Article

Journal of Political Science Studies
Vol 1: 33-51, 2019-20
Published by: Indiana Political Science Association
Available online at:
https://ipsa.apsoprojects.org/journals

The Smokescreen Effect: Expectancy Violations and Public Reaction to Accusations of Political Deception

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Abstract
Despite the public's uniformly dismal assessment of politicians' honesty, they *react* by punishing some offences and seemingly ignoring others. I use data from multiple survey experiments to show that public reaction is guided by the principle of expectancy violations. I find strong evidence that when deception is expected, it does not draw cognitive focus from members of the public, thereby causing the public to punish only lies that they find surprising. In this way, a reputation as a liar may produce a sort of smokescreen effect: that is, the fact that a politician is often accused of lying may contribute to public tolerance of them continuing to do so.

Introduction

The 2016 presidential campaign was marked by myriad accusations of lying – against both candidates, other political figures, and the media itself. Donald Trump was the focus of many of these accusations. As of this writing, over 70% of his statements were found to be false by the popular fact-checking website Politifact (34% received the colorful rating “Pants on Fire"). His campaign rhetoric was selected, in its totality, as their 2015 “Lie of the Year". These same patterns are also found in other fact-checking organizations such as the Washington Post Fact Checker, Factcheck.org, and live broadcast fact checking of campaign events such as the debates. As the Sydney Morning Herald memorably put it, Trump's campaign featured a `firehose of falsehoods'.

In this, Trump is, surprisingly, perhaps not that different from many of his political predecessors: Nixon claimed innocence during the Watergate affair, Johnson led the country into war by misleading the public about the Gulf of Tonkin attack, and Eisenhower claimed that the United States was not involved in the U-2 spyplane incident. Lying is nothing new in politics.

What may be unusual about Trump, however, is that despite the frequency with which he is publicly accused of lying, none of these condemnations seem to significantly impact his standing with the public. Indeed, during his race for the nomination, the “teflon" metaphor formerly used for Ronald Reagan was briefly revived. Many political commentators and pundits have scrambled to offer some sort of explanation for this lack of reaction on the part of the public, with theories ranging from anger among middle-class voters to selective media exposure to the current economic climate. These ad hoc explanations, however, fail to offer any systematic answers applicable beyond the current state of political affairs.

More generally, Trump is an example of a problem that political scientists seem currently ill-equipped to solve. Why is it that some allegations of deceit seem to spark public outrage and destroy political careers, while others seem to roll off the public's back without attracting any attention whatsoever? This article investigates how members of the public update their evaluations of a politician when said politician is accused of lying.

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Past Research

Lying has long been a subject of study in political science, and much excellent research has been done on topics as diverse as the effectiveness of treatments at discouraging its use among politicians to specific surveys of its prevalence in political advertising.[1] Deception has been characterized as everything from a cancer that will eventually destroy democracy to a vital component of its continued survival. Most research on political lying has focused on political elites (such as the question of whether elites are strategic in their use of deception [Nyhan and Reifler 2015]), and not the general public. Even among that subset of research that does focus on the public, most focuses on the public's ability to either *detect* deception (eg, Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003; Ekman 1996; McGraw 1998) or *correct* false beliefs (eg, Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Berinsky 2015; Kuklinski et al. 2000). Indeed, to my knowledge, this is the first experiment specifically designed to address that question.[2]

Yet comparatively little research has been done on how the public *reacts* to being deceived - that is, how they update their evaluations of the deceitful politician. Three mains reasons suggest themselves: First, a focus on explaining notable individual cases of lying. Although these examinations of specific cases (eg, Cohen 1992) are excellent and valuable contributions to the literature, their focus on the details of their own cases means that they have limited utility in forming a more generally applicable explanatory framework.

Second, the problem is often assumed to be solved. A great deal of prior research from fields such as economics and psychology has found that, in general, people strongly dislike being deceived and are willing to make substantial efforts to sanction liars (Wang, Galinsky, and Murnighan 2009).[3] Thus, it is reasonable for researchers to assume that when a politician is accused of lying, the public will respond negatively. Davis and Ferrantino (1996), for example, directly state the fact that they are making this assumption.[4] However, this assumption has seldom been tested in a political context, and there are many notable examples of the public staying quiescent when faced with a story of political deception. J. E. Cohen (2004), for example, shows that, far from falling, Clinton's poll numbers actually rose during the Lewinsky scandal. Other researchers assume that motivated reasoning leads the public to react negatively to their political foes and ignore transgressions by their political allies (Slothuss and de Vreese 2010), while some researchers assume the public is incapable of recognizing political deception at all (Jerit and Barabas 2006, Persson and Tabellini 2002).

Third, the topic of political deception carries inherent problems of endogeneity. For example, strategic politicians are most likely to tell lies under circumstances that they feel will not lead to public backlash, citizens engaging in selective media exposure are less likely to encounter accusations of lying against politicians they support, and campaigners and journalists are most likely to lodge accusations when they are prone to cause a public outcry.

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[1] For examples, see: Nyhan and Jason Reifler 2015; Callander and Wilkie 2007; Corazzini et al. 2014; Winneg et al. 2014; Mearsheimer 2011; Cliffe, Ramsay, and Bartlett 2000; Davis and Ferrantino 1996.

[2] Although work has been done on related topics, such as how justifications can affect the public's response to being deceived (McGraw, Lodge, and Jones 2002; Brendan Nyhan and Reifler 2015) or how fact-checking can influence the effectiveness of political advertising (Fridkin, Kenney, and Wintersieck 2015).

[3] See also: Wang and Leung 2010; Brandts and Charness 2003; Abbink, Irlenbusch, and Renner 2000; Baumeister et al. 2001.

[4] It is also present, whether explicit or implicit, in such studies as Huang (2010), Callander and Wilkie (2007), Glazer (1990), and Kartik and McAfee (2007), among other examples.

I address these problems by fielding experiments in which the reported honesty of political statements varied. Subjects were then asked to rate these politicians, showing how their evaluations were affected by the accusation.

I draw upon these original datasets and findings from cognitive research to argue that public reactions to charges of deception are guided by prior expectations. When a lie is anticipated, its revelation fails to prompt an updating of evaluations. When an expectation of honesty is violated, however, subjects are motivated to update their previously-held beliefs. Thus, this produces a counter-intuitive result where a reputation for dishonesty can seemingly grant a politician freedom to lie.

The following section provides some background information on how deception is conceptualized in this research. I next detail the concept of expectancy violations and describe its relevancy to political deception. Finally, I present the results from two original experiments and their support for several expectancy violation-based hypotheses.

Background

Consider the general sequence of events that occurs when a member of the public reacts to political deception. First, a politician makes a statement. Next, individuals get judgments of that statement's veracity from the news media. These media judgements can be thought of as conveying two main pieces of information: first, they assert that there is some true point P , representing an accurate statement of the facts. Second, that the politician has reported some alternate version of the facts that diverges from reality (P'). If P' is identical or very close to P , the politician is referred to as “honest". If P' is similar to P then the politicians is generally referred to as making “exaggerated" or “misleading" statements. If P and P' wildly diverge, then the politician is labeled as a “liar".

The question of this research, then, is how members of the public update their evaluations of a politician in the latter scenario. If they have a more negative opinion of the politician in question after updating, I refer to that as *punishment*.

This research focuses on media accusations rather than attempting to track actual instances of deceptions in order to reflect the mediated reality that the average watcher of American politics would observe. As Nimmo and Combs put it, “few people learn about politics through direct experience; for most persons political realities are mediated through mass and group communication" (Nimmo and Combs 1990). In the case of deception, the typical citizen seldom directly ascertains the truth or falsehood of a politician's statement personally, but relies on reports of its accuracy from others. Thus, only reported dishonesty is of substantive interest in this research.

Expectancy Violations

I draw upon what has been called the “cognitive revolution" in political psychology - as Lodge and Taber (2013) put it, a “revolution in thinking about thinking" - to offer an explanation. Citizens do not update their evaluations of politicians every time new information is presented, but rather do so when prompted by psychological mechanisms governing how finite cognitive resources are best expended. In brief, novel information is more likely to cause individuals to update previously held positions than non-novel (or expected) information, and thus accusations

of lying against politicians that are unforeseen or unexpected should be most likely to produce a reaction from the public.

A great many perspectives in political science argue for the importance of long-standing, relatively stable psychological constructs in determining political behavior. Partisan attachment, group identification, values, heuristics, stereotyping: all are highly influential in explaining how a given individual will act. This reliance on 'habits' (as an over-simplifying term) allows voters to make political decisions fairly easily without requiring a great deal of time, attention, or thought.

However, people do not make decisions based purely on political habits without integrating new information into their beliefs. Relying on previously formed evaluations serves excellently as a way to efficiently make decisions without expending unnecessary mental effort so long as circumstances are routine. However, when circumstances are not routine, a different decision-making model is used. When presented with information that is counter to previously held expectations, subjects become less reliant on heuristics and stereotypes (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000), more focused on contemporary evaluations (Brader 2005), more prone to have strong emotional reactions (Carmon and Kahneman, N.D.; Burgoon 2015), more motivated to seek out new information (Bunzeck and Dzel 2006), more likely to focus higher amounts of cognitive attention on related decisions (Redlawsk 2002), more likely to change held beliefs (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010), and more likely to actually encode said information into long-term memory (Hunt and Lamb 2001; Schmidt 1991; Bjork 1996). Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson (2010) refer to this mode of thought where attention is focused on new information as 'active processing', as opposed to standard low-effort 'normal processing'. Incidences of subjects being presented with information that is incongruent with their expectations are termed 'expectancy violations". Thus, subjects are likely to rely on and retain previously formed evaluations in most cases, but are more likely to update these beliefs when presented with an expectancy violation. This concept has been found to be directly relevant to the detection of and reaction to deception (Bond et al. 1992).

When applied to political lying, the concept of expectancy violations offers a clear guide as to how we should expect the public to react when presented with news of a politician being deceptive. Subjects will not always update their previously held beliefs when an accusation is lodged. Instead, when this information is congruent with previous expectations (if the politician was expected to lie) then the news of the lie does not prompt active processing of the message. Citizens do not punish the lie, but instead largely retain their previous evaluations of the politician in question.Those who disliked the politician dislike them no more than they did before, and those who were favorable to the politician (despite expecting news of their dishonesty) remain so, in line with motivated reasoning.[5]

However, when the news was unexpected, it promotes active processing. When the negative information is incorporated into their beliefs, evaluations of the politician shift downward, resulting in lying being 'punished'.

In other words, under expectancy violations, we should not expect citizens to react based upon the divergence between P and P', but rather between P' and their *expected position* of P'. If there is no gap between those last two values, then an accusation might well have no effect.

[5] In fact, some research suggests that negative information about a favored politician or position, when within expectations, can actually cause subjects to increase their support. Motivated skepticism inspires a search for countervailing information and a defensive strengthening of partisan beliefs (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010).

Take our opening example of Donald Trump. Imagine a typical American citizen viewing a news report stating that Trump has said something dishonest. The fact that the campaign coverage was saturated with stories of Trump's dishonesty (and perhaps that Trump was a media personality in his own right prior to his presidential run) means that a news report of Trump saying something outrageous is likely to viewed as expected, fail to produce enough cognitive arousal to be actively processed, and thus be viewed and passed over without ever having an effect on the citizen's beliefs. Our citizen dismisses the story with a "Look what he said now!" and a shake of the head, and it passes from mind without any lasting impact.

In contrast, if a politician with a reputation for honesty made the same statement as Trump, the unexpected nature of that story would cause our hypothetical viewer to take notice. That story would promote active processing, and would therefore lead our citizen to update their beliefs to incorporate the new information. In essence, the barrage of negative stories about Trump's honesty serve as a sort of 'smokescreen', forming a negative expectation of his honesty in voters' minds that hides him from further (active) thought.

This framework also helps to reconcile several earlier contradictory assumptions and related research findings: if individuals generally expect honesty from those around them, then we should observe punishment in those experiments focusing on average citizens. At the same time, if people have different expectations for the honesty of politicians (Gallup polls, for example, routinely show Members of Congress as less trustworthy than used car sellers) then we should expect the public to react differently to political lies.

Hypotheses

Therefore, from what we know about expectancy violations, it is possible to make a number of predictions. First, and most generally:

> Hypothesis 1: Accusations of political lying should produce a downward shift in a politician's reputation only with those subjects that possessed an expectation of honesty from said politician.

We can also make a number of sub-predictions here by focusing on which situations and characteristics are most likely to produce political trust. We know, for example, that individuals are more likely to trust politicians that are from their same political party (Hooghe and Oser 2017). So:

> Hypothesis 1a: Accusations of political lying against co-partisan politicians should be more likely to produce downward shifts in evaluations.

In addition, members of different parties have different levels of trust in government depending on which party is in control of major political institutions (primarily the Presidency) (Keele 2005). Since this experiment was conducted under a Democratic President, and since polls near the time of this research showed a roughly 15 point gap in political trust of Democrats over Republicans (Pew Research Center, November 2015, Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government), we can predict that:

> Hypothesis 1b: Accusations of political lying should be more likely to produce shifts in evaluations among Democrats than Republicans.

We also know that individuals should have expectations of politicians based on more than their political party. Congress generally holds a low level of public trust, but most Americans have a higher degree of trust in their own Member of Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Therefore,

> Hypothesis 1c: Accusations of political lying should be more likely to produce downward shifts in evaluations when they are made against a subject's own representatives.

Methods

In order to examine these hypotheses and overcome the obstacles to inference mentioned above, I conducted a pair of experimental studies. I report findings from these two experiments, both of which were run on convenience samples through Mechanical Turk ("MTurk"), a recruitment service run by Amazon.com. Subjects recruited through MTurk are generally more diverse and better approximate the general public than common student subjects, although it is important to note that they are still samples of convenience and do not constitute a nationally representative sample.[6]

After manual screening of responses and attention checks removed roughly a hundred subjects, 918 subjects were present in Study 1 and 1871 in Study 2, respectively. Power calculations suggested these high numbers of subjects given the number of sub-group comparisons to be made. In addition, the sampling for Study 2 was blocked on political partisanship, ensuring a roughly even liberal/conservative split. All subjects were required to be from the United States, confirmed using MTurk subject qualifications and IP address monitoring.

The experimental procedure involved several main steps. Subjects were asked to complete a survey on political attitudes. In the course of completing that questionnaire, subjects read embedded statements from honest and dishonest politicians, which was the main treatment. Second, subjects were then asked to evaluate the politician using a standard feeling thermometer scale. Demographic data and other variables of interest were also collected prior to the treatment. In Study 2, subjects were also asked to estimate the percentage of the time they thought politicians told the truth. Finally, subjects were given post-experimental interviews and debriefed.

Treatment

As part of what appeared to be a typical political survey, subjects were asked to read an excerpt from a (fictional) news article. In the course of the article, a statement from a senator is shown. The Senator was identified as Senator Adams. In Study 2, the Senator was also described as representing the subject's home state (this variation across experiments was present to allow the examination of Hypothesis 1c). Senator Adams is quoted as making a statement that involves some numerical figure. Numerical statements were chosen for this treatment as they are easily verifiable as true/not true, allow for simple and definite fact-checking statements, and are publicly available in case of prior knowledge.

[6] For more details on the use of this subject pool for political science research, see Berinsky et al. (2012), Hauser and Schwarz (2016), Paolacci and Chandler (2014), and Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling (2011).

The main treatment was whether or not subjects were assigned an honest or dishonest version of Senator Adams. When honest, Adams used accurate figures and when dishonest, Adams would use wildly inaccurate figures to support their position. The article also included a note in the style of various fact-checking organizations, rating the statement as honest or dishonest.

In addition, the Senator was identified as either Democratic or Republican. This means that there were four base treatment groups in Study 1. Subjects saw one of an accused or honest Republican Senator, or an accused or honest Democratic Senator. Other than these variations, the text of the excerpt remained constant across all treatments in Study 1, where it was an examination of coal power policy. In order to ensure that subject matter of the article excerpt itself was not responsible for the results, Study 2 was repeated three times on three new issue areas: political lobbying, energy security, and the growth of ISIS.

In order to ensure the validity of the treatment, manipulation checks were included. It could be the case, for example, that subjects might view a politician using incorrect figures to support their point of view as merely incompetent rather than genuinely dishonest. The manipulation checks show that indeed, the treatment causes subjects to view the fictional Senator Adams as dishonest, while in no way affecting their judgment of the senator's competence, knowledge, or skill. When asked about their willingness to ascribe various traits to Senator Adams using trait-labeling questions modeled after those used in the ANES, subjects were no less likely to describe Adams as ‘knowledgeable’ or ‘reliable’ when the Senator was accused of deception (Tests for significant differences of means returned p=.478 and .182 respectively. No substantive difference is found when tests are run on each issue area individually.). Subjects were, however, significantly less likely to label the Senator as ‘trustworthy’ (p<.001).

This pattern was also demonstrated in post-experimental interviews. When asked about Adams, almost all (>97%) subjects used language such as ‘honest/dishonest’, ‘a liar’ or some variation thereof. Fewer than 5% of subjects, however, mentioned competence or ability in any context. Coding of these mentions was intentionally inclusive: it included any post-interview that mentioned the Senator's competence, or any word relating to competence in any context.

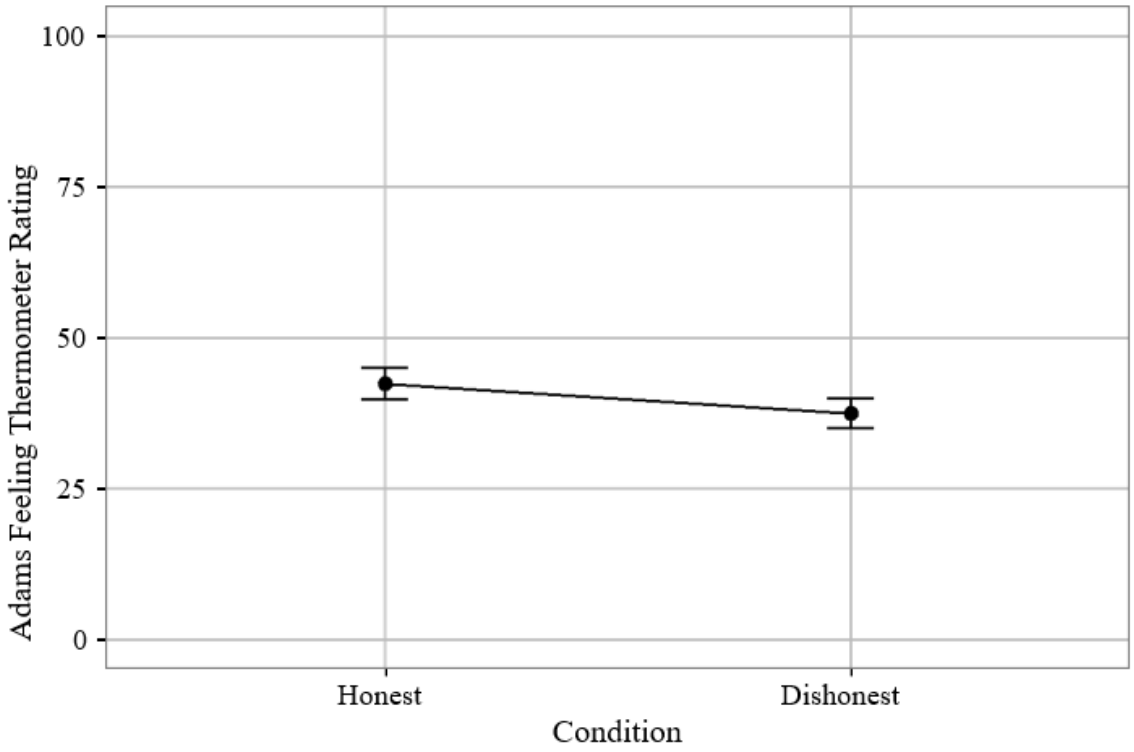
Repeating the analyses in this article minus those subjects that mentioned competence in some form, or restricting subjects solely to those that explicitly said that the article made them question Adams' honesty, produces no substantive difference in results. Thus, I can be confident that subjects are properly interpreting the variation from the correct figures as an act of deception on Adam's part, and not of incompetence, genuine ignorance, or anything of the sort.

In order to ensure that results were due to variations in attention, I also tested subjects' ability to recall a piece of information from the article. Compared to someone who places no faith in politicians (ie, someone who estimates they tell the truth 0% of the time), a simple logistic regression shows someone who believes that politicians are honest 100% of the time has 2.7 times greater odds of being able to accurately recall information from the article when exposed to an accusation against Adams (p<.001). This is consonant with the theory of expectancy violations.

Results

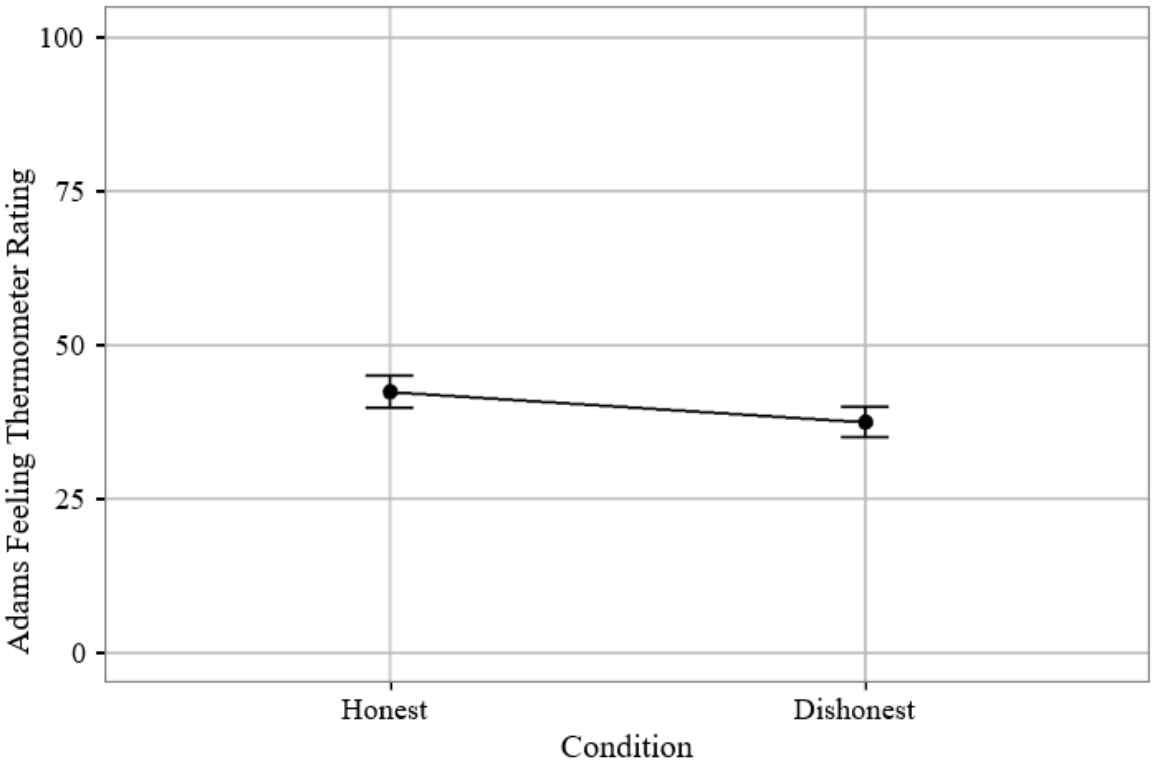
First, I present the base differentials in evaluations by accusations in both studies. The outcome variable is the mean rating of Senator Adams on a standard 0-100 feeling thermometer scale, with 100 being most positive.

Figure 1: Study 1 Base Lying Differential



Note: Feeling Thermometer is a standard 0-100 rating scale. Points denote the mean. Error bars around each point give 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2: Study 2 Base Lying Differentials, By Treatment Subject



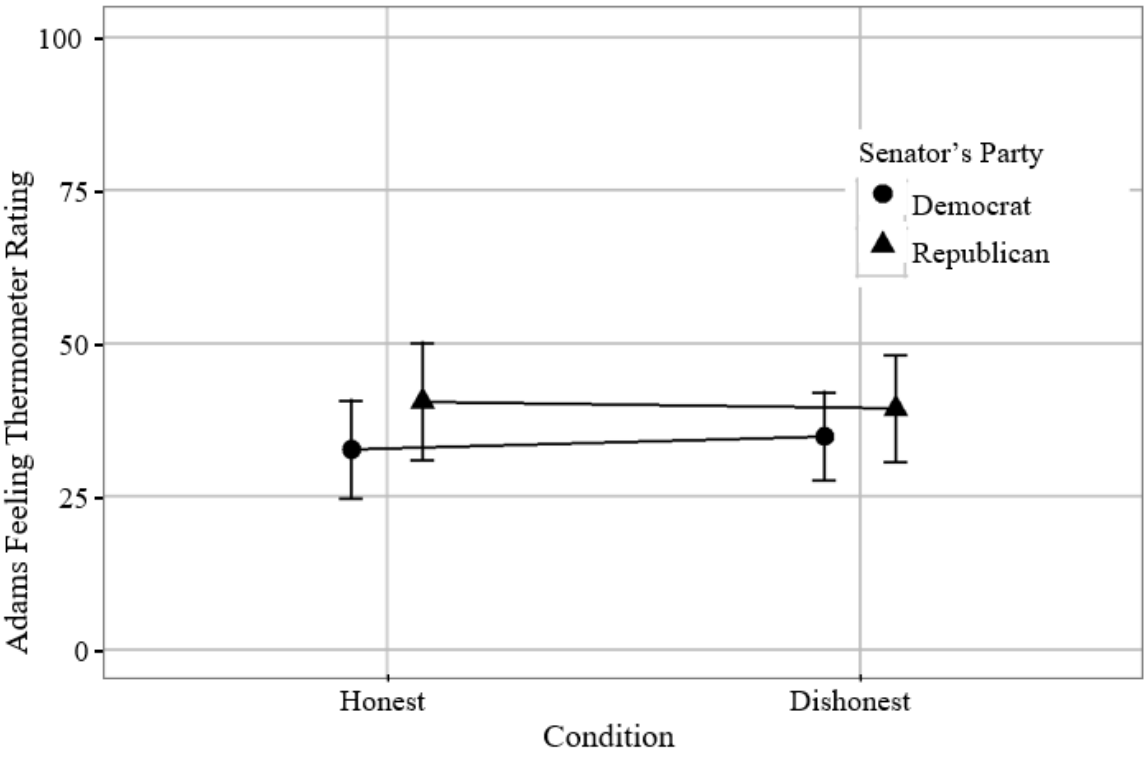
Note: Feeling Thermometer is a standard 0-100 rating scale. Points denote the mean. Error bars around each point give 95% confidence intervals.

Since all hypotheses call for partial movement of some subgroups in response to lying accusations, we should expect to observe some shift in evaluations of Adams in the aggregate. We can see in both Figure 1 and 2 that accusations of lying do produce some effect on evaluations of Adams. In Study 1, an accusation of dishonesty significantly lowered ratings of Adams by an average of 4.95 feeling thermometer points (p=.003). Study 2 showed similar effects: Adams suffered an average loss of 5.95 points (p<.001).

Figures 1 and 2 also demonstrate that the specific issue area used in the treatment does not seem to impact the general pattern of results obtained. The rest of the results present the pooled Study 2 results. Rerunning all tests below on each issue area separately produced no substantive differences.

Next, which groups of subjects are driving this aggregate change? First, a breakdown of the lying differential for Study 1 by respondent and Adams' partisanship.

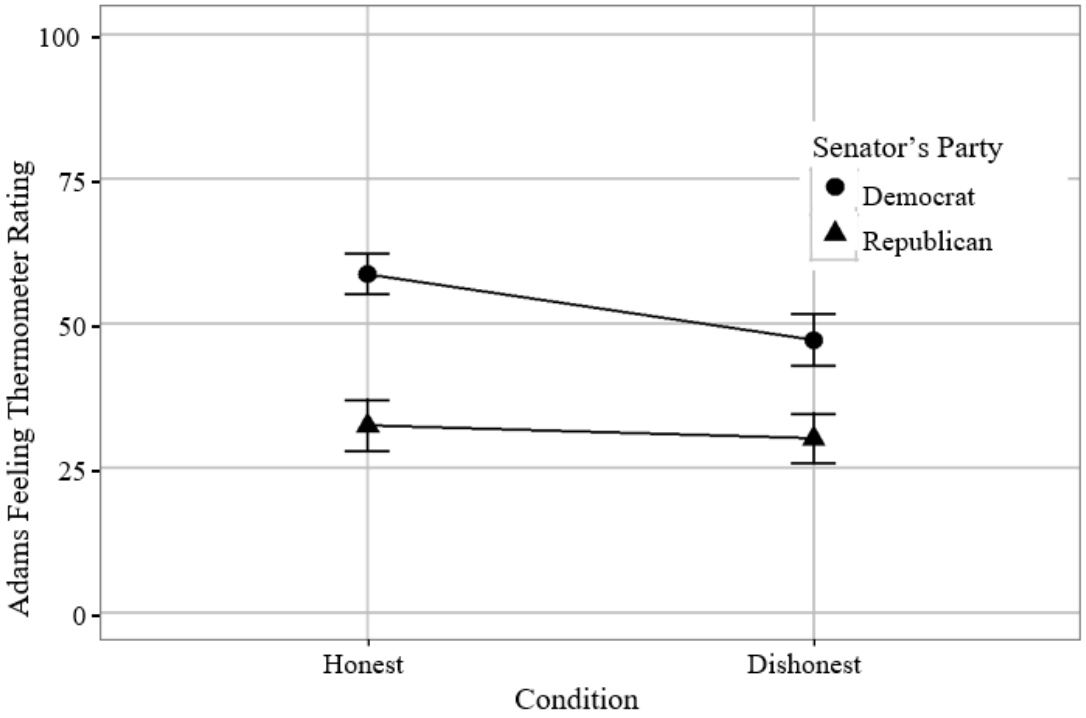
Figure 3: Study 1 Lying Differentials, By Senator Party (Republican Subjects Only)



Note: Feeling Thermometer is a standard 0-100 rating scale. Points denote the mean. Error bars around each point give 95% confidence intervals.

Looking at Figure 3, it is clear that accusations of lying produced no significant results among Republican subjects. Although Republican senators were rated more favorably overall, Republican subjects did not rate dishonest senators significantly differently from those that were honest (p=.878). However, Democrats showed a very different pattern. While the honesty or dishonesty of the Republican Adams produced no effect for them (p=.473), the same was not true of the Democratic Adams. Among fellow Democrats, being accused of dishonesty lowered Adams' feeling thermometer ratings by an average of 11.46 points (p<.001).

Figure 4: Study 1 Lying Differentials, By Senator Party, Democratic Subjects Only



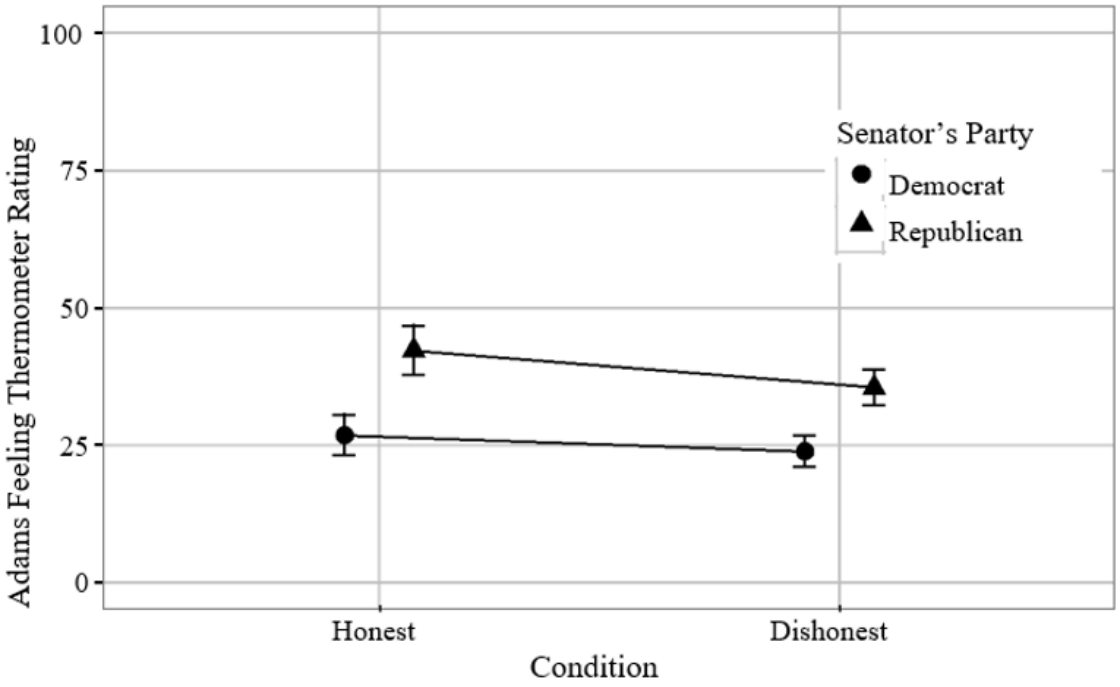
Note: Feeling Thermometer is a standard 0-100 rating scale. Points denote the mean. Error bars around each point give 95% confidence intervals.

These results are consistent with the predictions made in Hypotheses 1a and 1b. The only significant effect of lying accusations was found among co-partisans, suggesting that the higher expectations Democratic respondents had for 'their' senator led them to be more likely to update their evaluations to incorporate the new information. Meanwhile, Republicans, with their lower levels of trust in government and politicians, paid little to no attention to accusations of lying whatsoever. It is notable that not only did Republicans dismiss charges against co-partisans (as motivated skepticism might suggest) but also ignored charges against their political opponents.

Perhaps, however, Republicans are simply non-responsive in all cases to allegations of lying, valuing other qualities than honesty. Or perhaps the issue area is at fault - environmental policy might simply not be important enough to Republican respondents. To examine the robustness of these results, I turn to Study 2.

The first thing to note in Figures 5 and 6 is that the results seem to support Hypothesis 1c. The shift to a home state senator produced a pattern of responses far more indicative of accusations having an effect upon evaluations.

Figure 5: Study 2 Lying Differentials, By Senator Party, Republican Subjects Only



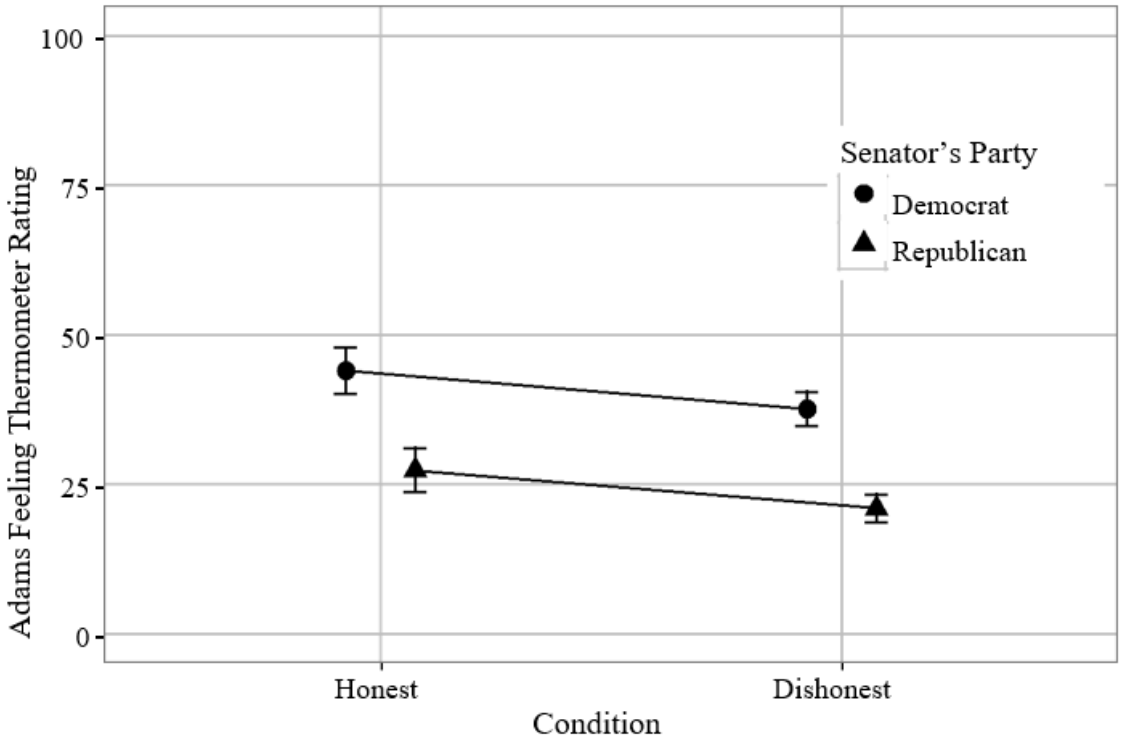
Note: Feeling Thermometer is a standard 0-100 rating scale. Points denote the mean. Error bars around each point give 95% confidence intervals.

In Figure 5, Republican subjects still respond to accusations against Democratic senators with complete indifference. There is no significant difference between the rating that an honest Democratic senator receives from a Republican audience versus a dishonest one (p=.231). However, when confronted with a co-partisan from their home state, Republican subjects were just as willing to punish deception as their Democratic counterparts, and to almost exactly the same degree. On average, a Republican senator in this instance lost 6.73 feeling thermometer points when accused of lying (p=.017).

Democratic subjects, in turn, also grew more responsive than in Study 1. Democratic senators suffered a mean loss of 6.40 feeling thermometer points with a Democratic audience when accused of lying (p=.003). The addition of the home-state expectation also led to Democratic subjects becoming responsive to accusations against Republican senators as well: an accusation led to an average 6.39 point loss (p=.010).

This suggests that politicians that were previously thought of as part of an out-group (Republican senators for Democratic respondents in Study 1, for example) were seen differently in Study 2. Democratic respondents in Study 2 punished Republican politicians accused of lying to almost exactly the same degree as they punished fellow Democrats. Republican respondents, in turn, became responsive for the first time. In other words, in this research, Democrats seem to trust all fellow Democrats and all local politicians, while Republicans trust only fellow Republicans who are also local.

Figure 6: Study 2 Lying Differentials, By Senator Party, Democratic Subjects Only



Note: Feeling Thermometer is a standard 0-100 rating scale. Points denote the mean. Error bars around each point give 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, Hypothesis 1 predicts that the overall effect of lying accusations on politician evaluations should be conditional on a subject's expectation of honesty. To examine this, I estimate a multiplicative analysis using OLS regression on results from Study 2, controlling for factors known to affect political evaluations. I include a dummy variable indicating whether the subject and Adams were from the same political party, since as mentioned above co-partisanship should be expected to positively impact feeling thermometer ratings. In addition, since Democrats should be expected to be more generally positive towards politicians in general than Republicans, a dummy variable for political partisanship was also included. Controls were also included for the subject's baseline feeling thermometer rating tendency by including their average ratings for other politicians, as well as a battery of demographic variables.

To examine whether the effect of lying accusations is conditional, I interact a dummy variable indicating whether or not a lying accusation was made with the subject's estimate (as a percentage from 0-100) of how often politicians tell the truth. The dependent variable is the subject's feeling thermometer rating of Senator Adams. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. The findings indicate that the whether or not an accusation of lying will prompt a shift in evaluations is conditioned by the subject's expectation of honesty. The interaction term is negatively signed and statistically significant.

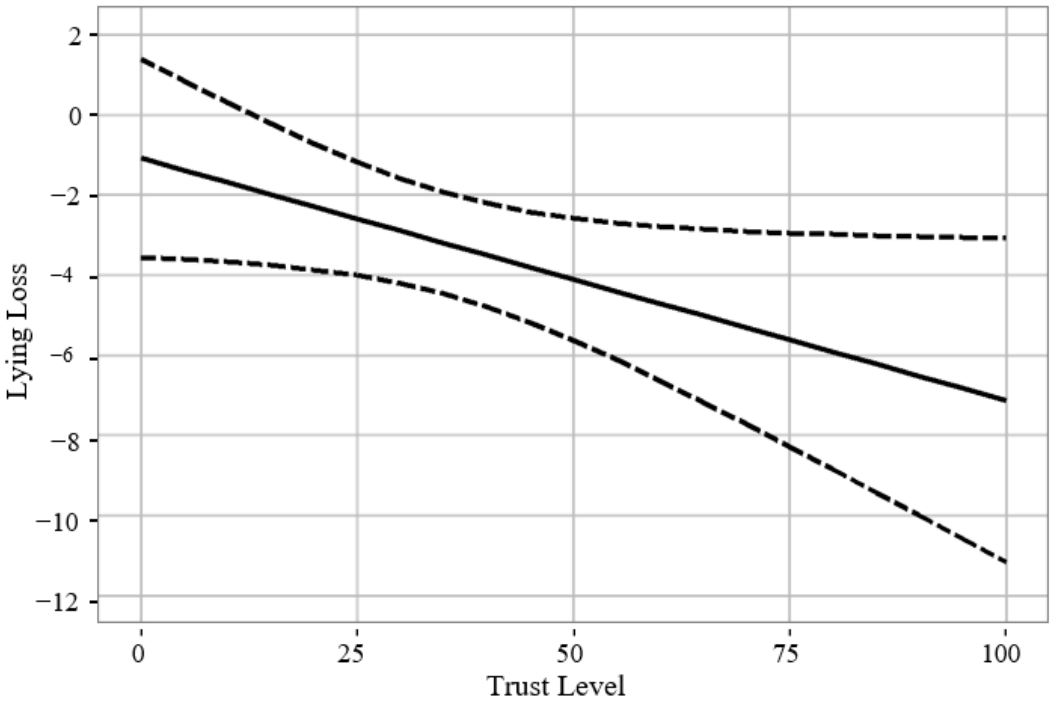
Table 1: Regression Results For Multiplicative Effect of Trust and Honesty on Adams Rating (Study 2)

Variable	*B*	Robust SE	*p*
Accusation	-1.09	1.26	0.39
Trust	0.32	0.04	0.00
Accusation * Trust	-0.06	0.03	0.04
Co-partisanship	14.81	1.08	0.00
Respondent Party	9.58	1.62	0.00
Constant	8.54	5.22	0.10

Note: R^2= 0.22. N = 1748. The dependent variable is the respondent's feeling thermometer rating of Adams from 0-100. Trust is the respondent's 0-100 percentage estimate of how often they expected politicians to tell the truth. Co-partisanship is coded 1 for respondents whose treatment contained a senator from their own party and 0 otherwise. Subject Party ID is coded one for Democratic respondents and 0 for Republican respondents. Demographic controls (suppressed): gender, age, race, political knowledge, and average feeling thermometer rating given to other politicians. Removing these controls produces substantively similar results.

More specifically, these results suggest that as people's expectations of political honesty increase, an accusation of lying against a politician significantly depresses that politician's rating. For example, for individuals that have the highest expectations of honesty (that is, those subjects that indicated that they expect politicians to tell the truth 100% of the time), the coeffcient measuring the effect of lying accusations on people's views of Adams is -7.09 (p<.001). However, among those subjects who expected dishonesty (that is, those subjects that indicated they expect politicians to tell the truth 0% of the time) we can see that the lying accusation dummy variable has no significant effect (p=.39). The estimated loss of feeling thermometer points due to dishonesty for given levels of political trust is presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Study 2 Estimated Loss of Feeling Thermometer Points Over Political Trust



Note: Trust Level is a percentage from 0-100. The solid line provides the estimated effect of *Accusation* on feeling thermometer ratings of Adams. Dotted lines give 95% confidence intervals.

In summary, certain groups of people are more responsive to accusations of lying, in that they are more likely to update their evaluations of the politician in question. Co-partisan senators were far more likely to suffer a drop in feeling thermometer ratings when accused: the only group of politicians to be punished in Study 1 were Democratic co-partisans. In Study 2, co-partisan politicians were the only group of politicians to be punished by both parties. In addition, across both studies, Republican respondents tended to be less responsive to accusations of deception than were Democratic respondents. Democratic respondents, on the other hand, were always responsive to deception. Finally, the presence of a home-state cue caused subjects to be more likely to respond. Democratic respondents began to treat Republican politicians in exactly the same manner as Democratic politicians, and Republicans became responsive for the first time, if only to fellow Republicans. These patterns of group responses do seem to be driven by expectations, as only those subjects that expected high levels of honesty from politicians were shown to be responsive to accusations of lying.

Conclusion

Deception is a common accusation in politics, and citizens seem to find the idea of political dishonesty particularly distasteful. In post-experimental interviews, respondents were at pains to make it clear how little they trusted the political class and to share their ideas for proper (and draconian) punishments for this sort of misbehavior. Jail time or execution (genuine suggestions

offered by respondents), however, would seem to be unnecessary. If, when a politician was charged by media watchdogs with lying, voters updated their held beliefs to incorporate this new and negative information, then election-seeking politicians would have a strong incentive to appear as honest as possible.

Evidence, however, suggests that citizens do not update their beliefs uniformly. Some politicians seem able to lie with near impunity and lose little to no support in the face of charges that would ruin other politicians' careers. Fact-checking organizations and initiatives have increased over time to become ubiquitous parts of the modern campaign narrative, and campaigns have always been ready to accuse their opponents of dishonesty. It is important, then, to understand what role these accusations play in shaping citizens beliefs about their leaders, since they make up an appreciable fraction of campaign discourse.

My research design bypassed several obstacles to inference by fielding a pair of nationwide online experiments. I drew on a substantial literature from cognitive political psychology to argue that citizens update their beliefs when psychological mechanisms triggered by the presence of information incongruent with expectations are activated. Therefore, I expected that contrary to what might seem intuitive, people should be most likely to punish lies that are committed by their own party members and personal representatives, and members of political parties that trust government more should be more likely to punish lies than those with a grimmer view of politics. The patterns of experimental findings supported these hypotheses.

Of course, this research was subject to many limitations. For example, experimental control required a fictional politician. Despite assurances in post-treatment interviews that Senator Adams seemed real (and buoyed by the remarkable number of subjects that assumed, despite all briefings, that he *was* real and was, in fact, their senator), subjects had none of the prior knowledge or heightened reactions that might be present for a real politician. Subjects in the experiment read the accusation against Adams directly after reading his statement, whereas in real politics a fact-check might follow at a significant gap in time and come from any number of sources. Similarly, the experiment controlled all of the information available about Adams, whereas in a genuine media environment, there would be a profusion of information available. For more information on how mixed information can affect cognitive processing, see Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson (2010).

In addition, the limitations of the experimental design mean that I am unable to judge how durable these effects might be over time. Nevertheless, although it is difficult to generalize from tightly controlled experimental settings to the comparative chaos and complexity of the modern political media environment, this experiment is an important step towards making those broader inferences. Future work, for example, might examine how Americans' historical decline in trust in government has affected the responsivity of the public to accusations over time, or offer a more detailed examination of how citizens form expectations of political actors.

If voters do, in fact, judge candidates on a sliding scale (basing their reaction to an accusation of deception not on the politician’s deviation from the truth but on their deviation from their *expected* deviation) what are the implications for political discourse at large? Should candidates go out of their way to lower expectations of their honesty in the same way that primary contestants will try to lower estimates of their performance before a debate, or is the modern political environment so negative that most politicians already benefit from the smokescreen effect? More research will be needed to say for sure. Yet the troubling conclusion is that accusations against largely honest politicians hold the potential to be devastating, while citizens prove least attentive to those that most bear watching.

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