The Strategic Balance Between Positional and Valence Strategies in Party Competition

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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; Franchino and Zucchini, 2015)

- Two dimensions: **policy-based valence** (competence on shared goals) and **character-based valence** (honesty, leadership, unity) (J. Adams, 2001; Clark, 2009)

- **Valence affects vote choice**, as shown by empirical studies and formal models (Mondak, 1995; Groseclose, 2001; J. Adams, S. Merrill, and Grofman, 2005; Curini, 2018)

- Parties respond to valence considerations: shifting ideological positions to recover from losses (Clark, 2014; Ceron and Volpi, 2022) and balancing positional and valence-based strategies (Jacoby, 2009; Abney et al., 2013)

Research Focus:
- How parties use **valence appeals** to shape voter perceptions across different arenas
- How they navigate the trade-off between **positional** and **valence-based** strategies
- How **negative valence shocks**, such as scandals, shape voters' evaluations

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

Valence and Electoral Campaigns

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

Valence and Economic Performance Indicators

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

Investigating Political Scandals: Combining Conjoint Analysis and Audio-Based Experiments

Political Scandals and Valence: Theory & Research Design

- Political scandals are **norm-breaking behaviors** (illegal, unethical, immoral) that attract public scrutiny and media attention (Genovese and Farrar-Myers, 2010; Thompson, 2013; Rottinghaus, 2023; Marion, 2010)
- If perceived as **negative valence information**, voters should punish involved politicians (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2014; Rottinghaus, 2023)
- Prior findings are mixed: scandals often hurt, but sometimes have limited impact on careers and voting behavior (Darr et al., 2019; Wolsky, 2022; Funck and McCabe, 2021; Lee et al., 2023)

Objective of the paper

How do different types of political scandals shape voter evaluations of candidates, and to what extent do **positive valence cues** or the **tone of delivery** condition these effects?

Two complementary experiments:
- **Conjoint:** How do voters weigh different scandals relative to other candidate attributes?
- **Audio:** How do tone and rhetorical delivery affect perceptions of scandal accusations?

Experiment 1: Conjoint — Design, Measures & Expectations

Design

- Rich **fictional election** scenario with two candidates (Galasso, Nannicini, and Nunnari, 2023)
- Respondents choose between two profiles across varied attributes
- **5 choice tasks** per respondent; 2 candidates each time
- **Sample:** 2,000 U.S. respondents (survey company)

Measures

- **Pre-treatment:** policy trade-offs; ideological proximity (L–R self-placement)
- **Outcomes:** vote choice (binary); perceived competence (cont.); perceived honesty (cont.)

Theoretical Expectations

- **H1 (Motivated reasoning):** out-partisans punish scandals more; co-partisans reward positive valence
- **H2 (Competence heuristic):** competence-related scandals most damaging; competence-positive valence mitigates
- **H3 (Valence matching):** positive cues in the scandal's domain are more effective
- **H4 (Gender bias):** women penalized more for scandals, rewarded less for positive valence

Experimental Design: Profile Attributes

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

Political Scandal (Negative Valence)	Positive Valence
– No scandal	– No positive valence
– Evidence found for unwanted sexual conduct towards staff members	– Praised for protecting staff from harassment and ensuring a respectful workplace
– Evidence found for falsification of credentials on curriculum vitae	– 95% of campaign statements certified as accurate by fact checkers
– Evidence found for appropriation of illegal funding	– Led a public-private partnership that prevented layoffs during a local economic downturn
– Evidence found for participation in a violent anti-government protest while underage	– Received a national award for community service while underage

Experiment 2: Audio Experiment Design

- We investigate how the **tone of delivery** conditions the effect of scandal accusations (Tigue et al., 2012; Gerstle and Nai, 2019; Boussalis et al., 2021)
- **Design:** Respondents hear realistic debates between two politicians, generated with open-source AI Text-to-Speech
- **Sample:** 2,000 U.S. respondents, recruited via survey company
- Respondents complete two tasks; medium randomized (70% audio, 30% text transcript)

Debate structure:
- Anchor introduces the two politicians and the policy-topic of the debate
- One politician attacks the other over a scandal (negative valence)
- The other redirects to their own policy proposals

Experimental manipulations: gender of politicians; attacker's tone (calm vs. aggressive); policy topic; scandal type (corruption vs. sexual allegations); medium

When Valence Strategies increase Polling Support: Evidence from Electoral Campaigns

Valence & Polling Support: Theory & Hypotheses

- We know valence matters, but less is known about **which types of valence** appeals are most effective and under what conditions (Stiers, 2022; Hamzawi, Kato, and Endo, 2025)
- **Campaigns** intensify signaling, media attention, and voter responsiveness (Haselmayer, Meyer, and Wagner, 2019; Bjarnøe, J. Adams, and Boydstun, 2023)

Objectives of the Paper

- Examine whether valence signaling translates into short-term polling gains
- Assess how valence effectiveness interacts with positional strategies

- **H1:** Emphasizing valence is associated with short-term polling gains (J. Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu, 2011; Lenz, 2012; Abney et al., 2013)
- **H2:** Effects are amplified for parties that **moderate** their ideological stance (Adams and Merrill, 2009; Clark, 2014; Johns and Kölln, 2020)
- **H3:** With **position blurring**, policy-valence gains traction while character-based valence weakens (Rovny, 2013; Zulianello and Larsen, 2023; Nasr, 2022)

Valence & Polling Support: Data & Methods

- **Valence data:** Comparative Campaign Dynamics Dataset (party self-promotional statements coded in newspapers) (Debus, Somer-Topcu, and Tavits, 2018)

- **Polling data:** (Will Jennings and Wlezien, 2016) + national sources; daily estimates using most recent poll

- **Sample:** 8 countries, 11 elections, 57 parties; daily panel dataset

- **Campaign Periods:** Official campaign periods from first coded article to election day (min. 30 days)

- **Dependent variable:** parties' daily polling support (%)

- **Independent variables:** weekly moving averages + lags of
  - Character-based valence statements
  - Policy-based valence statements
  - Positional statements

- **Moderators:** Party's ideological shift since previous election, Position Blurring

- **Method:** fixed-effects panel regression (within estimator, party levels)

Base Model: Effect Sizes
95% Confidence Intervals (Robust SE)
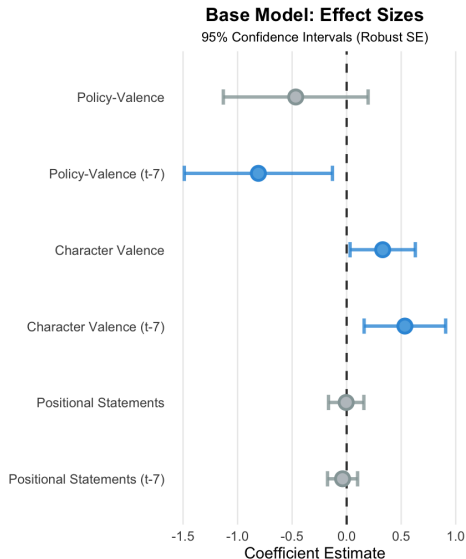
- Character-based valence (t and t–7) is positively associated with polling support (Abney et al., 2013)

- Policy-based valence is mixed/negative in baseline models

- Effectiveness varies depending on parties' positional strategies

  - Character valence is more effective when parties shift toward the center (Johns and Kölln, 2020)

  - Policy valence gains traction when parties blur their economic positions

Economic Performance Indicators and Party Valence Choices in Parliamentary Debates

Theory & Hypotheses

- **Economic conditions matter:** governments are rewarded in good times and punished in downturns (Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Timothy Hellwig, 2010; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007).
- We know less about how macroeconomic conditions shape parties' strategies between valence and positional appeals
- **Competing expectations:** some models predict that governments stress valence under strong economic performance, while others stress oppositions' use of valence attacks against incumbents

Objective of the Paper

- How do the governing and opposition parties adjust their emphasis on valence & positional traits in response to economic indicators?

Hypotheses (Hellwig, 2012; Green and 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

Data & Methods

Data:

- Parliamentary debates: **ParlaMint** (Erjavec et al., 2023)
- Focus on speeches in the "Macroeconomics" domain
- Macroeconomic indicators: GDP growth, unemployment, inflation

Methodology:

- Constructed a labeled dataset of nearly 600 parliamentary speeches
- Fine-tuned a **DeBERTa** model with a **LoRA adapter** ($F1 \approx 0.75$):
  - Economic-related valence: competence/honesty/unity in economic management, effective governance, leadership in crises
  - Positional issues: substantive policy stances on economic matters (e.g. issue ownership)
  - Other: procedural or non-substantive content
- Linear Probability Models (LPMs) with party and year fixed effects; clustered SEs

Preliminary Results

Government vs Opposition: predicted probability of valence speech (LPM)
95% confidence intervals; Robust SEs clustered by party × quarter
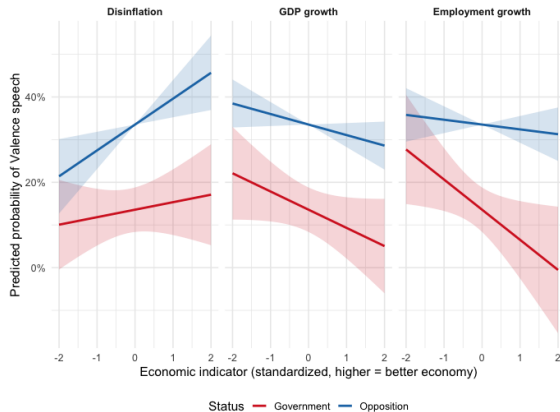
- **Sample:** Italy, Senate debates (2013–2022) on Macroeconomic issues

- Governments overall use **less valence** than oppositions

- **Interaction effects:**
  - Oppositions increase valence when the economy worsens
  - Governments shift toward policy when the economy improves

Conclusions and Next Steps

Political Scandals and Voter Evaluations

- Finalize pre-analysis plan and field the experiments
- Continue improving the realism of the synthetic speech
- Validate the tones using SpeechBrain (Ravanelli et al., 2021) trained on IEMOCAP

Electoral Campaigns and Valence

- Consolidate results and prepare full paper draft for submission
- Conduct additional robustness checks

Economic Performance and Valence

- Extend scope: more countries and parliamentary terms
- Refine annotation and classification of economic speeches
- Test different estimation strategies for gov–opposition differences

Thank You for Your Attention!

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