

# Counterfactual Communication in Politics: Features and Effects on Voters

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**Abstract.** During debates and interviews, political leaders often have to defend themselves from adversaries and journalists questioning their performance. To fight against these threats, politicians resort to various defensive strategies, either direct or indirect, to draw attention away from their responsibilities or shed a more positive light upon their work. Counterfactual defences (i.e., comparing past actual events with other hypothetical events) may be included among indirect defensive strategies. We first analyzed counterfactuals evoked by politicians during pre-electoral televised broadcasts. Results showed that politicians defended themselves by using: a) other-focused upward counterfactuals; b) self-focused downward counterfactuals. We then analyzed the effects of defensive counterfactuals on recipients. Participants were presented with different versions of a fictitious political interview, varying for the use of factual versus counterfactual defences and for counterfactual target and direction. Results showed that counterfactual communication is an effective defensive strategy in political debates.

**Keywords:** counterfactual thinking, political communication, defence, political debate.

## 1 Introduction

Whether they have to account for the results of their policies and decisions made while holding a public office, or explain a controversial vote in the legislative assembly, political leaders often have to deal with past events in their speeches. In doing this, they often try to emphasize their accomplishments in positive events and downplay their responsibility in negative ones. In fact, the management of credit and blame is one of the main preoccupations of political leaders. A wide range of rhetorical strategies are used for this purpose, with varying degrees of effectiveness [1, 2]. In our research, we focused on a specific yet quite common kind of argumentation in political discourse: the use of counterfactuals. Counterfactual thinking consists in mentally simulating (better or worse) alternatives to an actual event by changing one or more elements in it [3]. Counterfactuals are usually expressed by conditional propositions such as “if only... then”. For example, opposition leaders may use statements

like: “If the government had maintained its commitments, it would have lowered taxes” or “If the government had been stronger on economic policies, it would have lowered taxes”. In such cases, politicians compare the present situation with an alternative better one and they also imagine how a better situation could have been obtained (in the first case if the government had maintained its commitments, in the second if it had taken a stronger stance on economy). These statements may therefore be described as an attack against the incumbent government. Politicians can also use counterfactuals to defend themselves. For example, members of the incumbent government might try to defend their past decisions and performances by saying: “If our country had not been struck by the financial crisis, we would have lowered taxes” or “If the opposition had supported our policies, we would have lowered taxes”.

Through counterfactuals, politicians may direct the citizens’ attention to the possibility that things might have been different and, in this way, influence their account of reality. In our research, we analyzed political debates and interviews in order to investigate how politicians use counterfactual communication to promote their own representations of past political events, to defend themselves, to attack their adversaries and, more generally, to influence the citizens’ representation of political reality and of politicians themselves.

## 2 Counterfactual Thinking and Reference Norms

According to the so-called Norm Theory [4], events perceived as unexpected, exceptional, and deviating from the “norm” are more likely to trigger counterfactual thinking. Earlier research on norm deviation and counterfactual thinking focused on intrapersonal norms, generally consisting in routine or frequency-based norms defining usual or common courses of action. For example, in a series of experiments [5] participants were presented with a scenario where a man had a car accident after having changed his usual way back home from work or, similarly, after having left work earlier than usual. When thinking about these scenarios, participants tended to generate counterfactuals such as: “If the man had followed his usual route home...” or “If the man had stayed at work until the usual leaving time... the accident would not have happened”. Routine-breaking behaviours are easy to detect and counterfactual thinking hypothetically restores the “normal” pattern to the desired outcome. By focusing on these norm-deviating behaviours and events, however, people also tend to overestimate their importance, thus ignoring or undervaluing other possible factors that contributed to the actual outcome.

More recently, research on counterfactual thinking has extended attention to the influence of social norms on counterfactual generation. Social norms regard stereotypical expectations about individuals or social groups and their behaviour (e.g., gender roles). In a study by Catellani, Alberici and Milesi [6], participants were presented with a scenario where a woman had a car breakdown and asked for a lift from a male stranger, who eventually abused her. In this case, participants focused their counterfactuals on the woman’s decision to accept a lift from a stranger, generating counterfactuals such as “If only she had not accepted a lift from a stranger, she would not

have been raped”. Given the socially accepted reference norm of “not accepting lifts from strangers”, participants perceived the woman’s behaviour as anomalous and this triggered counterfactual thinking.

Both intrapersonal norm-based and social norm-based counterfactuals can lead to biased causal judgments, as they lead to focus attention on a single element of the actual event, instead of considering the whole situation. This biasing effect of reference norms evoked by counterfactual thinking can be strategically used by politicians to make such norms more salient in the minds of their audience, thus affecting their judgment of past events or decisions. Politicians will try to make reference to specific norms in a way that is functional to their discursive goal, which is generally to present a positive image of themselves and their group and a negative one of their adversaries. When talking about a negative event, for example, a politician might use counterfactuals to suggest that it was caused by the violation of a shared expectation or reference norm by one of his or her opponents. Going back to our previous examples, an opposition leader might explain the lack of tax cuts by stressing the fact that the incumbent government has not maintained its commitments (thus violating the social norm of keeping promises made to voters).

### 3 Counterfactual Thinking and Attribution

By focussing the counterfactual antecedent on a given actor, one can put the actor’s behaviour under scrutiny, imagining what would have happened if that specific actor had done something different (e.g., “If *the government* had maintained its commitments, it would have lowered taxes” or “If *the opposition* had supported our policies, we would have lowered taxes”). Past research [7, 8, 9] showed that the target of counterfactual thoughts is more likely to be held responsible for the event changed in the counterfactual. Counterfactuals focusing on a specific target can have significant effects on blame assignment, self- and other-evaluation [10, 11], regret and other related emotions [12, 13]. Focusing on a target makes it more salient in receivers’ minds, enhancing its likelihood to be held responsible for the final outcome. Further research [14,15] also showed that self- and group-protection motives influence the choice of counterfactual targets, as people tend to select targets other than themselves when thinking counterfactually about their failures. In this case, counterfactual thinking is used to prevent attributions of a negative event to oneself, making the role of other people or external factors more salient.

### 4 Counterfactuals in Political Discourse

What happens when counterfactuals are conveyed through interpersonal or public communication? Our research on counterfactual communication in political discourse focused on two main purposes: a) identifying what types of counterfactuals politicians are more likely to evoke; b) assessing what effects these counterfactuals may have on receivers.

In order to understand what kind of counterfactuals are employed by politicians, in a first study we analyzed six televised political programmes [16]. They were broadcast during the 2006 Italian electoral campaign and featured the incumbent Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and the challenging leader Romano Prodi as main guests. Four programmes, broadcast between January, 31 and March, 8 on the main public television channel (RaiUno), had a talk-show format, featuring one of the two leaders (either Berlusconi or Prodi) as the main guest. In all four broadcasts, episodes of the popular TV programme “*Porta a Porta*” (Engl. “*Door to Door*”) the moderator, Bruno Vespa, asked the guest politician a series of general questions, leaving him ample space for answering and exposing his political views without being interrupted. The other two programmes, broadcast on March, 14 and April, 3, had a more strictly regulated electoral debate format, consisting in a face-to-face rhetorical challenge between the two political leaders (as stressed by the title of the programme itself, “*Faccia a Faccia*”, Engl. “*Face to Face*”). Two guest journalists took turns in asking rather specific questions to each leader. Direct interaction between the leaders was practically non-existent, and further interventions of the journalists consisted mainly in asking the candidates to respect the time limit given for their reply.

The broadcasts were video-recorded, fully transcribed, and then analyzed by two independent coders. Both explicit and implicit counterfactuals were identified. Counterfactuals can be expressed in discourse either explicitly, through conditional sentences (“*if... then*”), or implicitly. In this case, a series of linguistic markers may serve as counterfactual cues, that is, they may signal the presence of a counterfactual [17, 18, 19, 20]. These markers include conjunctions, adverbs, and adverbial phrases introducing scenarios that never occurred in reality (e.g., *at least, otherwise, without, though*) or expectations that were not met (e.g., *even, still, instead*). Once all counterfactuals were identified, implicit counterfactuals were turned into explicit form. For example, the sentence “*The Euro was introduced too quickly, without taking the necessary precautions*” was turned into “*If the necessary precautions had been taken in introducing the Euro, the transition would have been better*”. Then, counterfactuals were coded according to a series of criteria, specified below. All examples reported here are either in their original explicit form or in the reformulated explicit one, based on original implicit counterfactuals.

a) The *speaker* who generated the counterfactual sentence, either the *incumbent government leader* (Silvio Berlusconi) or the *challenging coalition leader* (Romano Prodi).

b) The *target* on which the counterfactual antecedent was focused, that is the person who might have behaved differently in order to obtain a different outcome from the actual one. Counterfactuals in our corpus were divided into those focusing on the *government* (e.g., “*If the government had regulated more strictly the transition of prices from the lira to the Euro, things would have been better*”), on the *opposition* (e.g., “*If the opposition had not thwarted the government’s efforts...*”), and on *others*, including political actors and events of the national or international scene (e.g., “*If the terrorist attacks of September 11th had not happened...*”). As previously discussed, several studies showed that focusing counterfactuals on a specific target makes it more likely that the target is considered responsible for the event. We expected

politicians to vary the counterfactual target in a way that might be functional to avoid their being blamed for a negative event and to shift responsibility for these events onto others.

c) The *direction* of the change hypothesized in each counterfactual, distinguishing between *upward* counterfactuals, in which it is imagined how things might have been better (e.g., “*If I had had 51% of the votes, reforms would have been passed much more quickly*”), and *downward* counterfactuals, in which it is imagined how things might have been even worse (e.g., “*If the government hadn’t increased minimal pensions, things would have been worse*”). Research has shown that, in general, upward counterfactuals are more likely to be generated than downward ones [21, 22, 23, 24]. However, downward counterfactuals may also be frequent when the aim is to reduce the perceived negativity of the event one is thinking of, or speaking about [25, 26]. We expected that this would be the case of politicians of the incumbent government justifying their results (or lack of).

d) The *controllability* of the behaviour cited in the counterfactual antecedent, distinguishing between *controllable* counterfactuals, in which a behaviour under the target’s control is imagined (e.g., “*If the opposition had voted in favour of this law...*”) and *uncontrollable* counterfactuals, in which a behaviour out of the target’s control is evoked (e.g., “*If I could have counted on more financial resources...*”). Counterfactuals focused on controllable behaviours are more frequent than counterfactuals focused on uncontrollable behaviours [27, 28, 29, 30]. Focusing attention on fortuitous external circumstances that are beyond someone’s control can be used to reduce responsibility attribution to the counterfactual target, by implying that he or she could not really have behaved differently in that situation. Accordingly, we expected that politicians would strategically use counterfactual controllability to reduce their responsibility for negative events.

The length of the two politicians’ interventions in the analyzed programmes was very similar. Berlusconi’s utterances globally amounted to 40589 words and Prodi’s utterances to 40116 words. This balance in the length of the two politicians’ utterances was very likely a consequence of the already mentioned strictly regulated format of the programmes we analyzed. Overall, the analysis of the politicians’ utterances revealed the presence of a relevant number ( $N = 194$ ) of counterfactuals. The two leaders, Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi, generated a comparable number of counterfactuals (45.9% vs. 54.1% of the respective total utterances), indicating no significant differences in counterfactual generation between the two speakers. Moreover, the frequency of each type of counterfactual in the whole corpus of counterfactual sentences used by politicians in the recorded programmes was analyzed.

First of all, the government was the most frequent target (53.1% of counterfactual sentences), followed by the opposition (27.8%) and by other political actors (19.1%). These results are consistent with past research on political discourse in general, since the performance of the incumbent government is usually one of the main issues on which both politicians’ and citizens’ attention is focused during electoral campaigns [31]. As regards the other characteristics of counterfactual thoughts, upward counterfactuals were more frequent than downward counterfactuals (74.7% vs. 25.3%),

respectively): politicians were much more inclined to produce a hypothetical scenario with a better outcome than the real one (e.g., “*If Berlusconi had carried out reforms in the country’s general interest, the process of growth wouldn’t have been arrested*”) rather than a worse one. Finally, counterfactuals focused on controllable behaviours (76.8%) prevailed over counterfactuals focused on uncontrollable ones (23.2%). In most cases counterfactuals embedded in the politicians’ speeches included reference to behaviours that were evidently under control of their actors (e.g., “*If the government had supported the private enterprise system, it would have been able to make more investments*”) rather than uncontrollable ones. These results are consistent with what was found by previous research as regards the categories of counterfactuals that tend to prevail in spontaneous counterfactual generation in various domains.

Through the application of hierarchical log-linear models, we were able to analyze the interaction of the various counterfactual features (target, direction, and controllability), in order to identify the most frequent combinations of characteristics in politicians’ counterfactuals.

First of all, politicians showed a marked tendency to employ *upward, controllable* counterfactuals that targeted *their adversaries*. For example, Berlusconi stated that “*If Prodi had defended Italy’s interests, things would have been better*”. Or, similarly, Prodi stated that “*If Berlusconi had carried out reforms in the country’s general interest, the process of growth wouldn’t have been stopped*”. As mentioned above, previous research has shown that the targets of upward controllable counterfactuals are more likely to be perceived as responsible of negative events [8, 9]. Evidently, the leaders employed these types of counterfactuals as a way of charging their adversary with the responsibility for the negative events they were discussing.

*Upward uncontrollable* counterfactuals that targeted themselves (and not their adversaries) were also used by the two politicians. In this case, leaders could not use counterfactuals to shift responsibility to their adversaries, but instead they tried to put forward the idea that better conditions were basically impossible to obtain. For example, Berlusconi said: “*If the government had been able to contrast the negative actions of the Left in just five years, things would have been better*”. In his turn, Prodi said: “*If our party had had the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as we proposed, we would have had a consistent foreign policy within the Parliament now*”.

Opposite to *upward* ones, *downward controllable* counterfactuals were more frequently focused on the speakers themselves than on their adversaries. In this case, the purpose of the speaker was to highlight the positive results of his own actions, by comparing them with hypothetical failures that would have otherwise occurred. For example, Berlusconi stated: “*If the government had not increased the minimal pensions, things would have been worse*.”

To conclude, results showed that counterfactuals are rather frequent in the political discourse (in either an implicit or an explicit form) and that some types of counterfactuals are generally more frequent than others. Most importantly, however, the results show what specific types of counterfactuals are preferably employed by politicians either to attack their adversaries or to defend themselves.

## 5 The Effects of Counterfactual Defensive Statements on Citizens

After finding out how politicians use counterfactual messages in political debates, our aim was to analyze the effects of these kind of messages on the citizens' opinions and judgments about politicians, in order to understand whether using counterfactual messages is an effective strategy or not.

To do so, we created several different versions of a fictional interview scenario, manipulating its content across experimental conditions in a series of studies [32]. The text, based on actual political interviews, consisted in a short 1-page exchange between a Prime Minister running for re-election and an interviewer questioning the politician's past job on economic matters. At the end of each version of the interview, we incorporated different kinds of counterfactuals in the politician's final defensive statement, depending on the experimental condition. After reading the text, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire measuring their evaluation of the politician, their responsibility attributions for the negative economic conditions discussed in the interview, and their perception of the politician's personality dimensions. By doing so we were able to assess in a controlled experimental setting whether (and to what extent) counterfactual defences used by politicians in actual televised interviews have an effect on receivers. We expected these judgments to vary depending on some properties of counterfactuals embedded in the politician's defences (i.e., counterfactual target and direction).

### 5.1 Factual versus Counterfactual Defence

In one of the studies, the effects of simple factual defensive statements were compared with those of counterfactual ones, in order to test whether counterfactual messages were more effective in influencing receivers' responsibility attributions and evaluation of the defending politician. In the manipulated text the politician either blamed the opposition 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*"). Participants gave better evaluation ratings of the politician in the presence of a counterfactual (instead of factual) defence. Thus, other-blaming counterfactual defence successfully shifted responsibility to the opposition, inducing receivers to think about how things could have been better if *they* (and not the defending politician) had behaved differently. Such results indicated that the use of counterfactual argumentations by politicians actually provide some advantages, particularly when the aim of the speaker is to shift responsibility for a negative event or outcome to someone else, without doing it too explicitly. Psychosocial research on defensive accounts, both in the political and organizational fields [33, 34], indicates that blame avoidance can sometimes backfire, as speakers defending themselves by blaming others tend to be perceived as irresponsible, unreliable and ultimately untrustworthy. Our subsequent studies further investigated this possibility.

## 5.2 Counterfactual Target

In order to investigate whether the counterfactual target used in defensive accounts has a specific effect on receivers' judgments, in another study we tested the effects of counterfactual messages focused on three different targets: a) the politician (e.g., *Surely, things would have been better if I had supported my positions within the coalition with enough decision*); b) the opposition (e.g., *Surely, things would have been better if the opposition had revised some of its ideological stances*); c) international institutions (e.g., *Surely, things would have been better if the international financial organisations had given us more economic aids*). Results showed that counterfactual sentences with the opposition as their target yielded higher evaluations than those where the politicians blamed themselves, whereas blaming the international institutions did not provide any significant benefit over self-blame. This indicated that shifting the blame away is not always sufficient to convince one's audience. What can really make a difference, as previous research on counterfactual reasoning showed, is the choice of a specific external target on which to charge negative outcomes. In this case a proximal and relatively familiar target (the opposition) clearly provided more benefit than a more distant and indefinite one as the international financial institutions.

Looking more closely at how participants perceived politicians' personality, another interesting effect of the counterfactual target in defensive messages was found. In this study, participants evaluated the defending politician not only by giving a general evaluation score, but also by rating the politician on a set of traits representing the two most relevant personality dimensions in the perception of political candidates and leaders [35, 36, 37]. Counterfactual defences blaming external targets (and the opposition in particular) positively influenced the perception of the politician's leadership dimension (i.e., traits like decided, tenacious, and competent), whereas the perception of the politician's morality (i.e., traits like honest, sincere, and trustworthy) was not improved by other-blaming counterfactuals. This might suggest that the advantages deriving from this rhetorical strategy mainly consist in the maintenance or re-enforcement of a positive image of the politician as a strong and assertive leader, even when dealing with a critical situation such as having to defend oneself in a public debate.

## 5.3 Counterfactual Direction

As we have seen above in the analysis of actual political speeches, politicians often use counterfactual comparisons with hypothetical worse situations to put their not-so-positive achievements in a positive light. Does this strategy really have an effect on receivers' judgments of the politician? In another study, we experimentally manipulated the direction of counterfactuals embedded in the same interview scenario used in the previous ones. Participants read a text in which an incumbent politician partially admitted responsibility for the bad economic conditions of the country, using self-focused counterfactuals. There were two different versions of the text. In one version, the text included self-focused counterfactuals in an upward direction, where the politician said for example: "*Surely, things would have been better, if I had supported my position within the coalition with enough decision*". In the second version, the text included self-focused counterfactuals in a

downward direction, where the politician said for example: “*Surely, but things would have been worse, if I had hesitated to support my position within the coalition.*” Results showed that downward counterfactuals lead to a better evaluation of the defending politician than upward counterfactuals. This suggests that downward counterfactuals successfully direct receivers’ attention to a worse scenario, thus making the actual scenario comparatively less negative.

The effectiveness of downward counterfactual defences was further confirmed by results from another study where the ideology of the interviewed politician was also manipulated, asking participants to read and evaluate the self-defence of a politician with their same political orientation (either centre-left or centre-right) or the opposite one (i.e., having centre-left participants evaluating a centre-right politician or vice-versa). A strong *partisan bias* [38] in favour of politicians with matching ideology and against those with opposing ideology was found. Interestingly, however, downward counterfactual defences were still more effective than upward ones, regardless of the speaker’s ideology being similar to that of the participant or not. This suggests that making downward comparisons is a solid rhetorical strategy, which is able to overcome even robust biases in the way we usually make judgments about political leaders and their speeches.

## 6 Conclusion

In our studies, we analyzed the use of counterfactuals in political speeches and their effects on voters’ judgments. Results showed that counterfactuals are quite frequent in political discourse, either in an explicit or implicit form. When accounting for past events and decisions and when discussing their performance as incumbent government leaders, politicians easily tend to shift their focus from what they (or other political actors) actually did to what they (or others) could or should have done instead. These comparisons between reality and its possible alternatives are coherent with politicians’ discursive goals, which generally consist in presenting a positive image of themselves and their party and a negative image of their adversaries. To do so, they take advantage of some features of counterfactual thoughts, especially their relationship with responsibility attribution, for example, when they try to shift blame to their adversaries focusing counterfactuals on them. They also take advantage of what we may call the “consolatory” function of counterfactuals, when they try to mitigate the perception of a negative outcome, making a comparison with a hypothetical worse situation that could have occurred instead of the real one.

Our studies have also shown that this strategic use of counterfactuals does influence the citizens’ perception of politicians and the evaluation of their job. Results showed that the same strategies we found analyzing actual political speeches and debates were able to improve voters’ evaluation of politicians and the perception of their leadership skills.

We hope this line of research on counterfactual communication in politics may turn out to be useful both on a scientific and on a more applied level. On a scientific level, it might help our understanding of how counterfactuals are conveyed in discourse, and whether the effects on cognition, emotion, evaluation and decision making of an audience exposed to counterfactual messages are similar to those produced by

self-generated counterfactuals. On a more applied level, it might help politicians, but also citizens, to become more aware of some subtle and hardly recognized features and effects of political communication.

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