), McInerney (1992), Maoz (1990) and Fanis (2004). Attempts to set the reference point have largely focused on the role of the media in framing or agenda setting, including works by Gamson (Gamson 1989; Gamson and Modigliani 1989), Price (Price and Tewksbury 1997; Price, Tewksbury, and Powers 1997), Shah et. al. (2002) and Wolfsfeld (1997, 2001, 2004). These all focus on some aspect of the media or media use in setting the frame for debate, analysis or decision-making—or setting the reference point from the view of prospect theory. Additionally, while most authors have tended to operationalize decision frames through quantitative data analysis, works by Hancock and his colleagues (Hancock 2011; Hancock and Weiss 2011; Hancock, Weiss, and Duerr 2011) focused on the uses of media and elite narratives to affect voter choice and public support for Northern Ireland’s Good Friday Agreement and the Oslo Accords signed between the State of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. This examination is a blend of these prior works, seeking to explore the narrative frames propagated by the Obama Administration and its allies and the impact of these frames on the decisions of Democratic members of the US Senate to support or oppose the president’s efforts by supporting or opposing the implementation of the JCPOA.

For this analysis of the ‘selling’ of the JCPOA to Congressional Democrats we relied on a wide variety of documentary sources, including statements and speeches by the President and members of his cabinet, press briefings, interviews, committee hearings and testimony. Senatorial and Congressional documents included the aforementioned committee testimonies supplemented by news articles, press releases and floor statements. Both these sources were supplemented by many news articles, editorials and opinion pieces. Collection of these materials began in April 2015 with the announcement of the framework for the final agreement and continued through early spring 2016. The dates of all documentary evidence fell between the announcement of the framework to the final agreement and
the failure of the Senate resolution disapproving of the agreement to get a hearing by September 17, 2015. A small number of documents dating to just after this date were collected to supplement our analysis of the Administration’s success with that of other commentators. Overall we collected 693 documents, including 147 White House or allied documents, 144 Senatorial statements or floor speeches, and 402 documents from news sources. Documents were collected electronically and our case database was managed through the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software to ensure that each piece of data could be forensically traced back to its collection source and that each piece was unique (cf. Yin 2014; Gibbs 2007).

Our analyses will begin by examining administration efforts to persuade Democratic Senators to support the agreement. This will be followed by an analysis of responses by Democrats and Independents who lined up behind the Administration. Our final analysis will trace the use of narrative by both parties to show how arguments that originated in one camp made their way to the other camp, in effect, attempting to show the extent to which arguments based on positive approaches or based on prospect theory played any role in senators’ decisions to support or oppose the agreement.

**Administration Arguments**

From the announcement of the framework for the joint agreement on April 2, 2015 until September 8, when Senate Democrats announced that they had secured enough support to kill the motion of disapproval, the Administration waged an intensive lobbying effort designed to sway senatorial opinion. It sent senior officials to Capitol Hill to testify before both the House and the Senate, provided both classified and unclassified briefings, and enlisted the testimony of many experts and former officials to help make their case to Democrats in both chambers. Former officials and recognized experts made statements, wrote opinion pieces and gave testimony in front of House and Senate committees. Members of both chambers met with nuclear experts, regional experts and even with representatives of allied negotiating governments. President Obama himself gave speeches and interviews, met with members of Congress, both giving information and answering questions and even wrote letters to address the concerns of individual Senators and House members.

While we do not have access to any of the classified briefings given to members of Congress, we have painstakingly analyzed many public documents and found that there were two main approaches in terms of themes used by those who supported the agreement. The first was a more positive approach, which focused on the benefits of the agreement and, to a lesser extent, attempted to counter
opposition arguments that the agreement didn’t address issues related to Iran’s sponsorship of terrorist actions or the release of US citizens from Iranian prisons. The second was an approach modeled on Prospect Theory, which focused on the costs of rejecting the agreement for the United States and for Israel and possibly other nations in the Middle East. We will examine each of these approaches in turn, after completing a process examination of administration and allied efforts to communicate with and persuade Democratic members of Congress.

Lobbying Efforts

In examining the efforts made by the Administration and its allies to promote the agreement and persuade members of Congress to support it, it becomes clear that the Administration was very serious about ensuring support for the agreement and, in the words of many, wasn’t taking anyone’s vote for granted. The New York Times noted that the White House created its own war room to manage lobbying efforts and that:

Cabinet members and other senior administration officials talked directly with more than 200 House members and senators. The president spoke personally to about 100 lawmakers, either individually or in small groups, and aides said he called 30 lawmakers during his August vacation on Martha’s Vineyard (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2015).

A number of other articles noted that the President, his Cabinet and senior staff were actively engaged with Congressional members to ensure that they had every opportunity to ask questions of the Administration and to have those questions answered. One such letter was penned to Congressman Jerrold Nadler on August 19, which reiterated the President’s openness and commitment to addressing Congressional concerns, thanking the Congressman for “taking the time to so thoughtfully and comprehensively engage with me and members of my Administration” and noting that his team remained “fully prepared to continue this conversation in greater depth”.¹

As expected, the chief negotiators for the Administration, Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz and Treasury Secretary Jack Lew all made multiple appearances before House and Senate committees, giving testimony on all aspects of the agreement and answering questions from committee members. In addition, Vice President Biden made a number of calls, visited with House members on the Hill and even made a trip to Florida to help shore up support for the deal. Some members of Congress called these efforts important to their decisions, with Delaware Senator Chris

Coons noting that the Administration was “saying what I need to hear” after long talks with Biden and other Obama officials (Kane 2015).

For their part, supporters of the deal within Congress worked hard to keep the pressure up on their colleagues to announce their support for the agreement and to follow through on their announcements by voting in the President’s favor when the time came. In the House, minority leader Pelosi “orchestrated a daily roll-out of endorsements of the Iran deal from a Capitol war room”, indicating at the time that “there was a plan” to ensure that pressure was kept up (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2015). This plan included the use of “‘Dear colleague’ letters from respected members and assurances from outside experts” in order to help her reach the 146 House members necessary to sustain any presidential veto (Weisman 2015). The White House’s early strategy was to focus on the House, but as Ms. Pelosi was able to corral her members, focus shifted to the Senate (DeBonis 2015). In that chamber, it was the minority whip, Senator Richard Durbin, who proved to be instrumental in helping the Administration sell the deal. An in-depth report by the *Washington Post* noted that Durbin volunteered to spearhead efforts to persuade his colleagues to back the deal and that:

Shortly after the deal was announced, Durbin arranged private briefings for Democrats, separate from the all-senators briefings being delivered by Cabinet officials (DeBonis 2015).

One of these private briefings featured an unusual set of advocates for the agreement when diplomats from the countries that negotiated the Iran deal alongside the US “launched a coordinated lobbying effort on Capitol Hill” where they “briefed 25 Democratic Senators”, an event that the report described as “an unusual session in which diplomats from Britain, Germany and France were aligned with counterparts from Russia and China” in order to persuade Democrats to vote with the Administration (Morello 2015). As will be detailed more below, reports note that this first meeting with Democrats was focused on “what happens if the deal does not pass Congress and a presidential veto gets overridden” but that the ambassadors had “been in regular contact” with legislators, with the British Ambassador indicating that he had meet with at least three dozen members of Congress by himself or in the company of his colleagues (Morello 2015). As we will see in more detail below, several senators called these meetings “crucial” and “as close to a turning point as there was in the Senate, because the ambassadors were clear as day in their assessment that there would be no second negotiation” (DeBonis 2015).

Another avenue used to generate support for the agreement was the drafting of outside experts to speak privately to members of Congress or publicly through testimony, news reports or open letters. It is unclear whether there was an orchestrated campaign by the White House to ask for this kind of outside
support, but what is clear is that a number of outside experts—both supportive of the agreement and in opposition to it—did attempt to influence both public opinion and sway congressional Democrats. While we have little evidence from classified testimony or private conversations, there is ample public evidence available to show these concerted efforts. In early August, 29 well-known scientists wrote a public letter addressed to the President in which they praised the agreement as “innovative and stringent”, and provided a “boost” to the White House following the announcement by Senator Schumer that he would oppose the agreement (Broad 2015). Part of the strength of this letter stemmed from the prominence of many of the scientists who signed the document, with the New York Times noting that “many of them have held what the government calls Q-clearances…equivalent to the military’s top secret security clearance” and that furthermore many of them have served as advisors to “Congress, the White House or federal agencies” for decades (Broad 2015).

Although there were many more efforts to persuade both House and Senate members, the overall pattern is clear. In contrast to efforts to pass the ACA (otherwise known as Obamacare), lobbying efforts for the JCPOA was active and potentially well-coordinated. Among other things, supporters in Congress and in the White House were concerned that they not repeat the mistakes of 2009 by allowing members to head home without extensive efforts to persuade undecideds and to ensure that those who had made commitments to support the agreement kept to them (DeBonis 2015). According to the New York Times, “[o]pponents of the agreement said they could not remember another recent policy battle where the White House and Ms. Pelosi were so driven” (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2015).

**Positive Approaches**

Our thematic analysis of the arguments used in favor of the agreement focused on one set of positive approaches and one set of approaches based upon prospect theory. The themes resting on positive approaches tended to focus first on the benefits of the agreement, leading to the idea that these benefits rested not upon trusting Iran but upon what were described as the most stringent set of verification measures ever devised in a nuclear energy agreement. The follow-up themes from this approach were that because of these features the agreement itself was good and that it provided the best option available to curb Iran’s ability to manufacture nuclear weapons.

---

2 To view the letter, see https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2235612/iranletteraug2015.pdf
Concrete Benefits

The President and his supporters emphasized that the JCPOA met with “every single one of the bottom lines” established when the framework had been agreed to in April. As his remarks on announcing the deal on July 14 indicate “[e]very pathway to a nuclear weapon is cut off”, emphasizing the fact that Iran would not produce or stockpile highly enriched uranium, it would export 98% of its low-enriched uranium, and decommission two-thirds of its existing nuclear centrifuges. In addition, it would be required to fill the core of its main enrichment reactor at Arak with concrete and not build any other heavy water reactors for fifteen years (The White House 2015; JCPOA 2015).

These positive factors were forcefully advocated by the President in this announcement, in his many interviews and by his press secretary. In addition, the President noted that:

...even if everything the critics were saying was true -- that at the end of 10 years, or 12 years, or 15 years, Iran...won’t be at a breakout point that is more dangerous than the breakout point they’re in right now. They won’t be at a breakout point that is shorter than the one that exists today.³

In his opening remarks to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 23, Secretary of State John Kerry argued that the agreement would “make our country and our allies safer...ensuring that Iran’s nuclear activities will remain wholly peaceful” by closing off the four identified pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon, two uranium pathways, one plutonium pathway and one covert pathway.⁴

Alongside this argument about the positives, proponents attempted to negate one argument that had been brought up by opponents, namely that the agreement did not address either Iran’s actions in destabilizing the region as a state-sponsor of terrorist groups or the fact that at the time several US citizens were being held in Iranian prisons. Both of these arguments were first addressed by attempting to focus attention on the fact that the agreement was intended only to address the possibility of Iran manufacturing a nuclear weapon, and not to address other issues. This was first foreshadowed by the President in an April 7 interview with NPR. In response to a question as to why the US wasn’t predicking any final agreement on Iran’s recognition of Israel, the President responded that:

...the notion that we would condition Iran not getting nuclear weapons, in a verifiable deal, on Iran recognizing Israel is really akin to saying that we won’t sign a deal unless the nature of the Iranian regime completely transforms...I want to return to this point. We want Iran not to have nuclear weapons precisely because we can’t bank on the nature of the regime changing (NPR 2015).

The President returned to this theme in another interview with NPR, this one in early August:

³ White House Press Briefing by the President, July 15, 2015.
⁴ At the time of this writing, the Government Publishing Office had not provided a transcript of the hearing. Video available on YouTube at https://youtu.be/p9qa1e57Nns
...let’s first focus on the fact that a central objective of not just my foreign policy but of U.S. foreign policy with Democratic or Republican administrations has been preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon (NPR 2015).

In his opening statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Kerry made this point forcefully that:

This plan was designed to address the nuclear issue. The nuclear issue alone. Because we knew that if we got caught up with all the other issues, we'd never get where we needed to stop the nuclear program...the highest priority of President Obama was to make sure that Iran couldn't get a nuclear weapon.5

He further noted that they didn’t set out to address Iran’s support for terrorism or destabilizing effects in the Middle East and reiterated the Administration’s commitment to pushing back against these, concluding that the agreement was worth support because “[p]ushing back against an Iran with a nuclear weapon is very different from pushing back against an Iran without one. And we're guaranteeing they won't have one.”6

Another main issue of contention brought up by opponents of the agreement was that it did nothing to secure the release of four US nationals who were then being held in Iranian prisons. At several points between the announcement of the framework for the agreement up to the final failure of Republicans in the Senate to stop its implementation, efforts were made to tie approval of the agreement to the release of the four prisoners (Iran nuke deal questioned in US 2015; 4 Americans Caught in Nets of Iran Talks 2015; Kelly 2015; Morello 2015).7 In response to these efforts, the Administration again reiterated that their focus was on preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and, although they were committed to bringing the prisoners home, they did not want to jeopardize the talks by linking them to other factors. In response to a comment by CBS news correspondent Major Garrett asking if the Administration was celebrating while Americans languished in Iranian jails, President Obama, after scolding Garrett, noted:

...if the question is why we did not tie the negotiations to their release, think about the logic that that creates. Suddenly, Iran realizes, you know what, maybe we can get additional concessions out of the Americans by holding these individuals...if we had walked away from the nuclear deal, we’d still be pushing them just as hard to get these folks out. That’s why those issues are not connected.8

---

5 See note 4.
6 See note 4.
7 Also see Senator Rubio’s comments during Secretary Kerry’s testimony, See note 4.
8 See note 3.
**Mistrust and Verification**

Some arguments have been made that the main source of republican opposition to the JCPOA was, in fact, partisan opposition to the President and his policies. However, an analysis of the themes used by Republicans and those Democrats who opposed the agreement showed that the view of Iran as inherently untrustworthy underlay many of the arguments that were made in favor of rejecting the agreement. The second main ‘positive’ approach of the Administration and its supporters was also based on mistrust of Iran, namely the argument that the agreement was not based on trust, but did in fact not require trust because the agreement was based on stringent requirements for verification of Iran’s compliance with its terms.

The term used most often by Administration members, from the President on downward, to describe the JCPOA’s verification measures was ‘unprecedented’, indicating an argument that these measures should be more than sufficient to address concerns of mistrust. During his announcement of the framework agreement in April the President noted that:

> Iran will face strict limitations on its program, and Iran has also agreed to the most robust and intrusive inspections and transparency regime ever negotiated for any nuclear program in history. So this deal is not based on trust, it’s based on unprecedented verification.\(^9\)

When announcing the final agreement on July 14, the President repeated this theme:

> Because of this deal, we will, for the first time, be in a position to verify all of these commitments. That means this deal is not built on trust; it is built on verification.\(^10\)

He expanded on this during his press briefing the next day noting that:

> With this deal, we gain unprecedented, around-the-clock monitoring of Iran’s key nuclear facilities and the most comprehensive and intrusive inspection and verification regime ever negotiated...So this deal is not contingent on Iran changing its behavior.\(^11\)

Press Secretary Josh Earnest reiterated this a few days later in another press briefing, declaring the strength of the agreement by noting that:

> There is unprecedented transparency, unprecedented inspections...I think the skepticism that many Americans have about this agreement...is their concern about trusting Iran...that is a concern that is shared by the President of the United States, which is why the President insisted that whatever agreement was reached include the most intrusive set of inspections that have ever been imposed on a country’s nuclear program...this agreement is not rooted in mutual trust. This is an agreement that [is]

---

\(^9\) Statement by the President on the Framework to Prevent Iran from Obtaining a Nuclear Weapon, April 2, 2015.

\(^10\) Statement by the President on Iran, July 14, 2015.

\(^11\) See note 3.
rooted in the ability of the international community and international experts to verify Iran’s ongoing compliance with the agreement.  

In his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Kerry noted that “[t]he Supreme Leader highly distrusts us, and we highly distrust in return. There’s nothing in this agreement built on trust. It’s all a matter of verification.”

These statements appeared to be both a recognition that negotiating with an adversary is built upon a pragmatic approach to ensuring that the other party implements the agreement as signed. In addition one notes that because almost every mention of mistrust or lack of trust was coupled with what were often described as ‘unprecedented’ measures for verification, this theme may have been one designed to assuage Congressional concerns as well as blunt Republican critiques.

The follow-on to the benefits of the agreement, which would be ensured through ‘unprecedented’ verification based on mistrust, was that the agreement itself was a good one. The statement that the deal was a good one was repeated by the President when the framework was announced on April 2, during a weekly radio address on April 4, in his speech at American University and in the letter he sent to Congressman Nadler, in which he stated that:

I believe the JCPOA, which cuts off every pathway Iran could have to a nuclear weapon and creates the most robust verification regime ever negotiated to monitor a nuclear program, is a very good deal for the United States, for the State of Israel, and for the region as a whole.

In addition to the President, Mr. Earnest, Secretary Kerry and Vice-President Biden all made references to the deal being either a good one or a very good one based on the combination of its concrete benefits and verification measures. However, the fact that the deal itself was viewed as good by the Administration didn’t mean that this was the extent of their argument to members of Congress. Instead of leaving it at that, as was done with the ACA, supporters of the agreement spent a great deal of time and energy reminding Congressional Democrats as well as the general public of what would be lost should either house vote to reject the deal or fail to uphold the President’s veto of such a rejection.

Prospect Theory Approaches

In examining the arguments made in favor of the agreement, a good many of them stemmed from an approach based on the tenets of prospect theory. All were designed to increase the certainty of what might occur if Congress voted to reject the JCPOA. In our analysis we found that there were three broad
categories that these arguments tended to fall underneath. The first of these was a basic category that cautioned about the costs of voting to reject the agreement. The second was focused on a warning that one specific cost of voting against the agreement would be the failure of international sanctions due to the unwillingness of our major international allies in this effort to continue to sanction Iran when the US rejected the agreement. The third was a focused argument, sometimes following the second, that promoted the idea that there was either no alternative to the agreement or that the only alternative to the agreement was military action; in essence an unacceptable option as long as diplomacy had not been exhausted. This section will examine each in turn before we address how the Administration’s lobbying efforts impacted the decisions of Senate Democrats.

Costs of the Alternative

One way of viewing the costs of the alternative is to show how supporters of the agreement first focused our attention on specific costs that the US would face in the international diplomatic realm. This was evident from the manner in which the House organized to support the agreement. As reported in the *New York Times*, rejecting the deal could injure US diplomatic leadership:

“Our ability to build coalitions, to lead, to have credibility when we enter into a negotiation was really on the line,” said Representative Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat who organized the Iran deal strategy with Ms. Pelosi, with whom she consulted almost daily while lawmakers were scattered in their districts around the country. “To walk away now would diminish our ability to lead on future issues” (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2015).

Former ambassador Nicholas Burns, in his prepared testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also noted the potential damage to US credibility from a rejection of the treaty:

The most common criticism of the nuclear deal is that the U.S. should have walked away from the talks during the last year, sanctioned Iran further and attempted to negotiate a better and stronger agreement. But, this alternative would leave the U.S. weaker, rather than stronger, in confronting Iran’s nuclear program. If the U.S. left the negotiations unilaterally, I don’t believe it is likely that Russia and China and even the European allies and other key international economic powers would follow us...there is no doubt in my mind that it would leave the U.S. substantially weakened and worse off (Burns 2015, 10-11).

Burns concluded his testimony noting that “a vote of disapproval would weaken the effectiveness and credibility of the United States in the Middle East and around the world” (Burns 2015, 19).

The President himself made this point when he spoke to the press on July 15, noting that if the agreement was rejected, it would have “lost credibility in the eyes of the world”, having “effectively
united Iran and divided ourselves from our allies.” In his speech at American University, the President forcefully stated that:

If Congress kills this deal, we will lose more than just constraints on Iran’s nuclear program, or the sanctions we have painstakingly built. We will have lost something more precious: America’s credibility as a leader of diplomacy; America’s credibility as the anchor of the international system (Obama 2015).

Secretary Kerry also pressed this theme of a loss of US prestige in a number of venues. On the CBS television program *Face the Nation* he noted that:

...if we don't do this deal, if Congress says no to this deal, then there will be no restraints on Iran, there will be no sanctions left. Our friends in this effort will desert us (CBS News 2015).

In his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Kerry noted that “if we say no...they won’t know who to deal with, we certainly aren’t going to be dealt with, a lot of other people won’t know who to deal with.” In focusing on how rejection of the agreement would jeopardize US leadership with respect to international agreements, he noted that:

We would be turning away from the NPT. That's part of what this vote would be. Basically saying we don't trust the NPT, we don't like the NPT, there's no way Iran could come under the NPT, we're not going to do this.

A second aspect of the Costs of the Alternative theme was the focus on economic costs of walking away from the JCPOA. This theme was ancillary to the argument that the other signatories would not support the US in keeping international sanctions on Iran—which will be covered below—requiring the US to levy sanctions against our trading partners in order to try to force them to re-impose sanctions on Iran. At least one news report speculated that walking away from the deal could affect the US economy and the strength of the dollar, quoting Secretary Kerry at a Reuters news event as warning that “If we turn around and nix the deal and then tell them, ‘You’re going to have to obey our rules and sanctions anyway,’ that is a recipe, very quickly...for the American dollar to cease to be the reserve currency of the world” (Drezner 2015).

The President had premiered this argument in his American University speech, noting that:

We cannot dictate the foreign, economic and energy policies of every major power in the world. In order to even try to do that, we would have to sanction, for example, some of the world’s largest banks. We’d have to cut off countries like China from the American financial system. And since they happen to be

---

15 See note 3.
16 The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The US is one of the original members. As of spring 2016, 190 states are signatories.
17 See note 4.
major purchasers of our debt, such actions could trigger severe disruptions in our own economy, and, by way, raise questions internationally about the dollar’s role as the world’s reserve currency (Obama 2015).

Washington Post columnist Daniel Drezner analyzed this argument. And while he agreed with many conservatives that both the President and Kerry had engaged in some hyperbole, he backed them up in the sense that both China and Russia had been interested in the idea of replacing the dollar as the prime international reserve currency, noting that:

If the United States were to go back on an agreement viewed as addressing the Iran problem, that would be a game-changer in how key allies viewed American financial statecraft. It wouldn’t threaten or end the dollar’s status anytime soon, for all the reasons listed above. But I guarantee you that it would make European allies think long and hard about long-term options to displacing the dollar (Drezner 2015).

The third aspect of the Costs of the Alternative theme was a focus on the then current short break-out time for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. Proponents of the agreement argued that without the agreement, this breakout time would continue to shorten and that the US would then lack leverage to address this issue. As Secretary Kerry noted in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

Remember that, two years ago, when our negotiations began, we faced an Iran that was enriching uranium up to 20 percent at a facility built in secret and buried in a mountain, was rapidly stockpiling enriched uranium, had installed nearly 20,000 nuclear centrifuges, and was building a heavy water reactor that could produce weapons-grade plutonium at a rate of one to two bombs per year. Experts tabbed Iran’s so-called breakout time – the interval required for it to have enough fissile material for a bomb – at two to three months. This is the reality we would return to if this deal is rejected – except that the diplomatic support we have been steadily accumulating in recent years would disappear overnight (Kerry 2015, 2).

Kerry continued:

If we walk away from what was agreed in Vienna, we will be walking away from every one of the restrictions we have negotiated, and giving Iran the green light to double the pace of its uranium enrichment, proceed full speed ahead with a heavy water reactor, install new and more efficient centrifuges...And to those who are thinking about opposing the deal because of what might happen in year 15 or 16 – remember that, if we walk away, year 15 starts tomorrow – and without any of the long-term verification or transparency safeguards that we have put in place to ensure that we prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon (Kerry 2015, 2, 3).

Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew concurred, writing in his prepared testimony that “walking away from this deal and seeing to extend sanctions would leave the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism with a short and decreasing nuclear breakout time” (Lew 2015).
In an exchange with Senator Marco Rubio, Secretary Kerry emphasized how the alternative to the agreement was a lack of reduction in Iranian nuclear capabilities, arguing that:

The way we lose is by rejecting the deal. Because then you have no restraints. You have no sanctions. You have no insight. You have no inspectors. You have no diminution of their centrifuges. You have no reduction of their stockpile.\textsuperscript{18}

The President weighed in on this theme more than once. In particular during his July 15 press conference he made a number of comparisons to the state of affairs with the deal in place and without it. With respect to Iran’s nuclear capabilities, he argued that:

With this deal, we gain unprecedented, around-the-clock monitoring of Iran’s key nuclear facilities and the most comprehensive and intrusive inspection and verification regime ever negotiated. Without a deal, those inspections go away, and we lose the ability to closely monitor Iran’s program and detect any covert nuclear weapons program.\textsuperscript{19}

The President focused this argument more forcefully in his speech at American University, stating that:

Without this deal, Iran will be in a position -- however tough our rhetoric may be -- to steadily advance its capabilities. Its breakout time, which is already fairly small, could shrink to near zero (Obama 2015).

Administration supporters also used this theme to make an argument that the agreement was a good one and worth supporting. In their open letter to the President, a group of prominent nuclear scientists noted that:

A key result of these restrictions is that it would take Iran many months to enrich uranium for a weapon. We contrast this with the situation before the interim agreement was negotiated in Lausanne: at that time Iran had accumulated enough 20 percent enriched uranium that the required additional enrichment time for weapons use was only a few weeks.\textsuperscript{20}

Overall these three narrative components present a clear articulation of potential costs for choosing to reject the JCPOA. Each is presented by its proponents as being almost certain, and were often forcefully expressed by administration members or supporters. However, there were two sub-themes that may have proven to be more powerful in persuading Democratic Senators to support the agreement. These themes were focused on the failure of sanctions that would ‘inevitably’ follow from the rejection of the agreement, leading then to military action being the only option on the table should Iran choose to develop a nuclear weapon. This narrative approach culminated in the theme that there was no alternative to the JCPOA other than war. Each of these two themes—failure of sanctions and no

\textsuperscript{18} See note 4
\textsuperscript{19} See note 3
\textsuperscript{20} See note 2
alternative—will be explored below; followed by an analysis of their impact upon senatorial decision-making and an evaluation of the use of prospect theory to sell the JCPOA.

Failure of Sanctions

One of the more powerful arguments made by the Administration and its supporters in favor of the JCPOA was that if Congress rejected the deal, the US allies that had supported using economic sanctions to bring Iran to the negotiating table would not go along with any impetus to re-impose those sanctions in order to force a ‘better deal.’ These allies, instead, would allow the sanctions to fail and, because Iran and the US had little in the way of direct trade, the power of US-only sanctions would be insufficient to bring Iran back to the table.

In the President’s press briefing on July 15, he made several remarks about the rejection of the agreement leading to the failure of international sanctions. In rebutting the argument that the removal of sanctions envisioned by the agreement would lead to a terrorist windfall, the President noted that:

That argument is also premised on the notion that if there is no deal, if Congress votes down this deal, that we’re able to keep sanctions in place with the same vigor and effectiveness as we have right now. And that, I can promise you, is not true. That is absolutely not true…Without a deal, the international sanctions regime will unravel, with little ability to re-impose them.  

Continuing on this vein, the President argued that:

If they saw us walking away, or more specifically, if they saw the U.S. Congress effectively vetoing the judgment of 99 percent of the world community that this is a deal that resolves the Iranian weapons program -- nuclear weapons program in an equitable way, the sanctions system unravels. And so we could still maintain some of our unilateral sanctions, but it would be far less effective -- as it was before we were able to put together these multilateral sanctions.  

Press Secretary Josh Earnest echoed these comments in a briefing two days later on July 17, noting that rejection of the agreement:

...would have some very practical consequences...our sanctions regime against Iran succeeded in compelling them to the negotiating table is because it had a devastating impact on their economy...The key to the success of this latest round of sanctions has been the aggressive enforcement of countries around the world, including countries that aren’t even a party to this particular agreement -- countries like India, Japan, South Korea, and others that previously relied heavily on the importation of Iranian oil --

---

21 See note 3
22 See note 3
and by scaling back their oil purchases that had a negative impact on Iran’s economy but also had a negative impact on the domestic economy of those individual countries.\footnote{Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, July 17, 2015.}

Concluding:

So the point is that the sanctions regime would collapse...what that means is that the international leverage that we have previously used to reach this agreement would vanish.\footnote{See note 23}

During his July 30 press briefing Mr. Earnest again hammered home the point that if the agreement was rejected, international sanctions were sure to fail, taking the time to again explain why:

...since the deal has been announced a couple weeks ago now, 86 countries have issued public statements in support of the agreement... Among these 86 countries who have issued public support for the agreement include...the six countries that are currently allowed to import Iranian oil at restricted lower levels...a lot of countries, who, when these sanctions were initially announced, expressed some reservations about whether or not they’d be able or willing to go along with them. And that's because their economies relied significantly on the ability to import Iranian oil...It's hard to imagine that those six countries are going to be willing to re-impose sanctions unilaterally just because the Congress isn’t satisfied with the agreement.\footnote{Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, July 30, 2015.}

He then re-articulated a main administration theme, that rejection of the deal would only benefit Iran, as they would certainly receive sanctions relief whether or not the US supported the agreement:

We know that the sanctions regime will crumble. International unity will crumble. Iran will get all kinds of sanctions relief because the sanctions will no longer be enforced. [resulting in] Iran getting billions in sanctions relief even as they pursue a nuclear weapons program, and reduce our ability to get insight into exactly what they’re doing.\footnote{See note 25}

In addition, as alluded to above, the decision by our allies to remove sanctions in the face of US rejection of the JCPOA might lead to instances where the US is forced to implement economic sanctions against these allies for trading with Iran. In his speech at American University, the President alluded to this possibility, noting that:

...our closest allies in Europe, or in Asia -- much less China or Russia -- certainly are not going to agree to enforce existing sanctions for another 5, 10, 15 years according to the dictates of the U.S. Congress...those who say we can just walk away from this deal and maintain sanctions are selling a fantasy...Congress’s rejection would almost certainly result in multilateral sanctions unraveling. If, as has also been suggested, we tried to maintain unilateral sanctions, beefen them up, we would be standing alone...In order to even try to do that, we would have to sanction, for example, some of the world’s largest banks (Obama 2015).
Leading back to the argument made above about the impact on the US economy:

We’d have to cut off countries like China from the American financial system. And since they happen to be major purchasers of or our debt, such actions could trigger severe disruptions in our own economy and, by the way, raise questions internationally about the dollar’s role as the world’s reserve currency (Obama 2015).

The argument that other negotiating partners of the JCPOA—and potentially other countries—would not re-impose sanctions if Congress rejected the deal was, perhaps, made most forcefully by ambassadors of those states who traveled to Washington and briefed members as to their country’s intentions:

Just before the Senate left town for its August break, a dozen or so undecided Democrats met in the Capitol with senior diplomats from Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia who delivered a blunt, joint message: Their nuclear agreement with Iran was the best they could expect. The five world powers had no intention of returning to the negotiating table (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2015).

The New York Times also reported that even if one were to dismiss the President’s warning that the only alternative to the agreement was war with Iran, it was tougher to dismiss “predictions that blocking the agreement that Mr. Obama reached with Britain, China, France, Germany, Iran and Russia would damage the United States’ leadership and crumble the international consensus that makes sanctions possible” (Harwood 2015). In the article a quote by George W. Bush’s Treasury Secretary, Henry Paulson reiterates this position, noting that “It’s totally unrealistic to believe that if we backed out of this deal that the multilateral sanctions would stay in place” (Harwood 2015).

Finally, the theme of rejection leading to the failure of international sanctions often led to arguments that the outcome of such a path would almost inevitably be military action by the US against Iran, leading to even greater costs for the US and even more destabilization for the region.

No Alternative (Other than War)

The flow of thematic statements from the inevitable failure of sanctions to war, lead to the inescapable conclusion that there is no credible alternative to the JCPOA. The first time that the President mentioned war as a potential alternative was on April 2, when he announced the framework that would lead to the actual agreement in July. In this statement he challenged the idea that there was a better alternative:

So when you hear the inevitable critics of the deal sound off, ask them a simple question: Do you really think that this verifiable deal, if fully implemented, backed by the world’s major powers, is a worse option than the risk of another war in the Middle East? Is it worse than doing what we’ve done for almost two
decades, with Iran moving forward with its nuclear program and without robust inspections? I think the answer will be clear (The White House 2015).

Shortly thereafter in a videotaped interview with New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, the President spoke directly to the Israeli people on the issue, stating that:

What I would say to the Israeli people is, however, that there is no formula, there is no option, to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, that will be more effective than the diplomatic initiative and framework that we've put forward. And that's demonstrable (Friedman 2015). 27

In his statement announcing the deal on July 15, the President was even clearer in his view that rejection of the agreement would likely lead to war with Iran:

I strongly believe that our national security interest now depends upon preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon -- which means that without a diplomatic resolution, either I or a future U.S. President would face a decision about whether or not to allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon or whether to use our military to stop it. Put simply, no deal means a greater chance of more war in the Middle East (The White House 2015).

The next day, during his press briefing, the President focused a great deal of time and energy on the idea that there was no alternative to the JPCOA. Most often he did this by asking what alternative opponents of the deal had proposed, noting:

And for all the objections of Prime Minister Netanyahu, or, for that matter, some of the Republican leadership that's already spoken, none of them have presented to me, or the American people, a better alternative. 28

From this beginning he followed up with “[w]hat I haven’t heard is, what is your preferred alternative”, and if you are arguing that the deal is bad “then you should have some alternative to present. And I haven’t heard that”, finally hammering home by stating that:

And if the alternative is that we should bring Iran to heel through military force, then those critics should say so. And that will be an honest debate. 29

Secretary Kerry echoed these sentiments on Face the Nation on July 19, stating that:

...if Congress says no to this deal, then there will be no restraints on Iran, there will be no sanctions left. Our friends in this effort will desert us. We will be viewed as having killed the opportunity to stop them from having a weapons. They will begin to enrich again, and the greater likelihood is what the president said the other day; you will have a war (CBS News 2015).

---

27 This quote, and others from this interview, was transcribed by the authors from the videotaped interview available on the New York Times website at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html

28 See note 3

29 See note 3
Kerry shifted the focus from the threat of war to the idea that there was no other viable alternative during his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 23, arguing that:

Back ing away from this deal to escalate the economic pressure and try to obtain a broader capitulation from Iran would be a mistake. Even if one believed that extending sanctions pressure was a better course than resolving the threat of Iran’s nuclear program, that choice is not available.

And in response to Senator Rubio’s comments that the next president could cancel the deal, Kerry noted that he had “listened to a long list of your objections here about [the deal], but there’s no alternative that you or anybody else has proposed to it.”

The President returned to this theme in his speech at American University, starting by noting that none of the arguments against the agreement “stand up to scrutiny” and comparing the arguments against the agreement to those in favor of the Iraq war:

Over the last couple weeks, I have repeatedly challenged anyone opposed to this deal to put forward a better, plausible alternative. I have yet to hear one. What I’ve heard instead are the same types of arguments that we heard in the run-up to the Iraq War (Obama 2015).

Following up with:

I can tell you that alternatives to military action will have been exhausted once we reject a hard-won diplomatic solution that the world almost unanimously supports. So let’s not mince words. The choice we face is ultimately between diplomacy or some form of war -- maybe not tomorrow, maybe not three months from now, but soon (Obama 2015).

This theme was again emphasized during an interview with NPR correspondent Steve Inskeep on August 10, where the President took the opportunity to note that he had:

...listened to the critics...and that is that they will put forward arguments that, you know, after a few minutes, can be shown as illogical or based on the wrong facts, and then you ask them, "All right, what's your alternative?" and there's a deafening silence.

Alluding to the view that the only alternative to the agreement was war, the President continued:

If you just say, "We don't think you should deal with Iran," then that at least has a logic to it. If you're saying, though, that this is an issue that can't be resolved diplomatically and you share my view that Iran can't get a nuclear weapon, then you really are narrowing your choices at that point (NPR 2015).

Members of the Administration were not the only ones who used this theme in their attempts to persuade House and Senate Democrats to support the deal. In an open letter to Congress, 36 retired generals and admirals noted that “if the deal is rejected by America, the Iranians could have a nuclear

30 See note 4
weapon within a year. The choice is that stark.” In addition, as reported in the *Washington Post*, ambassadors from the five negotiating partners with the US visited the Senate and spent their time focusing on the consequences of Congressional rejection of the deal, with British Ambassador Peter Westmacott reporting that he had met with dozens of members of Congress, telling them that:

> We believe that it is a good, verifiable deal and the best way of stopping Iran from getting nuclear weapons. All the alternatives are worse (Morello 2015).

In addition, seven former diplomats sent letters to leaders of Congress praising the agreement and urging them to support the deal. In the letter they were reported to have said that:

> "We believe that without this agreement, however, the risks will be much higher for the United States and Israel," the letter said. "We see no fatal flaws that should call for the rejection of this agreement and have not heard any viable alternatives from those who oppose the implementation" of the deal (Associated Press 2015).

So overall what we can see here is a two-pronged strategy of focusing attention on both the concrete benefits and elements of verification and a strong and consistent message from multiple quarters that even if the agreement is less than perfect and less than certain, what was certain was that there were no alternatives, other than likely war, should Congress chose to reject the agreement. There are two main questions one can ask about this particular strategy. The first is whether or not this strategy was deliberate, and we think that given the evidence we have collected it is clearly so. The fact that all of the point people, from the President on downwards, focused on both the concrete deliverables and framed the alternative as not only much worse, but also as certain, it would be disingenuous to suggest that all of these actors came to the same conclusion independently. The second question is what impact these themes had upon the decisions of Democratic Senators to either support or oppose the agreement, and for that we will next turn to our analysis of their public statements.

**Senatorial Responses**

In order to test the effectiveness of different administration arguments in support of the JCPOA, we collected statements from all of the senators who supported the agreement, including 40 Democratic Senators and the two Independent Senators that caucus with the Democrats. We focus our analysis on the two main arguments covered above, those that accentuate the positives and those that followed prospect theory’s focus on the costs of rejecting the agreement. While we would expect that many

---

senators would have elements of both in their explanations of why they chose to support, or oppose, the JCPOA, we will try to divine which was most relevant for their decision based on the narrative explanations themselves, and upon the relative weight given to each narrative in their statements.

**Accentuating the Positive**

In examining senatorial narratives that responded to the positive themes of the Administration this section will examine narratives by senator rather than by splitting out the narrative of concrete benefits from mistrust and verification. As we noted in our analysis, just as the Administration tended to mention both narratives together or in close proximity to one another, so too did senators who cited these themes as being important to making their decisions. One main difference between the Administration’s approach and that of many senatorial supporters was that when senators described the deal as the best option, they tended to also describe it as imperfect rather than as a good deal, which is how the President and members of his administration tended to describe it. For example, when describing the benefits of the agreement, Senator Booker stated that:

> ...this deal, while falling short of permanently eliminating Iran’s pathways to a nuclear weapon, succeeds in either delaying it or giving us the credible ability to detect significant cheating on their part and respond accordingly. It establishes historically unprecedented mechanisms to block Iran’s near-term pathway to a nuclear weapon (Booker 2015).

He continues, focusing on the theme of mistrust and verification:

> The deal is also beneficial in that it will give the United States and our allies unprecedented access to, and information about, Iran’s nuclear activities and facilities. Consequently, it will give us intelligence advantages that are extremely valuable in the ongoing effort to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon as restrictions in this deal weaken over time.

> Further, this deal will maintain unified international pressure on Iran to comply with the terms of the deal or face the re-imposition of sanctions— which can be triggered unilaterally by the United States—or coordinated military action by the United States, Israel and other allies (Booker 2015).

> Senator Boxer’s statement listed a number of what she described as “the most important facts about this nuclear deal” which included mention of cutting of Iran’s ability to make a bomb “by reducing Iran’s stockpile of enriched uranium by 98 percent...by dismantling Iran’s Arak reactor core” (Boxer 2015). She also mentioned in the same list, the fact that the agreement included “the most intrusive inspections regime ever negotiated”, concluding that: “If Iran cheats, the United States and our allies will be able to snap back multi-lateral sanctions” (Boxer 2015).
Senator Casey also provided a list of positive elements, much like the list that appeared on a statement released by the White House on July 14 to accompany the announcement of the final agreement. Senator Casey’s list included elements similar to Senator Boxer’s focusing on the concrete benefits of the reduction in Iranian nuclear capabilities alongside the effects of intrusive IAEA inspections. In describing his decision to support the agreement, Senator Casey referenced both positive themes and those associated with prospect theory, declaring:

This agreement will substantially constrain the Iranian nuclear program for its duration, and compared with all realistic alternatives, it is the best option available to us at this time (Casey 2015).

His decision to support the agreement was based on his belief that:

...it is the best option available to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. It places strict limitations on Iran’s nuclear program, requires robust monitoring and verification measures, and grants relief only from nuclear sanctions in exchange for verified actions on Iran’s part (Casey 2015).

But he also reiterated the mistrust and verification themes of the Administration, stating that “[w]e need not, and indeed should not, trust the Iranian regime” and should be prepared for the possibility of Iranian violations.

Senator Coons’ explanation of the benefits of the agreement focused solely on the intrusiveness and invasiveness of the monitoring and inspection program, stating that he was:

...convinced of the real benefits of greater access to Iran’s nuclear sites and infrastructure that comes from fully implementing the JCPOA... Should the Iranians violate the agreement and move forward with nuclear weapons development, we are far more likely to detect it and be in a position to take decisive action with this agreement than without it (WBOC 2015).

It is noteworthy that even in his description of the benefits of the agreement, Senator Coons makes mention of the alternative in arguing that it would be far easier to detect Iranian nuclear development with the agreement than without it.

Several other senators, including Heinrich, Heitkamp, Peters, Warner, and Wyden all made references to the concrete benefits of the agreement, largely focusing on the reductions in uranium stockpiles, but also mentioning the reduction in operating centrifuges and increased verification through intrusive international inspections. Throughout this, some senators were more detailed and explicit while others mentioned these details in passing. Few, however, mentioned the inspections as being ‘unprecedented’ and many, while also praising these elements of the agreement, mentioned that they thought the agreement was less than perfect. In addition, our analysis showed that of the 42 senators that we examined, only 11 made statements referring to the concrete benefits of the agreement.
However, 17 senators made reference to the verification measures that would be imposed by the agreement.

One of those who mentioned the verification efforts without also mentioning the benefits of the deal was Senator Blumenthal, who noted that:

The agreement imposes an intrusive inspection and surveillance regime – relying on international verification by the IAEA. Future U.S. Presidents have the authority – immediately and through executive order -- to re-impose our sanctions if Iranian actions are inconsistent with our national security interests (Blumenthal 2015).

Senator Booker, who did mention the benefits of the agreement, also specifically mentioned that the agreement established:

...the most robust monitoring and inspections regime ever negotiated, covering Iran’s entire nuclear supply chain for 15 years. Some of the most intrusive monitoring, including of its uranium mines and mills and centrifuge production facilities, will last well beyond that period (Booker 2015).

Senator Casey likewise emphasized the role of the IAEA in conducting rigorous inspections of Iran’s nuclear energy program, noting in great detail the kinds of inspections and the duration of them. In addition he referred both to a letter he received from the State Department and to the letter sent by 36 retired generals and admirals, directly quoting from the latter. In summing up his support he stated that:

After discussions with Administration and outside experts, I believe that between the IAEA’s inspections and our intelligence community’s oversight, the necessary verification measures are in place to ensure we can detect any illicit nuclear activity that Iran might attempt to undertake (Casey 2015).

Following with a statement that the US “need not, and should not, trust the Iranian regime” (Casey 2015).

Several other senators combined this theme of mistrust and verification in their statements, most notably Senator Murray, who stated that:

Overall, the verification and inspections tools we will have are very strong and transparent...inspectors will have full access to the entire lifecycle of uranium in Iran, from the mines, to the centrifuges, to disposal of waste. [and] My support for this deal isn’t based on the hope that it will cause Iran to become more moderate, more trustworthy, or friendlier toward the United States and Israel...I support this deal not because I trust Iran, but because I don’t trust Iran (Murray 2015).

Senator Warren noted that:

I do not trust the Iranian regime, which continues to terrorize its neighbors and to undermine international peace and stability, and this deal does not end our significant disputes with Iran. [but] This agreement presents a comprehensive set of restrictions to block Iran's path to a nuclear bomb. It allows
us continuous access to key facilities and imposes stringent verification measures to ensure that Iran’s entire fuel cycle is peaceful (Warren 2015).

The other senators who made statements referring to the monitoring and verification themes and/or the mistrust theme in their statements were senators Brown, Cantwell, Carper, Heitkamp, Nelson, Peters, Schatz, Stabenow, Udall, Warner, and Wyden. Overall we can see that this theme held more power or more persuasion for many senators than did the benefits of the agreement by themselves. In one sense we could argue that this theme of mistrust and verification acts as a bridge between the positive themes associated with the benefits of the agreement and the negative themes associated with focusing on the costs of failing to support the agreement. However, another way to examine this theme is the fact that its power lays in helping to create more certainty about the benefits themselves through the verification process.

As with our analysis of the lobbying efforts of supporters of the agreement, the themes of benefits and mistrust and verification lead to the conclusion that the agreement is the best option for curbing Iran’s nuclear weapons capabilities. However, unlike the Administration, whose intermediary step was to describe the agreement as some form of ‘good deal’, most senators who took the time to describe the intermediary step in their thinking described the deal as less than perfect, leading us to our main examination of the narratives associated with prospect theory and the costs of the alternative.

**Prospecting the Negative**

As we saw above there were several themes used by proponents of the agreement that drew upon the tenets of prospect theory. These included the idea of focusing on the costs of the alternatives or upon the fact that opponents of the agreement did not appear to have specific alternatives that could address Iran’s supposed nuclear ambitions. In addition we found two specific sub-themes, one focusing on framing the failure of international sanctions as a certain outcome of a rejection of the agreement, leading to the idea that a military response would be the only possible option left. This led directly to the second sub-theme, which was that, short of war, there was no alternative to the JCPOA. In addition, a less frequently used parallel theme was the ‘train leaving the station theme’ which emphasized the need for the Senate to support the agreement because the rest of the international community was supporting it and if the US didn’t want to get left behind, it would need to support the agreement as well.

In comparison to the relatively few senators who made detailed comments about the benefits of the agreement or the few more who made more detailed reference to the impact of the verification
procedures, a great many senators made reference to at least one of the three themes associated with the tenets of prospect theory. Of the 42 senators who pledged to support the agreement, 39 of them made references to one of the three themes; the costs of the alternative, the inevitable failure of international sanctions or the sense that there was no alternative to the JCPOA. While we lack the space to detail each of the senatorial statements referencing the tenets of prospect theory, we will illustrate some of the more notable examples from each of the three themes, beginning with the overarching theme focused on the costs of the alternative.

Above we noted that this overarching theme tended to focus on one of three costs; diplomatic costs to US prestige, economic costs that could (eventually) result in the displacement of the dollar as a world reserve currency, and military costs due to the inability to check Iranian nuclear ambitions. Here we will examine all three of these, but it is worth noting that some senators responded to these costs individually and some referred to them together. For instance, Senator Casey hit upon several of these costs and included references to the failure of sanctions and to the view that the only alternative to the JCPOA was another US war in the Middle East in his statement where he repeated Secretary Kerry’s admonition that:

...If we walk away, we walk away alone. The world’s leading powers worked together effectively because of U.S. leadership. To turn our back on this accomplishment would be an abdication of the United States’ unique role and responsibility, incurring justified dismay among our allies and friends. We would lose all leverage over Iran’s nuclear activities. The international sanctions regime would dissolve. And no member of Congress should be under the illusion that another U.S. invasion of the Middle East would be helpful (Casey 2015).

A part of Senator Murphy’s response focused on the diplomatic impact of rejecting the agreement, arguing that:

...the United States would just become an international pariah. With all of our partners at the negotiating table, almost every nation around the world supporting this agreement, what would it say if the United States Congress walked away? Our power as a nation would be irreparably damaged (Murphy 2015).

Senator Peters concurred, stating:

I believe a rejection of this agreement will damage the international credibility of the United States, and that attempting to go it alone and implement unilateral sanctions without a coalition of nations will only weaken our standing (Peters 2015).

There appeared to be less support for the notion that rejecting the JCPOA would have an impact upon US financial stability. Most of the financial concerns had to do with the impact of losing international support for Iranian sanctions, but Senator Casey made a detailed case of what would
happen if rejection of the agreement led to the US being forced to sanction its allies or others who would choose to rescind their sanctions against Iran. Senator Casey noted that it would be a disaster to impose secondary sanctions on these states:

The countries whose cooperation we need — including those in the European Union, China, Japan, India and South Korea, as well as the companies and banks that handle their oil purchases and hold foreign reserves — are among the largest economies in the world. If we were to cut them off from the American dollar and our financial system, we would set off extensive financial hemorrhaging, not just in our partner countries but in the United States as well (Casey 2015).

Senator Booker also spoke to this issue, arguing that pursuing unilateral sanctions would “lead us to economic conflict with other nations...risking damage to our own economy” and would only offer “a fraction of the benefit” of international sanctions “at great cost to the American economy and our global influence” (Booker 2015).

Many more senators expressed concerns that there would be military costs to rejection of the agreement, mostly focused on the costs to our ability to rein in Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Again, Senator Casey was one of those who referenced this possibility when he indicated that:

...without the JCPOA in place, Moniz indicates that “the current Iranian Arak reactor design will be implemented, producing significant amounts of plutonium” and “plutonium-bearing irradiated fuel will remain in Iran and could be reprocessed to extract plutonium for weapons” (Casey 2015).

Senator Gilibrand concurred, stating that rejecting the agreement without international support would “only move us closer to military confrontation” (Gilibrand 2015). Senator Kaine referenced an interview with former Vice President Cheney, who called for the same strategy as that used by the Bush Administration. Kaine noted that:

Under that strategy, the Iranian nuclear program rocketed ahead, centrifuges, enriched uranium growing by the day... So if we go back to the preferred doctrine of no diplomacy, sanctions and military threat, we're likely to get what we just got before, and that's an acceleration of the Iranian nuclear program, and we should not go back down that path (Kaine 2015).

Senators Heitkamp, Wyden and Reed, among others, all concurred, arguing that rejection of the agreement would only hasten Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon, which would most likely lead to war.

The overarching set of themes under the costs of the alternative were used by 26 senators in their statements of support for the agreement. However, as powerful as the overall cost of the alternative arguments were, it could be argued that focus on the failure of sanctions sub-theme was even more powerful given that it was more narrowly focused on one economic consequence of rejection rather
than an amalgamation of several potential consequences. Narratives using the failure of sanctions as a theme for explaining support for the agreement were used by 19 senators, many of whom referenced their meeting with ambassadors from the five negotiating partners in the agreement. One of these narratives used the phrase, ‘walk away alone’ that was used by Senator Kerry during his testimony on Capitol Hill and by Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor to Presidents Ford and George H. W. Bush. Senator Casey directly referenced this in his statement:

If we walk away, we walk away alone. The world’s leading powers worked together effectively because of U.S. leadership. To turn our back on this accomplishment would be an abdication of the United States’ unique role and responsibility, incurring justified dismay among our allies and friends (Casey 2015).

Senator King paraphrased Kerry’s statement, noting that:

If we walk away from this deal, we are doing so alone. We had an extraordinary meeting before the recess with ambassadors from the P-5 + 1 countries. They made it clear that they had accepted this agreement, and that if we rejected it, their willingness to go back to the table, reinforce the sanctions – I believe one of the ambassadors used the term ‘far-fetched’ – is not going to happen. The sanctions are going to erode starting now, no matter what we do in this Congress (King 2015).

Senator Carper was explicit in linking the failure of international sanctions with both the lack of any peaceful alternative and to the role that his meeting with the visiting ambassadors:

Critics argue that America should reject this deal and negotiate a better one. Good luck. Earlier this month, several of my colleagues and I met with representatives of our five negotiating partners. They told us bluntly that if Congress kills this deal, the broad coalition of countries imposing sanctions on Iran would collapse...If Congress rejects this deal now, a better one will not take its place, they declared. Instead, America’s leverage would be lost, along with our best chance to address this threat peacefully. In effect, they urged us to learn from Arafat’s mistake and take yes for an answer (Carper 2015).

Senator Hirono also referenced the impact of the ambassadorial visit in convincing her that sanctions would fail if the agreement was rejected:

A rejection by the U.S. of this deal will not bring our partners back to negotiate another deal. In fact, at a recent meeting of leaders from our partner nations, I specifically asked the Ambassadors to the U.S. from China, the United Kingdom, and Russia whether their countries would come back to negotiate again should the U.S. walk away from the deal. They unanimously said, “No”, that there was already a deal- the one before Congress (Hirono 2015).

In addition to these four quoted here, statements from 15 other senators referenced the fact that international sanctions would fail if the agreement was rejected in their statements. Many of them also referenced their conversations with the foreign ambassadors as having convinced them of this fact, leaving yet another route to the idea that there was no credible alternative to the JPCOA.
Our final sub-theme of the costs of the alternative focuses on statements that echo the idea that either there is no alternative to the JCPOA or that the only alternative would be military conflict with Iran, which the President argued several times, would be unacceptable without first attempting to make diplomacy work. These themes were echoed by 26 senators in their statements of support for the agreement, often alongside statements that the agreement was not perfect, far from perfect, or flawed, but better than the alternative of war or the invasion of Iran. All of these themes were present in Senator Booker’s statement, along with a variation of the ‘train leaving the station theme’ articulated as a ‘point of no return’:

...with the JCPOA, we have now passed a point of no return that we should have never reached, leaving our nation to choose between two imperfect, dangerous and uncertain options. Left with these two choices, I nonetheless believe it is better to support a deeply flawed deal, for the alternative is worse. Thus, I will vote in support of the deal (Booker 2015).

Senator Blumenthal’s statement notes both the idea of risk involved with the alternative and the idea that even though the agreement is not perfect, it is better than the alternative, arguing that:

While this is not the agreement I would have accepted at the negotiating table, it is better than no deal at all.

And continuing:

Rejecting this agreement is fraught with unacceptable risk...There is no better deal available now. The present sanctions will soon become unenforceable, producing an economic windfall for Iran whether or not the United States accepts the agreement. The United States, instead of Iran, would be isolated. Iran’s nuclear program would be unconstrained (Blumenthal 2015).

Senator Boxer put it quite starkly in her statement arguing that “To walk away, in my view, means war...Because when we walk away, there is no deal. Iran keeps its nuclear program, and that cannot be allowed to happen” (Boxer 2015).

Senator Murphy concurred, noting that:

Because if there is no deal – if there is no ability to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon through a negotiation – and if you accept the premise that we are not going to stand still and do nothing and take a wait-or-see approach if they were to move closer to a bomb, then the only option is the military option (Murphy 2015).

The statements of Senators Gillibrand, Durbin, Schatz and Whitehouse all make references to their belief that the most likely cost of rejecting the JCPOA would be war with Iran. Several others derided the notion that there was any alternative at all, rejecting calls to ‘go back to the table’ or to keep up sanctions as some form of pipe dream or fantasy. Senator Murphy indicated that:
No one with any credible diplomatic experience in the Middle East believes that Iran will come back to the table if Congress rejects this deal...A better deal is fantasy, plain and simple (Murphy 2015).

Senator Shaheen’s statement was also quite clear:

I believe the choice is clear: Either we recognize that this agreement is the best available option, or we chase a fantasy agreement on our own as international sanctions collapse, Iran’s nuclear program continues unchecked, and our options for stopping it narrow (Shaheen 2015).

Senators Casey, Booker, Reid and Schatz’s statements all had variations on the ‘fantasy’ theme focusing on how the alternatives of keeping sanctions or going back to the negotiating table were not seen as credible or likely to end anywhere else but in failure or military confrontation. Overall, though, the most widely used description from this sub-theme was the notion that, even if flawed, there was no viable alternative to the JCPOA. There were several variations on this, with one by Senator Blumenthal being “There is no better deal available now” (Blumenthal 2015) and Senator Franken stating that he had “heard no persuasive arguments that there is a better alternative” (Franken 2015).

Senator Reed’s floor statement went into more detail:

Critics recommend rejecting the JCPOA and advocating a regime of new and increasingly crippling sanctions that are more effective to ensuring Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon. It is my view that this alternative is not feasible at this time and may, indeed, be counterproductive (Reed 2015).

Senator Schatz recognized that there were “legitimate concerns about the agreement” but that “there is no other alternative” to the agreement to achieve its results (Schatz 2015). And Senator Tester noted that “it’s clear that this deal is the only option right now to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons” (Tester 2015). In addition to these five examples, nine other senators used narratives that described the JCPOA as the only option available for moving forward. In all, the no alternative theme in all of its forms was the single most quoted theme used in senatorial statements, with 26 mentions; equivalent to the overarching costs of the alternative theme, which itself represented several sub-themes including the idea that the only alternative to the agreement was war with Iran.

**Achieving the Best Option**

The flow of narratives from the Administration to the Senate showed that not only did the Administration want the senators to support the idea that there were no alternatives to the agreement, but they wanted to make the argument that the agreement itself was the best option for achieving the goal of preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Both the positive approaches and those that were based on prospect theory guided their respondents toward this idea that the agreement was the best, or only, option available and that it deserved senatorial support. Our examination showed that 20
senators made use of this narrative, describing the agreement as the best option or the best available option for moving ahead. Senator Warren noted that:

The question now before Congress - the only question before Congress - is whether the recently-announced nuclear agreement represents our best available option for preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. After carefully reviewing the text of the agreement, consulting with experts both in and out of government and receiving extensive briefings from President Obama, Secretary of State Kerry, and Secretary of Energy Moniz, I am convinced that it does (Warren 2015).

Senator Schatz described the agreement as “the best approach to deny Iran a nuclear weapon” and Senator Reid, the minority leader, agreed, stating that the JCPOA “is the best path to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon” (Schatz 2015; Reid 2015). Senator Merkley described it as “the best available strategy” and Senator Klobuchar used the term “best available option” both indicating that, like their colleagues, they saw the agreement as imperfect but acceptable and achievable (Merkley 2015; Klobuchar 2015).

Although this final theme is not specifically a part of prospect theory we can see how it brings together the positive arguments that the agreement delivers specific benefits and has stringent verification requirements with those arguments based on prospect theory. Given that many of the ‘best option’ themes stress the fact that the agreement provides the best ‘available’ option shows the strength of the themes associated with prospect theory. They give us a better handle on why senators would vote for an agreement that was ‘flawed’ but was the ‘best available option’ rather than to try and go back to the well if the agreement was flawed but other options could be made available.

Analysis & Implications

The Administration’s lobbying attempted to decrease the uncertainty associated with supporting the agreement by focusing not only on its concrete benefits, but also on how the verification efforts were ‘unprecedented’ in their ability to mitigate potential dangers. Alongside this, the Administration attempted to increase the certainty that a no vote would lead, at the very least, to a failure of the international sanctions regime and, at worst, would lead to military intervention by the US in Iran—a military intervention that would lack the support of our major allies. It is also clear from our analysis that the President and his administration made strenuous efforts to persuade members of Congress to back the deal, engaging in multiple briefings, speeches, phone calls and even writing letters to address the concerns of individual members of the House and Senate. In addition, it is evident that the highly unusual action of foreign ambassadors coming to brief members of Congress had an impact. These
representatives of the five nations that had negotiated the agreement with Iran alongside the US lobbied Congressional members, warning them that their governments would not support renewed negotiations, nor would they support renewed sanctions. This clearly had an impact upon the thinking of several senators; who mentioned these assurances as critical to their decision to support the JCPOA.

Our analysis found evidence that some senators used positive arguments about the benefits of the agreement or the stringent requirements of the verification procedures to explain their support for the JCPOA. However, we found that many more statements used arguments based on prospect theory—focusing on the costs of rejecting the agreement—to explain support for an agreement with a state widely perceived to be an enemy of both the United States and Israel. As detailed above, coding of each Senator’s statement of support for the JCPOA found that 26 senatorial statements used the costs of the alternative theme separately from 19 that used the failure of international sanctions theme and 26 that used the no alternative theme. By contrast, only 11 senatorial statements used the detailed benefits of the agreement and 17 statements used the verification measures as arguments for supporting the agreement. Given that many senators used multiple arguments to explain, or justify, their support for the agreement; it may be more useful to examine how many senators made statements that did not include any references to one set of arguments. As noted above, only three senators did not use any of the arguments based on prospect theory, while 21 senators did not make any arguments based on either of the positive themes put forth by the Administration. This means that of the 42 senators who supported the JCPOA, fully one-half of them preferred to use arguments based on the costs of rejecting the agreement, while only 3 senators preferred to use arguments solely based on the benefits of the agreement.

We believe that our two analyses, one showing the impact of lobbying efforts and the other showing the flow of narrative themes from the Administration and its supporters to the senators’ statements, provides robust evidence that the Administration sought to point out the costs of rejecting the JCPOA to members of Congress and that it was this argument that was much more effective than focusing Congressional attention on the potential benefits of the agreement in limiting or curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions. However, in order to extend and strengthen our findings it would be beneficial to conduct interviews with both administration officials and Senators and/or their representatives. This would allow us to more fully evaluate the extent to which administration officials or other proponents of the agreement viewed the various arguments that they made and whether they felt they gave more impetus to one set of arguments over the other. A similar analysis done by Hancock (2011) with respect to the nonpartisan group that organized the YES! campaign to persuade voters in Northern Ireland to
support the Good Friday Agreement was strengthened through a number of interviews with the organizers, many of whom consciously chose to focus both on a narrow slice of the unionist electorate who would prove to be key in garnering enough support to ensure the agreement referendum’s success and on making an argument that there was no ‘plan B’, and that failure to pass the referendum would not result in any further negotiations, but could easily plunge the province back into conflict.

We think our analysis shows a similar pattern of focus on the alternative of the JCPOA being the failure of international sanctions, the collapse of the international coalition opposing Iranian nuclear ambitions, leaving military strikes or war with Iran an almost certainty. The evidence shows that it was this near certainty, much more than the strengths of the agreement itself, which persuaded Democratic Senators to back the JCPOA.

The implications for this understanding of the role of prospect theory in framing important policy decision should not be easily dismissed. It seems clear that framing choices with respect to avoiding certain risk is much more powerful than framing them in terms of uncertain benefit. Work by Hancock (Hancock and Weiss 2011; Hancock, Weiss, and Duerr 2011) and colleagues has shown the difference in these kinds of framing activities in both the Good Friday Agreement and the Oslo Accords, and so it is unsurprising to see similar frames in use within the US Government. However, we would argue against forcing a prospect theory frame onto policy decisions that do not support it use. For instance it is notable that neither Democrats nor Republicans have systematically used prospect theory frames in their arguments either for or against the right of President Obama to appoint a successor to fill Justice Scalia’s seat on the Supreme Court. This may be due to the fact that even though Supreme Court decisions can have a major impact upon the country, they do not typically involve issues of national security or broad economic stability. It also may be that the use of these kinds of narratives remains powerful because they are infrequently invoked. When comparing the major policy challenges faced by the Obama Administration it is notable that only the financial bailout started in the last quarter of the Bush Administration was framed as preferable to the alternative. The Affordable Care Act, notably, was framed as a positive achievement rather than as a needed alternative to the certain destruction of our healthcare system due to runaway costs. These comparisons imply that one can only safely or effectively use a prospect theory framing when the costs of the alternative can reasonably be framed as far worse than the preferred choice. The question for us as researchers is to investigate the effectiveness of such choices and such claims; and we would suggest that policy-makers be careful about using a prospect theory framing, saving it for issues where the choices are clear and the alternatives are costly.
Works Cited

4 Americans Caught in Nets of Iran Talks. 2015. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, WORLD; WORLD BRIEFS; Pg. A-4.


Booker, Cory. Supporting the Iran agreement is the better of two flawed options, September 3 2015. Available from https://medium.com/@CoryBooker/supporting-the-iran-agreement-is-the-better-of-two-flawed-options-2cf8d84b6379#.u38dpuaj2.


Broad, William J. 2015. Scientists Support Iran Deal in Letter to Obama. The New York Times, August 9, Section A; Column 0; Foreign Desk; Pg. 8.


Friedman, Thomas. 2015. The Obama Doctrine and Iran. The New York Times, April 6, Section A; Column 0; Editorial Desk; OP-ED COLUMNIST; Pg. 21.


Selling Iran  Hancock et. al.


Hancock, Landon E. 2011. There is No Alternative: Prospect Theory, the Yes Campaign and Selling the Good Friday Agreement. *Irish Political Studies* 26 (1):95 - 116.


Kelly, Erin. 2015. Dems block effort to derail Iran deal; GOP falls two votes short; McConnell says he may try again. *Dayton Daily News (Ohio)*, ; Pg. 23.


