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## Strategic Campaign Sentiment

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### I. Introduction

Politicians often face strong incentives to misrepresent their preferences, intentions, and accomplishments. During an election campaign, for example, political parties have an incentive to make popular policy promises they have no intention of honoring if they win. When negotiating the formation of a government, parties have an incentive to accept coalition agreements they have little intention of implementing. Incumbent government parties have an incentive to exaggerate their policy successes, while the opposition has an incentive to cast the incumbent's track-record in a somewhat different light. The rewards from strategically employing misleading information in a successful manner are potentially substantial, and include things like electoral success and participation in the government.

Despite these strong incentives, the amount of misinformation from political actors in most democracies is usually fairly limited. Empirical evidence suggests, for example, that parties tend to keep the policy promises they make on the campaign trail once they enter office (Thomson et al., 2017) and that they tend to abide by the coalition agreements they negotiate when serving in government (Moury, 2013). This is, however, perhaps not too surprising. Parties that routinely fail to keep their campaign promises and renege on their coalition agreements are liable to quickly lose their credibility.

The extent to which political actors in democracies avoid misrepresenting their preferences or intentions is likely to have something to do with the verifiability of their claims. Failing to implement policy promises that have been described in detail in a party's campaign manifesto or a coalition agreement opens a party up to criticism from voters, the media, and, perhaps most importantly, from other parties that seek to gain advantage by exposing the party's failure to act on its words and follow through on its promises. Thus, there are good reasons to think that politicians will be more likely to manipulate information when their claims are more difficult to verify or challenge. This is in line with the essay by Horz (2018) in this issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter*, which suggests that, as verifying information is costly, voters will only seek to verify the claims of politicians when they veer too far from their prior beliefs. In this framework, then, the harder and more costly it is to verify information, the greater the incentives for information manipulation. As Little (2018) notes in his essay, though, things are actually more complicated than this. One limitation of strategies of misinformation is that voters expect politicians to misrepresent the truth and, accordingly, can be expected to discount their claims — and that logic can be expected to extend to the choice of the things politicians choose to misrepresent information about. That is, a rational voter will expect claims that are difficult to verify to be more likely to be inaccurate and either discount them accordingly or be more willing to investigate the claims further (despite the greater difficulty).

Much of the literature on propaganda and the politics of misinformation focuses, as we have done so far, on whether the statements made by political actors are accurate or inaccurate, true or false. Importantly, though, the repertoire of strategies available to political actors who wish to change the attitudes and behavior of

their citizens is not limited to a dichotomous choice between telling the truth and outright lies. In their contribution to the *Newsletter*, for example, Rozenas and Stukal (2018) point out that political actors can engage in different forms of hard information manipulation (censorship and distortion) and soft information manipulation (distraction and selective attribution), only some of which involve the use of outright lies. While broader than the conceptual framework employed in much of the literature, the one provided by Rozenas and Stukal (2018) still focuses on the *informational content* of political statements.

Existing scholarship has tended to focus on how political actors strategically manipulate the content of the information available to citizens. As we have suggested, though, political actors can also seek to manipulate our attitudes and behavior through 'information-free' statements and the rhetorical language in which they wrap up their claims about the world.

As Horz (2018) notes in his essay, though, political actors can also use rhetoric and “information-free statements” to alter the attitudes and behavior of citizens. Although political scientists generally focus on some aspect of the informational content of political statements, critical discourse theorists have for a long time understood that political discourse itself – the words we use to convey our ideas, claims, and arguments – can be used to construct and perpetuate particular world views that affect individual attitudes and behavior, and serve the interests of political actors (Edelman, 1964, 1977, 1985; Foucault, 1972). Discourse theorists have examined the use and meaning of both lexical (co-location of words, metaphors, euphemisms, naming devices) and grammatical features (tense, aspect, voice) of political discourse. As an example, Breeze (2011) looks at the discursive style and phraseology used by political parties in their manifestos for the 2010 elections in the United Kingdom. She discusses how the parties were engaged in “framing contests” and how they used “deictic devices of a personal, social, temporal, spatial or discursive type ... to project group identity, signal or create a sense of solidarity, identify insiders and outsiders ... [and as] a strategy to rope the people/reader

into” supporting a party’s agenda (Breeze, 2011, 16).

Of particular interest to us here is the use of emotive rhetoric by political actors during election campaigns. Importantly, we know that the language we use can engender different types of sentiment, such as fear, anxiety, and optimism (Roseman, Abelson and Ewing, 1986; Pennebaker, 1993), and that individuals process information differently depending on their emotional mood (Schwarz, 2000; Clore, Gasper and Garvin, 2001). It is widely recognized that political actors make emotional appeals to the public (Hart, Childers and Lind, 2013), and recent studies have shown that campaign messages can be manipulated to trigger emotional responses that, in turn, produce predictable changes in voter behavior (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen, 2000; Brader, 2005, 2006; Brader and Marcus, 2013; Huddy and Gunthorsdottir, 2000; Weber, Searles and Ridout, 2011; Utych, 2018).

If this is all true, then political actors should be strategic in their use of emotion in their campaign messages. This is precisely what we look at in our paper, ‘It’s not only what you say, it’s also how you say it: The strategic use of campaign sentiment’ (Crabtree et al., 2018). Specifically, our paper examines the extent to which political parties adopt language that conveys positive or negative sentiment in their campaign messages. Campaign messages that include positive emotive language encourage people to adopt a positive frame when evaluating the world around them, whereas campaign messages that include negative emotive language have the opposite effect. Our analysis of the party manifestos in eight European countries over a thirty year time period finds that the level of positive sentiment that parties adopt in their campaigns is consistent with strategic behavior and depends, among other things, on their incumbency status and objective economic conditions.

## II. Campaign Strategies and Campaign Sentiment

Existing research tends to focus on two dimensions of electoral campaigns: (1) campaign content and (2) campaign focus. *Campaign content* refers to whether parties campaign on policy or valence, whereas *campaign focus* has to do with whether parties focus their messages on themselves or their competitors.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars of-

ten examine these two dimensions in isolation, they can be put together to obtain four ‘pure’ types of electoral campaigns, as shown in Figure 1. A *spatial campaign* is one in which parties appeal to voters by highlighting their own policies. This is the type of campaign captured in traditional spatial models of electoral competition. A *comparative campaign* is one in which parties seek to emphasize the inferiority of their opponent’s policies. This is similar to a ‘comparative advertising’ campaign in the economic sphere, where companies highlight the inferiority of a competitor’s product by comparing it to their own (Barry, 1993). A *valence campaign* is one in which parties appeal to voters by emphasizing their own valence characteristics. In contrast, an *attack campaign* is one in which parties point out the poor valence qualities of their opponents. This last type of campaign is often what the media have in mind when they talk about ‘dirty politics’ and ‘negative campaigning’. This two dimensional conceptualization of electoral campaigns focuses on *what* parties say and *who* they say it about.

This conceptual framework clearly allows for the use of misinformation by political parties. For example, parties can attempt to misrepresent the policy positions and valence of their opponents in order to make them appear extreme or incompetent. Similarly, parties can seek to overstate their own competence and proximity to the median voter (or some other ideological position that maximizes their vote share.) In each of these examples, parties are attempting to strategically alter the informational content of their campaign messages to suit their political purposes.

One aspect of electoral campaigns that is ignored in this two-dimensional framework is campaign sentiment, which refers to the emotive content of campaigns. Whereas campaign content and campaign focus address *what* parties say and *who* they say it about, campaign sentiment addresses *how* they say it. As we noted earlier, political actors can influence individual attitudes and behavior not only by altering the informational and substantive content of their claims but also by changing the emotive rhetoric they use to make those claims. Utych (2018), for example, finds that the emotive language used to describe political candidates influences how those candidates are evaluated even after

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<sup>1</sup>The campaign focus dimension is often referred to in the literature as *campaign tone*, with messages that focus on one’s own party considered positive and those that focus on other parties considered negative (Geer, 2006). In our opinion, this terminology is problematic as it confuses the *target* of a campaign message with the *tone* of the message.

Figure 1: A Two-Dimensional Conceptualization of Electoral Campaigns

		Campaign Focus	
		Own Party	Other Party
Campaign Content	Policy	'Spatial' Campaign	'Comparative' Campaign
	Valence	'Valence' Campaign	'Attack' Campaign

controlling for the informational content of the candidate descriptions. Empirically, the emotive content of campaigns does not strongly correlate with either of the two dimensions shown in Figure 1. For example, campaigns that focus on one's own party do not always contain positive emotive content, and those that focus on the opposition do not always contain negative emotive content (Ridout and Searles, 2011). Conceptually and empirically, campaign sentiment represents a third and distinct dimension of electoral campaigns.

Our theory of the strategic use of campaign sentiment is situated in the retrospective voting literature. Models of retrospective voting assume that individuals vote based on how they perceive the state of the world at election time. The state of the world is usually attributed in some way to the performance of the incumbent government, with good performance rewarded and poor performance punished. Typically, the retrospective voting literature thinks about the state of the world in economic terms — incumbents are expected to do better when unemployment and inflation are low and when economic growth is high (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). If vote choice is influenced by how we perceive the state of the world, then parties have incentives to shape those perceptions through their campaigns (Vavreck, 2009). Parties can obviously shape voter perceptions through their substantive campaign messages where they provide information about how things are

going. However, they can also shape voter perceptions through the emotive content of their campaign messages. In advanced democracies, where transparency is high and reliable economic statistics are readily available, the scope for parties to alter perceptions about the state of the world through substantive information is relatively circumscribed. Parties have greater freedom, though, when it comes to the emotive rhetoric they use to convey the informational content in their campaign messages.

The level of positive sentiment that parties adopt in their campaigns should depend, among other things, on their incumbency status and objective economic conditions.<sup>2</sup> Incumbent parties, who are typically held responsible for the current state of the world, would like voters to view things in a positive light. As a result, we can expect incumbent parties to use a lot of positive emotive rhetoric in their campaign messages. Opposition parties stand to gain from painting a less rosy picture of the incumbent's performance and are, thus, likely to use much lower levels of positive sentiment in their messages. Responsibility attribution is straightforward in the case of single-party governments but more challenging when the government consists of a coalition of parties (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Duch, Przepiorka and Stevenson, 2015). The prime minister's role as the head of government and the chief agenda setter (Norpoth and Gschwend, 2010; Duch and Stevenson, 2013) means that voters are likely to attribute greater responsi-

<sup>2</sup>In our paper, we examine other determinants of positive sentiment, including a party's policy position (Crabtree et al., 2018).

bility for the current state of the world to the prime ministerial party than to the other members of the coalition government. As a result, prime ministerial parties have an added incentive to use positive campaign sentiment and can be expected to outdo their coalition partners in that regard.

While parties will try to use emotive rhetoric to alter voter perceptions of the state of the world, we expect that the extent to which they can do this is constrained by economic reality (Parker-Stephen, 2013; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2016). Deviating too far from objective reality will eventually undermine the credibility of a party's messages and, perhaps, in line with what Horz (2018) suggests in his essay, invite unwanted scrutiny from the voters. In other words, the emotive rhetoric used in campaign messages can't be too positive when times are bad or too negative when times are good, otherwise voters will become suspicious. This suggests that the level of positive campaign sentiment exhibited by all parties should vary with the objective state of the economy.

### III. Campaign Sentiment in Party Manifestos

To test our theoretical claims, we examine the use of emotive language in European party manifestos. We recognize that manifestos are only one type of campaign message, but as we explain in our paper, they have certain advantages over other forms of campaign messages when it comes to testing our theory.<sup>3</sup> To summarize, manifestos provide parties with an opportunity to directly place their campaign strategy before voters in a carefully scripted way that is unfiltered by the media; they outline the overarching campaign strategy of parties in a way that, say, party press releases do not; they are a type of campaign message that is used across Europe, thus facilitating cross-national comparison; and they are available for a long period of time, thereby allowing us to examine how the same parties change their use of campaign sentiment over time as they move in and out of office. Our analysis is based on over 400 party manifestos from over 100 parties from eight European countries covering the years from 1980 to 2012.

<sup>3</sup>In the appendix to our paper, we also provide a case study of the 2013 elections in Germany where we examine the use of campaign sentiment in party manifestos, televised election debates, party election broadcasts, and on party websites.

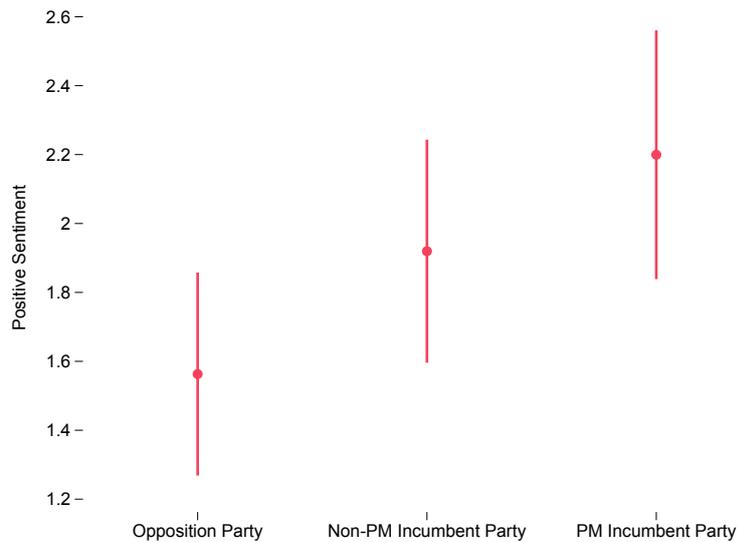
<sup>4</sup>We use language fixed effects to take account of the considerable heterogeneity across languages in the use of positive and negative words.

<sup>5</sup>While the confidence intervals in Figure 2 overlap, this is not necessarily evidence that the differences between point estimates are statistically insignificant (Schenker and Gentleman, 2001). Indeed, formal tests involving interaction terms show that all of the point estimates shown in Figure 2 are significantly different from each other ( $p < 0.001$ ).

We use the dictionary-based *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* (LIWC) program to measure campaign sentiment (Pennebaker, Booth and Francis, 2007). LIWC has been widely used in the social sciences and increasingly in political science (Bryan and Ringsmuth, 2016; Corley and Wedeking, 2014; Owens and Wedeking, 2011, 2012; Settle et al., 2016). LIWC identifies the percentage of words in a document belonging to several categories, such as verbs or psychological constructs such as affect or cognition. We focus on two LIWC categories that capture our interest in positive campaign sentiment: (i) positive emotive words and (ii) negative emotive words. As manifestos contain both positive and negative words, our dependent variable, *Positive Sentiment*, is calculated as the *positive words score* minus the *negative words score* for a given manifesto. The theoretical range for our dependent variable is  $[-100\%, 100\%]$ , with larger percentages indicating greater positive sentiment. Since most of the words we use lack emotional valence, the empirical range for our dependent variable is significantly smaller,  $[-0.68\%, 7.60\%]$ .<sup>4</sup>

Figure 2 graphically summarizes our results with respect to incumbency status. It shows how the predicted level of *Positive Sentiment* changes with a party's incumbency status, along with two-tailed 95% confidence intervals. In line with our theoretical expectations, incumbent government parties use more positive sentiment than opposition parties, and prime ministerial incumbent parties use more positive sentiment than non-prime ministerial incumbent parties. To be specific, non-prime ministerial parties use 23% [12.9%, 34.5%] more positive sentiment than opposition parties, while prime ministerial incumbent parties exhibit 41% [30%, 53.8%] more positive sentiment than opposition parties.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, our results with respect to incumbency status are robust to the use of party fixed effects, indicating that the same party uses higher levels of positive sentiment when it's in the government as opposed to when it's in the opposition. Overall, our results here are consistent with the idea that parties think and act strategically when it comes to the use of emotive language in campaign manifestos.

Figure 2: *Positive Sentiment* and a Party's Incumbency Status



Note: Figure 2 plots the predicted level of *Positive Sentiment* conditional on incumbency status based on our OLS results. The lines represent two-tailed 95% confidence intervals.

As predicted, parties adopt less positive sentiment when the economy is performing poorly with respect to inflation and unemployment. These particular results suggest that campaign sentiment varies in line with objective economic conditions, just as a standard economic voting framework would lead us to expect. There is no evidence, however, that positive sentiment varies with economic growth. Interestingly, our results with respect to economic conditions are consistent with previous research showing that unemployment and inflation have a significantly stronger impact on the emotional polarity of British parliamentary debates than economic growth (Rheault et al., 2016). They are also consistent with research showing that the extent to which parties emphasize economic issues in their manifestos varies systematically with inflation and unemployment but not economic growth (Williams, Seki and Whitten, 2016). Combining these results suggests that objective economic conditions, at least with respect to inflation and unemployment, influence not only how much space parties give to economic issues in their manifestos but also the emotive content of the language that parties use to convey their political messages.

#### IV. Conclusion

As many of the contributions to this issue of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter* indicate, political actors have

a variety of means at their disposal to manipulate the information environment and influence our behavior and attitudes. Existing scholarship has tended to focus on how political actors strategically manipulate the content of the information available to citizens. As we have suggested, though, political actors can also seek to manipulate our attitudes and behavior through ‘information-free’ statements and the rhetorical language in which they wrap up their claims about the world. In other words, political actors can be strategic not only about *what* information they provide, but also about *how* they present this information. In this sense, political actors, such as parties, have a larger arsenal of strategies available to them than is typically assumed in the existing literature on the politics of information. We encourage comparative politics scholars to pay more attention to the (emotive) rhetoric that political actors use to make their informational claims.

In our particular analysis, we find that political parties in European democracies use emotive sentiment in their campaign messages in a manner that is consistent with strategic behavior. We have shown, for example, that incumbent parties, and especially prime ministerial parties, adopt greater positive sentiment in their campaign messages than opposition parties. We have also shown that all parties adopt significantly less positive sentiment when objective economic conditions are

poor. That objective economic conditions constrain the strategic use of campaign sentiment is perhaps encouraging, because it suggests that electoral campaigns retain some accurate information content despite the incentives that parties have to manipulate voter emotions. On this point, the advent of ‘fake news’ and campaigns of deliberate misinformation that challenge media freedom and call into question the sources and reliability of objective (economic) data are a cause for concern. This is because these developments may serve to weaken the constraints offered by objective economic conditions and thereby provide parties with more room to engage in the strategic manipulation of voter emotions.

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## Foreign Native Advertising

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### I. Introduction

Since 2011, readers in the United States have been able to get news on China from a multi-page special section named *China Watch* in the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times* (Cook, 2017; Fallows, 2011). Unfortunately, instead of being a special editorial column on China, the *China Watch* section is a paid supplement provided by *China Daily*, a Chinese government-controlled English-language newspaper (Fallows, 2011). As of March 2018, the *China Daily* had cooperated with, and provided *China Watch* content to, more than 40 legacy news media in over 20 countries with a circulation of 4 million people.<sup>1</sup> This is all part of *China Daily*’s strategy to use the platforms and reputations of partnership publishers to increase the worldwide audience for its news stories (China Daily, 2018). China is not the only country that pays western legacy media outlets to publish news stories from government-controlled media. *Russia Beyond*, a Russian government-controlled media outlet, has also paid to place news stories in the *Washington Post* under the name *Russia Now*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike conventional sponsored content or advertisements, the news stories provided by *China Watch* and *Russia Now* camouflage themselves as standard editorial content from the hosting media outlet. As a result, people are often unaware that they are reading sponsored and paid content provided by a foreign government.

Communication scholars and journalists refer to paid content and advertisements that camouflage themselves as standard editorial content as *native advertising*. These scholars have tended to focus on native advertising in the context of commercial products (Carlson, 2015; Iversen and Knudsen, 2017; Jamieson et al., 2000; Batsell, 2018; Edmonds, 2017; Einstein, 2016; Mullin, 2017). Given that foreign governments are paying for things like *China Watch*, we refer to this as *foreign native advertising*. While there is a large and growing litera-

<sup>1</sup>Legacy media refer to older and more traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, and radio, in which the audience does not ‘interact’ with the media content.

<sup>2</sup>The hosted website and column [russianow.washingtonpost.com](http://russianow.washingtonpost.com) disappeared in 2015. For information and reports on *Russia Now*, see Barton (2015) and the *Washington Free Beacon* (2014).