

Political communication, social cognitive processes, and voters' judgments

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1. Introduction

How do our opinions of politicians depend on what politicians say and what other people tell about them or to them? In the present paper, we will focus on the relations between some subtle and indirect (but widely employed) forms of political communication and the effects they may have on perception of political candidates. Political communication has been widely investigated in terms of form, content, and discursive function (e.g., Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008). Political attitudes, their formation and change, and their effects have also been investigated, as well as several individual and social factors affecting them (e.g., Kuklinski, 2001). The effects of political communication on political attitudes, however, have been scarcely explored so far (but see McGraw, 2003). Both science and common sense agree on the fact that citizens base a wide portion of their judgments and decisions (including voting choice) on narrations the media and politicians make of political events, more than on the events themselves. Despite this, the subtle and complex processes through which all this unfolds are still largely unexplored.

Something similar has happened in the wider field of social psychology. Research on social cognition, intergroup processes, and decision making has rarely come in touch with research on communication and language. As discussed by Fiedler (2007), a wide range of fundamental psychosocial processes such as attribution (Fiedler, 2008; Semin & Fiedler, 1988; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989), conflict, stereotype formation and maintenance (Beukeboom, Finkenauer, & Wigboldus, 2010; Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000; 2006), or self- and other-presentation (Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Douglas, Sutton, & Wilkin, 2009) can be better understood by focusing on their communicational and linguistic basis. Actually, people may more or less purposely exploit the subtle mechanisms linking communication and cognition in order to influence receivers to their own advantage.

The relevance of language and communication in impression formation and decision making is possibly further enhanced in the political field. Rarely do citizens have direct access to political and economic facts. Several different political agents such as incumbent government officials, members of the opposition, journalists, pundits, and commentators present and explain those facts to voters. For instance, when facing a financial crisis or economic downturn, citizens may not be able to fully realise the extent or the consequences of the situation and they get most of the information from what is said in the political debate on the topic (Gomez & Wilson, 2001).

Government and majority members might try to downplay the seriousness of the situation, fearing that the economic crisis might negatively reflect on their future electoral performances. Opposition parties might on the contrary proclaim that the national economy is in danger, blaming the government for the negative results. As to the media, they may emphasize their coverage of economic news or reduce it, according to their own editorial line (and, sometimes, their political agenda).

Being essential to citizens' decision making, political communication not only has an informational (illocutory) function, but also a persuasive (perlocutory) function (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Speakers, most notably politicians, do not simply provide citizens information, but they do it with a purpose (e.g., increasing their chances of being voted). Analysing the function of political communication is therefore vital to an understanding of the speakers' communicative intentions and their intended (and actual) effects.

2. The pragmatic aspects of political communication

In their functional theory of political discourse, Benoit and Hartcock (1999) defined three main functions of political messages: acclaiming, attacking, and defending. First, candidates use acclaims to praise their accomplishments (e.g., taking credit for positive results, McGraw, 2003), policy stances, or personal qualities. Second, candidates can attack their opponents on personal, party, or policy issues. Third, when attacked by an opponent or the media, candidates can defend themselves, responding to external criticism. Both attacks and defences may have some drawbacks. Attacks can sometimes backfire, resulting in more negative judgments of the source rather than of the target of attacks. The so-called *backlash effect* is especially evident when politicians attack their adversaries on personal issues (Carraro et al., 2010; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989; Roesse & Sande, 1993). It may also turn up when politicians defend themselves from attacks. Research on defensive accounts both in the political and organizational fields (see McGraw, 1991; Kim et al., 2006) indicates that blame avoidance can sometimes backfire and expose the defending speaker as irresponsible, unreliable, and ultimately untrustworthy. This is especially the case when politicians devote most of their time to responding to other candidates' statements and therefore risk being seen as excessively defensive and reactive.

Citizens are aware, to some extent, of politicians' communicative purposes and they consequently weigh politicians' words depending on the issue they are dealing with. As found by McGraw, Lodge, and Jones (2002), suspicion of further motives is an important factor in the appraisal and elaboration of political communication, triggered by both stable individual factors (e.g., political trust and knowledge) and situational ones (e.g., policy disagreement, congruence between the speaker's and the audience's position, and even the mere fact of the speaker being a

politician). When these conditions are met, receivers engage in more critical and intense scrutiny of politicians' communication, resulting in a less positive evaluation of the speaker. As in the previously cited example of a nation facing an economic downturn, citizens might judge a member of the opposition criticising the current economic outlook as being genuinely concerned for the state of the economy. However, they could also easily attribute those complaints to a more selfish motivation, such as putting the incumbent government and its current policy in a negative light. Actually, social psychological research has shown that receivers are often able to infer the speaker's motivations from several contextual and conversational cues (Hornsey, 2006; 2008; Wanke, 2008), including subtle ones such as linguistic abstraction (Douglas & Sutton, 2006). Speakers, in turn, can actively adjust their language in order to make those cues less evident to receivers, thus reducing the probability of negative backlash.

Research on political communication investigated politicians' attempts to use language for their persuasive goals. When facing political predicaments that might endanger their reputation or credibility, for example, politicians often resort to indirect or noncommittal political discourse (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1988; Bull, 2008). By doing so, they use several different discursive and communicative strategies (Bull, 2000; Bull & Elliott, 1993) to avoid conflict and to present themselves positively to the audience.

3. Counterfactuals in political discourse

Counterfactuals are one of the subtle communication strategies that are widely employed in politics (Catellani, 2011). A counterfactual consists in the simulation of an alternative to an actual scenario or event, based on the modification of one or more elements in it (Roese, 1997). Counterfactuals may be expressed in various linguistic forms that may be brought back to conditional propositions of the "if only...then" type (e.g., "Today citizens would be more satisfied with your government, if you had taken effective measures to save the country's economy").

Several studies in social and cognitive psychology have demonstrated that counterfactual thinking is associated to responsibility attribution (Markman & Tetlock, 2000; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996; Wells & Gavansky, 1989), as well as evaluations, emotions, and attitudes toward past events (Branscombe, Wohl, Owen, Allison, & N'Gbala, 2003; Mandel & Dhimi, 2005; Sevdalis & Kokkinaki, 2006; van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2005). However, studies on counterfactuals embedded in a communicative context and their effects on receivers' judgments have been scarce to date (Catellani, Alberici, & Milesi, 2004; Tal-Or, Boninger, Poran, & Gleicher, 2004; Wong, 2010). When using counterfactual communication, speakers can provide their audience with an easy and familiar way of explaining complex events (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). This may enhance the probability of such explanation to be understood and agreed upon. We carried out a series of studies

to investigate the use of counterfactual communication in the political field and, most importantly, its effects on citizens.

4. The effects of counterfactual communication

4.1. Direct and indirect/counterfactual attacks

Counterfactual communication might have some possible advantages over simple, factual communication. For example, they may offer the possibility of attacking someone in an indirect way, thus reducing the probability of backlash effect. Being formulated as hypothetical scenarios, counterfactual statements allow speakers to express their point of view without having to demonstrate its empirical foundations. An opposition leader could say “If the government had lowered taxes, our economy would be in better conditions”, thus indirectly attacking the government, without going into a detailed explanation of how a proposed policy (i.e., lowering taxes) would have led to the desired outcome (i.e., improving the national economy).

In a series of studies (Catellani & Bertolotti, 2011), we investigated the effect of direct and indirect/counterfactual attacks against a politician in an interview scenario. We created several versions of a fictional interview to an incumbent Prime Minister running for re-election, varying for the final critical statement by the interviewing journalist. First of all we varied the content of the attack, either against the politician’s *leadership* skills (e.g., “You shied away from the fiscal problem. You obtained insufficient results on the problem of taxation burdens!”) or against the politician’s *morality* (e.g., “You acted incorrectly on the fiscal problem. You lied on the problem of taxation burdens!”). We also varied the style of the attack, using either *direct attacks* (as those cited above) or *indirect attacks* (e.g., “If you had dealt with the fiscal problem firmly, our country would be in better conditions today” in the leadership-attack condition, or “If you had acted correctly on the fiscal problem, our country would be in better conditions today” in the morality-attack condition). As it can be seen from the examples, direct and indirect attacks contained the same allegations to the politician. However, in the former case they were expressed in a very blunt and straightforward manner while in the latter they were expressed in a more subtle manner, stating how things might have been better if the politician had acted in a different way. After reading the interview, participants were asked to evaluate the politician (on a Likert scale) as well as the journalist’s attack (by indicating how clear, exhaustive, relevant, and convincing they found it).

We expected morality-based attacks to have a stronger effect on the evaluation of the politician, as morality has been shown to be the most relevant dimension in citizens’ evaluation of political leaders (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008). In the case of direct attacks against the politician this, however, did not happen. No significant differences in the evaluation of the politician after a leadership versus morality attack emerged, while both attacks yielded a negative evaluation of the

journalist. Direct attacks, in other words, exposed the source to the above-mentioned backlash effect (Carraro et al., 2010; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989; Roese & Sande, 1993) regardless of the content of the attack itself. In the case of counterfactual attacks, we found instead the expected stronger effect of the morality attack and, most importantly, a lesser degree of backlash against the attack source (the journalist).

Whereas direct attacks, regardless of their content, were easily attributed to the journalist being biased against the politician, counterfactual attacks did not trigger such negative reaction against the source and succeeded in affecting the evaluation of the target politician. In particular, counterfactual attacks to morality led to a more negative evaluation of the attacked politician and were judged more relevant, appropriate, exhaustive, and convincing than the other attacks.

4.2. Direct and indirect/counterfactual defences

Like attacks, defences may be made in a more or less direct way. In another series of studies (Catellani & Bertolotti, 2012), we investigated the effect of direct and indirect/counterfactual statements used by politicians to defend themselves. We created different versions of an interview scenario similar to the one used in studies quoted above. The text consisted in a 1-page exchange between a journalist and a former Prime Minister running for re-election, discussing the current state of the economy. After a couple of rather negative comments by the journalist, the politician made a final defensive statement, which varied across the conditions of the various studies. After the participants had read the text, we asked their evaluation of the politician, responsibility attributions for the negative economic conditions discussed in the interview, and their perception of the politician's personality dimensions. We expected these judgments to vary depending on the politician's defence, its direct or indirect style, as well as some properties of the indirect/counterfactual statements used in the experimental conditions (i.e., counterfactual target and counterfactual direction).

In one of the studies, we tested the effects of counterfactuals in one of the most common defensive strategies used by politicians: blaming someone else for their own failures (McGraw, 1990). Simple factual defensive statements were compared with counterfactual ones, in order to test which ones would be more effective in influencing receivers' responsibility attributions and the evaluation of the defending politician. By stating that things could have been better if someone else had acted differently, politicians would be able to divert receivers' attention from their own errors, lessening responsibility attributed to them for the final (negative) outcome. Politicians who recur to counterfactuals may trigger less suspicion and be more efficacious than politicians who directly shift their responsibility over others. Thus, in the manipulated text the fictitious politician blamed the opposition either directly, using factual statements (e.g., "The opposition did not revise some of

its ideological positions”), or indirectly, using counterfactual ones (e.g., “Things would have been better, if the opposition had revised some of its ideological positions”).

Results showed that participants in the counterfactual defence condition attribute less responsibility for the economic conditions to the politician and evaluate the politician better compared to the factual defence condition. Other-blaming counterfactual defence is therefore an effective strategy. It shifts responsibility attribution away from the defending politician, inducing receivers to think of how things might have been better if someone else had behaved differently. Direct other-blaming defence, on the other hand, is less effective in influencing receivers’ attributions and results in a more negative evaluation of the defending politician. Such findings indicate that counterfactual communication may adequately serve the aim of shifting responsibility for a negative event or outcome over someone else, without doing it too explicitly.

4.3. The effects of counterfactual target and direction

Two properties of counterfactuals that have been shown to be connected with attribution processes are the target the counterfactual is focused on and the direction of the counterfactual outcome. Previous research has shown that when the target of the counterfactual antecedent is focused on an individual or collective actor (“If only X had/had not done...”), that target is more likely to be perceived as responsible of the real event (Markman & Tetlock, 2000; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996; Wells & Gavansky, 1989). Unlike counterfactual target, counterfactual direction does not regard the antecedent but the consequence of the counterfactual, that may be presented as either better (“...things would have been better”) or worse (“... things would have been worse”) than the one observed in reality. Previous research has shown that thinking of a better possible outcome leads to perceive the real outcome as more negative and to attribute enhanced responsibility for it as compared to thinking of a worse possible outcome (Jones & Davis, 1965; Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993; Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995; Sanna, Turley-Ames, & Meier, 1999).

In our studies on the effects of counterfactual communication we varied counterfactual target and direction to investigate the influence they would have on receivers’ attributions. In one study, the politician’s reply to the journalist’s attack consisted of counterfactuals focused on different targets: the politician (“Things would have been better, if I had supported my positions within the coalition with enough decision”), the opposition (“... , if the opposition had revised some of its ideological positions”), or another external target (“... if the international institutions had given us more financial aids”). Our aim was to test whether any counterfactual blame-avoidance strategy would prove viable or whether its effectiveness would depend on the specific target chosen by the defending politician. We found that defensive counterfactuals blaming the opposition yielded

better evaluations of the politician, whereas blaming the international institutions did not provide any significant benefit over self-blame. This result suggests that shifting blame away from oneself is not always sufficient to convince one's audience. What can really make a difference is the choice of a plausible external target to charge negative outcomes onto. In this case a proximal and relatively familiar target (the opposition) proved to be a more convincing target than a more distant and indefinite target as the international financial institutions.

Looking more closely at how participants perceived the politician's personality according to the target chosen in counterfactual defence, we noticed that counterfactual defences blaming external targets (especially the opposition) positively influenced the perception of the politician's leadership, but not the perception of the politician's morality. This might suggest that the advantages deriving from the choice of an external counterfactual target mainly consist in the maintenance or re-enforcement of a positive image of the politician as a strong and assertive leader. The perception of the politician's morality, on the other hand, seems not to be influenced by the choice of counterfactual target, with both other-focused and self-focused counterfactual messages having similar effect on it.

In order to assess whether some specific type of counterfactual communication might influence citizens' perception of the politician's morality, we carried out one more study in which we varied the direction of the counterfactuals employed by the politician. In one experimental condition, the politician used a self-focused *upward* counterfactual (e.g., "Things would have been *better*, if I had supported my positions within the coalition with enough decision"), thus partially admitting responsibility for the negative economic situation. In another experimental condition, the politician used a self-focused *downward* counterfactual (e.g., "Things would have been *worse*, if I had hesitated to support my positions within the coalition").

We expected downward counterfactuals to be a useful strategy for the politician's defence. By focusing on a hypothetical worse scenario, politicians may induce a milder evaluation of the real scenario. Results confirmed that downward messages lead to a better evaluation of the defending politician than upward messages. Downward counterfactuals successfully direct receivers' attention to a worse scenario, thus making the actual scenario comparatively less negative. This in turn leads to a more positive evaluation of the politician held responsible for it. When, however, we analysed the effects of downward counterfactual messages on the perception of the politician's personality, we found that only the leadership dimension was positively affected by downward counterfactuals, whereas perceived morality was not.

4.4. Individual differences moderating the effectiveness of indirect attacks and defences

One may wonder whether the effectiveness of indirect messages in political communication may vary according to some characteristics of the receiver. In one of our studies we manipulated the politician's political orientation and we measured the receiver's political orientation (Catellani & Bertolotti, 2012). Consistent with the widespread partisan bias (see Bartels, 2002), we found that receivers gave a better evaluation of politicians sharing their ideology. However, no interaction with either attack or defence style was found. As to counterfactual direction, in another study we found downward counterfactual defences to be more effective than upward ones, regardless of the ideological similarity or dissimilarity between participants and the fictitious politician.

We also investigated (Bertolotti, Catellani, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012) the potential moderating effect of political sophistication, intended as a composite of political interest, knowledge, and media use (Luskin, 1990). Research on political information processing indicates that political sophistication can alter the way people evaluate information about political events, the degree of scrutiny in the elaboration of persuasive messages (McGraw, Lodge, & Jones, 2002), and the way they perceive and evaluate political candidates (Funk, 1997). In our studies, we found that political sophistication moderated the effects of upward and downward counterfactual defences on the perception of one personality dimension in particular, that is, politicians' morality. Participants with a low level of political sophistication attributed higher morality to the politician employing a downward counterfactual defence ("Things would have been worse, if I..."), whereas highly sophisticated participants attributed higher morality to the politician employing an upward counterfactual defence ("Things would have been worse, if I..."). More generally, less sophisticated participants found downward comparison convincing in restoring both the politician's leadership and the politician's morality. Things were partially different for more sophisticated participants. They attributed higher leadership to the politician using downward comparison, but attributed higher morality to the one using upward comparison.

The communicative intention attributed to the politician mediated the positive effect of upward counterfactuals (and, conversely, the negative effect of downward ones) among highly sophisticated participants. Upward counterfactuals, stating how things might have been better if the politician had acted differently, were seen as a form of responsibility taking (an intention denoting some degree of morality). Downward counterfactuals, focusing on how things might have been even worse, on the other hand, were seen as a form of deceptiveness and negatively regarded in terms of morality.

These findings bring us back to the already mentioned issue of receivers' pragmatic inferences about communication. The less sophisticated tend to take the message at face value, and letting the politician reduce the negativity of the current events with strategically crafted downward

comparisons. On the contrary, the more sophisticated base their assessment of politicians' morality on a more complex examination of defensive messages. Despite being less persuading per se, an upward counterfactual defence is recognized as not having a deceptive intent, and indicating that the politician is more willing to take responsibility for past actions. Such communicative implicature may be taken as a proof of the politician's morality, thus improving the general evaluation of the politician.

5. Future directions

Results from our research contributed to an understanding of how the use of subtle linguistic strategies in political communication may influence citizens' judgments and attributions. We focused on the effects of indirect counterfactual attacks and defences, which prove "useful" for politicians in two ways. On the one hand, they allow them to avoid full commitment in their statements, and this may prove as an advantage especially for the less socially accepted statements, such as attacking adversaries or blaming them for their failures. On the other hand, they can be used as an effective argumentation to influence citizens' responsibility attributions, as well as the explanation of actual events and situations.

Our results suggest that the effectiveness of indirect language employed by politicians is not reduced by otherwise strong and pervasive evaluative biases such as partisan bias. It is however moderated by the political sophistication of the receivers. We found that citizens with a high level of political sophistication are able to make complex inferences based on politicians' communication. They recognise the persuasive purpose of this kind of communication and accordingly make leadership and morality attributions. Citizens with a lower level of political sophistication are less capable to do so. This finding indicates that people with lower understanding of the subtle dynamics of political communication make less accurate judgments about politicians, which may bias their voting decisions. As it is the case for any kind of communication exchange, a sound political communication needs a common ground being shared by politicians and citizens. When this common ground is missing (e.g., when receivers lack familiarity with political communication rules), politicians are able to pursue their communicative agendas without citizens being fully aware of it. Doing so they can break the rules of the collaborative "inference games" (Fiedler, 2007) that provide meaning and context to communication, driving citizens towards the desired attributions and judgments.

So far, our research has been focused on the effects of counterfactual communication, that is, of hypothetical statements regarding the past. However, the effects of hypothetical statements regarding the future could also be usefully investigated. Both politicians and journalists use them to frame political programmes and proposals either positively or negatively. These statements may

trigger the so-called prefactual thinking in the receivers, that is, the consideration of various possible alternatives regarding the future (see Gleicher et al., 1995; Sanna, 1998), and this in turn may affect receivers' judgments and decisions. More generally, much is left to a study of how subtle communication and language tools influence citizens' perception of political actors and political issues.

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