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The paradox of the political maverick

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Attitudes about political mavericks (politicians who cross party lines to “vote their conscience”) depend on whether people construe them in general terms or at the level of specific policy proposals. Three studies examined this hypothesis. In Study 1, participants expressed more positive views of political mavericks described generally than when prompted to consider a maverick of their own political party. Study 2 found that mavericks described in personality trait terms were evaluated more favorably than “party-line” politicians, even when the maverick was of the participant's own political party. Study 3 found that when participants were provided with specific policy stances, a similarity-attraction pattern was found: opposing party mavericks were evaluated more positively, but same party mavericks were evaluated more negatively, than their party-line counterparts. Politicians challenging a politician's own party on a moral issue were evaluated particularly harshly. Implications of these findings for political perceptions and strategy are discussed.

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Introduction

After an extended period of intense partisanship in U.S. politics, the American electorate is now often characterized as being in a “post-partisan” mood. In a 2005 Harris poll, 85% of respondents agreed that the U.S. needs more politicians willing to vote independently rather than along party lines. This figure was consistent across party and ideological boundaries, and may reflect one reason why the 2008 presidential candidates of both major U.S. parties (Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama) are individuals whose reputation and rhetoric reflect a commitment to move beyond divisive partisan politics.

But recent examples reveal the perils of post-partisanship. John McCain’s willingness to endorse views that challenge Republican orthodoxy has made his name virtually synonymous with the term “political maverick.” While McCain’s straight-talking image has been a major aspect of his political success, his frequent apostasies have also made him distinctly unpopular among a substantial segment of his own party. Similarly, Senator Joseph Lieberman’s vocal support for the Bush Administration’s Iraq War policies has led him to be touted as a paragon of post-partisan objectivity by the ideological right, but was a key factor leading to his defeat in the Connecticut Democratic primary to retain his U.S. Senate seat in 2006 (he was ultimately re-elected as an Independent).

Social psychological research provides insight into why voters may have ambivalent reactions to politicians who express “cross-partisan” policy positions. Independence and authenticity are generally viewed as highly desirable personality traits, particularly in an individualistic cultural context (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Politicians who cultivate an image of “speaking their mind” and “voting their conscience” may benefit in popularity from the trait attributions that result. A willingness to support policy positions that challenge one’s party may enhance a politician’s credibility in the same way that arguing against one’s own self-interest is an effective form of persuasion (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978).

And yet, if a politician from your political party disagrees with the party on a policy issue, chances are good that she disagrees with you too. The well-established relation between attitude similarity and attraction (Byrne, 1961; Montoya & Horton, 2004) predicts that this disagreement will diminish liking for that individual. Research on the black-sheep effect similarly predicts that politicians perceived as “betraying” one’s ingroup should provoke strong negative reactions (Marques, Zerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). Thus, consistent with the anecdotal examples of Senators McCain and Lieberman, once the details of maverick political stances become focal, they are likely to be more endearing to the party those positions cross “to” than to the party those positions cross “from.”

The present studies

When people have ambivalent feelings about a stimulus, its evaluation can depend on how it is construed (Griffith & Ross, 1991; Trope & Lieberman, 2003). We expected such a pattern with evaluations of political mavericks. When considered in general terms, people’s positive feelings about the traits of independence and authenticity should lead them to feel favorably about politi-
cians who cross party lines to vote their conscience. But when con- sidered in a more specific way—particularly when details about cross-partisan policy positions are provided—maverick politicians should be evaluated positively by members of an opposing political party, but more negatively by members of their own political party. We conducted three studies to examine this prediction.

Study 1

As a preliminary test, 235 undergraduates from the University of California, Irvine and 5251 adult U.S. citizens recruited through the website yourmorals.org were asked whether they agreed, disagreed or were unsure regarding two statements about “maverick” voting behavior as part of larger questionnaires. The first was a general statement: I think politicians should always vote based on their own personal and moral beliefs, even if this is inconsistent with their political party’s position on the issue. The second statement was more specific: I would feel favorably toward a politician in my political party who voted his/her conscience on a moral issue, even if that vote contradicted my own personal moral position on the issue. The internet sample included data on participant’s political affiliation and a 3-point interest in politics scale.

Results and discussion

When couched in general terms, 65% of student participants agreed that politicians should cross party lines to vote based on their personal and moral beliefs, but only 42% expressed a similar sentiment when the question asked about a politician of the participant’s own party contradicting the participant’s own personal moral position (p < .001; see Table 1). A similar but less pronounced pattern was found in the internet sample (57% vs. 51%; p < .001).

In the internet sample, the greater level of agreement with the general than specific statement was found for Republicans (N = 999, 66% vs. 56%, p < .001) and Democrats (N = 3813, 55% vs. 50%, p < .001) but not for Independents (N = 439, 59% vs. 56%, p > 2). Independents may have found the party-specific question less meaningful. Stronger Republican affiliation and lower political interest predicted greater agreement with both the general and specific statements (all ps < .001).

Study 2

Study 1 revealed that: (a) attitudes about maverick politicians were generally positive, with a substantial proportion of participants (over 50% in most cases) expressing favorable opinions even about politicians of their own political party taking cross-partisan positions, and (b) more participants expressed positive attitudes about politicians crossing party lines when that act was described generally than when the question evoked a more specific image of someone of the participant’s own political party voting in a way that contradicted the participant’s personal political views.

Study 1 is limited, however, by its use of imperfectly matched attitude items about generic “politicians.” Studies 2 and 3 used experimental designs to compare reactions to maverick and “party-line” politicians. For Study 2, we predicted that, in the absence of policy detail, people would show uniformly favorable opinions of maverick politicians, even those from their own political party. Because Republican affiliation and lower political engagement were associated with support for mavericks in Study 1, we continued to examine the extent to which effects generalized across these variables.

Method

Adult participants recruited at a shopping mall (N = 248) were given a thumbnail description of a fictional politician. The politician was described as a former governor running for re-election to the U.S. Senate and it was varied whether he was said to be a Democrat, Republican, or had his party affiliation left unspecified. The politician was described in positive terms (as a “competent and principled politician” popular in his state) so as not to create an unduly negative perception of the party-line politician. The final sentence of the description characterized the politician as either “a man of loyalty” who “always votes in support of his party, even on controversial issues” (party-line condition) or “a man of integrity” who “always votes for what he believes is right, even if it means voting against his party on controversial issues” (maverick condition).

Participants rated their overall favorability toward the candidate and likelihood of voting for him on 9-point scales. The two measures were combined into an index (r = .81). Participants also indicated their political affiliation and how important that affiliation was to them. The final sample consisted of 95 Republicans, 95 Democrats, and 58 Independents.

Results and discussion

Because we were interested in how people viewed mavericks within and across party lines, our primary analysis included only Republicans and Democrats. A 2 (participant affiliation: Republican or Democrat) × 3 (affiliation match: politician same party as participant, politician different party from participant, or politician affiliation unlabeled) × 2 (politician description: party-line or maverick) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed, first, a main effect of affiliation match, F(2,178) = 8.14, p < .001, ηp² = .08. Participants rated politicians from their own party more favorably (M = 7.14) than politicians from the opposing party (M = 5.83), p < .001. Unlabeled politicians (M = 6.26) were not evaluated differently from either same or opposing party politicians.

The only other significant effect was the predicted main effect of politician description, F(1,178) = 22.15, p < .001, ηp² = .11. Overall, maverick politicians were rated significantly more favorably (M = 7.05) than party-line politicians (M = 5.77), and were rated more favorably at each level of affiliation match (all ps < .05; see Fig. 1).

Independents were examined separately and showed the same preference for maverick (M = 6.60) over party-line politicians (M = 4.60), F(1,52) = 14.61, p < .001, ηp² = .22. Finally, a separate analysis including affiliation importance as a fourth independent variable revealed only one additional effect: all politicians were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>UCI undergraduates (N = 235)</th>
<th>Yourmorals.org (N = 5251)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153 (65)</td>
<td>52 (22)</td>
<td>30 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>97 (42)</td>
<td>71 (30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
on one of the five issues. In the two conditions, the politician expressed a cross-partisan position pressed party-consistent positions on all five issues. In the other rights, and tax policy). In the war in Iraq, health care reform, warrantless wiretapping, abortion abortion (pro-choice) for the Republican, pro-life for the Democrat). This position was expressed a cross-partisan position on abortion (pro-choice)

evaluated more favorably by high than low importance participants, $F(1,166) = 5.59, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .03$.

**Study 3**

Study 2 showed that maverick politicians described in general terms were liked better than politicians who loyally adhered to the party line. This pattern held independent of the participant’s political affiliation, the importance of that affiliation, and whether the maverick was a member of the participant’s own or the opposing political party.

Study 3 examined whether political mavericks are similarly attractive when construed at the level of specific policy detail. It also compared morally based cross-partisan stands to those based on a pragmatic rationale of policy effectiveness. Moral convictions are particularly intolerant of opinion diversity (Stitika, Bauman, & Sargs, 2005). Our prediction was that politicians endorsing cross-partisan policy positions would only be attractive to members of an opposing political party, and that the tendency to disfavor mavericks of one’s own party would be more pronounced for moral than pragmatic mavericks.

**Method**

U.S. citizens visiting the website yourmorals.org ($N = 2597$) read excerpts from the campaign materials of a fictional politician running for the U.S. Senate. His party affiliation was varied (Republican or Democrat), as were his positions on five policy issues (the war in Iraq, health care reform, warrantless wiretapping, abortion rights, and tax policy). In the party-line condition, the politician expressed party-consistent positions on all five issues. In the other two conditions, the politician expressed a cross-partisan position on one of the five issues. In the moral maverick condition, the politician expressed a cross-partisan position on abortion (pro-choice for the Republican, pro-life for the Democrat). This position was explicitly identified as cross-partisan and framed as an issue of conscience (e.g., “I differ from my party on the issue of abortion... To me it is a moral issue...”). In the pragmatic maverick condition, the politician expressed a cross-partisan position on taxes (the Republican opposing tax cuts, the Democrat supporting tax cuts). Again, the cross-partisan nature of the position was identified, but in this case framed as a matter of effectiveness (e.g., “Ensuring that taxation is fair and effective is a serious endeavor, but we have to be smart about how we do it...”).

**Results and discussion**

A 2 (participant affiliation: Republican or Democrat) $\times$ 3 (party-consistency: party line, moral maverick, or pragmatic maverick) $\times$ 2 (affiliation match: same party or different party) ANOVA revealed a main effect of affiliation match (2.427) = 5106.12, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .68$) and an affiliation match $\times$ participant affiliation interaction (2.427) = 62.88, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$). All participants liked politicians of their own party best (2.75 vs. 2.07) and Democrats favored politicians from their own party slightly more than did Republicans.

Most importantly, unlike the pattern seen in Study 2, endorsing maverick policy positions did not lead to uniformly favorable impressions (see Fig. 2). A party-consistency $\times$ affiliation match interaction (2.427) = 82.24, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .06$) revealed that both moral and pragmatic mavericks belonging to the opposing political party were evaluated significantly more positively than their party-line counterpart ($p < .001$). In contrast, both mavericks from the participant’s own party were evaluated more negatively than the party-line politician ($p < .001$), with the moral maverick rated most negatively of all ($p < .001$).

Independents were examined separately and the only significant effect was a preference for the Democratic over the Republican politician ($M = 4.72$ vs. 2.91), $F(1,152) = 39.53, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .20$. Independents showed no preference for either maverick over the party-line politician. Finally, a supplementary analysis including affiliation importance as an additional independent variable revealed only one significant interaction involving affiliation importance: the tendency to favor politicians of one’s own party was more pronounced for individuals with high than low affiliation importance, $F(1,2420) = 28.05, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .01$.

**General discussion**

In his speech accepting the 2008 Republican party nomination for U.S. President, John McCain said, “I’ve been called a maverick; someone who marches to the beat of his own drum. Sometimes it’s meant as a compliment and sometimes it’s not.” Senator McCain’s characterization of people’s divergent reactions to political mavericks fits well with the data reported here.
Political mavericks were viewed favorably when construed in abstract terms (general attitude item in Study 1, Study 2). When cross-partisanship was framed to evoke desirable personality traits such as independence and personal integrity, maverick politicians were liked even when they were members of the participant’s own party. Voting one’s conscience was less uniformly admired, however, when lower level construal was encouraged, highlighting the potential for attitude disagreement (specific attitude item in Study 1, Study 3). When operationalized at the level of specific policy positions, evaluation of maverick politicians conformed to a classic similarity-attraction pattern: opposing party mavericks were viewed more positively than party-line politicians, but own party mavericks were evaluated more negatively than party-line politicians. Moreover, some evidence for a “moral black sheep” effect was found in that moral mavericks of the participant’s own party were viewed even less favorably than pragmatic mavericks. Given our use of only one historically controversial moral issue, however, future research must confirm this effect. On the positive side, our effects did generalize across political party and level of involvement in politics.

This research highlights the difficult strategic challenge faced by maverick politicians in a polarized, party-centric political culture like that in contemporary America. Disagreeing with one’s own party as a matter of conscience powerfully connotes trustworthiness, which in turn is a powerful determinant of impression formation, including political impressions (Todorov, 2008). The dilemma for a would-be maverick politician is to frame one’s campaign in a way that embraces this trustworthiness as a matter of personal character, while not also evoking specific maverick policy positions that undermine attractiveness within one’s own political base. When John McCain’s campaign manager, Rick Davis, famously stated that the 2008 Presidential election was “not about issues” but “about a composite view of what people take away from these candidates,” it was just this sort of framing he was striving to achieve. The studies reported here suggest that the electoral success of candidates like John McCain who seek to capitalize on a maverick image depends on how successfully their campaigns can keep the public focused on the generalities of character, while opponents strive to highlight specific policy issues.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data


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