The Strategic Balance Between Positional and Valence Issues in Party Competition

NASP-POLS PhD Project Colloquium

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Overview of the PhD Project

Valence theory: voters are influenced not only by policy positions, but also by concepts on which all voters hold near-identical preferences (Stokes, 1992; Clark, 2009)

- **Policy-based:** perceived competence on universally valued goals (Groseclose, 2001; Jacoby, 2009; Clark, 2009)

- **Character-based:** traits like honesty, competence, charisma, and unity (Clark, 2009; Adams, 2001)

Research Focus:

- How political parties strategically use **valence appeals** to shape voter perceptions and structure party competition across different arenas (e.g., parliamentary debates, electoral campaigns)

- How parties navigate the trade-off between **positional** and **valence-based** strategies

- How **negative valence shocks**, such as political scandals or negative news about the state of the economy, shape voters' evaluations of politicians and parties

Structure of the Dissertation - 3 (or more..) Interconnected Papers

Political Scandals and Voter Evaluations

- Examine the effects of political scandals on voter perceptions using two experiments:
  - Conjoint experiment
  - Audio-based survey experiment

Electoral Campaigns and Valence

- Investigates how parties' valence statements during campaigns affects polling support

Economic Performance and Strategic Valence

- Explores how governing and opposition parties adjust valence strategies in response to economic indicators

Donald Trump: I could "shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters"

Political Scandals and Valence Theory

- Political scandals involve **norm-breaking behavior** that violates societal norms, moral codes, or values (Genovese and Farrar-Myers, 2010; Thompson, 2013)

- Allegations of illegal, unethical, or immoral conduct directed at politicians or institutions (Rottinghaus, 2023), they attract public scrutiny and attention (Thompson, 2013; Marion, 2010)

- If scandals are perceived as **negative valence information**, then voters should negatively evaluate involved politicians (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2014; Rottinghaus, 2023)

- Some studies find that scandals have negative political consequences even in polarized contexts (Darr et al., 2019; Wolsky, 2022), while others suggest minimal impact on politicians' careers and electoral behavior (Funck and McCabe, 2021; Lee et al., 2023)

Research Design: Two Complementary Experiments

> **Main Research Question**
>
> How do different types of **political scandals** shape voter evaluations of political candidates?

Experiment 1: Conjoint Design (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto, 2014)

- How do voters weigh different political scandals relative to other candidate attributes, such as party affiliation, policy positions, and positive valence?
- Do shared values (co-partisanship, ideological alignment) moderate the impact of political scandals on voter evaluations?

Experiment 2: Audio-Based Survey Experiment

- How does the tone and rhetorical delivery of a scandal accusation (calm vs. aggressive) influence voter perceptions of the accused politician?
- Do policy positions and ideological alignment condition the effect of scandal accusations on voter attitudes?

The Conjoint Experiment

- Present **detailed-rich fictional scenario** where two candidates compete in an actual election
  (Galasso, Nannicini, and Nunnari, 2023)

- Participants will express a **preference between two politicians** with differing characteristics across various attributes

- Each respondent completes **3 tasks**, each time choosing between **2 candidates** and indicating their preferred choice

- **Sample:** 2,000 respondents per country (USA, UK) recruited via a survey company

- **Power Analysis:** Our sample size allows us to detect a 0.04 effect for an attribute with 5 levels with 0.84 statistical power (Lukac and Stefanelli, 2020)

Experimental Design: Profile Attributes

- **General Attributes:** Gender, Party Affiliation, Incumbency Status, Position on Immigration, Position on Economic Policies

Attributes	Levels
Political Scandal	No scandal
	Investigated for unwanted sexual conduct towards staff members
	Falsification of credentials on curriculum vitae
	Investigated for corruption
	Participated in a violent anti-government protest while underage
Positive Valence	No positive valence
	Had 95% of campaign statements certified as accurate by an independent fact checker
	Led public-private partnership preventing layoffs during local economic downturn
	Successfully rallied party support for innovative policy agenda, turning initial 30% backing into 90% consensus
	Voted with party positions on 93% of legislative votes

Audio Experiment

- Investigate how the **tone of delivery** influences the effectiveness of valence attacks (Tigue et al., 2012; Gerstle and A. Nai, 2019; Kulz et al., 2023)

- Utilize open-source multi-voice **TTS technology** to simulate realistic political debates

- **Sample:** 2,000 respondents per country (USA, UK) recruited via a survey company

- Participants will be randomly assigned to listen to one debate or read the text version. At the end of the experiment, respondents will indicate their preferred candidate

- **Debate Structure (Approx. 2 minutes):**
  - An anchor introduces the two politicians
  - One politician attacks the other over a political scandal (negative valence)
  - The second politician redirects the discussion to their own policy proposals

Experimental Manipulations

Gender "Accused" Politician	Male Female
Gender "Attacking" Politician	Male Female
Tone "Attacking" Politician	Calm Aggressive
Policy Topic	Promote strict border controls (Right-wing) More jobs, reduced unempl (Valence issue) Financial support for low-income families (Left-wing)
Valence Attack	Corruption Sexual Allegations

How are we generating the audios?

- **OS Text-To-Speech Model:** VITS (Kim, Kong, and Son, 2021), an end-to-end speech synthesis multispeaker model trained on the CSTR-VCTK Corpus (Veaux, Yamagishi, and MacDonald, 2017)

- **Pipeline 1: Pre-written Scripts + TTS**
  - We manually write a set of debate scripts, covering different policy topics and valence attacks
  - A Python script processes the text with the TTS model, converting it into audio while adjusting speaker gender and voice tone

- **Pipeline 2: LLM-Generated Debates + TTS**
  - An LLM generates debate scripts based on prompts specifying the policy topic and the scandal
  - The generated text is fed into the TTS model for audio synthesis

- **Post-processing:** we apply enhancements such as noise reduction and pitch adjustments using Librosa and Soundfile to improve realism

Example: Pre-written Debate Script

Anchorman: Welcome to today's debate on **economic policy.** Senator Williamson, Senator Smith, thank you for being here.

Senator John Williamson: Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to participate.

Senator Jane Smith: Good morning, I'm glad to be here.

Anchorman: Senator Williamson, let's start with you. What is your perspective on today's economic challenges?

Senator John Williamson: Our priority must be **job creation and unemployment reduction.** We've worked on policies that aims to reduce unemployment and provide more opportunities for our citizens. Our goal should be to improve living standards and ensure long-term stability.

Anchorman: Senator Smith, do you have a response?

Senator Jane Smith: Senator Williamson talks about job creation, but how can anyone take his words seriously when he's been investigated for **unwanted sexual conduct** towards staff members? This isn't just a matter of policy—it's about trust, integrity, and accountability.

The Impact of Valence on Polling Support during Electoral Campaigns

Main Research Questions

- **RQ1:** Do parties gain polling support by increasing their valence signaling during electoral campaigns?

- **RQ2:** Does the effect of valence vary when parties shift or moderate their ideological positions?
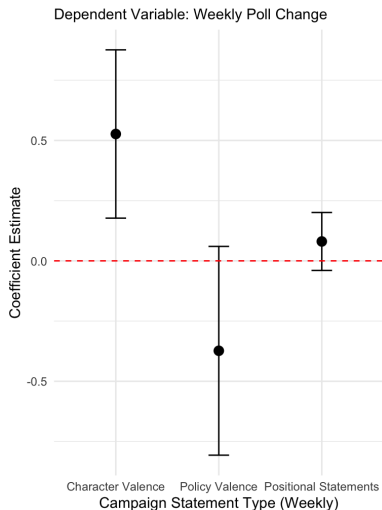
Theoretical Expectations

- **H1:** Emphasizing valence is associated with gains in polling support (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu, 2011; Abney et al., 2013)

- **H2:** Character-based valence has a stronger effect than policy-based valence and positional statements (Clark, 2009; Lenz, 2012)

- **H3:** The effect of valence is amplified for parties that have moderated their ideological stance since the previous election

Research Design: Data and Methodology

- **Valence Data:** Comparative Campaign Dynamics Dataset (Debus, Somer-Topcu, and Tavits, 2018), coding of self-promotional statements in newspapers by political parties during campaigns

- **Polling Data:** Polls dataset (Jennings and Wlezien, 2018), plus country-specific polling data from Wikipedia

- **Sample:** 9 European countries, 17 elections

- **Panel Dataset:**
  - Daily data for each party during the campaign, valence measured by the number of statements made each day
  - Polling data computed daily, using the most recent available poll for each day

- **Main Variables:**
  - **DV:** Weekly change in polling support (Δ Poll)
  - **IVs:** Weekly measures: Character-based valence, Policy-based valence, Positional statements

- **Methods:** Fixed-Effect panel regression

$$\Delta Poll_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Valence\_Char}_{i,t} + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Valence\_Policy}_{i,t} + \boldsymbol{\gamma} \cdot \mathbf{X}_{i,t} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$
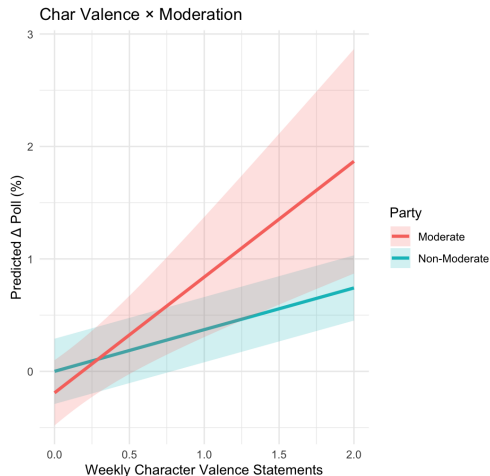
Dependent Variable: Weekly Poll Change

	Δ *Poll Weekly*
Policy Valence	-0.373
	(0.221)
Character Valence	0.527^{**}
	(0.178)
Positional	0.080
	(0.061)
Observations	$1,970$

Note: Robust standard errors clustered at the party level.
*p$<$0.05; **p$<$0.01; ***p$<$0.001

Char Valence × Moderation

	Δ Poll Weekly
Character Valence	0.371*
	(0.148)
Moderation	−0.191
	(0.117)
Policy Valence	−0.509
	(0.268)
Positional	0.051
	(0.078)
Character Valence × Moderation	0.659*
	(0.258)
Observations	1,505

Note: Robust standard errors clustered at the party level.
*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Economic Performance Indicators and Strategic Valence Choices

Main Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How do governing parties adjust their emphasis on valence traits in response to economic indicators?
- **RQ2:** How do opposition parties adjust their communication strategies around economic issues in response to economic indicators?

Theoretical Expectations (Hellwig, 2012; Green and W. Jennings, 2012; Greene, 2016)

- **H1:** Governing parties emphasize valence traits when economic performance indicators are positive
- **H2:** Opposition parties emphasize valence traits when economic performance indicators are negative
- **H3:** Opposition parties highlight positional issues (e.g. redistribution) to challenge the incumbent
- **H4:** Parties select issue emphasis strategically, based on whether they can claim credit or shift blame

Research Design

Data:

- Parliamentary debates: ParlaMint (Erjavec et al., 2023), ParlSpeech (Rauh and Schwalbach, 2020), ParlLawSpeech (Schwalbach et al., 2025)
- Economic performance indicators (e.g. GDP growth, unemployment rates)

Methodology:

- Use a Natural Language Inference (NLI) approach to classify debates:
  - "Economic-Related" valence traits: competence in managing the economy, effective governance, and leadership during economic crises
  - Positional issues: specific policy stances on economic matters
- Fine-tune an NLI classifier, such as Political DEBATE (Burnham et al., 2024)
- For political text classification, smaller fine-tuned LLMs consistently outperform larger zero-shot prompted models (Bucher and Martini, 2024)
- Analyze how governing parties emphasize economic valence traits in response to positive economic indicators
- Examine how opposition parties shift focus to positional issues under similar conditions

Conclusions and Next Steps

Political Scandals and Voter Evaluations
- Reflect on the wording of the attributes, complete the pre-registration
- Validate the tones using SpeechBrain (Ravanelli et al., 2021) trained on IEMOCAP
- Compare the advantages of LLM-generated vs. manually written debate scripts to capture natural political discourse

Electoral Campaigns and Valence
- Expand polling data coverage for additional elections and countries
- Conduct potential robustness checks to ensure the validity of results (e.g. Autoregressive Models, More controls)
- Test the role of policy moderation/change

Economic Performance and Strategic Valence
- Develop hypotheses for the Natural Language Inference (NLI) classifier
- Construct a dataset for fine-tuning on economic valence traits and positional issues
- Explore classical topic modeling approaches, LLM-based topic classification or LoRA adapters

Thank You for Your Attention!

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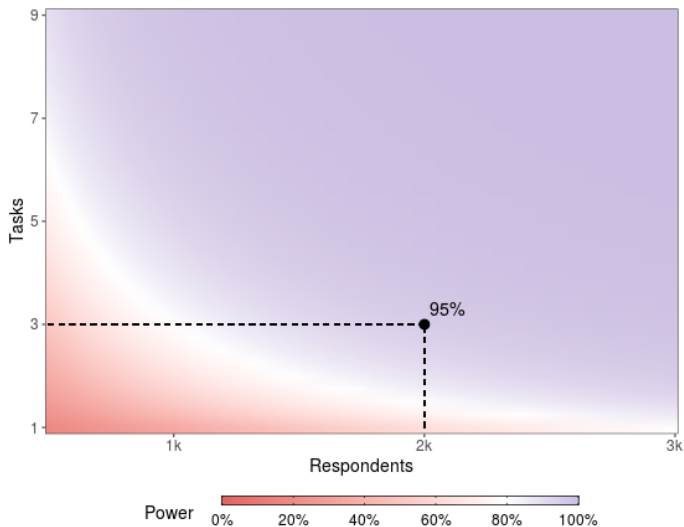
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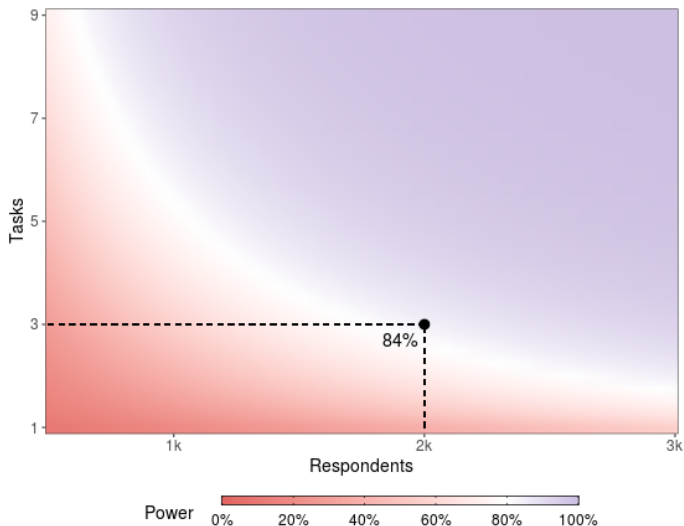
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Appendix 1.1 - Power Analysis - 0.05 es

Conjoint design: 2000 respondents, 3 tasks, assumed effect size 0.05, on a variable with 5 levels.

Appendix 1.2 - Power Analysis - 0.04 es

84%

Power 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Conjoint design: 2000 respondents, 3 tasks, assumed effect size 0.04, on a variable with 5 levels.

Appendix 2.1 - Prompt Example

```python
prompt = (
    f"This is a dialogue between two politicians, introduced by a journalist. The debate focuses on {selected_policy}. "
    f"Politician A defends their plan, while Politician B questions Politician A's competence due to a past political scandal. The political scandal is {selected_scandal}."
    "Politician A keeps emphasizing the policy, while Politician B focuses on the scandal. The debate should last 2 minutes max."
)
```

Appendix 2.2 - Prompt Example

```
prompt = (
f"This is a dialogue between two politicians, introduced by a journalist. "
f"The debate focuses on {selected_policy}, with Politician A defending their plan "
f"and Politician B criticizing them based on {selected_scandal}. They will keep doing that everytime. I will write you the start of the dialogue"
f"Policy: {selected_policy}\n"
f"Scandal: {selected_scandal}\n\n"
f"Moderator (Journalist): Welcome to today's debate on the new proposal about {selected_policy}. "
"We have two guests: First Senator John Williamson will speak and then Senator Jane Smith will reply. "
"Let's begin.\n\n"
"Politician A: Thank you for having me. I believe our plan will bring great benefits to our nation.\n"
f"Politician B: While Senator Williamson talks about benefits, let's not forget their involvement in {selected_scandal}.\n"
)
```

Appendix 3.1 - Full Profile Table

Attributes	Levels
Gender	Male
	Female
Party Affiliation	Right-Wing
	Left-Wing
Incumbency Status	Incumbent
	Opposition
Position on Immigration	Implement strict border controls and reduce immigration
	Promote inclusive immigration policies and increase quotas for asylum seekers
Position on Economic Policies	Advocates for tax reductions, market deregulation and business-friendly policies
	Supports stronger market regulations, higher corporate taxation and expanded welfare programs
Political Scandal	No scandal
	Investigated for unwanted sexual conduct towards staff members
	Falsification of credentials on curriculum vitae
	Investigated for corruption
	Participated in a violent anti-government protest while underage
Positive Valence	No positive valence
	Had 95% of campaign statements certified as accurate by an independent fact checker
	Led public-private partnership preventing layoffs during local economic downturn
	Successfully rallied party support for innovative policy agenda, turning initial 30% backing into 90% consensus
	Voted with party positions on 93% of legislative votes

Appendix 3.2 - Valence vs Valence

Attributes	Levels
Political Scandal	No scandal
	Investigated for unwanted sexual conduct towards staff members
	Falsification of credentials on curriculum vitae
	Investigated for appropriation of illegal funding
	Participated in a violent anti-government protest while underage
Positive Valence	No positive valence
	Received an award for championing workplace equity and inclusion from the National Diversity & Inclusion Association
	He had 95% of campaign statements certified as accurate by an independent fact checker
	Led a public-private partnership that prevented layoffs during a local economic downturn
	Received a national award for community service while underage

Appendix 4.1 - Literature Gaps in Political Scandal Research

- Limited focus on types of scandals beyond corruption, reducing generalizability (Kumlin and Esaiasson, 2012)

- Insufficient research on voters' reactions to different types of scandals

- Lack of systematic comparisons across various contexts (moral values are country dependent), scandal types and valence informations (Kumlin and Esaiasson, 2012)

- Effects of different scandal types on electoral behavior in polarized contexts remain poorly understood (Puglisi and Snyder, 2011; Darr et al., 2019; Rottinghaus, 2023)

Appendix 4.2 - Experiment Data Analysis Approach

- **AMCE:** The average effect of varying one attributes of a profile on the probability that that profile will be chosen by a respondent (Bansak et al., 2022)

- **Marginal Means:** An alternative estimator that does not rely on reference categories and is gaining preference in recent research (Casiraghi, Curini, and Alessandro Nai, 2024)

- **Exploratory Analyses:**
  - **ACIEs:** Examining how the impact of one attribute (e.g. party affiliation) depends on another (e.g. scandal)
  - **Subgroup analyses:** Preference heterogeneity across respondent characteristics (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley, 2020)

Appendix 5.1 - Countries, Elections, Parties

Country	Election Year	Party List
Czech Republic	2010	KDU+CSL, ODS, KSCM, CSSD, VV, TOP 09
Czech Republic	2013	ANO 2011, KDU+CSL, ODS, KSCM, CSSD, Dawn, TOP 09
Denmark	2011	DF, RV, EL, LA, A, SF, V
Germany	2009	Grüne, CDU/CSU, Linke, FDP, SPD
Germany	2013	AfD, Grüne, CDU/CSU, Linke, FDP, SPD
Hungary	2010	Fidesz, KDNP, Jobbik, MSZP
Netherlands	2012	CDA, D66, PvdA, PVV, SP, VVD
Poland	2007	PO, PiS, LPR, LiD, PSL, SRP
Poland	2011	PO, PiS, LiD, RP, PJN, PSL
Spain	2008	CiU, PNV, ERC, IU, PP, PSOE, UPyD
Sweden	2010	C, KD, MP, V, FP, M, RGA, S, SD
Sweden	2014	C, KD, FI, MP, V, FP, M, RGA, S, SD
United Kingdom	2005	Con, Lab, LibDem
United Kingdom	2010	Con, Lab, LibDem
United Kingdom	2015	Con, Lab, LibDem

Appendix 5.2 - Valence and Polls Dataset example

Table: Salection of Valence/Polls Dataset

country	election_year	date	party	char.val	pol.val	pos	poll_perc
UK	2005	2005-04-05	Conservative Party	0	0	3	35.25
UK	2005	2005-04-05	Labour Party	2	1	5	36
UK	2005	2005-04-05	Liberal Democratic Party	1	2	1	20.5
UK	2005	2005-04-06	Conservative Party	2	1	6	36
UK	2005	2005-04-06	Labour Party	4	4	16	36
UK	2005	2005-04-06	Liberal Democratic Party	1	0	3	21

Sample of dataset.

Moderation Effect Across Valence Levels