

Candidate Repositioning, Valence, and a Backfire Effect from Criticism

American Politics Research
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–12
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1532673X221125222
journals.sagepub.com/home/apr



Andrew Gooch¹ 

Abstract

Politicians who switch policy positions are often criticized for being inconsistent “flip-floppers”, which suggests a valence penalty for repositioning. Using a survey experiment with six treatment conditions and a sample of 2694 respondents, results show that candidates receive an increase in favorability and perceived competency when holding a consistent position on asylum seekers from the campaign to holding office. Repositioning on asylum seekers reduces favorability and perceived competency. However, in treatment conditions where the candidate is criticized for “flip-flopping” by unelected groups, candidate favorability improves relative to a treatment condition where only the repositioning is presented. These results suggest that a backfire effect might occur from criticisms. This backfire occurs on average across all respondents. This study contributes to the line of research that shows mechanisms that offset the negative effects of repositioning.

Keywords

repositioning, experiment, valence, backfire effect

An enduring part of American politics includes politicians repositioning from one side of an issue to another throughout their careers, often dubbed negatively as “flip-flopping”. When repositioning occurs, politicians are often criticized for it, and the conventional wisdom is that it can negatively affect their electoral prospects. Even before the term flip-flopping became in vogue, criticisms of repositioning were associated with the term “waffling”, which originated as a criticism of Jimmy Carter for “waffling and wiggling” on issues (Allgeier et al., 1979). Repositioning is also criticized in terms of valence by political elites where repositioning creates a “credibility gap” for candidates (Spragens, 1980). Salient examples of repositioning have their own rich history and specific circumstances, which are not exactly replicated here, but the pervasiveness of criticisms for flip-flopping in contemporary politics suggests that repositioning comes with a reputational cost. This study evaluates how citizens respond to a candidate who repositions in the short term from a campaign to taking office. More crucially, this study evaluates how citizens are affected by criticisms of “flip-flopping” from unelected groups like the media, voters, and activists. Do these criticisms further reduce the popularity of candidates? Or, do they backfire and actually help the flip-flopping candidate?

Repositioning is also an enduring part of political science research. Downs (1957) argued that individuals care about statements made during campaigns “only insofar as those statements serve as guides to the policies that party will carry

out in office” (107). Candidates who want to maximize their vote share should hold a consistent position from one time period to another so that their policy statements are reliable (Downs, 1957). Consistent positioning also benefits the party brand, which in turn influences a candidate’s electoral success (Snyder & Ting, 2002). However, isolating the effect of repositioning on a candidate’s electoral prospects is confounding because repositioning occurs at the same time as many other potentially causal factors. In addition, the nature of each repositioning case has time period-specific features making generalizations difficult. This makes attributing electoral success or failure to repositioning confounding using observational data. In addition, successful politicians do not reposition haphazardly or randomly. Switching positions typically occur because the politician believes they are advantaged by doing so for a variety of possible reasons, perhaps because constituents, donors, and/or interest groups support the new position (e.g., Karol, 2009). Previous researchers recognized these threats to causality, and as a result, research has focused on isolating specific aspects of repositioning using experiments. Most experimental research

¹Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ, USA

Corresponding Author:

Andrew Gooch, Political Science and Economics, Rowan University, 201 Mullica Hill Road, Glassboro, NJ 08028, USA.
Email: gooch@rowan.edu

shows that repositioning by itself does cause negative evaluations of candidates in terms of favorability and character evaluations (e.g., Hoffman & Carver, 1984; but also see the next section for a thorough review of the literature). This reduced support from repositioning implies that the electorate values 1) a policy position that is proximity close to their own or 2) policy consistency as a valence attribute.

However, the fact remains that repositioning occurs frequently among presidents and legislators over the course of their careers (e.g., Karol, 2009). Simply randomizing repositioning versus consistent positioning (and only those two possibilities) does not account for other factors that might mitigate the negative effects of repositioning. When a politician uses persuasive justifications, for example, they are able to compensate for potential repositioning penalties; thus, demonstrating how a politician might not lose public support (Robison, 2017; Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012). The timing of the repositioning also matters. Recent repositioning (which is the topic of this study) is considered worse than changing from a position that was held many years ago (Doherty et al., 2016). This suggests that voters are more forgiving of politicians who might have “evolved” on an issue over a longer period of time. Perhaps most importantly, the public is also sensitive to the proximity of the reposition to their own policy views – the public does not punish politicians for repositioning toward their preferred policy (e.g., Croco, 2016; Croco & Gartner, 2014). The present study contributes to this line of research that shows mechanisms that offset the negative effects of repositioning.

The experiment to follow evaluates a candidate for the House of Representatives under different repositioning scenarios. Treatments included one campaign condition and five in office conditions that include consistent positioning, repositioning, and criticisms by unelected groups for repositioning. Unlike past research, having a treatment condition for just the campaign position acts as a control group and allows for a direct test of whether candidates are rewarded for consistency in office. Results confirm past experimental research that demonstrates candidates are penalized for repositioning. Candidates are also benefited by consistency. Counterintuitively, results also show that respondents are *more* favorable of a candidate when they are criticized for repositioning by unelected groups compared to a candidate who only repositions. This occurred on average across all respondents and suggests a potential backfire effect from criticisms. These results contribute to the growing body of research that shows conditions where the negative effects of repositioning might be mitigated.

Repositioning Literature Review

Theoretical and Empirical Findings about Candidate Issue Positioning

In the classical Downsian theoretical model, politicians are highly responsive to voter preferences and position

themselves to maximize their expected vote share (Downs, 1957). In a two-party system, therefore, the model predicts that both candidates have an incentive to position themselves proximity close to the median voter. This logic was extended beyond specific policy positions to include ideological placement (e.g., Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Jessee, 2012). Assumptions of the Downsian model can also be changed to create outcomes where candidates maximize their vote share while holding positions that are not identical to the median voter, giving the model more explanatory power (Grofman, 2004). For example, candidates adopt multiple positions, emphasize different issues, belong to parties, and have non-policy characteristics that may also affect voter evaluations.

What about a candidate who repositions? Theoretical reasons exist for why candidates might want to hold consistent positions from the campaign to while in office. Downs (1957) argued that candidate positioning during a campaign is valuable when it reliably represents the positions that will be held while in office. Candidates who do not reposition are considered to have “integrity” – that is, “policy statements at the beginning of an election period are reasonably borne out by its actions” while in office (108). This implies that a candidate is better off not repositioning if their goal is to maintain support while in office or maximize votes in the next election. Labelling this as “integrity” also implies that repositioning might be associated with a negative valence attribute that should be avoided by all candidates. Note that this variant of repositioning is different than a long-term fight over a party’s policy positions. For example, Karol (2009) convincingly shows that repositioning has occurred (particularly on the issue of abortion, gun control, and free trade) after decades of activists influencing the parties and funding candidates. Once an activist group captured a party, candidates switch positions and the coalitions of the parties change too (Karol, 2009). However, these results do not speak to the costs of short-term repositioning from a campaign to immediately taking office.

Most incumbents are not incentivized to stray from their party, potentially because of a reputational cost. Using a theoretical model and almost 100 years of data, Cox and McCubbins (2005) show that bills receiving a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives are almost always supported by nearly all members of the majority party, demonstrating very little repositioning away from the party in roll call votes. The mechanism behind consistent roll call voting is based on preserving the party brand, which suggests that repositioning might also signal a valence dimension. This logic was formalized by a model that incorporates electoral punishment for candidates who are “mavericks” and support policies that are not fully aligned with their party (Snyder & Ting, 2002, p. 93). In this model, party brands are used in elections to signal policy platforms, and that signal is less informative to voters when members hold conflicting positions with their party. Stimson (2015) also argues that repositioning might signal that a candidate is unprincipled

about their issue positions, which again points toward a potential valence cost. In contrast to this observed consistency in roll call votes is the unobserved counterfactual repositioning that a candidate might have made but chose not to for fear of appearing fickle (Arnold, 1990). Therefore, candidates might not reposition for reasons beyond issue proximity – they might care about how it affects their perceived valence.

Empirically evaluating the connection between the issue positions of candidates and the preferences of voters has a rich history. The classical approach in this area (e.g., Miller & Stokes, 1963), which has been updated and improved (e.g. Canes-Wrone et al., 2002; Erikson et al., 2002; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2018), measures whether voters punish a politician who does not conform to the preferences of constituencies. Researchers examined the correlation between measures of political success (e.g., a candidate's vote share) and measures of issue divergence between the candidates and their constituencies. However, it is difficult to isolate the effect of issue positioning from other factors that influence candidate preferences like valence (Gooch et al., 2021). Complicating the analysis further, the public's views on policy are not constant over time. Governing parties spend money on programs to match policy demands from the public, and as a result, the public becomes less demanding for that policy (Wlezien, 1995; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). Officeholders also adjust their positions to match the fluctuating policy preferences of the public (Stimson et al., 1995).

The dynamic relationship between candidate positioning and the public, and the potential role of valence, suggests inferential challenges. Many scholars have turned to experiments where candidate issue positions can be randomized. Using a formal model and an experimental design, Tomz and Van Houweling (2008) show that roughly 58% of their sample's voting rule can be explained using proximity theory, where individuals select a candidate with an issue position that is closest to their own. Using an experimental design with theoretical expectations, Ahler and Broockman (2018) randomly assign a platform of policy positions supported by a pair of candidates, and they find that individuals prefer the candidate who holds their specific policy preference regardless of the ideology signaled from the entire platform. Moreover, studies that randomized party cues and policy information in order to measure the influence of each factor demonstrate that policy does play a role in opinion formation (e.g., Bullock, 2011; Orr & Huber, 2020). Taken together, these studies suggest that candidates are benefited by supporting policies that align with their constituency, which confirms theoretical expectations.

Policy and party are important, but it is difficult to parse out the independent influence of each on voters. Goggin et al. (2020) show that respondents can responsibly guess candidates' party identification when they support salient issue positions, which suggests that both policy and party information is signaled by issue positions. For example,

respondents can correctly associate “addressing the immigration problem” (page 4) with Republican candidates. Respondents' ability to guess a candidate's party did not vary by political knowledge levels. Moreover, Dias and Lelkes (2021) argue that party and policy are intertwined for many salient issues and therefore should not be included in a treatment simultaneously. Party and policy together in an experiment “present a compound treatment and, therefore, likely overestimate how much policy disagreement drives affective polarization” (Dias & Lelkes, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, I do not include explicit references to the candidate's party in my treatment conditions because that might be too much information for respondents. The next subsection reviews experiments that specifically evaluate repositioning.

Causally Identifying Repositioning with Experiments

In this subsection, I detail every experiment that directly evaluated candidate repositioning. Initial experiments that shed light on repositioning were mostly conducted by teams of psychologists in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Allgeier et al., 1979; Hoffman & Carver, 1984; Carlson & Dolan, 1985; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1986). These scholars were motivated by observing politics. That is, presidents and presidential candidates “waffling” on issues. These initial experiments largely agreed that repositioning reduces evaluations. By the 2010s, a second wave of political scientists conducted more robust experiments with designs that might account for why repositioning is not always penalized by the public (Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012; Croco & Gartner, 2014; Croco, 2016; Doherty et al., 2016; Robison 2017; Sorek et al., 2018).

The first wave of experiments offers valuable designs but have notable drawbacks. The individual repositioning in these experiments ranged from a “stranger” (Allgeier et al., 1979) to a very detailed vignette about a hypothetical president who is even given a fake name of “Benjamin R. Warren” (Sigelman & Sigelman, 1986). These studies were conducted on college students where the sample sizes ranged from 44 to 199 students and only one study exceeded 100 students. Repositioned issues ranged from non-political attitudes to salient political issues like war and gun control (Allgeier et al., 1979; Hoffman & Carver, 1984; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1986). Initially, these studies asked outcome measures related to interpersonal judgments and character, and the results suggested a connection between repositioning and valence (Allgeier et al., 1979; Carlson & Dolan, 1985). For example, individuals who repositioned were viewed as worse leaders, less decisive, and less reliable than consistent individuals (Allgeier et al., 1979). Once the vignettes were geared more toward politicians, researchers documented a reduction in candidate favorability as well as valence penalties (Hoffman & Carver, 1984; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1986). These results held regardless if the candidate switched on one issue only or one issue among other

consistent positions (Hoffman & Carver, 1984; Carlson & Dolan, 1985).

Aside from consistency, attitude similarities between the candidate and the respondent were important, which suggests a mechanism for why politicians might not be penalized for repositioning. When the politician moves in the proximate direction as the respondent, the politician is not penalized (Hoffman & Carver, 1984; Carlson & Dolan, 1985; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1986). In some instances, issue proximity was more important than consistency (Hoffman & Carver, 1984). The only dissenting study on proximity used “a stranger” (not a politician) with non-political issues, suggesting that proximity is less important when the context is apolitical (Allgeier et al., 1979). Taken together, these foundational experiments showed the value of using a political vignette with outcome measures related to favorability and valence. They suggest that consistency and proximity are important. However, these studies are limited by their sample sizes, the representativeness of their samples, and their ability to capture other aspects of the political environment that influence vote choice. They also do not include campaign comparison groups, and therefore document penalties for repositioning in office only.

The second wave of experiments by political scientists used larger and more representative sample sizes, more detailed treatments, and examined conditions where repositioning might not be penalized. Researchers still focused their attention on valence as a mechanism for valuing consistency, but important mechanisms that limit the negative effects of repositioning were explored included proximity, timing, and justifications. Several of these experiments focused on the issue of war (Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012; Croco & Gartner, 2014; Croco, 2016), potentially because of the prevalence of flip-flopping on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars by politicians at the time. Experiments on the Afghanistan and Iraq wars showed no penalty for hypothetical Senators who reposition in press releases as long as they support the respondent’s position (Croco & Gartner, 2014; Croco, 2016). Evaluations were also unaffected by the candidate’s gender (Croco & Gartner, 2014). Unlike the first wave of experiments, these results about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars show that consistency was not valued, and instead, respondents were most receptive to proximity. When these experiments were run, however, the public was less supportive of the Iraq war and politicians were repositioning against it (Jacobson, 2007; Croco, 2016). This suggests that the penalty for repositioning on Iraq might have been minimal because of growing opposition to the war. That being said, across almost all repositioning experiments in political science, proximity to the new position is critically important for understanding whether a penalty will be imposed by the public. The only experiment where proximity seemed less important included a hypothetical and newly developing scenario where respondents might be more receptive to new information because of so many unknowns (Levendusky &

Horowitz, 2012). That receptiveness to repositioning might be less apparent when randomizing long-standing, salient issues in American politics.¹

Timing is an additional factor that mitigates repositioning penalties. Recent repositioning by state and U.S. representatives were viewed more negatively than a change that occurred over a longer period (Doherty et al., 2016). Results also confirmed the importance of proximity. An experimental design that used less salient foreign policies, and included domestic policies, showed that consistency between campaign promises and action in office increased presidential approval (Sorek et al., 2018). These studies demonstrated the importance of holding consistent positions in the short term. The public might feel misled if repositioning occurs so soon after staking out a campaign position.

Justifications from candidates defending their repositioning can minimize negative effects. Justifications are similar to emphasis frames where a subset of potential considerations about an issue are highlighted as a way to persuade the public (e.g., Druckman, 2001). Using a rich vignette, a hypothetical president intends to send troops to stop an invasion of a foreign country, but then the president gives justifications for backing down (Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012). The design also included responses by Congress. Results showed that a politician can mitigate a reduction in approval simply by explaining their repositioning to the public (Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012). Two additional experiments with more detailed justifications confirmed the role of persuasion to buffer repositioning penalties (Robison 2017). Taken together, these studies show how politicians can justify their repositioning to the public, which occurs frequently in the real world but is not captured in experiments that only randomize repositioning verses consistency.

The present study extends this logic of justifications to include criticisms of repositioning from unelected groups like the media, voters, and activists. In contexts unrelated to repositioning, evidence exists that justifications from these groups can negatively impact perceptions of candidates and officeholders (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Druckman & Jacobs, 2015; Druckman et al., 2018; Broockman & Kalla, 2020; Kalla & Broockman, 2021). However, contrary to my expectations, I found that criticisms from unelected groups actually backfired and increased support for a candidate who repositions. Research on backfire effects is mostly associated with the literature on misinformation. A backfire effect occurs when the public “may come to support their original opinion *even more strongly*” (original authors’ emphasis) when being confronted with corrective information (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010, p. 307). A key difference is that the experiment in this study provides criticisms about repositioning – which is typically meant to reduce politician’s favorability – that backfires in the sense that it makes the politician more popular. These backfire results are consistent with the idea that the public will process

information in a way that reinforces their own views of the world (e.g., [Taber & Lodge, 2006](#)).

In summary, candidates and officeholders are incentivized to be consistent on issues potentially because of perceived valence. However, there are instances when repositioning is advantageous for candidates particularly proximity to voters. The next section outlines the design and hypotheses.

Methodology

Experimental Design

This section describes the treatments, outcomes measures, hypotheses, and data. This experiment was pre-registered at [aspredicted.org](#). A candidate holds a position on immigration policy (specifically, the cap on asylum seekers in the United States) during a campaign or while in office.² In office treatments can take two positions: holding the same position as during the campaign (consistent) or repositioning after the election. Repositioning treatments can include criticisms of “flip-flopping” from unelected groups or just information about the repositioning. This design allows for comparisons between the repositioning and the criticisms for repositioning.

The experiment included six treatment arms, and they are summarized in [Table 1](#). The campaign condition acts as a control group for evaluating the effects of repositioning and consistency. Previous research on repositioning compared a consistent candidate already in office with an inconsistent candidate in office. Therefore, it is unclear if candidates are actually viewed more favorability for being consistent after the campaign (i.e., is

there a benefit for simply being consistent?). The experimental design included three treatment arms with unelected group cues and criticisms of flip-flopping. These treatment arms add external validity by including information that voters might be exposed to when a candidate repositions. The criticism treatment conditions are informed by repositioning experiments that use justifications (e.g., [Robison 2017](#)) and studies on framing effects more generally (e.g., [Druckman, 2001](#)). The three unelected groups are voters, the media, and activists. The group cue of “voters” is meant to signal displeasure by fellow citizens (e.g., [Druckman et al., 2018](#); [Orr & Huber, 2020](#)). The group cue of “the media” is meant to signal an elite-level criticism that often occurs (e.g., [Iyengar & Kinder, 2010](#)).³ Finally, “activists” is meant to signal highly interested individuals who, research shows, play a pivotal role in long-term repositioning ([Karol, 2009](#)). Ultimately, criticisms of flip-flopping are a way to signal 1) that consistency is a valued trait by these groups, and 2) that the new position might be proximity far from these groups’ preferred position. See the [appendix](#) for balance tests showing the randomization was successful, the questionnaire, and a screenshot of the vignette from the respondents’ perspective.

Outcome Measures and Hypotheses

Respondents answered three outcome measures that tap into favorability, competency, and ideology. Favorability was asked as a feeling thermometer from 0–100 using a slider. To evaluate changes in valence from repositioning, a question about competency was asked. This was asked as a five-point question on a different page than favorability. Outcome

Table 1. Randomized Treatment Conditions.

Text for all respondents: The U.S. caps the number of immigrants seeking asylum to 15,000 per year. Asylum occurs when the U.S. grants protection for immigrants who are victims of persecution in their home country
Consider a candidate for the U.S. House of representatives. The candidate has taken several public stances during the campaign including a position on immigration

Treatment 1: Campaign position	The candidate’s position during the campaign is raise the cap of immigrants seeking asylum from 15,000 to 50,000 per year
Treatment 2: Consistent in office	(Treatment 1 text is shown) Now suppose this candidate won the election. Once in office, the candidate still supports raising the cap of immigrants seeking asylum from 15,000 to 50,000 per year
Treatment 3: Reposition in office	(Treatment 1 text is shown) Now suppose this candidate won the election. Once in office, the candidate no longer supports raising the cap and instead supports the current cap of 15,000 immigrants seeking asylum per year
Treatment 4: Reposition with criticism from voters	(Treatment 1 and Treatment 3 text is shown) In response, suppose that voters are now criticizing the candidate for flip-flopping on immigration
Treatment 5: Reposition with criticism from the media	(Treatment 1 and Treatment 3 text is shown) In response, suppose that the media are now criticizing the candidate for flip-flopping on immigration
Treatment 6: Reposition with criticism from activists	(Treatment 1 and Treatment 3 text is shown) In response, suppose that political activists are now criticizing the candidate for flip-flopping on immigration

Notes: An introductory page was shown before treatment randomization informing respondents that they will be evaluating a hypothetical House candidate. See [appendix](#) for questionnaire.

measures related to favorability and valence were regularly used in past studies about repositioning (e.g., Allgeier et al., 1979; Robison 2017). Respondents were also asked to evaluate the candidate's ideology using a five-point question that included a "not sure" option.

Below are my pre-registered hypotheses. I hypothesized that the consistent candidate (treatment arm 2) would be more favorable and competent than a candidate who simply held the position in a campaign (treatment arm 1). I hypothesized that the repositioned candidate (treatment arm 3) would be less favorable and competent than the campaign candidate (treatment arm 1) and less favorable and competent than the consistent candidate (treatment arm 2). These hypotheses are informed by theoretical expectations and evidence in the first and second wave of repositioning experiments – that a penalty exists for repositioning when no other information is presented. I hypothesized that the criticism treatment arms would make the candidate less favorable and less competent than simply repositioning (treatment arms 4, 5, and 6 vs. treatment arm 3). Results to follow show that this set of hypotheses about criticisms was incorrect. In terms of ideology, I hypothesized that repositioning (treatments 3, 4, 5, and 6) will cause ideological evaluations to move in the direction of the new position (conservative). In addition, I hypothesized that repositioning (treatments 3, 4, 5, and 6) would increase the proportion of respondents who cannot place the candidate ideologically because the ideological signal will be less clear.

The outcome measures will be graphically displayed as averages by treatment condition with 95% confidence intervals. Differences between treatment conditions will be evaluated using independent t-tests of means and will be reported in-text. In light of these findings, additional regression analysis with controls was conducted to confirm the backfire effect.

Data

Data come from Lucid, an online survey sampling company. The total sample size in this study is 2694. This sample size is large enough to detect small differences between each treatment group, which will contain over 400 respondents per condition. To provide some background on the sampling firm, Lucid is one of the largest online sampling marketplaces (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). Samples are based on pre-survey demographic characteristics, which are used to construct representative surveys via quotas. In a study comparing Lucid samples to MTurk – a more well-used sample in the social sciences – Lucid comes closer to matching the American National Election Studies' distributions on demographics, voter registration, turnout, and party identification (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). Researchers found that "Lucid performed remarkably well in recovering estimates that come close to the original estimates" in five replication studies (Coppock & McClellan, 2019, p. 12). These results

suggest that Lucid samples are viable for social science research.

Results

Favorability, Competency, and Ideology

Figure 1 displays average favorability for each treatment condition with 95% confidence intervals. In the first condition, the candidate simply held a position on asylum seekers during the campaign, and their average favorability was 49.0. When the candidate was "consistent" – meaning they held the same position once in office – the average rating goes up to 53.3, for a treatment effect of 4.3 percentage points (p -value = 0.02). These results highlight the value of the "control" campaign condition unique to this study because this consistency premium would not be observed without it. When the candidate repositions in office, their average favorability drops to 42.8, which is a 10.5 percentage point decrease from the consistency condition and a 6.2 percentage point decrease from the campaign condition. Both differences are significant with p -values < .001.

However, the treatment conditions that included criticisms from voters, the media, or activists do not further reduce favorability. On average, favorability *increases* relative to just repositioning. When respondents are presented with a criticism of "flip-flopping" by voters, candidate favorability is 46.4 on average, which represents a 3.6 percentage point increase (p -value = 0.032) in favorability compared to repositioning in isolation. Similarly, the difference between the repositioning treatment condition and the media criticism treatment condition is 3.8 (p -value = 0.023). Criticism by activists is in the same direction, an increase of 2.1 percentage points, but is not significant at a 95% level (p -value = 0.13). The next subsection investigates this counterintuitive result further using regression.

Figure 2 displays perceptions of candidate competency by treatment condition. The results show an almost identical trend as the favorability results in Figure 1. The candidate who is consistent in office was perceived as significantly more competent than the candidate who held the position during the campaign. In addition, repositioning in office caused the candidate to be perceived as less competent. The treatment conditions that included a criticism show significant increases when voters and the media are included, but no difference for activists. Given the similar results between the competency and favorability questions, it is difficult to conclude that they tap into distinct outcomes (even though the questions did not appear on the same page and were asked with different answer choice options). That being said, these findings comport with past research that shows the importance of valence.

Figure 3 displays results from a question about perceived ideology, which has not been directly measured by past

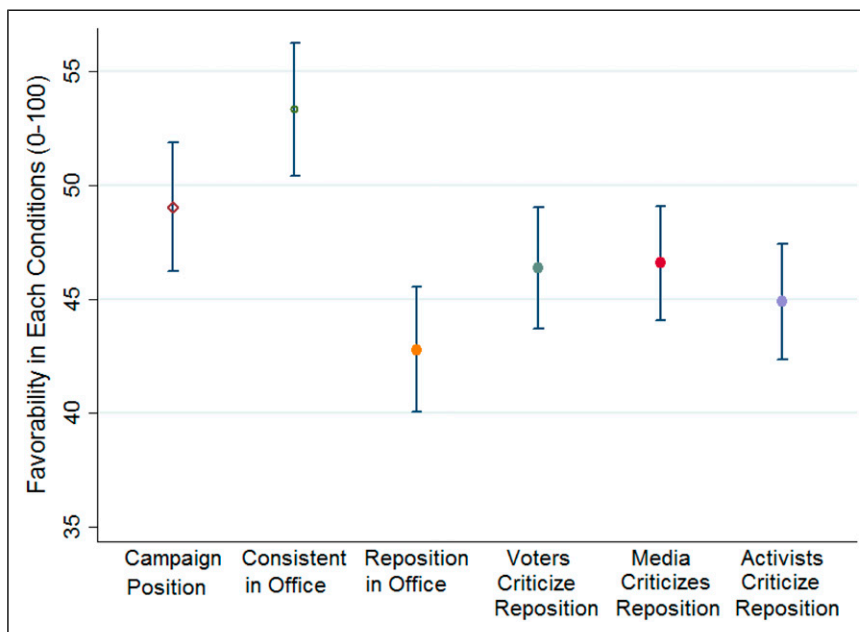


Figure 1. Candidate favorability for each randomized treatment condition.

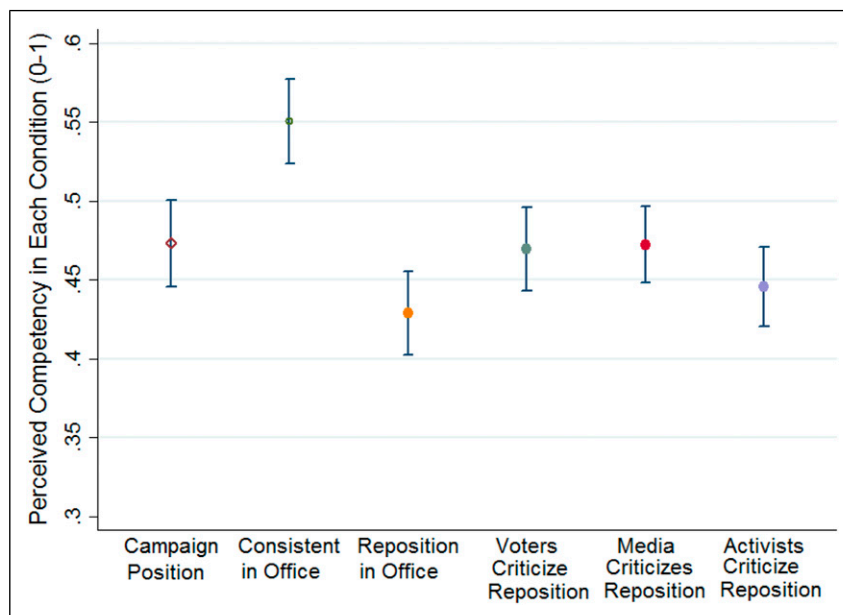


Figure 2. Candidate competency for each randomized treatment condition.

repositioning research. I expected repositioning to cause ideological evaluations to move in the direction of the new position (conservative), and that repositioning will increase the proportion of respondents who cannot place the candidate ideologically. The top panel of [Figure 3](#) displays the average ideological evaluations of the candidate scaled from 0 (very conservative) to 1 (very liberal), and the bottom panel of [Figure 3](#) displays the proportion of respondents who could not place the candidate ideologically. Starting with the top

panel, average ideology with a (liberal) campaign position on asylum seekers is 0.73 on average, and holding the same position once in office is 0.71 for a statistically insignificant difference of 2.0 percentage points (p -value = 0.138). This demonstrates that holding a consistent position in office does not change ideological evaluations compared to the campaign.

The repositioning treatments, however, show a drastic difference in ideological evaluations. Average ideological evaluations in the repositioning condition drops to an average

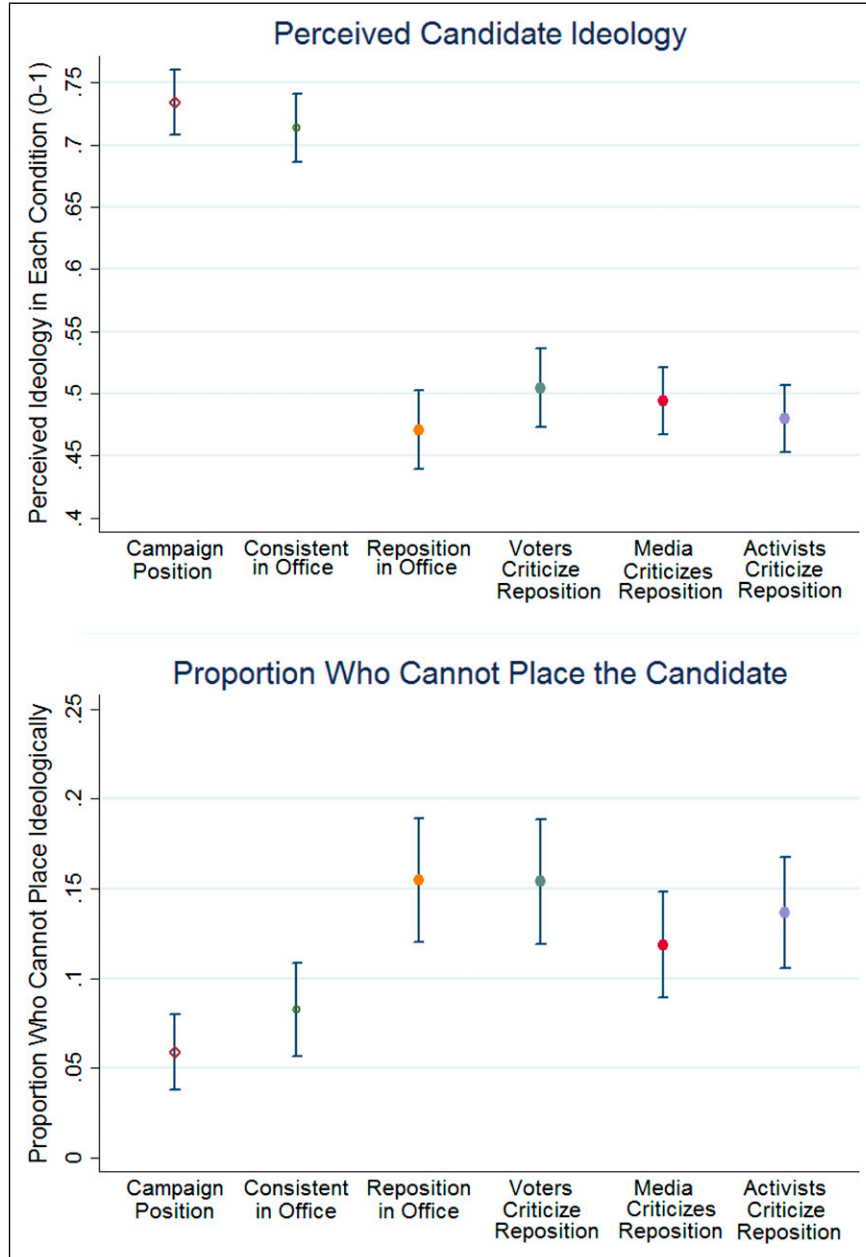


Figure 3. Candidate ideology and those who cannot place the candidate ideologically.

of 0.47. Compared to the consistent position, this is a difference of 24 percentage points (p -value < 0.001). Translating these results into the answer choices, respondents updated their evaluation from liberal on average to moderate on average due to repositioning. The difference between the repositioning condition and the voter criticism condition is 3.4 percentage point and approaches significance (p -value = 0.07), and the media and activist conditions differ only slightly from the repositioning treatment (differences of 2.3 percentage points and 0.9 percentage points, respectively). These results suggest that changes in ideological evaluations come from repositioning itself and not the additional criticisms.

The bottom panel of Figure 3 displays the proportion of respondents who could not place the candidate ideologically. Much like average ideological evaluations, consistent compared to repositioning showed the biggest difference. As expected, the proportion of those who cannot place increased in the repositioning condition compared to the consistent condition by 7.2 percentage points (p -value < 0.001). The proportion of those who could not place increased in the consistent condition compared to the campaign position by 2.4 percentage points but is not significant at a 95% level (p -value = 0.079).

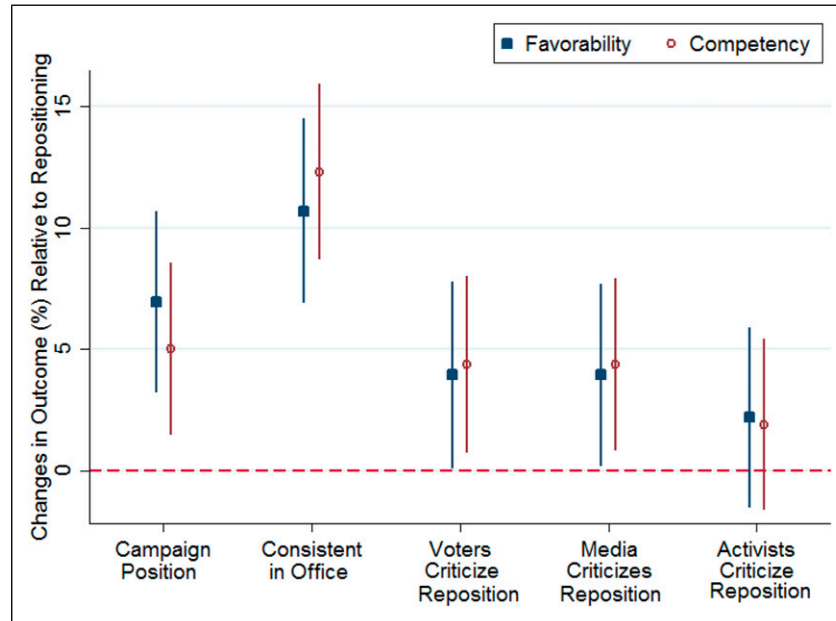


Figure 4. Changes Relative to Repositioning Treatment from Regression Analysis.

Notes: Estimates come from two regression models (favorability and competency as outcome variables) where the repositioning treatment is the excluded category in the model and is represented by the dotted line at zero. See [appendix](#) for regression table.

As a further test of ideological uncertainty, I report the standard deviations by treatment group in the appendix, but I find no consistent pattern across treatment groups. The campaign group and consistent group are nearly identical, and I found a slight increase in standard deviations for the repositioning and voter criticism groups. However, the other two criticism groups are similar to the campaign treatment group.

Regression Models of Backfire Effects

As an additional test of the backfire effect, I estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with predictors for treatment assignment and pre-treatment covariates. Although presented graphically with 95% confidence intervals, I estimated the following

$$\begin{aligned} Outcome_i = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 CampaignPosition_i + \beta_2 Consistent_i \\ & + \beta_3 VoterCriticism_i + \beta_4 MediaCriticism_i \\ & + \beta_5 ActivistCriticism_i + \delta Controls + e_i. \end{aligned}$$

The outcome variables used are favorability and competency scaled from 0-100 so that coefficients can be interpreted as percentage point changes. All treatment variables are indicator variables (1=yes, 0=no). To specifically evaluate the differences between repositioning and criticisms, I used the repositioning treatment group as the excluded category in the regression. Therefore, β_1 , β_2 , β_3 , β_4 , and β_5 estimate differences from the repositioned candidate. The vector *Controls* included a number of pre-treatment variables meant to

account for expected differences in candidate evaluations including party identification, self-placed ideology, 2020 turnout, 2020 vote choice, the most important issue is immigration, household income, education, and race. Full regression tables appear in the [appendix](#).

Figure 4 displays the regression results. The dotted line at zero represents the repositioning treatment condition. Confidence intervals that do not overlap zero demonstrate significant differences from repositioning. The campaign position and consistent in office treatments show large significant differences in favorability and evaluations of competency, confirming the t-test results in the previous subsection. Importantly, the voter criticism and media criticism groups do not overlap zero for favorability or competency and are significant at a 95% level. However, the activist criticism condition overlaps zero and therefore is not distinguishable from the repositioned condition. These results confirm that the backfire effect holds for voter and media criticisms when treatment effects are jointly estimated with controls.

Conclusion and Discussion

Repositioning is a ubiquitous part of American politics, but it is often difficult to measure whether the public punishes candidates for it because of so many competing factors. The present study used six treatment conditions and three outcome measures to evaluate repositioning under different circumstances. The results are bolstered by the addition of a campaign-only condition that acts as a control group, and

three treatments that included criticisms from voters, the media, and activists. These results suggest that candidates receive a premium from being consistent once in office and are penalized for repositioning. These results hold with an outcome measure of competency, demonstrating the connection between repositioning and valence.

Unlike past research, this experiment directly measured changes in ideology, and results showed that respondents updated their ideological evaluations of the candidate in the direction of the reposition. Candidates who repositioned also received a larger proportion of respondents who cannot place them on the ideological spectrum. This suggests that repositioning sends mixed ideological signals to the public. This result also comports with observational studies that show candidates who mix liberal and conservative positions are harder to place ideologically compared to consistently liberal or conservative candidates during elections (Gooch & Huber, 2018). Lastly, these results act as a validity check that respondents can interpret the ideological signal from the positions in the experiment. Future research will investigate changes in ideological evaluations from repositioning by party and proximity.

Unexpectedly, additional criticisms of flip-flopping by various unelected groups did not hurt the candidate further. Instead, criticisms increased candidate favorability and perceived competency on average in two of the three criticism groups across all respondents. This suggests a backfire to criticisms from unelected groups. Criticisms of politicians might backfire because respondents might see it as excessive, and the unelected groups are simply “piling on”. These results contribute to the literature that shows conditions where repositioning is not punished by voters. Although the backfire results are unexpected, they are credible for two reasons. First, the results in the initial three treatment conditions are consistent with past experimental research demonstrating a penalty for repositioning when other factors are held constant (with the exception in the literature being the Iraq and Afghanistan war experiments). Second, the backfire effect is robust across two treatment conditions and two outcome measures, suggesting that these results are not an outlier driven by a single treatment or outcome measure.

Finally, these results speak to the dynamics at play when a candidate or officeholder repositions. The intended purpose of criticizing a politician for repositioning is to hurt their reputations. This study shows why that might not always be the case. Criticisms might cause the public to rally around that candidate instead of reducing their support. These results might also demonstrate why politicians will sometimes “play the victim” when being criticized. Instead of defending the substance of the criticisms, some candidate justifications devolve into ad hominem attacks about those who are doing the criticizing. The most prominent example of this might be when candidates attack the media as an institution after a negative news story. The backfire effect documented here suggests that these candidate strategies might actually generate support.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This experiment was funded by the Political Science and Economics Department at Rowan University.

ORCID iD

Andrew Gooch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1001-2438>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Robison (2016) included immigration policy (Dream Act) and a less salient issue, patent reform (TOL Act). Doherty et al. (2016) included abortion, Social Security, nuclear power, and fighting terrorism. Note that also included abortion and taxes.
2. Note that this experiment was run before Joe Biden announced an increase to the cap after withdrawal from Afghanistan.
3. Note that polls like Gallup show that the public has very negative views of the media (Brenan 2020).

References

- Ahler, D. J., & Broockman, D. E. (2018). The delegate paradox: Why polarized politicians can represent citizens best. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(4), 1117–1133. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698755>
- Allgeier, A. R., Byrne, D., Brooks, B., & Revnes, D. (1979). The waffle phenomenon: Negative evaluations of those who shift attitudinally. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 9(2), 170–182. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1979.tb00802.x>
- Arnold, R. D. (1990). *The logic of congressional action*. Yale University Press.
- Broockman, D. E., & Kalla, J. L. (2020). *Research note: Candidate ideology and vote choice in the 2020 US presidential election*. Unpublished manuscript: <https://osf.io/25wm9/>
- Bullock, J. G. (2011). Elite influence on public opinion in an informed electorate. *American Political Science Review*, 105(3), 496–515. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055411000165>
- Canes-Wrone, B., Brady, D. W., & Cogan, J. F. (2002). Out of step, out of office: Electoral accountability and House members' voting. *American Political Science Review*, 96(1), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055402004276>
- Carlson, J. M., & Dolan, K. (1985). The waffle phenomenon and candidates' image. *Psychological Reports*, 57(3), 795–798. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1985.57.3.795>
- Coppock, A., & McClellan, O. A. (2019). Validating the demographic, political, psychological, and experimental results obtained from a new source of online survey respondents.

- Research & Politics*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018822174>.
- Cox, G. W., & McCubbins, M. D. (2005). *Setting the agenda: Responsible party government in the US House of representatives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Croco, S. E. (2016). The flipside of flip-flopping: Leader inconsistency, citizen preferences, and the war in Iraq. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12(3), 237–257. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orw006>
- Croco, S. E., & Gartner, S. S. (2014). Flip-flops and high heels: An experimental analysis of elite position change and gender on wartime public support. *International Interactions*, 40(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2013.863195>
- Dias, N., & Lelkes, Y. (2021). The nature of affective polarization: Disentangling policy disagreement from partisan identity. *American Journal of Political Science*, 66(3), 775–790. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12628>
- Doherty, D., Dowling, C. M., & Miller, M. G. (2016). When is changing policy positions costly for politicians? Experimental evidence. *Political Behavior*, 38(2), 455–484. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9321-9>
- Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. Harper Collins.
- Druckman, J. N. (2001). The implications of framing effects for citizen competence. *Political Behavior*, 23(3), 225–256. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1015006907312>.
- Druckman, J. N., & Jacobs, L. R. (2015). *Who governs?* University of Chicago Press.
- Druckman, J. N., Levendusky, M. S., & McLain, A. (2018). No need to watch: How the effects of partisan media can spread via interpersonal discussions. *American Journal of Political Science*, 62(1), 99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12325>
- Enelow, J. M., & Hinich, M. J. (1984). *The spatial theory of voting: An introduction*. CUP Archive.
- Erikson, R. S., MacKuen, M. B., & Stimson, J. A. (2002). *The macro polity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goggin, S. N., Henderson, J. A., & Theodoridis, A. G. (2020). What goes with red and blue? Mapping partisan and ideological associations in the minds of voters. *Political Behavior*, 42(4), 985–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-09525-6>
- Gooch, A., Gerber, A. S., & Huber, G. A. (2021). Evaluations of candidates' non-policy characteristics from issue positions: Evidence of valence spillover. *Electoral Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102246>.
- Gooch, A., & Huber, G. A. (2018). Exploiting Donald Trump: Using candidates' positions to assess ideological voting in the 2016 and 2008 presidential elections. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12461>.
- Grofman, B. (2004). Downs and two-party convergence. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 7(1), 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.7.012003.104711>
- Hoffman, H. S., & Carver, C. S. (1984). Political waffling: Its effects on the evaluations of observers 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 14(4), 375–385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1984.tb02245.x>
- Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. R. (2010). *News that matters: Television and American opinion*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobson, G. C. (2007). *The public, the president, and the war in Iraq*. (pp. 245–284). The polarized presidency of George W.
- Jessee, S. A. (2012). *Ideology and spatial voting in American elections*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2021). “Outside lobbying” over the airwaves: A randomized field experiment on televised issue ads. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055421001349>.
- Karol, D. (2009). *Party position change in American politics: Coalition management*. Cambridge University Press.
- Krosnick, J. A., & Kinder, D. R. (1990). Altering the foundations of support for the president through priming. *American Political Science Review*, 84(2), 497–512. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963531>
- Levendusky, M. S., & Horowitz, M. C. (2012). When backing down is the right decision: Partisanship, new information, and audience costs. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(2), 323–338. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002238161100154x>
- Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1963). Constituency influence in congress. *American Political Science Review*, 57(2), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952717>
- Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, 32(2), 303–330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2>
- Orr, L. V., & Huber, G. A. (2020). The policy basis of measured partisan animosity in the United States. *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(3), 569–586. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12498>
- Robison, J. (2017). The role of elite accounts in mitigating the negative effects of repositioning. *Political Behavior*, 39(3), 609–628. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9372-6>
- Sigelman, L., & Sigelman, C. K. (1986). Shattered expectations: Public responses to “out-of-character” presidential actions. *Political Behavior*, 8(3), 262–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01002101>
- Snyder, J. M. Jr., & Ting, M. M. (2002). An informational rationale for political parties. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(1), 90–110. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088416>
- Sorek, A. Y., Haglin, K., & Geva, N. (2018). In capable hands: An experimental study of the effects of competence and consistency on leadership approval. *Political Behavior*, 40(3), 659–679. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-017-9417-5>
- Spragens, W. C. (1980). The myth of the Johnson “credibility gap”. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 10(4), 629–635. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27547631>.
- Stimson, J. A. (2015). *Tides of consent: How public opinion shapes American politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stimson, J. A., MacKuen, M. B., & Erikson, R. S. (1995). Dynamic representation. *American Political Science Review*, 89(3), 543–565. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082973>

- Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 755–769. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00214.x>
- Tausanovitch, C., & Warshaw, C. (2018). Does the ideological proximity between candidates and voters affect voting in US house elections? *Political Behavior*, 40(1), 223–245. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-017-9437-1>
- Tomz, M., & Van Houweling, R. P. (2008). Candidate positioning and voter choice. *American Political Science Review*, 102(3), 303–318. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055408080301>
- Wlezien, C. (1995). The public as thermostat: Dynamics of preferences for spending. *American Journal of Political Science*, 39, (4), 981–1000. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111666>
- Wlezien, C., & Soroka, S. N. (2012). Political institutions and the opinion–policy link. *West European Politics*, 35(6), 1407–1432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2012.713752>

Author Biography

Andrew Gooch is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and Economics at Rowan University.