

When Valence Strategies increase Polling Support: Evidence from Electoral Campaigns

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Abstract

Valence issues, which focus on universally valued traits and the perceived ability to deliver broadly shared policy goals, play a central role in shaping voter preferences and the strategic choices parties make during campaigns. While a growing literature has investigated spatial models of competition and how parties respond to changes in their valence attributes, we know less about the electoral returns of actively emphasizing valence during electoral campaigns and how such effects might depend on the party's broader ideological positioning.

This paper examines how parties' use of valence appeals during election campaigns shapes their electoral support, and whether the effectiveness of these appeals depends on the party's ideological positioning. Building on theories of issue competition and valence politics, we argue that character-based valence attributes, such as honesty, competence, and integrity, are particularly effective in mobilizing voter support. Moreover, their impact is amplified when parties adopt a more moderate ideological stance, which enhances the credibility of non-positional appeals.

Empirically, we build a new party-day panel dataset covering 17 elections in 9 Western European countries. Valence data comes from the Comparative Campaign Dynamics Dataset, which codes policy and valence statements by parties in national newspapers during electoral campaigns. We combine this with publicly available polling data to assess how campaign strategies relate to short-term shifts in electoral support. The analysis relies on panel regression models with party fixed effects to capture within-party dynamics over time.

Preliminary results suggest that character-based valence statements are positively associated with increases in polling support, whereas policy-based valence and positional statements show no consistent effects. We also find that the effect of character valence is stronger for parties that have moderated their ideological stance since the previous election.

The study contributes to debates on the strategic role of valence in party competition and electoral behaviour by showing that character-based valence appeals can boost polling support during campaigns, especially when combined with ideological moderation. Moreover, it provides empirical evidence on the short-term electoral returns of valence strategies.

Keywords: Valence Politics, Electoral Campaigns, Party Competition, Polling Dynamics

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