Part 4

The Political and Social Consequences of Communication and Cognition

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Political Communication, Social Cognitive Processes, and Voters' Judgments

PATRIZIA CATELLANI AND MAURO BERTOLOTTI

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 focus on the relations between some subtle and indirect (but widely employed) forms of political communication and the effects they may have on the perception of political candidates. We especially focus on attack and defense communication and on the possibility that using a subtle and indirect communicative strategy such as counterfactual statements (i.e., "If only . . .") may increase the effectiveness of communication. After taking into account some pragmatic features of political communication and its links with impression formation, we briefly review the sociocognitive processes that previous research has shown to be connected to the generation of counterfactual thoughts. We then examine how the use of counterfactuals in attack and defense messages may affect receivers' judgments in the political context.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND IMPRESSION FORMATION

Political communication has been widely investigated in terms of form, content, and discursive function (e.g., Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008). Political attitudes, their formation, change, and 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). In particular, we have little knowledge of the subtle and complex processes through which the media and

politicians can influence citizens' judgments and decisions, including voting choice.

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 (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989; Semin & Fiedler, 1988), 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, 2008) 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 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 realize 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).

Besides being an essential source of information for citizens' decision making, political communication is a form of persuasive communication. In fact, politicians do not simply provide citizens information, but they do it with a purpose (e.g., increasing their own chances of being voted). Such persuasive function of political communication is often very evident, but sometimes it can be more subtle and less easy to discern from the actual informational content. Analyzing the functions of political communication is therefore vital to an understanding of the speakers' communicative intentions and their intended (and actual) effects.

ATTACKS AND DEFENSES IN 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, policy stances, or personal qualities. Second, candidates attack their opponents on personal, party, or policy issues. Third, when attacked by an opponent or the media, candidates defend themselves, responding to external criticism.

Attacks and defenses are not only dialectic exchanges between political actors, but they involve a third and most important actor: the audience. This introduces a further layer of complexity in the pragmatics of political communication, making it the main channel through which impression management is

performed (McGraw, 2003), with both positive and negative results. For example, attacks can sometimes backfire, resulting in more negative judgments of the source rather than of the target of attacks (Carraro, Gawronski, & Castelli, 2010; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989; Roese & Sande, 1993). When exposed to a political attack, such as negative advertising, or criticism during a debate, people do not just ponder over the negative information about the target provided by the source of the attack. They also try to figure out the intent of such negative comment, whether it is an honest opinion or a malicious attempt at putting one's adversary in a negative light. Thereby, they adjust their attitudes toward not only the target, but also the source.

A similar process may turn up when politicians defend themselves from attacks. Research on defensive accounts both in the political and organizational fields (see Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; McGraw, 1991) 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.

Social psychological research has shown that receivers are often able to infer the speaker's motivations from several contextual and conversational cues (Hornsey, Robson, Smith, Esposo, & Sutton, 2008; Wänke, 2007), including subtle ones such as linguistic abstraction (Douglas & Sutton, 2006). Speakers, in turn, can actively adjust their language to make those cues less evident to receivers, thus reducing the probability of negative backlash (for further examples, see the linguistic strategies analyzed by Chapter 3, this volume).

In the political domain 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, leaving their prior attitudes largely unaffected by the persuasive attempt. This process may also result in a less positive evaluation of the speaker. Going back to the previously cited example of a nation facing an economic downturn, citizens can judge a member of the opposition criticizing the current economic outlook as being genuinely concerned for the state of the economy. However, they can also attribute those complaints to a more selfish motivation, such as putting the incumbent government and its current policy in a negative light.

Research on political communication investigated politicians' attempts to use language for their persuasive goals. When facing predicaments that might endanger their reputation or credibility, for example, politicians often resort to

indirect or noncommittal discourse (Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988; Bull, 2008). By doing so, they use several different discursive and communicative strategies (Bull, 2000; Bull & Mayer, 1993) to avoid conflict and to present themselves positively to the audience.

COUNTERFACTUAL COMMUNICATION

Counterfactuals are one of the subtle communication strategies that politicians widely employ in their discourse (Catellani, 2011). Counterfactuals consist in the simulation of alternatives to actual scenarios or events, based on the modification of one or more elements in them (Roese, 1997). They are usually expressed through conditional propositions of the "if . . . then" type (e.g., "If you had taken effective measures to save the country's economy, citizens would be more satisfied with your government"). Counterfactuals may be also conveyed in other linguistic forms that may be brought back to the "if . . . then" type proposition. In this case, they are signaled by the presence of linguistic markers alluding to scenarios that never occurred in reality (e.g., *otherwise*, *though*) or to expectations that have not been met (e.g., *even*, *instead*; Catellani & Milesi, 2001; Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver, & Thompson, 1995; Sanna & Turley-Ames, 2000).

People spontaneously engage in counterfactual thinking when unexpected or undesired events occur. In these cases, they mentally simulate how the final result could have been better (or worse) if some prior event had gone differently. Research on counterfactual thinking showed that the events that are more likely to be counterfactually mutated are those deviating from the subjective *norm* (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), that is a routine or common course of action, such as leaving work at the same time every day or following the usual route to go back home. When something goes wrong (e.g., when a traffic jam or a car accident occurs), routine-breaking behaviors are easily detected, and counterfactual thinking is used to hypothetically restore the *normal* pattern to the desired outcome (e.g., "If I had taken the usual route home, I would not have had a car accident"). Perceived violations of a *social norm* are also likely to trigger counterfactual thinking. Stereotypical expectations about individuals or social groups and their behavior (e.g., gender roles) can become salient when generating hypothetical alternatives to an undesired event (Catellani, Alberici, & Milesi, 2004; Catellani & Milesi, 2005).

By focusing on norm-deviating behaviors and events, people also tend to overestimate their importance, ignoring or undervaluing other possible factors that contributed to the actual outcome. Several studies in social and cognitive psychology have demonstrated that counterfactual thinking is associated to event explanation and responsibility attribution (Markman & Tetlock, 2000; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996; Wells & Gavanski, 1989), as well as evaluations, emotions, and attitudes toward past events (Branscombe, Wohl, Owen, Allison, & N'gbala, 2003; Mandel & Dhami, 2005; Sevdalis & Kokkinaki, 2006; Van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2005). In the study of these phenomena, two characteristics of counterfactuals assume especial relevance, namely, their target and their

direction. The *counterfactual target* is the individual or collective actor whose actions are mutated in the counterfactual antecedent (e.g., "If the *prime minister* had been more efficient . . ." or "If the *opposition* had kept its stance . . ."). The *counterfactual direction* has instead to do with the outcome of the hypothetically mutated antecedent. Such an outcome can be either more positive than the real outcome in *upward counterfactuals* (e.g., "our country would be in a *better* condition now") or more negative than the real outcome in *downward counterfactuals* (e.g., "our country would be in a *worse* condition now").

Past research has shown that the generation of upward counterfactuals leads to perceive the real event as more negative whereas the generation of downward counterfactuals leads to perceive the real event as less negative (Jones & Davis, 1965; Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993; Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995; Sanna, Turley-Ames, & Meier, 1999). Besides, when a person is the target of upward counterfactuals, the same person is more likely to be perceived as responsible of the real event as compared with other actors involved in the event (Markman & Tetlock, 2000; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996; Wells & Gavanski, 1989). The generation of downward counterfactuals is instead associated with positive emotions (Markman et al., 1993; McMullen & Markman, 2000; Medvec et al., 1995; Sanna et al., 1999). When thinking about how things could have gone worse than they did, people usually feel comforted and reassured about their skill and ability to deal with negative situations (a "positive contrast effect"; McMullen, 1997; Roese, 1994).

If these are the consequences of counterfactual thoughts, one may figure out that counterfactuals can be effectively evoked in communication to attack other people and to defend oneself. Using counterfactual communication speakers can provide their audience with an easy and familiar way of explaining complex events (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982), and this may enhance the probability of such an explanation to be understood and agreed upon. As a matter of fact, however, studies on counterfactuals embedded in a communicative context and their effects on receivers' judgments have been scarce so far (Catellani et al., 2004; Tal-Or, Boninger, Poran, & Gleicher, 2004; Wong, 2010). To fill this gap, we carried out a series of studies to investigate the effects of counterfactuals when they are employed in attack and defense communication in the political context.

THE EFFECTS OF COUNTERFACTUAL ATTACKS AND DEFENSES

Factual and Counterfactual Attacks

Counterfactual communication can have some advantages over factual communication. For example, being a form of indirect communication, it may reduce the probability of backlash effect when used in an attack message. Besides, being formulated as hypothetical, counterfactual communication allows speakers to express their point of view without having to demonstrate its empirical foundations. An opposition leader could say "If the government had cut down

on taxes, the national economy would be in a better condition," thus indirectly attacking the government, without going into a detailed explanation of how a proposed policy (i.e., cutting down on taxes) would have led to the desired outcome (i.e., improving the national economy).

In a series of studies (Catellani & Bertolotti, 2013a), we investigated the effect of factual and counterfactual attacks against a politician in an interview scenario. We created several versions of a fictional interview by a journalist to an incumbent prime minister. The interview dealt with the government's interventions on national economy and ended with a final critical statement by the journalist, varying as to attack style and attack dimension. As to the *attack style,* the journalist used either a *factual attack* or a *counterfactual attack*. In the former case, the attack was expressed in a very blunt and straightforward manner (e.g., "You acted incorrectly on the fiscal problem"). In the latter case, the attack was instead expressed in a more subtle manner, 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"). As to the *attack dimension,* both factual and counterfactual attacks were either against the politician's *leadership* (e.g., "You shied away from the fiscal problem") or against the politician's *morality* (e.g., "You misrepresented the problem of taxation burdens"). After reading the interview, participants were asked to evaluate both the politician and the journalist, as well as to judge the journalist's attack indicating how convincing, relevant, intelligent, and polite they found it.

In the case of morality attacks, factual attacks yielded a more negative evaluation of the journalist as compared with counterfactual attacks. Evidently, factual attacks were attributed to the attack source being biased against the politician and ended up with backfiring on the source (see also Carraro et al., 2010; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989; Roese & Sande, 1993). Counterfactual attacks, on the other hand, did not trigger such negative reaction against the source and succeeded in negatively affecting the evaluation of the target politician. As already discussed in this volume (see Chapters 10 and 11), when evaluating others, people tend to focus on the morality dimension. This is true also in the political domain (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008), where citizens are understandably concerned about their representatives' reliability and trustworthiness. Consistently, we found morality-based attacks to have a stronger effect than leadership-attacks, but only when they were made in indirect, counterfactual terms.

These results provide some insight on how citizens perceive attacks against politicians. Negative information about politicians seems to prompt receivers to make inferences about the source's intentions, even when the source is allegedly neutral such as in the case of a journalist. This prevents the more straightforward attacks against politicians to negatively influence receivers' attitudes toward them. Although in principle counterfactual attacks are less conclusive than direct attacks, as they are formulated in "if . . . then" conditional clauses, they turn out to be more effective. Thanks to their indirectness, they more easily avoid the backlash commonly elicited by attacks.

Factual and Counterfactual Defenses

Like attacks, defenses may also be expressed in a more or less direct way. In another series of studies (Catellani & Bertolotti, 2013b), we investigated the effect of factual and 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 one-page exchange between a journalist and a former prime minister running for reelection, discussing the current state of the economy. After a couple of 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 and their responsibility attribution for the negative economic conditions discussed in the interview. We expected these judgments to vary depending on the politician's defense.

In one of the studies, we tested two opposite defensive scenarios. In one case, the politician blamed the opposition for the government's alleged insufficient results, a defense that may be defined as *denial-attack* (based on McGraw's [1990] typology of political defensive statements). In the other case, the politician admitted that the government's results were not positive, a defense that may be defined as *concession*. Both factual and counterfactual formulations of the two defensive strategies were used, thus providing participants in the different experimental conditions with factual denial-attack (e.g., "The opposition did not revise its ideological stance and it did not keep members of its extreme wing under control"), counterfactual denial-attack (e.g., "Things would have been better, if the opposition had revised its ideological stance and if it had kept members of its extreme wing under control"), factual concession (e.g., "I did not state my position firmly enough and I did not fully implement my own ideas"), or counterfactual concession (e.g., "Things would have been better, if I had stated my position firmly enough and if I had fully implemented my own ideas").

On the one hand, one would expect a concession to be hardly an effective way of defending from criticism. On the other hand, politicians who openly blame others for their poor results risk being perceived as more interested in promoting themselves than working for their country's good. In both cases, our expectation was that politicians using counterfactual statements would defend themselves more effectively than politicians using factual statements.

Results showed that, compared with participants in the factual defense conditions, participants in the counterfactual defense conditions attributed less responsibility for the bad economic results to the politician and overall evaluated the politician better. This was particularly evident in the case of denial-attacks. Focusing counterfactuals on the opposition effectively shifted responsibility attribution away from the defending politician, inducing receivers to think of how things might have been better if someone else (the opposition, in this case) had behaved differently. These findings indicate that counterfactual communication may adequately serve the aim of shifting responsibility for a negative event or outcome on to someone else, as compared with more explicit

modes of communication. As in the case of attacks, also in the case of denial-attacks, receivers are not likely to accept argumentations coming from a source too blatantly blaming other people for their faults. Counterfactuals may help disguising the speaker's communicative intention, thus making receivers less vigilant and, potentially, more easily persuadable (Brehm, 2000; see also Chapter 3, this volume).

Upward and Downward Counterfactual Defenses

In a further study, we varied the direction of the counterfactual defense and compared self-focused *upward* counterfactuals (e.g., "Things would have been *better*, if I had stated my position firmly enough and if I had fully implemented my own ideas") with self-focused *downward* counterfactuals (e.g., "Things would have been *worse*, if I had hesitated to state my position firmly enough and if I had not fully implemented my own ideas"). According to McGraw's (1990) typology of defensive statements, we thus compared a *concession*, in which the person partially admits responsibility for the negative event, with a *justification*, in which the person tries to reduce the seriousness of the event.

As mentioned above, whereas the generation of upward counterfactuals increases the perceived negativity of the actual event, the generation of downward counterfactuals decreases it (Jones & Davis, 1965; Markman et al., 1993; Medvec et al., 1995; Sanna et al., 1999). When used as a defense, comparing an actual negative outcome with an even more negative hypothetical one can presumably put the actual outcome in a more positive light, through a contrast effect. In other words, downward, self-focused defenses can be used to provide the audience a negative, albeit purely hypothetical, comparison term. This would in turn induce the audience to be somewhat indulgent toward the actual results one is accounting for, as a more negative element is made salient.

We therefore expected downward counterfactuals to be a useful defensive strategy and our results confirmed that self-focused downward counterfactuals lead to a better evaluation of the defending politician than self-focused upward counterfactuals. A defense based on downward counterfactuals successfully directs 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 person held responsible for it.

Individual Differences

One may wonder whether the effectiveness of indirect messages in political communication varies according to some characteristics of the receiver. In our analysis, we took into account two characteristics of the receivers that might interfere with political communication, namely, ideology and political sophistication. The first may vary receivers' motivation to listen and accept what politicians say, whereas the second may vary receivers' ability to understand politicians and interpret their purposes.

In some of our studies on counterfactual attacks and defenses, we manipulated the ideology of politicians being attacked or defending themselves and measured the ideology of the participants (Catellani & Bertolotti, 2013a, 2013b). Consistent with the widespread phenomenon of *partisan bias* (see Bartels, 2002), we found that participants gave a better evaluation of politicians sharing their ideology. However, no interaction with either attack or defense style was found. For example, downward counterfactual defenses turned out to be more effective than upward ones regardless of the ideological similarity or dissimilarity between participants and the politician.

We also investigated (Bertolotti, Catellani, Douglas, & Sutton, 2013) 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 et al., 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 defenses on the perception of one personality dimension in particular, that is, the morality of politicians. Participants with a low level of political sophistication attributed higher morality to the politician employing a downward counterfactual defense ("Things would have been worse, if I . . ."), whereas participants with a high level of political sophistication attributed higher morality to the politician employing an upward counterfactual defense ("Things would have been better, 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 politician 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 let 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 defense is recognized as not having a deceptive intent and indicates that the politician is more willing to take responsibility for

past actions. Sophisticated citizens, in other words, base their judgments not only on how politicians present their results, but also on their understanding of politicians' communicative intention in presenting them.

CONCLUSIONS

Results from our research contribute 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 counterfactual attacks and defenses, 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 to be an advantage especially in the case of 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 receivers with a high level of political sophistication are able to make complex inferences based on politicians' communication. They recognize the persuasive purpose of politicians' messages and accordingly make leadership and morality attributions. Receivers 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 citizens lack familiarity with political communication rules), politicians are able to pursue their communicative agendas without citizens being fully aware of them. Doing so, they can break the rules of the collaborative inference games that provide meaning and context to communication, driving citizens toward the desired attributions and judgments (Fiedler, 2007).

These results also contribute to our understanding of the social factors influencing epistemic vigilance in communication (see also Chapter 8, this volume). In general, political communication has little effect on people's beliefs (and therefore on their attitudes), as citizens approach it with caution or even suspicion. Counterfactual communication may be used to bypass such preemptive filter, as its "if . . . then" formulation does not explicitly request receivers to believe the content of a statement. Receivers may perceive counterfactual communication coming from politicians as a harmless invitation to engage in hypothetical considerations, rather than a socially intrusive persuasive attempt.

Future research may investigate whether the same effects of counterfactual attacks and defenses can be found also beyond the political realm taken into account here. As we stated in the introduction, attacks and defenses play

a particularly relevant role in political impression formation and management. However, accounting for one's past behavior, presenting oneself in a positive light (or conversely presenting someone else in a negative light), and more generally, trying to exert an influence on other peoples' impressions are common communicative tasks in a range of social contexts and situations. We could reasonably expect the features of counterfactual communication we analyzed in the political context to have at least partially similar effects in other contexts. At the same time, the pragmatic constraints that differentiate the political context from other contexts should be taken into account because they may influence the cognitive and social processes triggered by counterfactual communication. For example, although a counterfactual defense based on denial of responsibility by shifting it on to the adversaries was evidently effective in the context of political public speaking, it might not be equally effective in more informal, interpersonal communication. To conclude, thanks to the present and possible future developments, the study of counterfactual communication can contribute to expanding our knowledge of the complex and multifaceted relations between communication, individual cognitive processes, and the social context.

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