



Are political statements only expressive? An experiment



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ABSTRACT

Many forms of political communication are thought to be expressive rather than instrumental. We present evidence suggesting the presence of a perceived instrumental benefit of individual political communication. Subjects may send a sometimes costly comment on another person's choice of how to donate to two rival political groups. Subjects who may comment before the choice is made – when they may have some persuasive impact – are more than twice as likely to comment as those who may only send a message after the decision. When the timing of the messages – pre- or post-decision – remains fixed, but the experimenter alone receives the message, there is no difference in the proportion of messages sent pre- and post-decision. Moreover, most of the comments made to the decision-maker prior to the decision use an imperative construction, while few do so after the decision is made or when writing to the experimenter alone. Taken together, these results indicate that political expression is *both* expressive and instrumental.

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1. Introduction

Political communication takes on many forms, from voting, attending public demonstrations, or donating to a campaign, to displaying a candidate's paraphernalia, writing a letter to the editor, or merely talking politics. What drives political communication? As the probability of decisively influencing outcomes is vanishingly small in these situations (Gelman et al., 2012), political communication is difficult to rationalize based upon material self-interest alone. One alternative explanation to an instrumental account – wherein communication is intended to influence the behavior of others – is that political communication is expressive (Brennan and Buchanan, 1984; Brennan and Lomasky, 1993; Fiorina, 1976; Hamlin and Jennings, 2011; Hillman, 2010; Schuessler, 2000). The pure expressive account of political behavior suggests that people communicate their political beliefs not to change the behavior of others – not to influence outcomes – but to affirm their political identity to others and themselves. To paraphrase Schuessler (2000, p. 54), political communication is expressively motivated if people engage in it not to affect politics, but to be the sort of person who participates in politics, whether formally or informally.

We argue that people undertake political behavior at the individual level for both expressive and instrumental reasons. Individuals engage in political expression in a genuine attempt to change others' thoughts and behaviors, not merely to affirm their ideological or partisan identity. We provide evidence for this claim in a novel lab experiment. In our experiment, a single decision-maker chooses how to divide an endowment between herself and two politically opposed interest groups

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on a specific issue (gun control). The remaining subjects have an opportunity to send a message to this decision-maker. In one treatment, subjects have the opportunity to send their message prior to the decision-maker's allocation. In the other, they choose whether to send their message after the decision-maker has chosen her allocation. As we induce no preferences for the commenters (or the decision maker) and all messages are the commenters' natural language, our experiment measures subjects' preference for political expression.

If political communication is purely expressive in its motivation, subjects send messages to affirm their political positions to themselves and others (the decision-maker). In this case, we would expect no difference in the percentage of subjects sending messages to the decision-maker between treatments. That is not what we observe. While 15% of subjects send a message after the decision-maker has acted – when only expressive motivation remains – 32% of subjects choose to do so prior to the decision-maker's allocation. This difference suggests an additional motive: the instrumental desire to influence the decision-maker's allocation. The difference we observe is not reduced when we control for subject characteristics such as ideology and the subject's position on the issue (gun control) as well as the cost of sending a message. Though much communication is expressive, a substantial fraction of it is driven by (perceived) instrumentality.

We confirm our interpretation of the difference between pre- and post-decision communication with an additional treatment, identical to the first except that commenting subjects send their message to the experimenter rather than the decision-maker. If a motivation other than influencing the decision-maker's choice drove the difference between treatments above, we would expect to see the same behavior when the experimenter receives the message. This is not what we find. About 17% of subjects in the pre-decision treatment send a message to the experimenter, while 10% send a message to the experimenter after the decision. These proportions are not different from one another, nor from the post-decision treatment when commenters sent messages to the decision-maker.

Furthermore, if expression were the predominant motivation across treatments, then we would not expect to see a difference in the content of the messages across treatments when commenters could message the decision-maker. In fact, a majority of commenters (58%) suggested or recommended a course of action – that is, were imperative in tone – when the decision-maker was the recipient and had yet to allocate the funds. Only 10% of comments sent to the decision-maker after the outcome were imperative; the difference is strongly significant. The fraction of comments sent to the experimenter that use the imperative cannot be distinguished from zero. The perceived opportunity to be instrumental – the chance to persuade someone – not only results in more comments, but more actual attempts at persuasion. Finally, we vary the cost sending messages within both treatments. We find that a positive cost significantly decreases subjects' propensity to comment, indicating that expressive motivations, like instrumental concerns, respond to some degree to differences in cost.

Our experiment contributes to the research on expressive behavior. In their thorough survey on expressive behavior, [Hamlin and Jennings \(2011\)](#) note an empirical focus on the topic of voting, but relatively little work on other forms of communication. Our examination of political communication is nevertheless closely related to several recent experiments on voting ([Feddersen et al., 2009](#); [Kamenica and Egan Brad, 2012](#); [Shayo and Harel, 2012](#); [Tyran, 2004](#)). Consistent with evidence in favor of the expressive model of voting ([Feddersen et al., 2009](#); [Shayo and Harel, 2012](#)), we find that there are subjects who send messages even when they cannot be instrumental, and that subjects' comments are less imperative when they have no opportunity to influence the outcome.

Our results also feed into a larger experimental literature on the effect of communication both generally and in strategic games. Our evidence on the importance of instrumentality is clearly consistent with the powerful effect communication – even one-way communication – has on behavior in cooperative and non-cooperative environments (e.g., [Andreoni and Rao, 2011](#); [Cason and Mui, 2013](#); [Farrell and Rabin, 1996](#); [Ismayilov and Potters, 2012](#); [Issac and Walker, 1988](#); [Servátka et al., 2011](#)). For instance, the opportunity to use costless messages post-decision has been shown to serve as a means of reward or punishment ([Ellingsen and Johannesson, 2008](#); [Xiao and Houser, 2009](#)). That we also find subjects choosing to send costly messages when they cannot affect others' behavior underscores the value of voice even when it cannot directly affect outcomes ([Xiao and Houser, 2005](#); [Ong et al., 2012](#); [Grosskopf and Lopez-Vargas, 2013](#)). Our experiment bears some resemblance to a cheap-talk game ([Crawford and Sobel, 1982](#); [Crawford, 1998](#)), though unlike recent extensions of that environment (e.g., [Agranov and Schotter, forthcoming](#)) our commenters do not have information that is necessarily of use to the decision-maker.¹

Our paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 discusses the literature on expressive behavior. Section 3 explains our research design and procedures, and Section 4 our hypotheses. Section 5 contains our results. Section 6 concludes.

2. Related literature

Empirical examination of expressive political behavior has focused primarily on voting.

In a survey of British voters following the 1997 general election, [Jones and Hudson \(2000\)](#) use voter's perceived difference between the parties as a proxy for expressive preferences. Contrary to expressive voting, the authors find no relationship between perceived difference and turnout. [Kan and Yang \(2001\)](#), using data from the 1988 U.S. presidential election, find

¹ The paper is also weakly connected to the literature on persuasion (see [DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2009](#), for a selective review). While extensions of this environment would be useful to study political persuasion, our experiment examines the motivations to communicate – including instrumental persuasion – by varying the timing of communication, and not the effect on the recipients' actions – the usual focus of the persuasion literature.

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