

# Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing

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## Counterfactuals in the Social Context: The Case of Political Interviews and Their Effects

On April 6, 2009, a tremendous earthquake struck Abruzzo, a central southern Italian region. In the following days, the earthquake became one of the main issues of political discussion in Italy. On April 30, Antonio Di Pietro, one of the major antagonists of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, stated in a public declaration, among other things: "All these deaths could have been avoided, if only the government had listened to those who warned of the imminent danger". This statement is an example of counterfactual communication, evidently aimed at attacking the government's performance.

For some time now, my colleagues and I have been studying how politicians employ counterfactuals in political discourse, comparing what (allegedly) happened with what might (or should) have happened. Our basic assumption is that politicians can use counterfactual communication to promote their own representations of past political events, to defend themselves, to attack their adversaries, and, more generally, to influence citizens' representation of political reality and of politicians.

In particular, we focus on two main questions: a) What counterfactuals do politicians use in discourse? b) What effects do these counterfactuals have on voters? In addressing these questions, we build on what previous psychological research has shown regarding counterfactual thinking and its relations with other psychological processes, such as causal reasoning, emotional reactions, and decision making. In the two following sections, I will briefly deal with the functions and the activation conditions of counterfactual thinking. Taking these notions as a background, I will then describe the method and the results of two studies aimed at investigating counterfactual communication in the political context, as well as its effects on citizens' evaluations.

## I. The Functions of Counterfactual Thinking

Previous research has shown that counterfactual thinking serves several psychological functions, which may come down to three main ones:<sup>1</sup>

*Affective function.* Counterfactuals influence emotional reactions. For example, after being involved in a car accident, thinking that things might have gone better (an *upward* counterfactual) is likely to trigger a negative emotion such as discomfort or regret. On the contrary, thinking that things could have gone worse (a *downward* counterfactual) is likely to trigger a positive emotion like relief. This seems to be due to a “contrast effect”.<sup>2</sup> An outcome, even a negative one, triggers more positive emotions when an even less desirable outcome is made salient to one’s mind. After a negative event, people have been shown to spontaneously generate more upward than downward counterfactuals.<sup>3</sup> However, people may also react to the spontaneous upcoming of upward counterfactuals through intentionally focusing on the generation of downward counterfactuals. Actually, the more frequent generation of downward counterfactuals after an unsuccessful outcome has been shown to distinguish optimistic from pessimistic people.<sup>4</sup>

*Preparatory function.* Besides cognitively restructuring the past, counterfactuals “construct” the future, that is, they can favor the preparation of future actions. Past research has shown that the best way to plan an action consists in mentally simulating both the process (i.e., the various steps) leading to an expected goal and the goal itself.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, counterfactual thinking is a form of “post hoc” simulation, including both the process leading to an expected outcome and the outcome itself. Thus, it may serve as “correction” of an un-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Neal J. Roesse, “The Functional Basis of Counterfactual Thinking”, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66/1994, pp. 805–818.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Norbert Schwarz/Herbert Bless, “Constructing Reality and Its Alternatives: Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Social Judgment”, in: Leonard L. Martin/Abraham Tesser (eds.), *The Construction of Social Judgment*, Hillsdale 1992, pp. 217–245.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Keith D. Markman/Igor Gavanski/Steven J. Sherman/Matthew N. McMullen, “The Mental Simulation of Better and Worse Possible Worlds”, in: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 29/1993, pp. 87–109.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lawrence J. Sanna, “Defensive Pessimism, Optimism, and Simulating Alternatives: Some Ups and Downs of Prefactual and Counterfactual Thinking”, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71/1996, pp. 1020–1036.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lien B. Pham/Shelley E. Taylor, “From Thought to Action: Effects of Process- Versus Outcome-Based Mental Simulations on Performance”, in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25/1999, pp. 250–260.

satisfying past outcome, increasing the probability of getting a more satisfying outcome in case similar events occur again in the future. For example, Morris and Moore demonstrated that, in a training program including a series of virtual landings, pilots who had generated counterfactuals regarding their past performances offered better performances than those who had not generated counterfactuals.<sup>6</sup>

Some counterfactuals have been shown to serve a preparative function better than others. This is the case for upward counterfactuals as compared with downward counterfactuals.<sup>7</sup> In stating that things might have gone better if one or another element of a past event had been different, upward counterfactuals stress the negativity of the actual event, but at the same time they may serve a preparatory function, suggesting what might be done in the future to increase the possibility for similar events to have a better outcome. The subtractive versus additive nature of counterfactuals has also been shown to matter with regard to their preparatory function. When we generate a *subtractive* counterfactual we remove an element which was present in the real scenario. For example: "If the government *hadn't* approved that budget, the economic conditions of the country would be better now". By contrast, when we generate an *additive* counterfactual we introduce elements that were not present in the real scenario. For example: "If the government *had* taken special measures to reduce the inflation rate, the economic conditions of the country would be better now". While subtractive counterfactuals are constrained to what already happened, additive counterfactuals are creative regarding what happened in the past, introducing new elements that were not part of reality in the past but might become real in the future. As such, they have been shown to contribute to preparing future action better than subtractive counterfactuals.<sup>8</sup>

*Explanatory function.* Previous research has shown that generating and being exposed to counterfactuals regarding a given event may have consequences in terms of the explanation of the event and the perception of the event's actors, especially the attribution of responsibility and blame. The actor focused on as the person who might have changed the outcome if he or she had acted differently is often considered responsible for the obtained

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Michael W. Morris/Paul C. Moore, "The Lessons We (Don't) Learn: Counterfactual Thinking and Organizational Accountability after a Close Call", in: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 45/2000, pp. 737–765.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lawrence J. Sanna/Kandi J. Turley-Ames, "Counterfactual Intensity", in: *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 30/2000, pp. 273–296.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Roese, "Basis".

outcome.<sup>9</sup> For example, after listening to the above-mentioned counterfactual by Antonio Di Pietro, one might think that the government was at least partly responsible for the terrible consequences of the earthquake. In fact, when faced with a negative event, people have been shown to be more likely to attribute counterfactuals to individual actors rather than to external conditions, even when these conditions may have played a relevant role in causing the event.<sup>10</sup> Focusing attention on actors who are perceived as capable of exerting some control on the event, instead of on fortuitous or uncontrollable external circumstances, would well serve the consolatory function of convincing people that the same negative event could be prevented from happening again in the future.

## II. Reference to Norms in Counterfactual Thinking

What elements of the real event are more likely to trigger counterfactuals? According to the so-called *Norm Theory*,<sup>11</sup> elements perceived as “exceptional” are more likely to trigger counterfactual thinking because “normal” alternatives are easily available to the person’s mind. But what are “normal” alternatives or, in other words, what norms do we refer to when generating counterfactuals?

Early research on counterfactual thinking was mainly focused on laboratory studies where participants were presented with events in which exceptionality consisted in deviation from routine. For example, a man has a car accident after having changed his usual way back home from work. Faced with this event, participants were likely to generate the counterfactual “If the man had followed his usual route home, the accident would not have happened”.<sup>12</sup> More recently, research has been extended to more ecological, that

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Michelle R. Nario-Redmond/Nyla R. Branscombe, “It Could Have Been Better or It Might Have Been Worse: Implications for Blame Assignment in Rape Cases”, in: *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 18/1996, pp. 347–366; Gary L. Wells/Igor Gavanski, “Mental Simulation of Causality”, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56/1989, pp. 161–169.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. John I. McClure/Denis J. Hilton/Robbie M. Sutton, “Judgments of Voluntary and Physical Causes in Causal Chains: Probabilistic and Social Functionalist Criteria for Attributions”, in: *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 37/2007, pp. 879–901.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Daniel Kahneman/Dale T. Miller, “Norm Theory: Comparing Reality to Its Alternatives”, in: *Psychological Review*, 93/1986, pp. 136–153.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Daniel Kahneman/Amos Tversky, “The Simulation Heuristic”, in: Daniel Kahneman/Paul Slovic/Amos Tversky (eds.), *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, New York 1982, pp. 201–208.

is, less artificial, scenarios and this has led to focusing attention on how counterfactuals may be triggered not only by deviations from routine-based norms, but also by deviations from social-based norms, such as stereotypical expectations regarding the behavior of people involved in a given event.

Let us consider the following event. A woman who usually goes to work by train decides to go by car for a change. Her car has a breakdown and she accepts a lift from a male stranger who afterwards rapes her. Faced with this event, a juror might generate a counterfactual like: "If only she had taken the train, things would have been different". In this case, the reference norm would be a *routine-based* or *intrapersonal norm*. The woman's behavior is compared with her own standard behavior, and the element showing low consistency with this standard is mutated in the counterfactual.<sup>13</sup>

However, in a socially embedded context the actor of an event may be perceived not only as an individual, but also as a member of a given social category (for example, a woman, an old person, or a gipsy). As a consequence, the actor's behavior may be compared not only with intrapersonal norms, but also with social norms triggered by the social category the actor belongs to. Thus, faced with the same event, our juror might also generate a counterfactual like: "If only she had not accepted a lift from a stranger, things would have been different". In this case, the reference norm would be a *stereotype-based* or *social norm*. The woman's behavior is compared with the perceived standard behavior of a (non-raped) woman, which includes not accepting lifts from strangers.<sup>14</sup>

Trying to assess what kind of norm violations are more likely to trigger counterfactuals is especially relevant if we take into account the already mentioned relationships between counterfactual thinking, responsibility attribution, and blame. In the above example, a juror generating the counterfactual "If the woman had not accepted the lift ..." is more likely to perceive her as responsible for what happened, than a juror who did not generate the same counterfactual. Some research has indeed demonstrated that reference to social norms (such as the one of not accepting lifts from strangers) may in-

<sup>13</sup> Cf., among others, Karl C. Klauer/Thomas Jacobsen/Gerd Migulla, "Counterfactual Processing: Test of a Hierarchical Correspondence Model", in: *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 25/1995, pp. 577-595; Gary L. Wells/Brian R. Taylor/John W. Turtle, "The Undoing of Scenarios", in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53/1987, pp. 421-430.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., among others, Patrizia Catellani/Augusta I. Alberici/Patrizia Milesi, "Counterfactual Thinking and Stereotypes: The Nonconformity Effect", in: *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 34/2004, pp. 421-436; Patrizia Catellani/Patrizia Milesi, "Counterfactuals, Stereotypes, and Suspicion", in preparation.

fluence jurors' judgments even if these norms do not have any correspondence in legal norms.<sup>15</sup>

So far, we have made reference to how single individuals generate counterfactuals, but counterfactuals may also be conveyed through interpersonal and public communication. The dynamics underlying counterfactual communication have not been widely investigated so far.<sup>16</sup> Our research on counterfactuals in political discourse is aimed at deepening our knowledge of how counterfactuals are employed in communication and what effects they have on receivers.

Our basic assumption is that, through the evocation of given *counterfactual* scenarios a speaker is likely to enhance the salience of given reference norms to the receiver's mind, and thus to influence the receiver's perception of the *real* scenarios. For example, through the above-mentioned sentence "Things would be better if the government had listened to warnings of danger", Antonio Di Pietro presumably made the reference norm "a government should listen to warnings of danger" salient to the mind of the citizens. Very likely, he also highlighted that the government did not respect a shared norm, and thus enhanced the likelihood that the government would be held responsible for the negative outcome of the event the counterfactual referred to. In other words, through counterfactuals speakers may communicate that shared expectations or reference norms have been violated. In this way, those norms that might otherwise have gone unnoticed are made more salient to receivers' minds. For example, when reconstructing past political events, politicians may compare the actual events with a variety of possible alternatives. Very likely, politicians will choose one or another alternative in a way that may be functional to their discursive goals, among which are the defense of a positive image of themselves and their group as well as the attack against their adversaries.<sup>17</sup> For example, in replying to Di Pietro's "counterfactual attack" regarding the government's inadequate reaction to the danger of an earthquake, Berlusconi might employ a "counterfactual defense" by saying something like: "If the opposition had taken care of the interests of

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Patrizia Catellani/Patrizia Milesi, "Juries in Italy: Legal and Extra-Legal Norms in Sentencing", in: Martin F. Kaplan/Ana M. Martin (eds.), *Understanding World Jury Systems through Social Psychological Research*, New York 2006, pp. 125–145.

<sup>16</sup> An exception is Nurit Tal-Or/David S. Boninger/Amir Poran/Faith Gleicher, "Counterfactual Thinking as a Mechanism in Narrative Persuasion", in: *Human Communication Research*, 30/2004, pp. 301–328.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. William L. Benoit/Joseph R. Blaney/P.M. Pier, "Acclaiming, Attacking, and Defending: A Functional Analysis of Nominating Convention Keynote Speeches, 1960–1996", in: *Political Communication*, 17/2004, pp. 61–84.



the country, they would have made the government action easier". In this way, Berlusconi would suggest that the opposition had violated the widely shared reference norm according to which "politicians should act in the interests of the country", thus shifting the responsibility for the negative consequences of the event from himself to the opposition.

### III. Our Research

Our research on counterfactual communication in political discourse has two main aims: a) identifying what types of counterfactuals politicians are more likely to evoke in their political discourses; b) assessing what effects these counterfactuals may have on receivers. To reach these two aims we adopt two different research approaches in an integrated way, both of them widely employed in social psychological research. The first is an ecological and qualitative research approach. We look for counterfactuals embedded in actual political discourses and interviews, we code them according to a series of criteria, and finally we analyze them through the application of non-parametrical statistic analyses. Building on the results of these qualitative studies, we develop a series of experimental studies. They consist in the creation of a research setting in which different versions of fictitious political discourses and interviews, including different types of counterfactuals, are individually submitted to separate groups of participants. After reading the text, participants are required to answer a series of questions in order to assess the degree of persuasiveness of what they have read and their perception of the speaker.

In the remaining sections of this paper, I will briefly outline the research questions and the results of two studies, one for each of the main aims pursued by our research program. The first study consists in the analysis of counterfactuals embedded in a sample of actual political discourses by the two leaders who were competing in the 2006 Italian general election, Romano Prodi and Silvio Berlusconi.<sup>18</sup> The second study consists of an experimental simulation, including fictitious political discourses, and aims at assessing the effects on receivers of counterfactuals employed by politicians.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Patrizia Catellani/Venusia Covelli, "Group-Protective Bias in Counterfactual Communication: The Case of Politicians", submitted.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Patrizia Catellani/Mauro Bertolotti/Venusia Covelli, "Counterfactuals in Political Interviews: The Effects of Self-Defending Through 'If Only ...' Thoughts", in preparation.

These two studies offer examples of the theoretical and methodological approach adopted by social psychology when studying counterfactual thinking in applied domains.

#### IV. Counterfactuals in Political Discourse

In the two months preceding the 2006 Italian general elections, we recorded and fully transcribed a number of televised pre-electoral broadcastings with Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi as main guests. Transcribed texts were then analyzed by two independent coders, who looked for the presence of counterfactuals, in either an explicit or an implicit form. Counterfactuals can be expressed in discourse explicitly, through the use of hypothetical periods of unreality. More often, however, counterfactuals are conveyed implicitly, through linguistic indicators alluding to scenarios that have never occurred in reality. Linguistic markers of counterfactuals include, among others, adverbs such as *even*, *at least*, *without*, or *besides*.<sup>20</sup> In our study, implicit counterfactuals were turned into their explicit form (e.g., the sentence “The euro was introduced too quickly, *without* taking the necessary precautions” was turned into “If the necessary precautions had been taken, things would have been better”).

After having identified all counterfactuals, the two coders independently classified them according to a series of criteria, the main ones being listed below:

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

b) The *target* on which the counterfactual antecedent is focused, distinguishing among antecedents focused on the *government* (e.g., “If the government had checked more strictly the transformation of prices from lira into euro, things would have been better”), the *opposition* (e.g., “If the opposition had not thwarted the government ...”), and *others*, including political actors and events of the national or international political/economic context (e.g., “If the terrorist attacks of September 11 had not happened ...”).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Patrizia Catellani/Patrizia Milesi, “Counterfactuals and Roles: Mock Victims’ and Perpetrators’ Accounts of Judicial Cases”, in: *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31/2001, pp. 247–264; Christopher G. Davis/Darrin R. Lehman/Camille B. Wortman/Roxane C. Silver/Suzanne C. Thompson, “The Undoing of Traumatic Life Events”, in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21/1995, pp. 109–124; Sanna/Turley-Ames, “Intensity”.

c) The *direction* of the change imagined in each counterfactual, distinguishing between *upward* counterfactuals, in which it is imagined how things might have gone better (e.g., “If I had had 51 % of the votes, reforms would have been made much more quickly”), and *downward* counterfactuals, in which it is imagined how things might have gone worse (e.g., “If the government hadn’t increased minimal pensions, things would have been worse”).

d) The *structure* of the counterfactual antecedents, distinguishing between *additive* counterfactuals, in which an antecedent is hypothetically added in the counterfactual scenario (e.g. “If the government had given the needed resources to the local authority ...”), and *subtractive* counterfactuals, in which an antecedent of the real scenario is hypothetically deleted in the counterfactual one (e.g., “If the euro had not been introduced ...”).

e) The *controllability* of the behavior quoted in the counterfactual antecedent, distinguishing between *controllable* counterfactuals, in which behavior under the target’s control is imagined (e.g., “If the opposition had voted in favor of this law ...”) and *uncontrollable* counterfactuals, in which behavior out of the target’s control is imagined (e.g., “If I could have counted on more financial resources ...”).

All counterfactuals were also coded according to other criteria, such as whether they appeared in a text following the intervention of either a journalist or the opposing leader, or whether they were generated during a given program instead of another. Here, however, we will not take into account these further criteria, because they turned out not to have a strong influence on the frequency and type of counterfactuals generated by the two leaders. As already mentioned, both the identification of counterfactuals in the texts and their classification were carried out separately by two coders, who turned out to have a high agreement rate. Any discrepancy was resolved through discussion.

Overall, our analyses showed that both Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi employed a consistent number of counterfactuals in their discourses (periods including counterfactuals amounted to 6 % of the global number of periods in the texts analyzed), in either an explicit (27 %) or an implicit (73 %) form. Besides, analyses carried out separately on each coding criterion showed that some categories of counterfactuals were more frequent than others, independent of the speaker who generated them. First of all, the government was the most frequent target of the counterfactuals, followed by the opposition and by other political actors. This is not surprising, 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.

As to the other coding criteria, upward counterfactuals prevailed over downward counterfactuals, additive counterfactuals over subtractive counterfactuals, and counterfactuals focused on controllable behaviors over counterfactuals focused on 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.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, more refined analyses of our data (the application of hierarchical log-linear models) allowed us to take into account several coding criteria at the same time (target, direction, controllability, etc.) and to compare the characteristics of counterfactuals employed by the two leaders. Results showed that some combinations of criteria were more frequent than others and that there were significant differences in the counterfactuals employed by the incumbent leader as compared to the challenging leader.

First of all, each leader showed a marked tendency to employ *upward controllable* counterfactuals that targeted his adversary. For example, Berlusconi stated that “If Prodi had defended Italy’s interests, things would have been better” (March 8, 2006). Conversely, Prodi stated that “If Berlusconi had carried out reforms in the country’s general interest, the process of growth wouldn’t have been arrested” (March 7, 2006). 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.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, the two leaders employed these types of counterfactuals as a way of charging their adversary with the responsibility for what was wrong in the country.

Conversely, both leaders employed more *upward uncontrollable* counterfactuals that targeted themselves (and not their adversary). In this case, it is as if the two leaders said that “getting better results was simply impossible for them”. For example, Berlusconi said: “If the government had been able to counter the negative actions of the Left, things would be better now” (March 8, 2006). In his turn, Prodi said: “If our party had had the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as we had proposed, we would have a common foreign politics within Parliament now” (March 7, 2006). *Downward controllable*

<sup>21</sup> Cf., among others, Markman/Gavanski/Sherman/McMullen, “Mental Simulation”; Seymour Epstein/Abigail Lipson/Carolyn Holstein/Eileen Huh, “Irrational Reactions to Negative Outcomes: Evidence for Two Conceptual Systems”, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62/1992, pp. 328–339; Vittorio Girotto/Paolo Legrenzi/Antonio Rizzo, “Event Controllability in Counterfactual Thinking”, in: *Acta Psychologica*, 78/1991, pp. 111–133.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Nario-Redmond/Branscombe, “Blame Assignment”; Wells/Gavanski, “Mental Simulation”.

counterfactuals were also more frequently focused on the speakers themselves than on their adversary. In this case, it is as if the politician said something like: "Had I acted in a different way, things would have been worse". For example, Silvio Berlusconi stated: "If we hadn't intervened on tax evasion with the Budget, the tax system would be worse now" (April 3, 2006).

Other characteristics of counterfactuals, such as their additive or subtractive structure, did not significantly differ as a function of the counterfactual speaker or target, nor were any significant differences found between the leaders as regards the frequency and the characteristics of counterfactuals having other actors as targets.

To conclude, this study offered an overview of how politicians employ counterfactual communication. We found that counterfactuals show up rather frequently in politicians' discourse (in either an implicit or an explicit form) and that some types of counterfactuals are generally more frequent than others. Most importantly, however, we also found that the two politicians preferably employed specific types of counterfactuals to either attack their adversary (upward controllable counterfactuals having their adversaries as target) or to defend themselves (upward uncontrollable or downward controllable counterfactuals having themselves as targets).

## V. The Effects of Counterfactuals Employed by Politicians

Starting from the results of qualitative studies such as the one presented above, we have designed a series of experimental studies in which different versions of fictitious political discourses and interviews are submitted to different groups of participants. These texts vary as to the types of counterfactuals embedded in them in order to assess whether and how far the use of specific counterfactuals may influence the receivers' perception of the politician employing them. It may well be the case that some types of counterfactuals are more effective than others. Besides, counterfactuals may have a differential influence according to some characteristics of the citizens who are exposed to them, such as their degree of political sophistication or their sharing or not sharing the ideology of the speaker.

It should be mentioned that an in-depth investigation of the effects of counterfactual communication requires a number of experimental studies, because only a few independent variables may be taken into account in one single study at the same time. In one of these studies, 203 university students were presented with an excerpt of an interview of a hypothetical incumbent politician. In the interview, a journalist told the politician that he had not

done enough to improve the bad financial conditions of the country. The intervention of the journalist ended with the following sentence: "Voters are skeptical regarding your intervention on public expenses. Many of them think you could have done much more". In his reply, the politician employed some counterfactuals, such as: "Surely, the situation would be better if I had firmly stated my position within the coalition and if I had insisted in putting forward my ideas". Four different versions of the politician's reply were prepared, differing according to the target (either the politician or the adversary) and the direction (either upward or downward) of the counterfactuals embedded in it. For example, the sentences quoted above are examples of *politician-focused upward* counterfactuals. But we also employed examples of *politician-focused downward* counterfactuals such as: "Sure, but the situation would be worse if I had hesitated in stating my position within the coalition and if I had given up my ideas". The remaining versions included *adversary-focused upward* counterfactuals and *adversary-focused downward* counterfactuals. The four versions of the politician's reply were submitted to four different sub-groups of participants.

After reading the interview, all participants were asked to evaluate the politician according to a number of criteria in order to assess whether the evaluations would vary as a function of the characteristics of the counterfactuals employed by the politician. First of all, participants rated the politician with regard to a series of personality traits that past research has shown to be crucial in voters' judgment of political leaders. These traits can be linked back to two larger dimensions: the *leadership* dimension, measured through personality traits such as "dynamic", "energetic", and "decided", and the *morality* dimension, measured through personality traits such as "honest", "loyal", and "sincere". Results showed that participants attributed different traits to the politician according to the different characteristics of the counterfactuals he employed in his reply to the journalist. The politician employing *downward* counterfactuals having himself as target ("the situation would be *worse* if *I* ...") was perceived as more energetic than the politician employing *upward* counterfactuals still having himself as target ("the situation would be *better* if *I* ..."). In both cases the politician was perceived as fairly moral. By contrast, the politician was perceived as less moral, but still very energetic, when he employed upward counterfactuals having the opposition as target ("the situation would be *better* if *they* ...").

Overall, evaluations of the politician were significantly more positive when the politician's reply included downward counterfactuals than when it included upward counterfactuals. These results suggest that politicians, when required to account for a negative outcome of their performance, may

successfully preserve their credibility by stressing how things could have been worse than they actually have been, rather than focusing on what they could have done to get a better outcome. Figuring out a scenario where things “went bad, but could have been worse” seems more rewarding for the incumbent politician than openly recognizing the presence of a negative outcome and figuring out a better scenario. Also, shifting responsibility from themselves to the adversary seems, at least from the point of view of leadership evaluations, a rewarding defensive strategy for a politician.

If the study described above has shown the effects of counterfactual direction on citizens’ judgments, other studies of ours have investigated the effects of other characteristics of the counterfactuals employed by politicians. For example, we observed that politicians employing additive counterfactuals are perceived as more likely to act successfully in the future and as deserving more trust than politicians employing subtractive counterfactuals. As mentioned above, additive counterfactuals serve a preparatory function better than subtractive ones. It is therefore likely that politicians employing additive counterfactuals are perceived as more inclined to prepare future action. Interestingly, people with a high degree of political sophistication appear to be more sensitive to the *additive* versus *subtractive* structure of counterfactuals, as compared with people with a lower degree of political sophistication. High sophisticates give a better evaluation of politicians employing additive counterfactuals (e.g., “Certainly, if I *had* imposed my ideas and my proposals, some decisions would have been made more easily”) than of politicians employing subtractive counterfactuals (e.g., “Certainly, if I *had not* given up my ideas and my proposals, some decisions would have been made more easily”). Such a difference between high and low sophisticates may probably be ascribed to the fact that high sophisticates are more inclined to make plans for future political activity, and are therefore more likely to prefer politicians who appear to be doing the same.

## VI. Conclusion

Our studies have demonstrated that politicians make wide use of counterfactuals in their discourses. When publicly accounting for political events and their performance, politicians focus not only on what they, or other political actors, actually did, but also on what they (or others) could/should (or could not/should not) have done. These comparisons between reality and its possible alternatives are made in a way that is consistent with politicians’ discursive goals, specifically the ones of presenting a positive image of themselves

and their party and a negative image of their adversaries. Accordingly, opposing politicians differ with regard to the characteristics of the counterfactuals they employ in discourse, mainly in terms of their target, direction, and controllability.

Our studies have also shown that counterfactual communication may influence citizens' perception of politicians. Some types of counterfactuals seem to be more powerful than others in influencing the citizen in favor of the politician who is using them, while the positive influence of other types of counterfactuals seems to vary according to some characteristics of the citizens, first of all their degree of political sophistication. Interestingly, exposure to counterfactual communication has been shown to influence not only citizens' evaluations of what the politician did in the past, but also their expectations regarding what the politician may do in the future. This is consistent with the fact that counterfactual thinking has been shown to serve not only the psychological function of explaining the past but also that of preparing the future.

What is left to do in order to fully investigate the effects of counterfactual communication in the political context? Quite a lot. For example, exploring of the effects of counterfactuals employed by journalists when they interview politicians. Nowadays, interviews are the most frequent form through which politicians communicate with citizens, and what journalists say or ask (including their use of counterfactuals) is very likely to influence citizens' perceptions of both the journalist and the politician.

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, as well as of their effects on people who are exposed to them. On a more applied level, it might help politicians, but also citizens, to become more aware of the dynamics underlying political communication, and thus to develop a critical consciousness about it.