

The Perception of Politicians' Morality: Attacks and Defences

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Introduction

In the latest decades, a trend towards popularisation of politics (Mazzoleni, 2003; Norris, 1996) has increased the importance of political leaders within the political landscape, as they have become the protagonists of political news coverage, at the expense of political parties, institutions and political issues. The way voters form their impressions about politicians has thus become increasingly relevant, as it more substantially affects voting preferences and, ultimately, election results. Politicians, on the other hand, pay more and more attention to how they are perceived by potential voters and to how they can positively influence such perception.

In this chapter, psychosocial research on these two parallel and complementary processes, impression formation and impression management in politics (McGraw, 2003), is discussed. Psychosocial research so far has mainly focused on impression formation, but its extension to the study of the perception of politicians is likely to lead to an increased focus on impression management, specifically on how politicians and opinion leaders try to influence perception through communication. This extended focus provides a great opportunity to investigate the complex interplay of different phenomena that social psychology traditionally analyses separately, such as impression formation and attribution processes on one side, and communication and persuasion on the other (Fiedler, 2007).

In the following paragraphs, after briefly discussing the fundamental dimensions in person perception, we will focus our attention on how politicians are perceived and what factors influence such perception. We will then shift our attention to the confrontational context in which politicians and other opinion leaders try to influence people's judgments and decisions, including those regarding politicians' personality. We will discuss research results on the effects of different, more or less subtle, communication strategies to attack and defend politicians' morality.

Personality dimensions in the perception of common people

Research on person perception found that two basic dimensions underlie social judgments on individuals and groups. These dimensions represent two fundamental orientations in social

behaviour and relations: on one hand, the need to create and maintain positive relations with other people, on the other hand the need to achieve individual goals. Although these two basic dimensions (the so-called “Big Two”; Abele & Wojciszke, 2013) have been labelled in various ways, the most recurrent terms used to define them have been “warmth” and “competence” (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), or “communion” and “agency” (Wojciszke & Abele, 2008).

Although people spontaneously interpret behaviour and form impressions of other people in terms of both communion (or warmth) and agency (or competence), judgments related to communion precede those related to agency and they have a greater influence on the behavioural and affective reactions of observers (Ybarra, Burnstein, Winkielman, Keller, Manis, Chan & Rodriguez, 2008). More generally, the primacy of communion over agency in person perception would serve the evolutionary need to quickly and efficiently identify other individuals as potential sources of threat, by detecting their intentions (Peeters 1983; 2001).

Some authors have argued that the communion dimension actually covers two distinct sub-dimensions, namely sociability and morality (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Whereas they both represent the basic need of “getting along” with people, they relate to different aspects of it. Sociability pertains to one’s friendliness and good intent towards others, whereas morality pertains to one’s fairness in interpersonal relations and respect of social norms. Morality-related information is processed more quickly than sociability-related information (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011). Morality traits, such as honest, sincere, and trustworthy, are also more closely related with overall judgments of individuals than sociability traits, such as friendly, warm, and likeable, and competence traits, such as intelligent, competent, and skilful (Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012). These findings suggest that morality is the most important dimension in social perception, as people are primarily concerned to detect other individuals’ intentions towards them, in order to regulate interpersonal behaviour.

Personality dimensions in the perception of politicians

Contemporary politics seems to give greater attention to its main actors (and their public and private lives) than to political issues (Barisione 2009; Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli 2006; Schoen & Schumann 2007). The phenomenon of the personalization of politics has led to an increased interest in how the perception of politicians' personalities influences citizens' judgments and voting decisions. The decline of ideological voting, with weakening ties between traditional parties and citizens, and, most importantly, the greatly expanded role of media in politics are often cited to explain the increasing importance of candidates' personality traits in citizens' voting choice (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; King, 2002; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Recourse to the so-called "candidate heuristic" seems particularly frequent among voters with low political sophistication and those making late voting decisions (Catellani & Alberici, 2012).

Empirical studies investigating the perception of political leaders have used several different measures, making the respective results difficult to compare. Whereas social psychologists often use traits referring to the fundamental dimensions of social judgments discussed in the previous paragraph (Abele, Uchronski, Suitner, & Wojciszke, 2008), personality psychologists use a different set of personality traits, which overlap only in part with those referring to the "Big Two" model. A line of research based on the "Big Five" factor model of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1997) found that the perception of politicians' personality traits tended to cluster around two main dimensions, which were named leadership and integrity (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 2002; Caprara, Schwarz, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2008; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Vecchione, Gonzalez Castro, & Caprara, 2011). Citizens use politicians' behaviour, speech and appearance to infer their disposition, that is whether they possess personal characteristics deemed as important for their role, such as the ability to propose and pursue policies on behalf of the citizens they represent (the leadership dimension) and their commitment to them (the integrity dimension).

Long-running surveys of representative samples of voters, such as the American National Election Studies (ANES) in the United States (Kinder 1986; Pierce 1993), have changed many questions and response options over time. Generally, however, these surveys include questions

asking participants whether each candidate is “knowledgeable”, “a strong leader”, “compassionate” and “honest”. These are intended as measures of competence, leadership, empathy, and morality, and these four dimensions have been proposed as the most relevant dimensions of politician’s personality (Goren, 2002; 2007; Hayes, 2005; Pierce, 1993). Comparing these four dimensions with the Big Two dimensions emerging from parallel research in social psychology, we might consider competence and leadership as sub-dimensions of the broader dimension of agency, whereas integrity and empathy adequately fit psychosocial constructs of morality and sociability, either as independent dimensions or as sub-dimensions of a single, broader communion dimension.

Which dimension counts more in the perception of politicians?

When electing someone as our representative, we are likely to be concerned about the person’s agency, competence, and ability to pursue political goals. The act of delegating power, however, also requires some degree of trust towards the person we delegate power to. When making a voting choice, we wonder whether the representatives we elect will keep their commitment and do what we voted them for, in other words whether they are trustworthy, loyal, and honest.

Which traits count more in the perception of politicians, then? As discussed above, past research on social perception found a primacy of morality judgments over judgments referring to other dimensions (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Brambilla et al., 2011). When focusing on the perception of politicians rather than common people, however, findings are less clear-cut on this point. Some empirical studies found that the perception of politicians’ morality is more closely related to overall judgments and voting intention (Catellani & Bertolotti, 2013; Cislak e Wojcizske 2006, 2008). Other empirical studies found that competence judgments based on political candidates’ photographs were better predictors not only of study participants’ voting intention, but also of the actual results of the elections (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009; Castelli, Carraro, Ghitti, & Pastore, 2009; Johns & Shephard, 2011; Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). Some critics, however, pointed out that study participants’ competence judgments may actually depend on facial cues of dominance and approachability (Poutvaara, Jordahl, &

Berggren, 2010; Riggio & Riggio, 2010; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2005). Even brief exposures to pictures of unknown candidates, then, seem to reflect a multi-dimensional assessment of their personality.

The issue of which dimension prevails in the perception of politicians is therefore not easily resolved, and can also be influenced by other factors. Ideology is one of them. Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Zimbardo (1999) found that leadership was regarded as most important by right-wing voters while morality was regarded as most important by left-wing ones (see also Caprara, Schwartz, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli 2008; Caprara, Vecchione, Barbaranelli, et al. 2007). According to the authors, this might be due to voters' preference for candidates similar to themselves in terms of personality traits: as left-wing voters tend to score higher in measures of morality-related traits and right-wing voters tend to score higher in leadership-related ones (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008), they tend to vote for candidates perceived as having similar dispositions. This in turn makes politicians perceived as strong leaders more likely to be elected in conservative or right-wing parties and politicians perceived as sociable and empathetic to be successful in liberal or left-wing parties.

Given the relatively stable preference for leadership-related traits among right-wing voters and morality-related ones among left-wing voters, Hayes (2005) found that political candidates sometimes take advantage of such "trait ownership", presenting themselves in a way that might appeal to voters of a specific political orientation. In the American context, Democrat candidates are usually regarded as more compassionate and empathetic, whereas Republican candidates are seen as stronger leaders. Data from the Italian National Election Studies (Barisione, Catellani, & Garzia, 2013) provided some support to this hypothesis also outside the American context. In the last four Italian election surveys, centre-left coalition candidates were repeatedly found to be perceived comparatively weak on leadership, and strong on empathy and morality. On the other hand, the centre-right coalition candidate (the same in the course of the four elections) was perceived as a strong leader but weak on morality.

Bertolotti and Catellani (in preparation) investigated the importance of different personality dimensions in the perception of politicians in an experimental study where they asked participants to describe the typical politician using a list of 16 personality traits measuring perceived morality (honest, sincere, loyal, and trustworthy), sociability (warm, helpful, caring, and friendly), competence (intelligent, competent, capable, and efficient) and leadership (energetic, decided, dynamic, and determined). The same participants were also asked to describe with the same traits four other kinds of professionals, namely entrepreneurs, university teachers, judges, and psychologists. Each profession received positive ratings on traits linked to their typical function: entrepreneurs were rated high on leadership, university teachers on competence, judges on morality, psychologists on sociability.

As for politicians, participants' ratings of the various personality dimensions were generally lower than for the other professionals. Morality ratings were especially low, showing that participants had a particularly negative opinion of this dimension of the politician's personality (see also Catellani, 1990; Catellani & Quadrio, 1991). Despite such a poor opinion of politicians' morality, however, when asked to indicate the most important characteristics a politician should ideally possess, most participants chose one of the four morality traits as the highest-ranked characteristic of the ideal politician, with a particular emphasis on honesty. These findings indicate that politicians are in the rather awkward position of being expected to possess traits such as honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness, and simultaneously of being perceived as lacking precisely those traits.

The importance attributed to politicians' morality is likely to be influenced, at least in part, by contextual factors, thus varying across times and nations. In a political context where no one of the main leaders is questioned on morality-related matters, morality is less likely to be highly salient in citizens' judgments of the politicians. In this case, citizens may focus more on other features, such as leadership or competence. Instead, in a political context in which corruption is perceived to

be a particularly important issue, morality can be an extremely salient dimension and citizens can be strongly motivated to assess the different candidates' morality rather than their leadership.

Contextual differences can be stressed, and in part even created, by communication. The media, or politicians themselves, can increase or decrease the importance attributed to different personality characteristics by discussing or emphasizing specific issues or events. This point brings us to another important issue, namely, the role of communication in impression formation regarding politicians.

Communication and the perception of politicians

Impression formation and attribution processes on one side, and communication and persuasion on the other have been traditionally separate areas of interest in psychosocial research (Fiedler, 2007). Investigating self-presentation and the use of communication to influence other people's impressions, however, can greatly contribute to our understanding of how people form impressions of other individuals in the real world. Research on the perception of politicians may contribute to bridging this gap, when it focusses on the communicative strategies used by politicians and opinion leaders to influence people's judgments, including their perception of politicians' personality.

Politics is naturally contentious and politicians are often faced with communicative conditions that are confrontational or which threaten their reputation. Not surprisingly, therefore, politicians devote a lot of their communication time to *facework* (Bull & Fetzer, 2010), that is, to defend their positive face and aggravate the face of their adversaries. The successful outcome of this effort is not guaranteed, however. Citizens are (more or less) aware of the fact that politicians try to present themselves in a way that is consistent with their political goals, and thus tend to be suspicious and distrustful of what politicians say (McGraw, 2003; McGraw, Lodge, & Jones, 2002). This applies not only to what political actors (politicians, journalists, reporters etc.) say about themselves, but also to what they say about others, including attacks aimed at negatively influencing citizens' impression of other politicians (Benoit & Hartcock, 1999).

In such a difficult and confrontational context, recourse to subtle, indirect communication strategies can be essential to increase persuasiveness. We will now focus on this subject, considering some research results on the effects of various communicative strategies in attacking and defending politicians' morality.

The effects of attacks against politicians' morality

Attacks can be defined as messages providing negative information about a target and its behavior. Research on impression formation indicates that even small pieces of negative information can be harmful to the reputation of the target, as negative information is generally more salient than positive information — the *negativity effect* (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997; Fiske, 1980; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Peeters, 1971; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). Not all attempts to criticise a person, however, result in negative evaluations of the target. Attacks often lead to more negative judgments of the source than of the target of criticism, a phenomenon known as *backlash effect* (Budesheim, Houston, & DePaola, 1996; Carraro, Gawronski, & Castelli, 2010; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Roese & Sande, 1993; Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998). This effect derives from two simultaneous processes. First, when forming an impression about the target of an attack, people recognize the message as an attempt of damaging someone's image rather than of providing truthful information, and therefore ignore such biased information (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). Second, when forming an impression of the source of the attack, people make negative dispositional inferences based on its communicative behaviour, thus perceiving the source as aggressive and unscrupulous, rather than sincere and likeable (Carraro, et al., 2010; Carraro, et al., 2012). This is particularly evident in the case of intergroup communication when criticism comes from an outgroup member (Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002; Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Rabinovich & Morton, 2010).

A great deal of research on political communication has been devoted to studying negative messages and campaigns, that is, criticism of and attacks against politicians coming from various sources such as rival politicians, journalists, or political commentators. While negative campaigning

is growing across the world (Buell & Sigelman, 2008; Damore, 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Geer, 2006; Kahn & Kenney, 2004; Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995; Lau & Pomper, 2004), its effects on voters' attitudes and choices are still debated (Lau, Siegelman, Heldman, & Babbit, 1999; Lau, Siegelman, & Rovner 2007). Attack messages have been found to backfire against their source, particularly when politicians attack their adversaries on personal issues (Carraro et al., 2010; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989; Roese & Sande, 1993).

The effectiveness of attacks in political communication, as in other social contexts, is therefore still uncertain. A way to reduce the backlash effect may be to formulate the attack in a subtle, indirect way. Past research on communication and persuasion has indeed suggested that using indirect formulation of messages (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988; Hornsey, Robson, Smith, Esposito, & Sutton, 2008) can improve their persuasiveness, and this is likely to be the case also with political communication. A research by Catellani and Covelli (2013) has shown that politicians do resort to subtle strategies to make their attacking intent less evident. Through an analysis of televised speeches of Italian politicians during the 2006 election campaign Catellani and Covelli (2013) observed that politicians often recur to counterfactual communication as an indirect form of attack or defence.

Counterfactuals are mental simulations of how the outcomes of past events might have changed if the antecedents of such events had been hypothetically altered (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Roese, 1997). This kind of reasoning is very common in everyday life, particularly when reflecting on or discussing negative past events. In the political discourse counterfactuals can be used, for instance, when discussing the results of an incumbent government. An opposition leader might argue that if the government had acted differently (especially following the opposition's proposals), the country would have achieved positive results, and/or avoided negative results. Analysing actual political interviews, Catellani and Covelli (2013) found this kind of argumentation in the speeches of both opposition and incumbent leaders. By presenting one's points in a hypothetical form, counterfactual messages can be used as an indirect and implicit form of attack,

possibly preventing backlash. They may be perceived as legitimate speculations about alternative courses of actions, rather than attempts to criticise the target of the attack.

The use of an indirect, counterfactual attack may be effective in impairing the personality dimension that people perceive as most relevant but also as the weakest in politicians. In a series of studies, Catellani & Bertolotti (under review) investigated the effects of factual and counterfactual attacks against the morality of politicians. They created different versions of a fictional interview where a journalist, after briefly discussing the government's interventions on national economy, criticised an incumbent Prime Minister running for re-election. The journalist's final remark was manipulated by ending the interview with either a direct, factual attack, an indirect, counterfactual attack, or no attack at all.

In the factual attack condition, the journalist made a rather blunt and straightforward negative remark, criticising the politician's past actions (e.g., "You acted incorrectly on the fiscal problem. You disregarded your previous commitment about the issue of taxes"). In the counterfactual attack condition, the journalist used a more subtle way of criticising the politician's action, stating how things might have been better if the politician had acted in a different way (e.g., "If you had acted correctly on the fiscal problem, our country would be in a better condition today. If you had honoured your previous commitment about the issue of taxes, things would be better now."). Participants were then asked to evaluate both the politician, by indicating their judgment and their perception of the politician's morality, and the journalist, by indicating to what extent they believed the journalist was biased against the politician and how appropriate they found the final remark.

Results showed that a counterfactual attack resulted in a more positive evaluation of the remark, which was evaluated as more appropriate, and of the journalist, who was perceived as less biased than in the factual attack condition. A counterfactual attack was also more effective in inducing a negative evaluation of the politician, who was evaluated more negatively and perceived as less honest, sincere, loyal, and trustworthy than in the factual attack condition (and also in the no-

attack condition). Mediation analysis also showed that the effect of counterfactual attacks on the evaluation of the target was mediated by the perceived bias of the source. Participants interpreted very explicit, factual attacks as a sign of the source (i.e., the journalist) being biased against the target (i.e., the politician), which in turn led them to not giving credit to the negative information provided by the attack. These results provide some insight on why previous research often found negative political messages being ineffective or even backfiring against the source (Carraro et al., 2010; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989; Roese & Sande, 1993). When forming an impression of politicians' morality, people carefully scrutinise information provided about them using implicit cues, such as the directness of a remark, as supplemental information to determine whether the source is reliable or not.

Interestingly, counterfactual attacks, which might appear less decisive than factual ones, do not trigger such inferential process, resulting in a more negative evaluation of the target, without negative effects on the evaluation of the source. In a follow-up study, Catellani & Bertolotti (under review) provided participants explicit information about the journalist's previous attitude towards the politician. In one condition, the journalist was described as having been ostensibly neutral to the politician in the past. In another condition, the journalist was described as having been very unfavourable to the politician in the past. Whereas in the former condition (the neutral source condition) results were similar to those of the previous experiment, in the latter condition (the unfavourable source condition), no difference between factual and counterfactual attacks was found, as participants discarded both of them. This result suggests that people rely on implicit linguistic cues especially when they have no previous information regarding the intention of the source of the attack.

In a further study, Catellani & Bertolotti (in preparation) tested whether additional information about the target of the attack, rather than about its source, would influence the way participants evaluated it. In the experimental scenario, the politician was presented as the leader of a centre-left or centre-right coalition, and participants' own political orientation on the left-right axis

was measured. A strong partisan bias in participants' judgments was found, with centre-left participants evaluating the centre-left politician more positively than the centre-right politician and vice-versa. Such bias, however, did not annul the effect of the style of the attack, as counterfactual attacks remained more effective than factual attacks regardless of ideological similarity or dissimilarity.

The effects of defences on morality perception

When attacked, politicians try to defend themselves and restore their public image and citizens' trust in them. Impression management under unfavourable circumstances, such as in the wake of scandals (Funk, 1996) or when past decisions lead to undesired results, however, is often a difficult task to handle, particularly when politicians' morality is questioned (Banducci & Karp, 1994; Bowler & Karp, 2004; Doherty, Dowling, & Miller, 2011). As in the case of attacks, indirect and subtle forms of communication may be used to effectively defend politicians' image. In the above cited study on the 2006 Italian national elections campaign, Catellani and Covelli (2013) found that politicians use counterfactual statements not only as a way of indirectly attacking opponents, but also as a way of defending themselves. For example, when criticised for past negative results, the leaders of the incumbent government coalition often use counterfactuals to defend themselves, stating that things would have been better if someone *else* had acted differently (e.g., "If Prodi [the opposition candidate, who had previously been president of the European Commission] had defended the interests of Italy, things would be better now"). Counterfactuals are also used to put unsatisfying results in a more positive light, by comparing them with hypothetical worse outcomes (e.g., "If I hadn't intervened on tax evasion, the economic condition of the country would have been worse").

In a series of experimental studies, Catellani and Bertolotti (2013) compared the effectiveness of factual and counterfactual defensive messages, using a political interview scenario similar to the one used to investigate the effects of factual and counterfactual attacks. Participants read the excerpt of an interview where the leader of an incumbent government responded to

criticism using either factual (e.g. "It should be said that the opposition didn't revise its ideological stance and it didn't keep their extreme wing under control.") or counterfactual statements (e.g. "Things would have been better, if the opposition had revised its ideological stance and kept their extreme wing under control.").

Results showed that participants exposed to a counterfactual defence considered such defence more convincing as compared to participants exposed to a factual defence. After a counterfactual defence, the politician was also attributed less responsibility than after a factual defence, and this in turn led to a more positive evaluation of the politician. Thanks to its conditional formulation, then, counterfactual defence provides a hypothetical alternative, a sort of rhetorical decoy, which can prevent politicians from being perceived negatively due to their past actions and decisions.

Research in political psychology investigated defensive accounts used by politicians, proposing a typology based on the functions of defences (McGraw, 1990; 1991). As suggested by classic research on account giving (Austin, 1961), the functions of defensive accounts are basically two: dealing with responsibility attribution, and reducing the perceived negativity of the outcome of one's past actions and decisions. According to this typology, four types of defensive accounts can be used. The first is denial, where politicians reject both responsibility for an event and the negativity of its outcome. The second is concession, where politicians conversely acknowledge both the negativity of an outcome and their responsibility for it. The third is excuse, where politicians can acknowledge the existence of a negative outcome, but deny responsibility for it, attributing it to external causes (or to their adversaries). Excuses therefore attempt to avoid blame for a negative event, shifting it on to other actors (e.g., an uncooperative opposition, or external forces such as intergovernmental organisations), or to uncontrollable events (e.g., a global economic downturn). The fourth type of defence is justification, where politicians acknowledge their role in the event, but deny or downplay the negativity of the outcome. Justifications attempt to reframe the negative event

by highlighting previously unconsidered positive aspects of it, or by setting it against events that are even more negative.

Justifications are especially interesting from the point of view of counterfactual communication. Politicians might use justifications based on downward comparison with counterfactual alternatives to indirectly reduce the perceived negativity of their results. Past research on counterfactual thinking found that mentally simulating a worse outcome (e.g. "Things would be worse if...") tends to trigger an 'affective contrast effect', which leads to a comparatively positive evaluation of the actual outcome (McMullen & Markman, 2000; 2002). Catellani and Bertolotti (in press) compared the effectiveness of counterfactual justifications and of other types of counterfactual defence. Among other things, results showed that counterfactual justification (i.e., "If I... things would have been *worse*") proved more effective than counterfactual concession (i.e., "If I... things would have been *better*") in restoring a positive evaluation of the politician.

The advantage of counterfactual justification over counterfactual concession seems, however, less straightforward when one considers the effects of the two types of defence on the perception of politicians' personality dimensions. In another series of studies, Bertolotti, Catellani, Douglas, and Sutton (2012) showed that the perception of a fictitious politician's leadership (i.e., how resolved, tenacious, dynamic, knowledgeable the politician was) was higher after a counterfactual justification than after a counterfactual concession. Evidently, the hypothetical downward comparison influenced not only the evaluation of past results, but also the perception of the politician's ability to achieve positive results. The effects of counterfactual defences on the perception of the politician's morality (i.e., how honest, sincere, loyal and reliable the politician was), on the other hand, depended on participants' degree of sophistication (measured as an index of political interest, knowledge, and information). Less sophisticated participants attributed higher morality to the politician employing counterfactual justification than to the politician employing factual or counterfactual concessions. On the contrary, more sophisticated participants attributed less morality to the politician employing a counterfactual justification than to the politician using

concessions. Further analyses showed that sophisticated participants used implicit linguistic cues to discern the politician's communicative intent and form their impression without being swayed by positive self-presentation attempts. Sophisticated participants (unlike less sophisticated ones) perceived counterfactual justification as deceptive and inferred that the politician was untrustworthy and insincere, thus overall immoral. Conversely, they perceived counterfactual concession as a way to take responsibility for past mistakes, considering it a sign of honesty and, therefore, morality.

Conclusion

In this chapter we discussed the perception of politicians, and in particular the perception of politicians' morality, focusing on how it may be influenced by communication about and by them. We argued that findings from this research can contribute to the advancement of more general psychosocial research on impression formation and impression management.

The perception of politicians partly follows the same rules that apply to social perception in general, for instance regarding the great importance attributed to morality. It was found, however, that the functions of politicians and their relationship with people further increase the importance attributed to morality, which is explicitly cited as the most relevant (but also the weakest) dimension in politicians. Sociability, on the other hand, seems to count less in the perception of politicians than in the perception of other categories of people.

Perhaps the most important contribution that research on the perception of politicians offers to psychosocial research on person perception derives from its strong focus on the effects of communication on impression formation processes. Impression management and communication strategies, including the more subtle ones, influence how people perceive politicians. The more so for the more subtle strategies, as we have seen when discussing the effects of counterfactual attacks and defences on people's judgments.

Future research should further investigate the effects of different kinds of attack and defence on the various dimensions of politicians' personalities. Another open question is whether what applies to communication about politicians also applies to communication about other professionals

and people in general. Any new insight on the interplay between impression formation and impression management in the political context would prove useful to expand our knowledge of how communication and persuasion affect our judgments in a wide range of situations.

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