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ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: THE USE OF PREFACTUALS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON RECEIVERS

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"*If we do not reduce CO2 emissions, we will have devastating effects on the environment*", "*If we win the coming elections, we will deeply change the judicial system*". These are examples of prefactual statements, in which hypothetical future scenarios and their possible consequences are mentally simulated (Sanna, 1998). Surprisingly, although anticipation of the future is an intrinsic feature of political discourse (Edelman, 1988; Dunmire, 2005), the use of prefactuals has not been analyzed in terms of its argumentative and persuasive function so far. Previous research on prefactuals has shown that the motivation to avoid future regret for a negative outcome affects people's decisions and behavioural choices. Moreover, one strategy for reducing future regret is attributing responsibility for potentially regretful decision to others (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2007).

In two studies, we investigated: a) the use of prefactuals by the news media as a possible way to subtly communicate specific "news frames" regarding the application of the EU climate package (Entman, 1993); b) the effects of the strategic use of these statements on receivers' attitudes.

In Study 1, we analyzed the press coverage of the public debate that preceded the approval of the EU climate package. The study was conducted on four Italian daily newspapers (*La Stampa, la Repubblica, Libero, Il Manifesto*), between 1 September and 31 December 2008. An analysis of the whole text of the articles made it possible: a) to identify the characteristics and the frequency of prefactuals; b) to rate the presence of the "risk" vs. the "opportunity" frame of European policies in the four newspapers (Shuck & de Vreese, 2006). Taking into account a series of linguistic markers, we coded prefactuals according to the *target* they were focused on (Italy, Europe, Impersonal), and the *direction* of the change imagined in each prefactual (upward, downward). Results of loglinear analysis showed that: a) prefactuals were especially employed to convey the "risk" frame and to envisage future negative scenarios; b) "Risk" newspapers, as compared to "Opportunity" newspapers, employed more frequently downward prefactuals focused on European targets, implicitly attributing to Europe the responsibility for the prospected negative consequences of the EU package.

In Study 2, participants read a fictitious newspaper article portraying the EU climate package in terms of its future risks vs. opportunities (plus control condition). Participants were randomly and equally assigned one of six conditions produced by the manipulation of

the direction (upward vs. downward vs. neutral) and the target (Europe vs. generic target) of the prefactual statements employed in the article. After reading the article, participants were asked to report their attitudes towards the climate package and to rate the future risks of climate change. Results showed that participants in the downward prefactual condition (as compared to participants in either the upward prefactual or neutral condition) were less in favor of the application of the climate package and rated the climate change effects as less serious. A three-way Prefactual Direction X Target X Political Sophistication interaction effect on the evaluation of the EU was also found. Low sophisticates were more inclined to give a more negative evaluation of the EU after reading downward prefactuals focused on Europe, while this was not the case for high sophisticates. These findings show the presence of a generalized negativity effect in people's reactions to prefactual communication and suggest that low sophisticates are more easily convinced when a specific responsibility for a negative future scenario is suggested.

The discussion of results focuses on the implications of using prefactuals as a "future-preventing" discursive strategy in political communication.

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