

Effects of Bipartisanship Messaging and Candidate Exposure on the Political Organization–Public Relationship

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Abstract

As an online experiment with a 2×3 factorial design, this study manipulates participants' ($N = 441$) exposure to a candidate's (Barack Obama or Mitt Romney) post-election speech along with additional messages about bipartisanship (supporting bipartisanship, challenging bipartisanship, no message). Results showed main and interaction effects on all relationship factors based on experimental cell. In addition, data indicate that assessment of candidate sincerity was most strongly affected by ideological strength, more so than relationship or exposure support messages calling for bipartisanship. The study focuses on first-time voters and is framed through the lens of political public relations.

Keywords

relationship, efficacy, authenticity, bipartisan, political public relations, political organization–public relationship, POPR, candidate, constituent, experiment, message, speech, tactics

The 2012 U.S. presidential election was discussed in the media with intense excitement. The drama portrayed on the political stage was more than the average incumbent-verses-challenger conflict frame, as polls up to Election Day showed the candidates neck-and-neck, within the margin of error such that it would be hard to tell

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who would win until the votes were counted. After the election, some media even referred to the resulting scene as the “Divided States of America.” To combat this divisiveness, Barack Obama’s victory speech and Mitt Romney’s concession speech called for each party to lay their differences aside and come together in a spirit of bipartisanship.

From a political public relations standpoint, these battling groups of Republicans and Democrats—who appeared so equally matched with numbers of supporters during the election—must be brought together after the election in order to move forward. The message of bipartisanship was then important for both sides, though arguably able to be handled much differently by each party. So the message strategically would have to change from the requests to “support your candidate to the bitter end” (during the election) to “reach across the aisle in a bipartisan manner to work together” (after the election). To some, this switch to bipartisan rhetoric after such a heated election may seem like a major public relations messaging challenge from the campaign standpoint.

One might suggest that entering the political process as a first-time voter at such a time may polarize and perhaps even confuse young voters who are newly affiliated members of their chosen party. Though youth have observed the political process arguably their entire lives, with elections occurring in the United States in 2-year cycles, for many young voters this was the first time that they were participants in the electoral process. It is certain that these young people had political ideas and beliefs prior to being eligible to vote, yet the 2012 election was the first time that they officially became a part of a political party and a part of that political process. Whereas other research has looked at why one chooses a political party (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Cooper, Golden, & Socha, 2013; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002; Sweetser, 2013a), this study will focus on dimensions such as relationship with one’s political party and reaction to bipartisanship messaging among first-time voters after the election has ended. Approaching the inquiry here from a political public relations standpoint (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011) in the wake of a divisive campaign, this study will empirically examine the effect of bipartisan messaging on what is called in public relations scholarship the *candidate-consistent relationship*, internal and external efficacy, and candidate perception constructs such as genuineness and authenticity. As one of the first experiments in political public relations, this study attempts to determine whether candidate speeches or external messaging affect one’s perceived relationship with the candidate and assessment of him.

Literature Review

This study drew from literature on political public relations (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011), with emphasis on components of dialogic communication and relationship theory. More specific, this study evaluates dialogic communication and relationships through candidate appraisals as well as the effect on traditional political efficacy and political information efficacy measures. For relationship, the constructs of the *organization–public relationship*, referring to the relationship that the public feels it has with an organization, provide insight into how connected one feels to an organization. In

political public relations, this relationship is often referred to as the *political organization–public relationship*.

Political Public Relations

A growing area of political communication research has focused on the political campaign in the realm of public relations (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). In this sense, much like the political marketing literature from Europe, it is apparent that political campaigns do indeed operate in many of the same ways as do public relations campaigns. Campaigns, as the name suggests, are more than mere ads—they are multi-month engagement programs (sometimes multi-year in the United States) that use tactics such as publicity, pseudo-events (rallies), complex multi-media messaging, and strategy. By looking at the political campaign as a public relations campaign, political communication scholarship has much to gain by way of understanding the underlying engagement and persuasion effects-based outcomes.

Relationship, Authenticity, and Genuineness

Relationship is such an important component of public relations that the word *relations* is represented in the name of the field and central to nearly every definition of the industry (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985; Public Relations Society of America, 2012). Scholars, too, agree on the importance of relationships as relationship maintenance strategies of the organization–public relationship (Ferguson, 1984; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser, 2010; Wise, 2007). In relationship theory, the relationship is not necessarily real, since the perceived relationship that publics have with an organization are of significant importance. Bruning (2001) suggested that in relationships, organization–public relations are mutually beneficial and interdependent and that the publics expect to be communicated with through preferred media. Just as in interpersonal relationships, strong organization–public relationships that have openness, involvement, trust, commitment, and investment can lead to immense loyalty from the organization’s publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). When it comes to new relationships, Ledingham, Bruning, and Wilson (1999) found evidence of something of a “honeymoon period” where the strength of the relationship may wane after a few years.

Sweetser (2010) supports the idea that organization–public relationships are much like interpersonal relationships, especially in the case of damaging a relationship. In an experiment manipulating the ethical construct of disclosure, Sweetser found relationship to be significantly negatively affected when publics are lied to by an organization. Given this, the relationship-related perception constructs of authenticity and genuineness may have a role in strengthening—or weakening—a relationship with an organization. It is certain that decades of political communication work have used candidate evaluations of characteristics, with measures investigating sincerity and trustworthiness, to assess a voter’s perception of the candidate (e.g., Kaid, 1995). Although authenticity variables have not yet been connected in the literature to relationship

theory, it seems possible that the concepts may be supportive of one another, especially in the political arena.

Though public relations research has a rich body of literature investigating and understanding the role of relationship with publics, few political public relations studies have used that lens to examine the candidate–constituent relationship. Research instead in political organization–public relationships focuses on the campaign as opposed to the candidate. Levenshush (2010) examined the 2008 Obama campaign as a case study to understand how the campaign worked to engage supporters through grassroots efforts via the Internet. Seltzer and Zhang (2011) conducted one of the first quantitative studies examining political organization–public relationships. Their research examined antecedents to one’s relationship with a political party and found that time, interpersonal trust, mediated communication, and interpersonal communication emerged as significant predictors for strength of relationship with one’s party. Continuing this work, Sweetser (2013b) examined relationship with one’s political party and found that although relationships contributed to predicting the strength of one’s affiliation with a political party, those who crossed party lines were lower in relationship factors than were their loyal counterparts.

It is evident, then, that communication plays an important role in relationships. Voters, it appears, feel connected to their political parties when the messages are voiced in such a way that is less political and more similar to the way that friends would talk to one another. Candidates, then, provide the ideal opportunity to literally become the voice of a party to transform policy in a true expression. As the first experiment involving relationship theory in political public relations, the current study will attempt to build on the previous research by investigating whether manipulation of exposure to campaign messaging can affect that candidate–constituent relationship and what, if any, role authenticity and genuineness play in that relationship.

Efficacy

Oftentimes, connections to an organization, or in this case a candidate, include much more than the obvious interactions that occur between the groups. That is, there are internal variables at play that may affect one’s willingness to connect with a candidate. For instance, if a voter is cynical or feels he or she may not have an effect in the political process, then it stands that perhaps that voter is less likely to perceive a relationship with a candidate. Given these conceptual connections, the construct of efficacy was measured here to determine what role it plays in the candidate–voter relationship.

In studies of political attitudes, political efficacy has historically been one of the most continuously examined constructs since it was introduced more than a half century ago. It was defined historically as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, that is, that it is worthwhile to perform one’s civic duties” (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187). Political efficacy is a citizen’s perception of his or her powerfulness or powerlessness; does an individual’s feelings, actions, or thoughts make any difference? For many years, political scientists concentrated on the relationship between political efficacy and individual

political participation (Finkel, 1985). Some studies have documented a strong relationship between political efficacy and electoral participation, even blaming declining perceptions of government effectiveness and responsiveness to declines in voter turnout (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982).

When a government is perceived as nonresponsive to citizens' wants and needs, the perception is sometimes labeled cynicism, a type of external political efficacy. More than a lack of "trust in government," political cynicism is defined in the communication literature as a "sense of powerlessness" (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998) and as a "feeling that government in general and political leaders in particular do not care about the public's opinions and are not acting in the best interest of the people" (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000).

If a voter displays low levels of efficacy naturally, then that may affect the ability of that voter to perceive a relationship with the candidate. From a public relations standpoint, it is possible, however, that exposure to a candidate may affect efficacy as well.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to a candidate or bipartisan support message will strengthen the candidate–constituent relationship.

Hypothesis 2: Exposure to messages challenging bipartisanship will increase young voters' level of cynicism.

Hypothesis 3: Exposure to the candidate or bipartisanship messages will increase young voters' level of political information efficacy.

Hypothesis 4: Exposure to the bipartisan messages will significantly affect young voters' world views and perceptions about the candidates' bipartisanship.

Research Question 1: With regard to a lack of bipartisanship and its consequences, what predicts a negative reaction to politics among young voters?

Research Question 2: How does exposure to messages about bipartisanship (support and challenges) affect one's assessment of the candidate's sincerity?

Method

Though public relations research has begun to examine relationship in the political organization–publics context, the quantitative studies to date have been surveys (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser, 2013b) rather than experiments. Huang and Zhang (2013) noted that relationship theory research has been criticized for being based more on intuition than on rigorous methodology (Broom et al., 1997). Experimental method, in other contexts, has been extremely useful in controlling and targeting relationship (Sweetser, 2010; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Using an online experiment administered through Qualtrics, this study manipulated exposure to post-election messages from candidates. Following a 2×3 posttest-only factorial design with control group, the independent variables were exposure to political candidate (Barack Obama or Mitt Romney) and bipartisanship (no message, message was supportive of bipartisanship, or message challenged bipartisanship). All participants in a treatment cell were exposed to a

post-election video speech from the candidate. A control group received the posttest only (no exposure to the speech or the independent variables) but was randomly assigned to rate a specific candidate (either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney) on the items in the questionnaire in order to be consistent with the treatment groups. Data were collected following the election, over the winter months in late 2012 and early 2013.

Sample

This study focused on the first-time voter in an effort to understand how young citizens, presumably not yet cynical and still optimistic about the ability of government to work together, are affected by political messages. In an effort to reach these young voters, a convenience sample of young people from two university campuses along the eastern seaboard participated in the online experiment. As consistent with demographic data from both campuses, the sample was predominately female ($n = 328$; 74.4%) and about a quarter male ($n = 105$; 23.8%). The average age of participants was 19.99 years old ($SD = 2.01$), thereby accurately representing the first-time voter.

Stimuli

The stimuli used for this experiment were taken, when possible, from real-world products to create an authentic feel to the materials as well as increase external validity. This study used a 2×3 factorial design, manipulating exposure to candidate (Barack Obama or Mitt Romney) and messaging about bipartisanship (no message, supportive of bipartisanship, challenges with bipartisanship). Each participant in a manipulation cell was exposed to a randomly assigned real YouTube video of one of the two major U.S. presidential candidates from the 2012 elections. The Barack Obama video was his acceptance speech and the Mitt Romney video was his concession speech, which were both available online. To counterbalance one's own political ideology, participants were both randomly assigned a candidate stimulus as well as asked with which party they were affiliated.

In the three-condition bipartisanship manipulation, participants were additionally exposed to media messages that (1) supported bipartisanship, (2) challenged the need for bipartisan collaboration moving forward, or (3) contained no bipartisanship message at all. These messages were an edited version taken from real politicians' statements, revised in such a way that in one condition the statement would be positive in support of bipartisanship and in another the statement would be negative against bipartisanship. The messages were presented to participants on a single screen in the Qualtrics experiment and attributed to a variety of sources in traditional and social media.

To control the online experimental environment, participants were held on the stimuli pages (both video and text stimuli) until they had enough time to completely read or watch the stimuli; participants were not allowed to advance until such a time appropriate to consume the stimuli had passed.

A series of manipulation checks ensured that the participants understood the manipulations they were exposed to by asking which candidate's speech they had seen, if

any, $\chi^2(14) = 804.81$, $p \leq .001$; whether they viewed a concession speech, victory speech, or no speech, $\chi^2(28) = 798.46$, $p \leq .001$; and whether the message after the video about Republicans and Democrats working together after the election was optimistic, pessimistic, or nonexistent, $\chi^2(14) = 363.09$, $p \leq .001$. All manipulation checks showed that manipulations operated as designed.

Instrument

The instrument was composed of standard political and public relations constructs, which have been used widely in previous studies and developed further here. The measures included the relationship maintenance scale (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser, 2010, 2013b), internal and external political efficacy, authenticity (Louden & McCauliff, 2004), genuineness, and various personal and political demographics.

The relational maintenance scale assesses one's relationship with an organization. The relationship score is perceived, as it is gauged only from the perspective of the respondent (the public) rather than an actual measure of the true relationship that might exist between the public and the organization. Although the scale has long been used in general public relations research to measure the organization–public relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser, 2010, 2013b), it has only recently been employed in political public relations scholarship as a means to investigate the political organization–public relationship (Sweetser, 2013b). Measuring 25 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), the scale included items about relational commitment, conversational human voice, task sharing, responsiveness/customer service, and positivity/optimism. The scale was factor analyzed using varimax rotation, resulting in a four-factor solution, which explained 62.91% of the variance. Two items were dropped from the analysis due to reliability. See Table 1 for a full listing of items and factor loading scores used in this analysis.

Continuing this review of how the first-time voter might connect with the candidate, two scales were further developed here. First, a scale rating the genuine nature of the candidate was created and tested for this study. Second, a candidate authenticity judgment scale developed from Louden and McCauliff's (2004) candidate authenticity chapter was further developed. The genuine nature of the candidate included 6 items, measured on a 5-point scale. An initial exploratory factor analysis indicated that the construct was unidimensional and so the items were summed into a single computed index ($M = 25.66$; $SD = 9.05$; $\alpha = .893$). Authenticity was measured here on an 11-item 5-point Likert-type scale (Louden & McCauliff, 2004). An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on these measures; however, the resulting factor solution indicated unidimensionality, therefore a summative authenticity index score was then computed ($M = 37.73$; $SD = 7.17$, $\alpha = .890$; see Table 2).

Internal and external political efficacy was measured through a series of items adapted from prior political efficacy constructs (e.g., Rosenstone, Kinder, & Miller, 1997) by pairing an 8-item political cynicism scale (external efficacy) and 4-item

Table 1. Factor Loading Scores for Candidate–Constituent Relationship.

	Mean	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Factor 1: optimism/positivity & human voice					
Uses a positive, optimistic tone	4.08	.717			
Is interesting in communication	3.70	.680			
Communicates in a conversational style	3.71	.666			
Expresses cheer and optimism about the future	3.98	.665			
Communicates in a human voice	4.03	.654			
Uses a sense of humor in communication	3.30	.624			
Invites visitors into conversation	3.45	.575			
Is open to dialog	3.42	.559			
Factor 2: relational commitment					
Stresses commitment to visitors	3.74		.792		
Implies a long-term relationship with visitors	3.53		.777		
Communicates a desire to build a relationship with visitors	3.69	.361	.739		
Demonstrates a commitment to maintaining a relationship with visitors	3.64		.737		
Treats visitors as human	3.83		.519		
Provides connections to competitors	3.63	.315	.493		
Factor 3: symmetrical communication					
Accepts visitors' email	3.03			.760	
Accepts visitor feedback/comments	3.19			.745	
Positively addresses complaints or queries	3.28			.701	
Admits mistakes	2.93		.351	.656	
Provides prompt/uncritical feedback when addressing criticism	3.02		.358	.563	
Factor 4: responsibility					
Performs organizational responsibilities	3.61				.768
Directly addresses organizational responsibility	3.57				.762
Discusses the nature of the organization	3.63				.739
Emphasizes relationship quality	3.62				.475
% variance explained		45.35	7.54	5.14	4.61

Note. All factors were reliable: optimism/positivity and human voice ($\alpha = .887$), commitment and responsibility ($\alpha = .890$), symmetrical communication ($\alpha = .819$), and relational responsibility ($\alpha = .835$). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

political information efficacy scale (internal efficacy; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2004, 2007). These items held together strongly and produced an alpha of .822. Each of the efficacy items was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (for cynicism, a higher number indicated a greater degree of cynicism; for political information

Table 2. Genuine Nature of the Candidate and Authenticity Indices.

	M	SD
Candidate genuineness	25.66	9.05
(The candidate) understands people like me.	4.04	1.85
(The candidate) understands the problems faced by people like me.	4.09	1.85
(The candidate) shares my values.	3.97	1.88
(The candidate) cares more about his success and advancement than improving America (reversed).	4.26	1.60
I trust the candidate to do what he thinks is best for the country.	4.31	1.75
Whether I agree or disagree with the candidate, I believe he genuinely wants what's best for America.	4.97	1.69
Candidate authenticity judgments: (The candidate . . .)	37.73	7.17
. . . is comfortable in his own skin.	4.12	0.71
. . . presents positions consistent with his true beliefs.	3.71	0.89
. . . consistently represents his true beliefs.	3.57	0.98
. . . has messages that reveal his true self.	3.61	0.90
. . . believes what he says he believes.	3.63	0.93
. . . does what he says he will do.	2.95	1.02
. . . has messages that are authentic.	3.31	1.01
. . . has a public persona that is authentic.	3.47	1.02
. . . has a private persona that is very different from his public persona (reversed).	3.00	0.97
. . . is too political (reversed).	3.07	0.91
Based on what the candidate says, we can trust our interpretation of him.	3.25	0.98

Note. Each concept was summed into a separate index, both of which were reliable: genuineness ($\alpha = .922$) and authenticity ($\alpha = .890$). Both concepts were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale where a higher number indicated a greater degree of that concept.

efficacy, a higher number indicated a greater degree of internal efficacy). Two separate indices were created as summed scores: external efficacy (cynicism) and internal efficacy (political information efficacy), as described in Table 3.

With bipartisanship being an important component of this study, the posttest employed several individual measures to determine the degree to which the participant felt the candidate was bipartisan and genuine about the desire to work with the other party. The bipartisan items were separate statements such as, "Now that Obama has won a second term, he is more likely to push a liberal agenda without concern for Republicans," and "Calls for bipartisan cooperation from Mitt Romney are sincere." In the analysis, bipartisanship was gauged by the series of single statements and not combined as the statements were not intended to be a scale.

Political demographic variables included political party identification as Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Party strength was measured on a 5-point semantic differential scale ranging from *weak* to *strong*, in addition to *liberal* to *conservative*. Voting participation items were asked, such as whether the participant voted, for whom

Table 3. Cynicism and Political Information Efficacy.

	M	SD
Cynicism	26.28	5.58
Politicians are more interested in power than what people think.	3.50	0.93
Politicians are corrupt.	3.33	0.90
Politicians make promises that are never kept.	3.32	0.92
Politicians cannot be trusted.	3.00	0.87
Politicians are greedy.	3.21	0.94
Politicians always tell the public what they want to hear instead of what they actually do.	3.58	0.96
Politicians are dishonest.	3.20	0.89
Politicians are more concerned about power than advocating for citizens.	3.14	0.94
Political information efficacy	12.63	3.78
I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics.	2.83	1.19
I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.	2.88	1.23
I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important issues facing our country.	3.44	0.97
If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for.	3.47	1.06

Note. Each concept was summed into a separate index, both of which were reliable: cynicism ($\alpha = .893$) and political information efficacy ($\alpha = .867$). Both concepts were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale where a higher number indicated a greater degree of that concept (e.g., more cynical or more efficacious).

the participant voted, whether that vote crossed party lines, and whether the participant changed his or her mind about that vote during the election. Finally, the standard political “feeling thermometer” measure was used, asking participants to rate the “temperature” they felt toward each candidate, each political party, and both liberal and conservative ideologies as if measured with a thermometer.

Media diet was gauged through a series of ratio-level items asking how many minutes the respondent spent on various media such as television news, radio, Internet, Facebook, text messaging, and so on.

Results

Candidate–Constituent Relationship

To answer Hypothesis 1, a series of analysis of variance tests (ANOVAs) was run to determine if exposure to a candidate or a message in support of bipartisanship would result in a stronger candidate–constituent relationship. A one-way ANOVA was run on the experimental cell and the relationship factors to determine if exposure to either the candidate speaking or messages about bipartisanship might affect one’s relationship with

the candidate (participants rated relationship with the candidate to whom they were exposed; control cell was randomly assigned either Romney or Obama as a candidate to rate). There were main effects found for each of the four relationship factors based on manipulation cell: optimism/positivity & human voice, $F(7, 411) = 3.79, p \leq .001$; commitment & responsibility, $F(7, 411) = 3.41, p \leq .001$; symmetrical communication, $F(7, 411) = 2.70, p \leq .001$; and relational responsibility, $F(7, 411) = 2.83, p \leq .005$.

In the *optimism/positivity & human voice* factor, there were statistically significant interaction effects between the cell who saw only Obama's victory speech and those who saw both (1) Romney's concession speech with the challenge message and (2) the Romney control. In both cases, those who saw Obama's speech alone rated higher than the Romney-challenge condition (M difference = .65, $p \leq .05$) and the Romney control (M difference = .61, $p \leq .05$). Similarly, the Obama-support condition saw interaction effects with factor 1 in the same conditions. Along these same lines, the Obama-support condition exhibited a stronger relationship than the Romney-challenge condition (M difference = .71, $p \leq .01$) and Romney control (M difference = .67, $p \leq .05$).

For the *commitment & responsibility* factor, there were interaction effects as well. The Obama (speech only) condition showed a significantly higher factor 2 relationship than the Obama control (M difference = .59, $p \leq .05$) and the Romney control (M difference = .72, $p \leq .005$).

For the *symmetrical communication* factor, there was an interaction effect between the Romney-challenge condition and the Romney (speech only) condition (M difference = .63, $p \leq .05$, Romney-challenge only higher).

For the *relational responsibility* factor, there was a significant difference between the Romney control and the Obama control, with the Romney control showing a stronger factor 4 relationship (M difference = .58, $p \leq .05$). In addition, the Romney control condition was higher than the Obama-challenge condition (M difference = .59, $p \leq .05$).

In answering Hypothesis 1, the data show that exposure to the candidate does improve candidate-constituent relationships under certain conditions.

Cynicism and Political Information Efficacy

A series of ANOVAs was run on the manipulation conditions with each of the traditional political efficacy indices: cynicism and political information efficacy. Among these, none showed a statistically significant main effect, meaning that there was not a difference in efficacy in these young voters based on manipulation. Neither Hypothesis 2 nor Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Bipartisan Measures

The questionnaire included several individual item measures examining bipartisanship issues focused separately on Obama and Romney. An ANOVA for each of these individual measures and the manipulation cells was run, resulting in main effects for only one Obama-phrased statement: "Now that Obama has won a second term, he is more likely to push a liberal agenda without concern for Republicans," $F(7, 425) = 3.33$,

Table 4. Regression Models.

	Standardized Coefficient β		
	Predicting Obama Sincerity (adj. $R^2 = .297$)	Predicting Romney Sincerity (adj. $R^2 = .109$)	Lack of Bipartisanship (adj. $R^2 = .102$)
Political party coefficients			
Party affiliation strength	-.040	-.084	-.121*
Ideological strength	-.486**	.264**	-.064
Relationship factors			
Optimism/positivity & human voice	-.059	-.030	.006
Relational commitment	.007	.024	.076
Symmetrical communication	.075	-.035	-.121
Responsibility	.037	.032	.124*
Efficacy			
Cynicism	-.093*	-.031	.294**
Political information efficacy	.032	-.031	.073
Authenticity			
Genuineness	.083	.114	.069
Authenticity	.058	-.048	-.075

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .001$.

$p \leq .005$. The Romney-support condition showed interaction effects with the following cells showing a higher score: Obama-challenge (M difference = .71, $p \leq .01$, with Obama-challenge being higher) and Romney-challenge (M difference = .77, $p \leq .005$, with Romney-challenge being higher). There were main effects for only one Romney-focused statement: "Calls for bipartisan cooperation from Mitt Romney are sincere," $F(7, 425) = 2.66$, $p \leq .005$. There were interaction effects with Romney (speech only) being .48 higher ($p \leq .01$) than Obama-challenge, and Romney-support being .56 higher ($p \leq .05$) than Obama-challenge.

Predicting the Perception of Candidate Sincerity

Research Question 2 asked how exposure to either the candidate himself or to bipartisanship messages would affect first-time voters' candidate sincerity ratings. To properly test this, four dummy variables were created from the manipulation cell variable to indicate (1) exposure to the Obama video, (2) exposure to the Romney video, (3) exposure to a support message, or (4) exposure to a challenge message. See Table 4 for regression results.

The linear regression to predict the sincerity of Obama resulted in an r^2 value explaining 32.5% (adjusted $r^2 = .29$), $F(15, 370) = 11.86$, $p \leq .001$. Political party strength was the strongest predictor in the model ($\beta = -.486$, $p \leq .05$), meaning that those with a weaker party affiliation were more likely to rate Obama as sincere. Those

who didn't see the challenge messages were also more likely to rate Obama as being sincere ($\beta = -.119, p \leq .05$).

For Romney, the model predicting that his calls for bipartisanship were sincere resulted in an r^2 of .14 (adjusted $r^2 = .109$), $F(15, 369) = 4.11, p \leq .001$. Again, political party strength was the strongest predictor in the model, but in this case a stronger connection to one's political party correlated with the feeling that Romney was sincere ($\beta = .264, p \leq .001$). Having seen the Romney video ($\beta = .194, p \leq .01$) and having not seen a challenge message ($\beta = -.141, p \leq .05$) also contributed.

Predicting Visceral Reactions Based on a Lack of Partisanship

To understand what might turn a first-time voter away from politics and how bipartisan messages might play into that, a linear regression was run with the interval-level item, "The lack of bipartisanship cooperation in Washington turns me off to politics," as the dependent variable. The resulting model, as seen in Table 4, was statistically significant ($p \leq .001$), with an r^2 of 12.8% (adjusted $r^2 = .10$). Cynicism proved to be the most powerful variable in the model ($\beta = .294, p \leq .001$). Weakness in one's political party identification strength (strength $\beta = -.121, p \leq .05$) also played a role.

Discussion

As the first experiment of its kind conducted in the political public relations area, this study added to our empirical understanding not only of public relations tactics (speeches and strategic messages) but also of their effect on voters with regard to relationship and candidate assessment of authenticity and genuineness. Through this study's complex 2×3 factorial design, several overarching trends were observed.

Effect of Speech and External Messages on Relationship

A common political public relations tactic is the speech. In these cases, very specific and strategic speeches were selected (post-election victory speech and concession speech). This creates an opportunity for the voter to be exposed to a speech in the experimental setting that would not be particularly issue laden (thereby avoiding any personal political beliefs) and thus perhaps a clearer read on the speech strategy. Though public relations practitioners work to shape the communication environment through the spokesperson's comments, it is an artifact of today's media that public relations cannot control the communication environment. External messages may compete and conflict with the candidate message.

The optimism/positivity & human voice relationship factor appeared to be most affected by exposure to Obama's speech. Those who were exposed to his speech had significantly higher factor scores for optimism/positivity and human voice than several Romney conditions. This may be related to several possible explanations. Obama is a noted and well-regarded orator, who was delivering a positive victory speech after winning a tightly fought re-election campaign. In such cases, positivity would

naturally be the undercurrent theme of the speech, which could affect one's connection with the speaker. Second, the Obama speech was much longer than the Romney speech, which could give the viewer more of a chance to connect with him. Though this research cannot pinpoint what other influences were at play in these findings, the fact that a large portion of the experimental participants were self-reported Republicans who voted for Romney should send a clear message to public relations practitioners that mere exposure to your candidate speaking can strengthen relationship.

Looking at relational commitment, the data again trend, this time pointing to the Obama speech as creating a stronger relationship on this factor than both of the control groups. It is interesting that the addition of bipartisan messages—in either support or challenge—did not affect the outcome of this relationship factor among participants. This perhaps suggests to public relations practitioners that the best opportunity to create relational commitment lies within creating exposure opportunities to the candidate himself. The addition of external messages may, however, confuse and dilute the effect as it did here.

Symmetrical communication differences were noticed only among Romney exposure cells, with the Romney-challenge condition exhibiting a greater symmetrical communication factor score than the Romney control. In this case, the outside messages challenging the calls for bipartisanship actually work in the candidate's favor.

Efficacy

This study included several contributions to scholarship with regard to efficacy. Methodologically, the combined internal and external scales measuring efficacy appeared to perform better as a multidimensional construct than the separate treatment of the scales on a unidimensional level. Future scholarship should continue to test these measures.

With regard to the implications gleaned from these scales, it is interesting that in this dataset, there were no differences between first-time voters in efficacy items. This signals that the young voters entered the experimental conditions with similar baseline levels of efficacy. Perhaps due to their inexperience with the political process, and having just participated in a campaign for the first time, the youth could have been more attuned to their internal psychological factors.

Bipartisanship

It appears that on the topic of bipartisanship, negative external messaging outside of the confines of the campaign may have an effect on one's perception of bipartisanship. The results here show that the two manipulation cells that were exposed to messages that were pessimistic and challenged the ability of the government to act in a bipartisan nature indeed showed higher levels displaying the perception that Obama would push a liberal agenda without concern for the Republicans. For public relations practitioners, this further showcases the complex communication environment and displays the need for working with other groups (in this case, within the political party) to ensure

that a single message is communicated across the media landscape from the different voices. Although public relations cannot control the communication environment, they can control their own message and work to ensure consistency across like-minded organizational partnerships. By filling the media space with a more consistent message, it may drown out the negative messaging challenges voiced by the opposition.

When it comes to creating a positive assessment, the findings here suggest that exposure to one's speech (and speech only) with no additional information can create a sense among voters that the candidate is sincere in his calls for bipartisanship. This was the case in rating Romney as sincere, as those who saw only his speech perceived him more as being sincere than those who saw Obama's speech along with the challenge message.

Together, these bipartisan findings underscore the importance of controlling the message and controlling exposure. Even though classic persuasion techniques laud the tactic of facing competing messages head on, in this case introducing the competing message (opponent's speech, challenge messages) reduced perceptions among first-time voters that the candidate was sincerely committed to bipartisanship.

Predicting Sincerity

Although candidate exposure and relationship-related variables were the main focus of this study expected to predict receptiveness to bipartisan messages, the standout variable appeared not to be those feelings of relationship (relationship factors) or even assessments of the candidate (authenticity, genuineness), rather the strength of one's ideology stands as the strongest predictor. Similar to survey data from Sweetser (2013b), the importance of ideological strength now suggests that it may be an important precursor to relationship. More research must be done on this topic, further isolating both relationship effects and ideological strength to determine how the two interact.

Limitations

This study is not without limitation. The experimental environment limits external validity. Would Republicans really watch the entirety of Obama's victory speech? Would Democrats watch Romney's concession speech? It is certain that these are issues with any controlled environment and such is the case here as well.

Though the study incorporated several relationship variables as well as internal psychological variables, the ability to pinpoint an exact understanding of what causes relationship changes is limited. Future research should continue to add externally affected variables (such as relationship was in this study) as well as measure the internally oriented variables (such as efficacy).

The data were collected after the election and what could be considered a "cooling-off period" for voters. Although researchers did take measures to control one's own ideology in this research through both random assignment and asking for self-report of political party ideology, the real-world events of a winner and a loser in the election

may have played into findings here. Future research should continue to strive for high ecological validity in addition to experimental control in order to isolate variables in the best possible manner.

Conclusion

As the result of the first political public relations experiment, the findings here suggest that at its base, political public relations is still a very traditional form of public relations. The concepts of controlling the message and shaping the media environment as well as the importance of information subsidies and tactics such as speeches are all textbook public relations approaches that were found to be both relevant and effective in the political realm.

The continued application of relationship theory in political organization–public relationships (Levenshus, 2010; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser, 2013b; Wise, 2007) and more finite focus on the candidate–constituent context return the concept to its roots, focusing on that parasocial-like interpersonal relationship that the voter perceives with the candidate. Acting as a true hybrid of its interpersonal communication roots and its organization-based public relations development, relationship theory applied to a political actor provides an ideal and relatable opportunity to further test it.

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