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The “Big Two” in Political Communication:

The Effects of Attacking and Defending Politicians’ Leadership or Morality

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Abstract

In two experimental studies (conducted in Britain and Italy), participants read about a politician answering to leadership- versus morality-related allegations using either downward counterfactuals (“things could have been worse, if...”) or upward counterfactuals (“things could have been better, if...”). Downward messages increased the perception of the politician’s leadership, while both downward and upward messages increased morality perception. Political sophistication moderated the effect of message direction, with downward messages increasing perceived morality in low sophisticates and upward messages increasing perceived morality in high sophisticates. In the latter group, the acknowledgement of a responsibility-taking intent mediated morality judgment. Results were consistent across different countries, highlighting previously unexplored effects of communication on the perception of the “Big Two” dimensions.

Keywords: social perception; counterfactual communication; political sophistication.

THE “BIG TWO” IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: THE EFFECTS OF ATTACKING AND DEFENDING POLITICIANS’ LEADERSHIP OR MORALITY

Introduction

Politicians often have to account for negative results deriving from their past decisions and they do this in different ways (see McGraw, 2001). For example, they may use hypothetical downward comparisons, by saying that “*things would have gone even worse if a different course of action had been taken.*” This response might show a politician’s determination and consistency, but it could be interpreted as defensive, too. On the other hand, they may use upward counterfactual comparisons, by saying that “*things could have gone better if a different course of action had been taken.*” This admission might be welcomed as a sign of frankness, but it would also very likely expose the politician’s previous poor judgment to criticism. In the present paper, we investigated how political communication influences citizens’ perception of politicians on the two fundamental dimensions of personality, namely, agency and communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). In particular, we examined communicative situations in which a politician’s leadership or morality was questioned, analyzing how different defensive strategies used by the politician (based on hypothetical downward or upward comparisons) influenced citizens’ perception of the two personality dimensions.

Impression formation in the political context

There is growing consensus in research on social perception that two fundamental dimensions, usually referred to as competence and warmth or agency and communion, underlie judgments of the self (Abele, Uchronski, Suitner, & Wojciszke, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wojciszke, 2005), others (Wojciszke & Abele, 2008), and groups (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Several recent studies in political psychology found a similar convergence on two main dimensions in the perception of political leaders, which can be traced back to agency and communion (Barisione & Catellani, 2008; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Cislak & Wojciszke, 2006, 2008; Vecchione, Gonzalez Castro, & Caprara,

2011). This pattern of results holds in different national and political contexts and in studies conducted from different theoretical perspectives. For example, research by Caprara and colleagues, which assumed the “Big Five” model of personality as a theoretical reference, found that traits attributed to politicians cluster along two dimensions substantially conforming to the “Big Two” dimensions of agency and communion (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 2002; Caprara, Vecchione, Barbaranelli, & Fraley, 2007; Caprara, Schwartz, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2008).

Within each dimension, some traits seem to be more central than others. This is consistent with research on impression formation, which found that the importance attributed to some traits rather than others changes as a function of the target’s role and relation to the perceiver (Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). In the political context, the most relevant traits in the agency dimension are energetic, resolute and competent, while the most relevant ones in the communion dimension are sincere, loyal and honest (Caprara et al., 2008; Jones & Hudson, 1996; Mondak, 1995). Evidently, when people have to choose representatives they attribute a particular importance to their ability to take decisions effectively and manage complex situations (in other words to their leadership) and to their commitment to social norms accepted by the group (in other words to their morality).

One might wonder which of these two dimension, leadership or morality, has a greater role in attracting citizens’ attention and orienting their evaluation of politicians. Several studies indicate that, compared to other personality dimensions, morality has greater importance in the perception and evaluation of other people (Abele & Brückmuller, 2011; Vonk 1999; Willis & Todorov, 2006; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008; Ybarra et al., 2008). In particular, negative information about morality seems to have greater salience in person perception and information seeking (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011), possibly because such information is considered more threatening to the self (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). Something similar seems to occur in the political context. Cislak and Wojciszke (2008) found that morality weighted more than competence in the evaluation of politicians, but also that politicians were rated as lower in morality than in competence.

Other studies also indicate that citizens see morality as a weak spot in politicians' personalities (Birch & Allen, 2010; Mazzoleni, 2007; Redlawsk & McCann, 2005). This negative perception of politicians' morality is likely to vary according to the frequency of political scandals affecting the country the citizen is living in, and has been connected to low levels of trust in political institutions as a whole (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Consistent with the interpretation given by this research, political scientists link the primacy of the morality dimension in the evaluation of political leaders to the dismal consideration of politicians' morality and the potential harm deriving from their acts of moral misconduct (Newman, 2003).

While several studies have investigated politicians' personality dimensions and traits analyzing citizens' impression formation process, research on how political communication may influence such process is still limited (see McGraw, 2003). In our research, we examined how politicians can cope with situations in which either their leadership or their morality are under attack. Our main hypothesis was that different types of defenses would have different effects in repairing the attacked leadership or morality dimension.

The influence of defensive statements on impression formation

Politicians are frequently put under scrutiny by the media and public opinion, particularly when they have to deal with scandals and unexpected or negative results of past decisions. In such situations, politicians devote considerable efforts to justifying and explaining their actions, in order to maintain or reinforce positive evaluations among their constituencies. They can resort to different strategies, ranging from denying involvement to pleading guilty, through bringing up different kinds of excuses and justifications (McGraw, 1990; McGraw, Timpone, & Bruck, 1993). The effects of post-scandal explanations on dimension-specific perceptions of politicians, however, have not been systematically investigated (Funk, 1996).

One defensive strategy often employed by politicians is counterfactual downward comparison (McGraw, 1990; 1991; Catellani, 2011). When reacting to criticism of their past performances, they can say that if they had acted differently, things would have gone worse than

they actually did (e.g., “If we had not raised taxes, the State would have gone bankrupt”). Such comparisons with hypothetical worse conditions may prove beneficial for politicians using them. Past research showed that when counterfactuals of this type are generated spontaneously by people reflecting on their own past experiences, they generally result in positive self-evaluations (Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993; Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995; Sanna, Turley-Ames, & Meier, 1999). Besides, downward counterfactuals may induce observers to attribute less responsibility to the actors of an event resulting in a negative outcome. For example, in the judicial context Nario-Redmond and Branscombe (1996) found that generating downward counterfactuals about a rape scenario (e.g., thinking how the victim could have suffered even more serious harm from the aggression) led mock jurors to attribute less responsibility to the assailant.

One might wonder whether the consequences are equally positive when people evaluate downward counterfactuals generated by others rather than by themselves. Research by Wong (2010) showed that airline pilots commenting on their actions in emergency situations with downward counterfactuals were actually judged more negatively than those using upward counterfactuals. Such effect of counterfactual direction on evaluation was mediated by participants’ perception that pilots using downward counterfactuals were not taking up enough responsibility for their past actions. Wong’s research suggests that people exposed to counterfactuals might be influenced not only by their content (i.e., what the speaker could have been done in the past), but also by the communicative intention attributed to the speaker (i.e., what the speaker wants the audience to believe, see Douglas & Sutton, 2006; Elder, Sutton, & Douglas, 2005; Hornsey & Imani, 2004). According to Wong’s (2010) findings, the inferred intention in those who generate upward counterfactuals may be the one of taking responsibility for a negative result in the past, therefore showing sincerity rather than defensiveness.

In the present research we investigated the effects of downward and upward counterfactual defenses, expecting them to differentially influence the evaluation of politicians’ leadership and morality. We assumed that leadership pertains to performance, whereas morality pertains to social

relations (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). On this basis, we also assumed that the relational aspect of defensive communication (i.e., the communicative intention attributed to the speaker) would be particularly important in morality judgment.

From these general assumptions, we developed specific predictions regarding the link between recourse to upward versus downward counterfactual defenses and the perceived leadership versus morality of the speaker. We expected leadership judgment to be mainly improved by downward counterfactual defenses, as downward comparison would cast past actions of the defending politician in a better light than comparison to upward counterfactuals. A possible objection to this expectation may arise from past research showing that spontaneous, self-focused upward counterfactuals can actually boost one’s intention to act more effectively in the future (see for a review Epstude & Roese, 2008). However, when these counterfactuals are employed in defensive communication they may be more likely to focus external observers’ attention on the fact that the speaker acted ineffectively in the past.

As for morality evaluations, we expected them to be improved by both downward and upward counterfactuals. As we have described for leadership evaluations, downward counterfactuals can provide a comparison with a worse alternative to the actual situation, leading to a comparatively better evaluation of the politician’s morality. Such evaluation, however, might be improved by upward counterfactuals, as well. This would be the case when the receiver’s attention shifts from the actual content of the defense message (i.e., the idea that things could have been better) to the intention underlying such message (i.e., honestly accounting for one’s past decision and how they could have led to better results). We therefore expected both downward counterfactual and upward counterfactual defenses to improve morality evaluation, with the effectiveness of either defensive strategy depending on the receiver’s focus being either on the content of the defense or the intention underlying it. We expected the degree of political sophistication of receivers to play a role in this.

The moderating effect of political sophistication

In our research, we expected that the effectiveness of communicative strategies based on upward or downward counterfactuals would vary depending on the level of political sophistication of those exposed to such communication. Political sophistication has been defined as the amount, complexity, and organization of political cognition (Luskin, 1990). It generally encompasses a number of more specific constructs as political interest, political knowledge (Delli Carpini, & Keeter, 1993), and expertise (Fiske, Lau, & Smith, 1990; Zaller, 1990).

Past research indicates that political sophistication can alter the way people process and evaluate information about political events and politicians. Politically sophisticated citizens are more interested in getting information about candidates or political issues (Lodge & Taber, 2000). Also, they more deeply scrutinize messages coming from a source perceived as suspicious, making inferences about the source’s ulterior motives (McGraw, Lodge, & Jones, 2002). Consistently, in the present research we expected politically sophisticated participants to be more analytical in processing and evaluating politicians’ upward versus downward defenses, taking in consideration not only the content-related but also the intention-related components of defensive communication. In particular, we expected sophisticated participants to attribute higher morality to the politician in the upward defense condition and that this effect would be mediated by the acknowledgment of the politician’s responsibility-taking intent. Conversely, we expected participants with low political sophistication to take the politician’s downward messages at face value and therefore attribute higher morality to the politician in the downward defense condition.

Research overview and hypotheses

In two studies on two different national groups of participants (British and Italian), we analyzed the perception of leadership and morality of a politician being attacked on either dimension, and the variation of such perception after the politician used upward or downward counterfactuals as a defense.

We presented participants with a fictitious newspaper article dealing with the negative results of a local government official’s decision. The text of the article was manipulated in order to

focus on either the politician’s lack of foresight in allocating budget funds (in the leadership-attack condition) or the politician’s choice of contracting one of the main campaign funding contributors (in the morality-attack condition). Then, after measuring the initial perception of the politician’s leadership and morality dimensions, we presented the politician’s response to the allegations, using downward counterfactual, upward counterfactual, or non-counterfactual statements. Finally, we measured again leadership and morality perceptions, in order to assess the effects of the different defensive messages on them.

A preliminary assumption of the research was that attacks against the politician’s leadership or morality would have a stronger negative effect on the respective dimension than on the other one. Consistently with the above mentioned asymmetry of leadership and morality in the evaluation of politicians, we also assumed that morality would be perceived as lower than leadership.

Concerning the effects of defensive statements, overall we expected an increase in the evaluation of the two dimensions after the politician’s defense. However, we also expected such an increase to vary as a function of evaluated dimension and defense type, and we developed four specific hypotheses in this regard. First, we expected leadership evaluations to be improved by downward counterfactual defenses more than by the other two defense types (Hypothesis 1). This would be due to the already mentioned positive effect of downward comparison on the perception of one’s past performance. As for morality evaluations, we expected them to be improved by both downward and upward counterfactuals (Hypothesis 2). In the former case, this would be again due to the effect of downward comparison, as for leadership evaluation. In the latter case, this would be instead due to the recognition of a responsibility-taking intent underlying the defense.

We also expected that the effect of downward versus upward defense on morality evaluation, as well as the consideration of the responsibility-taking intent, would vary according to participants’ political sophistication. Specifically, we expected low-sophisticated participants to attribute higher morality to the politician using a downward counterfactual defense and high-sophisticated participants to attribute higher morality to the politician using an upward

counterfactual defense (Hypothesis 3). Finally, we expected that in the case of high-sophisticated participants the positive effect of upward counterfactual defenses on morality evaluations would be mediated by the acknowledgment of a responsibility-taking intent to the politician (Hypothesis 4).

All four hypotheses were tested twice, in Study 1 with a British sample and in Study 2 with an Italian sample. We expected to find the same results in both studies, confirming the general nature of the observed effects of attacks and defenses in political communication.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we tested our hypotheses by asking a group of participants (university students from a British university) to imagine being part of our fictional scenario as the citizens of a local community which was going to hold County council elections in the upcoming months.

Method

Participants were 109 students from the University of Kent (age $M = 19.6$, $SD = 2.61$, 30.3% males), who joined this web-based study in exchange for course credit. The study had a 2 (attacked dimension: leadership vs. morality) \times 3 (defense type: upward counterfactual vs. downward counterfactual vs. non-counterfactual) design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six experimental conditions. They were presented the text of an alleged newspaper column describing the acts of a County Council member regarding the institution of a private school bus service which resulted in some extra expenses (£ 40,000) for the County budget. The article focused either on the leadership-related shortcomings of the politician (e.g., citing the fact that Mr. XXX miscalculated the projected cost of the initiative) or on the morality-related ones (e.g., citing the fact that Mr. XXX assigned the service to a private company owned by one of the campaign contributors). The text ended with the journalist openly questioning the politician’s fitness for re-election and announcing that the politician had promised to respond to those allegations with a declaration. After reading the attack text, participants answered a first set of questions. They were asked to rate the politician on a series of personality traits (“*Based on the impression you made from the information included in the article, would you define Mr. XXX as... resolved, tenacious, dynamic,*

knowledgeable, honest, reliable, sincere, trustworthy”, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1, “*not at all*” to 7, “*very*”). Two leadership and morality mean indexes were computed, after performing a principal factor analysis (using oblimin rotation) which confirmed a bi-factorial solution. The first factor explained 38% of variance and was loaded by the morality-related trait items (honest, reliable, trustworthy, sincere). The second factor explained 14.24% of variance and was loaded by the leadership-related items (resolved, tenacious, dynamic, knowledgeable).

Once they completed the first part of the questionnaire, participants were presented the politician’s response to the previous article. In the response, previous allegations were addressed by using either upward counterfactual, downward counterfactual, or non-counterfactual sentences. Examples of upward counterfactuals were the following: “*If I had more thoughtfully considered the financial consequences of such a decision, the resulting expenses would have been avoided.*” (leadership defense) or “*If I had more transparently disclosed the implications of this decision, the resulting expenses would have been avoided.*” (morality defense). Examples of downward counterfactuals were the following: “*If I had less thoughtfully considered the financial consequences of such a decision, the resulting expenses would have been even larger.*” (leadership defense) or “*If I had concealed the implications of this decision, the resulting expenses would have been even larger*” (morality defense). Finally, examples of the non-counterfactual defense were: e.g., “*Although I thoughtfully considered the financial consequences of such a decision, it resulted in some extra expenses*” (leadership defense) or “*Although I transparently disclosed the implications of this decision, it resulted in some extra expenses.*” (morality defense).

After reading the response, participants were asked to re-evaluate the politician’s personality traits. These measures were intended to replicate those of the first part of the questionnaire, in order to allow a comparison between the evaluations given before and after the politician’s defense. Participants were also asked to indicate to what extent they believed the politician was taking responsibility for the situation (“*To what extent do you think Mr. XXX is taking responsibility for what happened?*”, on a 7-point scale). Then, they were asked some more general questions about

their interest in political matters (“*How interested are you in politics*”, on a scale ranging from 1, “not interested at all” to 7, “very interested”), their media use (by indicating how often they read political news from newspapers and magazines, TV news and debates or websites, on a 6-point scale ranging from “*never*” to “*every day*”), and their level of knowledge of political facts, through a set of five multiple-choice questions on political institutions (e.g., “*There are currently 650 MPs in the House of Commons [yes/ no]*”) or important political figures (e.g., “*What is the current position of Nick Clegg, MP, in the incumbent government cabinet? [Deputy prime minister/ Secretary of State for Education/Chancellor of the Exchequer]*”). Political interest, knowledge and media use scores were later recoded into a single political sophistication index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$). Finally, participants were asked to indicate their political orientation (“*When speaking about political orientation people usually refer to categories such as left, center or right. How would you position yourself on the political left-right dimension?*”), with five answer options, namely “*left*”, “*center-left*”, “*center*”, “*center-right*” and “*right*”.

Results

Preliminary analyses

In order to check whether the manipulated attacks to either the leadership or the morality of the politician did indeed affect the respective personality dimensions, we analyzed participants’ perception of the politician’s leadership and morality after reading the newspaper article containing the allegation. We performed a 2×2 repeated measures ANOVA with the attacked dimension (leadership vs. morality) as a between-subject factor and the evaluated dimension (leadership vs. morality) as a within-subject factor. A main effect of evaluated dimension was found, $F(1,103) = 47.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$, with the politician’s morality being evaluated as significantly lower ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.84$) than the politician’s leadership ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.01$). An interaction effect between attacked and evaluated dimension was found as well, $F(1,103) = 23.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$. Follow-up ANOVAs on each evaluated dimension showed that the morality evaluation was significantly lower in the morality-based attack condition than in the leadership-based attack

condition ($M = 2.51, SD = 0.98$ vs. $M = 3.11, SD = 0.96$), $F(1,108) = 10.22, p < .01, \eta^2 = .09$. The opposite trend was found for leadership evaluation ($M = 3.29, SD = 0.86$ in the leadership-based attack condition vs. $M = 3.54, SD = 0.81$ in the morality-based attack condition), although the difference only approached significance in this case, $F(1,108) = 2.40, p = .13, \eta^2 = .02$.

These results confirmed that the manipulated attacks indeed impaired the attacked dimension more than the other one. However, the effect was more evident for the morality attack. Morality was generally evaluated as lower than leadership and more heavily affected by negative information provided in the attack article. These results were consistent with previous research findings, showing that a politician’s morality is evaluated as lower than a politician’s leadership (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008) and that the morality dimension is more sensitive to attacks (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987, 1989; Wojciszke, Brycz, & Borkeanu, 1993).

As mentioned in the introduction, some previous research showed a link between political orientation and the relative importance attributed to personality dimensions in the evaluation of political leaders. We therefore preliminarily checked for differences in the evaluation of the politician’s leadership and morality among participants with different political orientations. We ran the above-described ANOVAs adding political orientation as a between-subject factor. Results showed no main effect of political orientation on the perception of either the politician’s leadership, $F(4,106) = 0.68, p > .60, \eta^2 = .03$, or the politician’s morality, $F(4,106) = 1.05, p > .30, \eta^2 = .04$, nor any interaction effect with the attacked dimension, $F_s < 1.2$, all *n.s.*

Finally, we analyzed the correlations between leadership and morality evaluations. Results showed that the evaluations of the politician’s leadership and the politician’s morality were only weakly correlated both before and after the politician’s defense ($r = .249, p < .01$ and $r = .279, p < .005$, respectively). Such low correlation was consistent with what has often been observed by previous research on the “Big Two” dimensions (Judd et al., 2005).

Effect of defense on leadership and morality perception

To test our Hypotheses 1 and 2 regarding the effects of downward and upward defenses on the evaluation of the two personality dimensions, we carried out two separate ANOVAs on the perception of the politician’s leadership and, respectively, the politician’s morality. In both ANOVAs a 2 (attacked dimension: leadership vs. morality) \times 3 (defense type: upward counterfactual vs. downward counterfactual vs. non-counterfactual) \times 2 (measurement time: before defense vs. after defense) mixed-design was adopted, with attacked dimension and defense type as between-subject factors and measurement time as within-subject factor.

First of all, the results of the ANOVA on leadership ratings showed a main effect of measurement time, $F(1, 103) = 26.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$, with leadership ratings being significantly higher after reading the politician’s defense ($M = 3.83, SD = 0.92$) than before ($M = 3.42, SD = 0.84$). More importantly for our research goals, a measurement time by defense type significant interaction also emerged, $F(2,103) = 3.97, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$. Follow-up separate t-tests for each defense type condition were performed. Results showed a statistically significant increase in leadership perception in the downward defense condition (from $M = 3.39, SD = 0.76$ to $M = 4.15, SD = 0.75$), $t = 4.98, p < .001$. In the other two conditions, differences between leadership perception before and after the politician defense were smaller and not significant (all M s and SD s for the various sub-groups are reported in Table 1). Results therefore corroborated Hypothesis 1, according to which the downward counterfactual defense would have been more effective than the upward one in restoring the evaluation of the politician’s leadership.

The ANOVA on morality ratings showed a main effect of measurement time, $F(1, 103) = 99.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .49$, with morality ratings being significantly higher after reading the politician’s defense ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.02$) than before ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.01$). This time, however, the measurement time by defense type interaction was not significant, $F(2,103) = 0.94, p = .40, \eta^2 = .02$, with all three defensive strategies leading to a comparable increase in the evaluation of the politician’s morality (see Table 1). This result was consistent with our Hypothesis 2, according to

which both upward and downward counterfactual defenses would have had a positive effect on morality evaluation.

Moderation analysis

Although both upward and downward defenses turned out to be effective in restoring the politician’s morality, an additional expectation of ours was that this would not be the case for all citizens in the same way. According to our Hypothesis 3, political sophistication would moderate the effect of upward and downward defenses on morality evaluation. In order to test this hypothesis, we created a political sophistication index (centered and standardized) and two dummy variables representing the upward and downward counterfactual defense conditions (keeping the factual defense condition as a reference point, see Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). The political sophistication index and the two dummy variables were entered in a hierarchical linear regression, followed by the respective interaction terms. As a dependent variable, we used an index of the increase in morality evaluation after the politician’s response. The index was calculated by subtracting the pre-defense morality ratings to the post-defense ones.

Consistent with the previous ANOVA analysis, no significant main effect of defense type emerged. However, significant interaction effects between political sophistication and both the upward defense, $\beta = .310, t = 2.79, p < .01$ and the downward defense, $\beta = -.335, t = 3.14, p < .005$, were indeed found (Table 2, right side). Analyses of simple slopes for each defense type showed that the upward defense was more effective in increasing perceived morality among more sophisticated participants, $\beta = .207, t = 2.32, p < .05$, while the downward defense was more effective in increasing perceived morality among less sophisticated participants, $\beta = -.248, t = 2.68, p < .01$ (Figure 1). These results confirm our expectation that political sophistication would moderate the effect of counterfactual defense on morality evaluation. Upward and downward defensive statements had completely opposite effects on participants with different levels of political sophistication, showing the important moderating role of this variable.

When performing the same regression on the increase in leadership evaluations, only a significant main effect of the downward defense emerged (see the ANOVA analysis above), while political sophistication had no effect neither alone nor in interaction with defense type (all regression values are shown in Table 2, left side).

Mediation analysis

Our final expectation (Hypothesis 4) was that for more sophisticated participants (but not for less sophisticated ones) the effect of upward and downward defenses on morality judgments would be mediated by the communicative intent attributed to the politician, specifically the one of taking responsibility for past performance. To test this expectation, we first split the sample in two subgroups with sophistication levels above ($n = 54$) or below the median value ($n = 55$). Then, we tested the mediational role of responsibility taking on morality judgments in each subgroup.

Sophisticated participants attributed a stronger responsibility-taking intent to the politician in the upward counterfactual defense condition, $\beta = .236$, $t = 1.75$, $p = .08$. We then regressed the increase in morality evaluation on defense type, finding the predicted positive effect of upward counterfactual defenses, $\beta = .288$, $t = 2.17$, $p < .05$. When we included responsibility taking in the model, we found that it had a strong positive effect on the increase in perceived morality, $\beta = .547$, $t = 4.68$, $p < .001$, whereas the previous effect of defense type was not significant anymore, $\beta = .159$, $t = 1.38$, $p = .17$ (Figure 2). Sobel (1982) test of mediation on the indirect effect of defense type through responsibility taking approached statistical significance, $Z = 1.65$, $p = .09$.

Less sophisticated participants, on the contrary, did not attribute a stronger responsibility-taking intent to the politician in the upward counterfactual defense condition, nor in their case did such attribution led to a larger increase in perceived morality, $Z = 0.50$, $p > .60$.

These results confirmed our Hypothesis 4 according to which the impression of the politician taking responsibility for the negative outcome would mediate the positive effect of the upward defense on morality judgments, but only among sophisticated participants.

STUDY 2

To corroborate the findings from Study 1, we replicated the same experimental design and procedure on a similar group of participants (university students with comparable age and gender distribution), but in a different national context (Italy). We expected to find similar results regarding the effects of the politician’s defensive statements, as well as the moderation and mediation effects related to participants’ political sophistication.

Method

Participants were 121 university students from the Catholic University of Milan (age $M = 22.2$, $SD = 3.81$, 42.4% males), who joined this web-based study as volunteers. The experimental design was the same used in Study 1. The manipulation texts were translated into Italian with only minor adaptations (e.g., the politician was presented as provincial councilor, which roughly corresponds to the County council member position in the Italian local government). The questionnaire was also translated and adapted. In particular, the political knowledge questions were adapted to Italian political institutions and the Italian trait adjectives used to measure the politician’s leadership and morality perceptions were selected basing on the cross-language trait list proposed by Abele, Uchrowski, Suitner, and Wojciszke (2008).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Like in Study 1, we first of all assessed the effectiveness of the manipulated attacks on the corresponding personality dimension. A 2×2 mixed ANOVA with the attacked dimension (leadership vs. morality) as a between-subject factor and the evaluated dimension (leadership vs. morality) as a within-subject factor was performed. Results mirrored those found in Study 1. A main effect of evaluated dimension emerged, $F(1,119) = 175.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .59$, with the politician’s morality being evaluated as considerably lower ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.97$) than the politician’s leadership ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.13$). An interaction effect between attacked and evaluated dimension also emerged, $F(1,119) = 33.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$. Follow-up ANOVAs on each

evaluated dimension showed that leadership evaluations were lower in the leadership-based attack condition ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.05$) than in the morality-based attack one ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.11$), $F(1,124) = 11.71$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$, while morality evaluations were lower in the morality-based attack condition ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.85$) than in the leadership-based attack one ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.99$), $F(1,124) = 13.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. The effectiveness of each kind of attack on the corresponding personality dimension of the politician was therefore confirmed, as it was the lower degree of morality attributed to the politician compared to leadership.

The possible intervening effect of participants’ political orientation on leadership and morality perception was also tested, adding political orientation as a between-subject factor to the previous ANOVA design. As in Study 1, there was no main effect of political orientation on the perception of leadership, $F(4,106) = 0.68$, $p > .60$, $\eta^2 = .03$, and morality, $F(4,106) = 1.05$, $p > .30$, $\eta^2 = .04$, nor any interaction effect with the article focus on either dimension, $F_s < 1.6$, all *n.s.*

Effects of defense on leadership and morality perception

As in Study 1, we compared leadership and morality scores measured before and after the politician’s defense, in order to find out whether defensive statements improved the perception of the politician and which kind of defense was more effective on each dimension. A 2 (attacked dimension) \times 3 (defense type) \times 2 (measurement time) mixed-design ANOVA was carried out on leadership ratings. No main effect of measurement time emerged, while the interaction between measurement time and defense type was instead significant, $F(2,117) = 3.09$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Follow-up *t* tests showed a significant increase in perceived leadership only in the downward defense condition, from $M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.21$ to $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.25$, $t = 2.54$, $p < .05$ (all *M*s and *SD*s for the three sub-groups are reported in Table 3). This result, analogous to the one emerged in Study 1, offered a further confirmation to our Hypothesis 1 on the higher effectiveness of downward counterfactual defenses in improving leadership evaluations.

A second ANOVA with the same design was carried out on morality ratings. Results mirrored those emerged in the corresponding analysis in Study 1. Morality ratings were significantly higher after the participants read the politician’s defense ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.03$) than before ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.98$), $F(1,117) = 49.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$, and no significant interaction between measurement time and defense type emerged. Apparently, all three defensive strategies positively affected the evaluation of the politician’s morality. This result replicated what emerged in Study 1 and offered further support to our expectation (Hypothesis 2) regarding the positive effect of both upward and downward defenses on morality evaluations.

Moderation analysis

In order to assess whether participants’ political sophistication moderated the effect of downward and upward defenses on morality evaluations (Hypothesis 3), we followed the same procedure employed in Study 1. A political sophistication index (centered and standardized) and two dummy variables representing the upward and downward counterfactual defense conditions (keeping the factual defense condition as a reference point) were entered in a hierarchical linear regression, followed by interaction terms between political sophistication and defense type. Like in Study 1, political sophistication significantly interacted (in opposite directions) with both upward defense, $\beta = .253$, $t = 2.21$, $p < .05$, and downward defense, $\beta = -.337$, $t = 3.06$, $p < .01$. Simple slope analyses for each defense type showed that a downward defense led to increased perceived morality among less sophisticated participants, $\beta = -.180$, $t = 2.02$, $p < .05$, while in the case of more sophisticated ones this happened for the upward defense, $\beta = .205$, $t = 2.32$, $p < .05$. The moderating role of political sophistication on morality perception (Hypothesis 3), already emerged in Study 1, was therefore further confirmed by results of Study 2. Upward and downward defenses had opposite effects on the morality evaluations of more versus less sophisticated participants.

As in Study 1, nothing similar happened as regards the effect of defense on leadership ratings. In this case, the same regression model employed for morality ratings showed only a main

effect of the downward defense on leadership ratings, $\beta = .202$, $t = 2.25$, $p < .05$, but no main or interaction effects with political sophistication.

Mediation analysis

To test the mediation effect of responsibility taking on morality evaluations of sophisticated and unsophisticated participants, we followed the same procedure adopted in Study 1. We first split the sample in two sub-groups of participants with a sophistication level above ($n = 69$) or below ($n = 56$) the median value. Sophisticated participants attributed a very strong responsibility-taking intent to the politician in the upward counterfactual defense condition, $\beta = .602$, $t = 6.08$, $p < .001$. When the increase in morality evaluation was regressed on defense type, we found the predicted positive effect of upward counterfactual defenses, $\beta = .265$, $t = 2.22$, $p = .05$. After including responsibility taking in the model, we also found that it had a strong positive effect on the increase in perceived morality, $\beta = .556$, $t = 4.24$, $p < .001$, whereas the previous effect of defense type was not significant anymore, $\beta = .061$, $t = 0.46$, $p = .65$. Sobel’s (1982) test of mediation on the indirect effect of defense type through responsibility taking was clearly significant, $Z = 3.34$, $p < .001$.

As in Study 1, less sophisticated participants did not instead attribute a responsibility taking intent to the politician in the upward counterfactual defense condition, nor such attribution led to a larger increase in perceived morality, $Z = 0.69$, $p > .49$.

These results were similar to those found in Study 1, corroborating Hypothesis 4, according to which the perception of the politician taking responsibility for the negative outcome would mediate the positive effect of the upward defense on morality judgments. Once again, this was true only among more sophisticated participants.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of our research contribute to expand our knowledge of how communication can influence social perception, in particular how defensive communication can influence the perception of the two fundamental dimensions, agency and communion. We found that different

types of defense, based on counterfactual upward or downward comparisons, can differently increase the perception of leadership and morality of politicians responding to an attack. We also found that these effects differ according to the level of political sophistication of receivers. The robustness of these results is confirmed by the fact that they emerged in both our studies, carried out with participants from different countries (Britain and Italy). Although our research focused on the political context, its findings have a more general relevance, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between communication and social perception.

First of all, our data on the effects of attack and defense communication on the perception of politicians were consistent with the primacy of morality in social perception already found by previous psycho-social research. As discussed in the introduction, people usually pay more attention to information about morality than to information about other personality dimensions (Abele & Brückmuller, 2011; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008; Ybarra et al., 2008), particularly in the case of negative information (Brambilla et al., 2011; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). In the political context, where the evaluation of politicians’ morality is often lower than that of other dimensions (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008) people are also very likely to be sensitive to the morality dimension. This is precisely what we found in the research. Attacks to morality had a stronger negative influence on the perception of morality than attacks against leadership had on the corresponding dimension. Interestingly, defenses focusing on morality also had a more evident effect on participants’ perceptions than those focusing on leadership. Evidently, the mere fact of responding to allegations about one’s own morality has a positive effect on morality evaluation (see also Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, Dirks, 2007). These results extend previous research on the primacy of morality information in social perception (Abele & Brückmuller, 2011; Vonk 1999; Willis & Todorov, 2006; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008; Ybarra et al., 2008) by showing what happens when such information is part of attack or defense communication.

Besides these general differences in the effects of communication about leadership and morality, more specific differences in the effects of various defenses on the perception of the two

personality dimensions also emerged. We found downward counterfactual defenses, focusing on how things might have been worse than they actually did, to significantly increase the perception of the politician’s leadership more than upward counterfactual defenses. As shown in previous studies in different areas, such as in the judiciary, downward counterfactuals favor positive evaluations by eliciting comparisons with a more negative standard (Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993; Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996). Consistently, politicians using downward counterfactual defenses were successful in shedding a more positive light on their past performances and inducing their audiences to evaluate their leadership more positively. Upward counterfactuals were not as successful in increasing leadership perception. Even if generating upward counterfactual thoughts (focusing on how things might have been better than they were) can improve one’s future performance on the same task (Epstude & Roese, 2008), our own data suggest that their use in defensive communication actually stresses the shortcomings of past actions more than it highlights the possibility of future improvements.

As for the perception of morality, both downward and upward counterfactual defenses turned out to be effective. However, in this case a strong effect of political sophistication also emerged. In the case of less sophisticated citizens, downward defenses increased perceived morality. In the case of more sophisticated citizens, on the contrary, upward defenses were more effective in increasing perceived morality and such increase was mediated by responsibility-taking by the defending politician. In other words, whereas the less sophisticated tend to take the message at face value, the negativity of politicians’ past performances being reduced by downward comparisons, more sophisticated citizens’ assessment of politicians’ morality is based on a more complex examination of the defensive message. Despite being less persuading *per se*, an upward counterfactual defense is recognized as indicating that the politician is more willing to take responsibility for past actions. Such communicative implicature (Grice, 1975) is taken as a proof of the politician’s morality, thus improving its evaluation. Such results are consistent with previous studies indicating a tendency of politically sophisticated people to more deeply scrutinize

information about politicians, particularly in the case of messages coming from a source perceived as suspicious (McGraw et al., 2002).

In sum, the effects of defensive communication on leadership perception seem to depend mainly on the content of what people say to defend themselves, whereas the effects of defensive communication on morality seem to be more influenced by the communicative intention attributed to the speaker. This is not surprising if we take in mind that judgments about leadership (i.e., agency) are based on one’s ability to attain results, whereas judgments about morality (i.e., communion) are based on one’s ability to relate with other people (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Morality judgments are therefore more likely to be based on the relational dimension of defensive messages.

The effects of defenses were substantially the same in both studies, indicating that the results were consistent across different national and political contexts. As such, results from our research provide some general insight on how political leaders can work to shape the impression they make when defending their past performance. Politicians should be aware that citizens’ judgment on their leadership will largely depend on the way in which they present such performance. On the contrary, citizens’ judgment on their morality may also be largely influenced by the intention attributed to the defensive communication *per se*. As our data clearly showed, however, not all citizens make such a close inspection of intentions underlying defensive communication. Future research should further investigate individual differences in citizens’ ability or motivation to detect subtle discursive cues that allow to go beyond the explicit content of defensive messages. This would help politicians to tailor their defensive message according to the characteristics of their audience, and this would be especially relevant when politicians are defending their morality.

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Table 1. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for leadership and morality scores before and after the politician’s defense (Study 1).

	Perceived leadership			Perceived morality		
	Before defense	After defense	<i>t</i>	Before defense	After defense	<i>t</i>
Downward CF defense	3.39 (0.76)	4.15 (0.75)	4.69***	2.82 (0.98)	3.85 (0.97)	5.29***
Non-CF defense	3.37 (0.89)	3.56 (1.04)	1.85	2.68 (1.01)	3.44 (1.07)	6.24***
Upward CF defense	3.51 (0.88)	3.78 (0.89)	1.88	2.91 (1.06)	3.95 (0.96)	6.17***

*** $p < .001$

Table 2. *Moderation analysis. Regression coefficients for the increase in perceived leadership and morality of the politician evaluation and the evaluation of after the politician’s defense (Study 1).*

	Increase in perceived leadership			Increase in perceived morality		
	β	t	Sig.	β	t	Sig.
Predictor variables:						
Upward CF defense	.074	0.78	.440	.092	0.86	.171
Downward CF defense	.259	2.73	.008**	.072	0.68	.501
Political sophistication	-.069	0.67	.506	-.028	0.31	.187
Interactions:						
Upward CF \times Political sophistication	.007	0.08	.940	.310	2.90	.005**
Downward CF \times Political sophistication	-.014	0.14	.892	-.335	3.14	.002**
R^2	.031			.078		
N	109			109		

** $p < .01$

Table 3. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for leadership and morality scores before and after the politician’s defense (Study 2).

	Perceived leadership			Perceived morality		
	Before defense	After defense	<i>t</i>	Before defense	After defense	<i>t</i>
Downward CF defense	3.50 (1.21)	3.92 (1.25)	2.54*	2.15 (0.97)	2.64 (1.02)	3.37**
Non-CF defense	3.78 (1.00)	3.68 (1.10)	0.57	2.09 (1.01)	2.74 (1.10)	4.00***
Upward CF defense	3.47 (1.20)	3.51 (1.04)	0.26	2.18 (0.99)	2.82 (1.00)	4.61***

*** $p < .001$

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Increase in perceived leadership and morality of the politician as a function of defense type and participants’ political sophistication (Study 1).

Figure 2. Mediation of responsibility taking on the increase in perceived morality after the politician's defense (politically sophisticated participants, $N = 54$, Study 1). Note: Defense type was coded +1 = upward CF, 0 = non CF, -1 = downward CF.

† $p = .08$; * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$



