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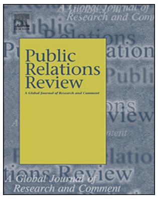

Representations of reliability: The rhetoric of political flip-flopping

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ABSTRACT

This study used a qualitative analysis of political flip-flops ($N = 141$) to create a typology of rhetorical strategies for politicians who are perceived to have changed positions on political issues. The core purpose of such rhetoric is to achieve a *representation of reliability*. Politicians who appear to change positions must do so in a way that does not make them seem unreliable to their key stakeholders. Strategies for achieving this goal fall into four primary categories: ignore, deny, justify, and repent. Within each category are more specific tactics, such as evading questions, claiming one was misquoted, arguing one is adapting to new circumstances, or explaining that one has acquired new information about an issue. Using Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation, we argue that certain strategies are more appropriate than others in certain situations. We discuss the practical and ethical implications of these strategies.

1. Introduction

Political observers of a certain age remember John Kerry's famous words during the 2004 presidential election: "*I actually did vote for the 87 billion, before I voted against it.*" Senator Kerry was trying to explain his vote against an $87 billion appropriation for U.S. troops in Iraq, but President George W. Bush used the quotation in a campaign advertisement to paint Kerry as a flip-flopper. Branding Kerry as someone who constantly changed positions for political expediency was an effective strategy in the Bush reelection campaign (Schulman, 2007).

More recently, politicians like Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain have come under scrutiny for changing their positions on key political questions. During election campaigns, it is especially popular for candidates to accuse their opponents of being inconsistent, and by implication, untrustworthy. Lempert (2009) observed that politicians must appear to be people of conviction, while at the same time being responsive to changes in public opinion.

From a public relations perspective, managing political flop-flops involves issues management as well as reputation management. This study focuses specifically on developing a typology of rhetorical strategies for addressing flip-flops or allegations of flip-flops. This typology is useful for scholars analyzing the effectiveness and appropriateness of such political statements. It is also helpful to spokespeople and other public relations practitioners when planning for such situations. After all, in a democratic society, politicians must persuade constituents to support them if they hope to be successful.

This study uses a qualitative analysis of 141 political flip-flops to develop a typology of rhetorical strategies. We begin by reviewing key concepts that inform the way flip-flops ought to be managed. Next, we describe the study's methodology. Finally, we propose a typology of strategies and discuss theoretical and practical implications.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Understanding flip-flops

A political flip-flop is a “sudden reversal of opinion or policy by a politician, usually running for office” (Goddard, n.d.). Liason (2008) described flip-flops as “the political u-turns that candidates make when they need to change their positions” (para. 1). One political pollster suggested in 2004 that the term had come to mean “the antithesis of leadership” (Cave, 2004, para. 2).

Flip-flops occur for various reasons. New information or changing circumstances may lead to a new position. Sometimes candidates have “simply [grown] older and wiser and rethought their positions” (Schulman, 2007, para. 7). However, many flip-flops are seen as nothing but political opportunism. For example, candidates may take more extreme positions to please their base during primary elections, and then moderate their stances to attract swing voters during general elections (Sullivan & Johnson, 2015). Some politicians also support a particular policy when their party is in power, but then oppose that policy when their party is out of power.

Psychological research indicates that Americans are more comfortable with politicians changing positions on *policy* than on *moral* stances (Kreps, Laurin, & Merritt, 2017). In fact, leaders who change their moral positions are considered more hypocritical, less effective, and less worthy of support.[1] It is not surprising, then, that so many candidates try to frame their opponents as flip-floppers (Glantz, 2010). Furthermore, it is important for politicians who do change positions to explain the change in a way that does not suggest a lack of moral values.

2.2. Flip-flopping and public relations

Public relations plays an important role in politics. Public information officers and spokespeople serve government agencies and officials. Campaigns often rely on public relations professionals to perform key functions like writing speeches, crafting advertisements, organizing events, monitoring social media, and overseeing media relations. There are two areas of public relations that are especially relevant to the study of flip-flopping: issues management and reputation management.

2.2.1. Issues management

Although issues management is normally described as managing issues *on behalf of an organization*, the core principles also apply to political campaigns or administrations. Issues management is “the process of anticipating, identifying, evaluating, and responding to issues and trends that potentially affect an organization’s relationships with its publics” (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 15). By its nature, issues management elevates public relations from a purely communication function to a strategic planning function (Tucker, Broom, & Caywood, 1993).

From a rhetorical perspective, an issue is defined as “a contestable matter of fact, value, or policy” (Heath, 2008, p. 11). When organizations (or politicians) disagree with key stakeholders about facts, values, or policies, stakeholders may be upset and a social legitimacy gap may be created. According to Heath:

> The challenge is for each organization to be viewed as legitimate in its understanding of the situation in which it operates, the formulation of plans to accomplish its mission, and the crafting and accommodating means to implement plans to achieve that future. (2008, p. 8)

Effective issues management requires public relations professionals to monitor the environment and identify potential issues *before* they become problems (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). The client has time, then, to plan an appropriate response to any disagreements, to be educated about the situation before taking a firm stance, or to begin dialoguing with key stakeholders to find a mutually beneficial solution.

Sometimes the issues management process will lead clients to change certain positions. When the clients are politicians, voters may perceive these changes as flip-flops (or political opponents may portray them as such). At other times, failure to manage issues proactively may result in politicians taking positions that are out of touch with stakeholders’ values. If any of these situations are mismanaged, they can lead to reputational challenges or even crises for politicians.

2.2.2. Reputation management

Reputation is “the track record of an organization in the public’s mind” (Wilcox, Cameron, & Reber, 2015, p. 270). Back in 1999, Hutton warned, “The rise of terms such as ‘reputation management,’ ‘perception management,’ and ‘image management’ appears to be an ominous trend for the field, partly because they have come into favor for most of the wrong reasons” (p. 202). Hutton was rightfully concerned about businesses trying to substitute superficial public relations efforts for actual performance. However, responsible CEOs understand that public relations communication “can only enhance what is already there and cannot substitute for great services and products” (Murray & White, 2005, p. 350).

In an organizational context, reputation management cannot take the place of serving stakeholders well. If companies have poor track records, public relations cannot trick stakeholders into thinking those companies are successful and reliable. As indicated already, issues management requires public relations professionals to help organizations listen to the concerns of their stakeholders, make strategic plans for addressing those concerns, and then communicate the organizations' intentions and actions to stakeholders. In terms of reputation management, this may involve reporting on an organization's goods deeds in the community (i.e., corporate social responsibility), expressing its values and vision for the future, or helping it manage risks and crises.

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[1] We question whether all position changes can be neatly categorized as *either* policy shifts *or* moral shifts; there may be significant overlap, sometimes. Nevertheless, what matters is how politicians and the media *frame* these changes, and how voters *perceive* them. A flip-flop that appears to be a moral shift is likely to threaten a politician’s reputation more than a flip-flop that appears to be merely a policy shift.

Indeed, much of the crisis communication literature focuses on helping repair the reputations of organizations or public figures (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007). Benoit's (2015) Image Repair Theory offers a typology of five strategies for managing one's reputation following an offensive act: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (i.e., apologizing). Coombs' (2015) Situational Crisis Communication Theory uses stakeholder attributions of blame to determine which organizational responses will be most effective at reputation management in a crisis. For example, when a company is the victim of false rumors, a posture of denial is appropriate. However, when a company is at fault it needs to adopt a rebuilding posture (e.g., apologizing or compensating victims).

Politicians must manage their reputations strategically, too. Slick PR may trick voters in the short term, but in the long term a politician's track record is clear. Ethical and effective reputation management for politicians involves listening first, followed by communicating ideas and accomplishments to voters or journalists. Politicians who change their positions on key issues must account for these changes in a way that preserves their reputations. If they cannot, they may face reputational crises.

Naturally, politicians make mistakes. In these situations, admitting the mistake is typically the most strategic and ethical course of action. However, there are other times when one's political opponents make unfair attacks, or when journalists misreport situations. In such cases, politicians are right to defend themselves against charges of flip-flopping.

2.3. The role of rhetoric in addressing flip-flops

If public relations professionals are going to help their clients explain flip-flops (real or alleged), they must understand their rhetorical options. Aristotle famously defined rhetoric as a "faculty of considering all the possible means of persuasion on every subject" (Aristotle, 1851/1995, p. 11Aristotle, 1851Aristotle, 1851/1995, p. 11). Although we often think of rhetoric in terms of words, it may include "any discourse, art form, performance, cultural object, or event that—by symbolic and/or material means—has the capacity to move someone" (Ott & Dickinson, 2013, p. 2).

As Bitzer (1968) explained, some situations are *rhetorical*, in the sense that they invite "discourse capable of participating with [the] situation and thereby altering its reality" (p. 6). A rhetorical situation involves (1) an exigence (i.e., problem) that can be affected by communicating with people; (2) an audience that can be influenced to do something about the exigence; and (3) constraints, such as facts, attitudes, traditions, motives, etc., that limit the options in that situation.

In the case of a perceived flip-flop, there is the exigence of a politician appearing hypocritical or untrustworthy. If the politician can persuade audience members (e.g., voters, donors, journalists) there was no flip-flop, or the flip-flop was justified, it may be possible to protect or repair the politician's reputation. However, there are many potential constraints on the situation. Politicians need to be seen as people of conviction and moral character, while simultaneously responding to shifts in circumstances or public opinion. They must consider the possibility that political enemies are seeking to discredit them, and they must realize their options are limited by past statements. In particular, their options are limited by whether or not they have actually flip-flopped.

Identifying the rhetorical strategies available in such situations is an important part of public relations scholarship. As mentioned already, one of the most influential crisis communication theories, Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997), arose out of efforts to create a typology of image repair strategies. The present study is far more modest, but seeks to extend this tradition of rhetorical theorizing in public relations research. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question:

> **RQ:** What rhetorical strategies are available for politicians who are perceived to have flip-flopped on an issue and want to preserve their reputation for reliability?

3. Methodology

This study draws upon the classic grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton & Walsh, 2017). Grounded theory seeks "to discover and conceptually explain a main concern in a substantive area of inquiry and how that concern is addressed or resolved" (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 51). In this study, the main concern is how politicians account for a change of position without losing credibility. Through qualitative data coding and memoing, the grounded theory approach allows theory to emerge from data. This approach is primarily descriptive. In some respects, it harkens back to Aristotle's approach in his *Treatise on Rhetoric*, which Kennedy (1994) has described as "largely an objective, nonjudgmental analysis of the forms that rhetoric took in his time" (p. 56). The process of data collection and analysis is described below.

3.1. Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from the website Politifact.com. Politifact is a fact-checking website set up by the *Tampa Bay Times* in 2007 (Sharockman, 2011). The Poynter Institute acquired it in 2018.

PolitiFact is known for its Truth-O-Meter, which rates the accuracy of politicians' public statements. In 2008, the website added the Flip-O-Meter, which determines whether a public official has been consistent on an issue over time. Statements judged to be consistent are rated *No Flip*, statements deemed a partial change of position are rated *Half Flip*, and statements considered a complete

Table 1
Strategies and tactics for representing reliabilty.

Categories/ Strategies	Subcategories/ Tactics	Key Characteristic
Ignore	Announce a new position **without addressing** an old position **Evade questions** about a flip-flop	Does not acknowledge a change in position (or an allegation of a change)
Deny	**Deny statements** attributed to oneself (includes selective self-quoting) Dispute the **meaning** of statements one has made	Argues that no flip-flop has occurred because previous positions have been misrepresented or misunderstood
Justify	Frame new position as adaptation to **new facts or circumstances** Explain that **new information, personal experience, or perspective** was gained Argue that an earlier statement was merely **good manners** Claim that one is **settling** for the best deal available	Argues that a flip-flop is necessary to uphold an important value (thus, not a sign of hypocrisy or inconsistency)
Repent	Admit one was **wrong** before	Does not try to defend or deny a previous position. Repudiates previous position as a mistake.

change of position are rated *Full Flop*. The Flip-O-Meter does not make a value judgment on whether politicians had legitimate reasons for changing positions.

Between August 2008 and January 2018, PolitiFact rated 141 statements by various politicians as full flops. The journalists at PolitiFact provided a write-up of each situation and included quotations from the politicians, if available. We analyzed all 141 of these cases. This was not a census of all political flip-flops from 2008 to 2018; rather, it was a theoretical sample that provided enough cases for us to achieve theoretical saturation. By the end of the analysis, new concepts were no longer emerging from new data.

3.2. *Analysis*

We did not concern ourselves with determining whether PolitiFact's full-flop rulings were correct. Our goal was to understand how politicians responded when they were *perceived* to have flip-flopped. Our analysis began with substantive coding. Substantive coding involves (1) open coding of the data to identify as many concepts as possible, followed by (2) selective coding, which focuses on a core category and related concepts to address the main concern of the study (Holton & Walsh, 2017). During this stage, we wrote numerous memos about the concepts and categories that were emerging from the data.

The next stage in our analysis was theoretical coding. This stage involves the constant comparison of new cases to old ones, as well as to concepts and categories identified in the previous stage (Holton & Walsh, 2017). We continued memoing through the theoretical coding stage, refining our core category and concepts until we reached theoretical saturation.

We identified *representing reliability* as the core concept in our study. The core concept explains how the main concern of a study "is managed, processed, or resolved" (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 88). The core concept can take various forms, such as a process, a cycle, a continuum, or a typology. In this study, *representing reliability* is a typology of rhetorical strategies with four main categories and eight subcategories (see Table 1). These findings are explained in the next section.

4. Findings

Politicians who change positions need a way to explain these changes without appearing to compromise their core values. The main concern of this study, as expressed in the research question, is what rhetorical strategies are available for politicians who are perceived to have flip-flopped on an issue and who want to preserve a reputation for reliability. In the 141 cases we analyzed, the core category, or theme, of the responses was a desire to *represent reliability*. We use the term "represent" to highlight the fact that politicians seem to care more about being perceived as reliable than about actually being reliable. Just as Aristotle's concept of *ethos* refers "only the appearance, not necessarily the reality, of noble character" (Marsh, 2013, p. 56), so representations may be accurate, or they may not be. Their purpose, however, is the same—to convince key stakeholders that the politician is not unprincipled or hypocritical.

As seen in Table 1, there are four main strategies for handling flip-flops. Politicians may ignore their flip-flops, deny that they have flip-flopped, justify their flip-flops, or repent of their old positions. Not every strategy is appropriate for every situation. Rather, the constraints of each rhetorical situation will dictate which rhetorical options are most likely to be effective and to represent reliability to stakeholders (see Fig. 1).

4.1. *Ignore the flip-flop*

One option when a politician changes positions is to simply announce the new position without acknowledging any change occurred. Ignoring the flip-flop may allow the politician to avoid awkward questions about it, if the issue has low salience for key

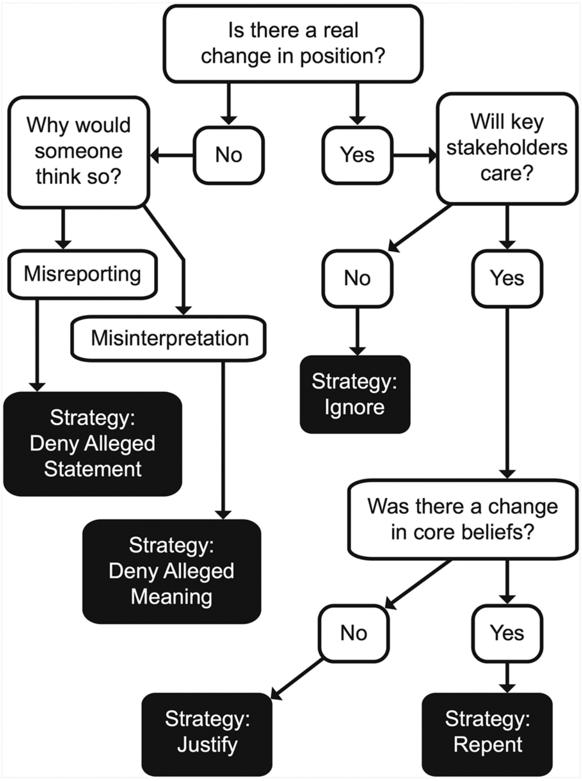
Is there a real change in position?
No
Yes
Why would someone think so?
Will key stakeholders care?
Misreporting
Misinterpretation
No
Yes
Strategy: Ignore
Strategy: Deny Alleged Statement
Strategy: Deny Alleged Meaning
Was there a change in core beliefs?
No
Yes
Strategy: Justify
Strategy: Repent

Fig. 1. How to select the appropriate rhetorical strategy for representing reliabilty after a political flip-flop or accusation of a flip-flop.

stakeholders. For example, during the 2008 presidential campaign Barack Obama criticized John McCain for proposing a commission to study the recent financial crisis on Wall Street. “A commission,” Obama said, “That’s Washington-speak for we’ll—we’ll get back to you later” (Jacobson, 2010, para. 2). However, after his election, President Obama created commissions to deal with the BP oil spill, the national debt, nuclear energy, and bioethics. PolitiFact reported that the White House declined to comment on its story. It may be that most voters had little interest in the issue of government commissions, and even Obama’s political opponents were not motivated to attack him over it. Thus, ignoring the apparent inconsistency was a viable strategy.

Another situation in which politicians may be able to ignore their flip-flops is when only their partisan opponents are concerned with the flip-flop, or when the flip-flop has become commonplace in Washington. Between 2013 and 2018, for example, Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, and Harry Reid, the Senate Democratic leader, both changed their positions on filibustering judicial nominees. When Democrats controlled the Senate, Reid supported eliminating the filibuster (to allow Democrats to confirm their judges) and McConnell opposed it. Later, when Republicans controlled the Senate, McConnell supported the elimination of the filibuster and Reid opposed it. PolitiFact found that both men performed full-flops, but neither senator attempted to justification the change. The mostly likely explanation for the change seems to be naked partisanship; however, because most Republicans and Democrats were guilty of the same thing, and because each party’s base supported its actions, there was little reason to address these flip-flops directly.

If politicians try to ignore their flip-flops, they run the risk of looking foolish when someone questions them on the subject. We found several cases in which politicians announced new positions and did not explain how they had arrived at them until journalists or voters challenged them on the change. A few politicians tried to continue ignoring the issue by dodging the questions or giving non-responsive answers. Most attempted to deny or justify their flip-flops. We believe a more effective and ethical strategy in these situations is to announce the reason for the change up front. Failure to do so may insult the intelligence of key stakeholders.

4.2. Deny the flip-flop

In many cases, we found that politicians who were accused of flip-flopping simply denied it (n = 34). In some situations they denied making the statements attributed to them. In other situations they disputed the meaning of those statements.

The most obvious way for politicians to deny what they have said is to claim they were misquoted. This strategy is risky, however, if anyone has a recording of the comments. It is also potentially harmful to relationships with journalists.

We found that another common way politicians disputed what they had said before was *selective self-quoting*. For example, during the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump said, “Boy, I love reading those WikiLeaks!” (Jacobson, 2017, para. 1). WikiLeaks had released private emails stolen from the Democratic National Committee, as well as classified information on various topics. Trump also called on Russia to find and release emails deleted from Hillary Clinton's private server. However, after he took office in early 2017, President Trump began complaining about leaks from the intelligence community and criticizing newspapers for printing them. At a news conference, Trump argued that the leaks harming his administration were of classified information, and what he had previously endorsed was the leaking of unclassified (albeit, embarrassing) information. While it was true that Trump's earlier statements did endorse leaking unclassified information, they also endorsed an organization widely known for leaking classified documents. By selectively self-quoting, Trump sought to deny the facts of what he had said.

In a world where nothing on the Internet is every truly deleted, and where smartphone cameras capture so much, it is usually hard for politicians to credibly deny something they have said before. However, they still have the option of disputing the *meaning* of what they said. They can do this by carefully parsing the words they used, by claiming they misspoke (i.e., did not intend to say what they said), or by arguing that they did not intend for their words to be taken literally. For example, during his 2010 campaign for Congress, Bill Flores of Texas suggested he would consider raising the retirement age for Social Security recipients, but later claimed he had a headache and misspoke (O'Rourke, 2010). In 2011, Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown told people at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon he would vote for the Republican budget proposal, but it would fail anyway. He later announced he would vote *against* the bill. He claimed his earlier comments were meant to be about the political games being played in Washington, not "the merits of the bill" (Jacobson, 2011, para. 11).

A good example of denying a flip-flop by parsing language came from Georgia Governor Nathan Deal. When he ran for office, Deal signed a pledge not to raise taxes. Later, however, he urged voters to approve a 1% sales tax increase. In denying any violation of the pledge, Deal's spokesman said, "This passed before he was governor. He is advocating for Georgians to approve it, not imposing it on them" (Stirgus, 2012, para. 24).

Whether denials are likely to be effective depends on the constraints of the rhetorical situation. If there is clear evidence of a politician saying something, denying it will just look dishonest. Similarly, if the meaning of the original statement was clear, it will not work to twist it to mean something different. Given that politicians need to be perceived as people of conviction and moral character (Kreps et al., 2017; Lempert, 2009), it is more strategic (and more ethical) in such cases to explain or justify the shift in position than to deny it.

4.3. Justify the flip-flop

Out of 141 political flip-flops we analyzed, 57 involved some attempt to justify the change in position. Justification is a way of arguing that, although a specific position may have changed, one's underlying principles remain the same. In other words, the change was necessary in order to uphold one's values.

Some justifications were implicit, such as Hillary Clinton's justification for her changing position on same-sex marriage. Clinton recorded a video for the Human Rights Campaign in which she said the following:

> Traveling the world these past four years, reaffirmed and deepened my pride in our country and in the ideals we stand for. It also inspired and challenged me to think anew about who we are and the values we represent to the world. Now having left public office, I want to share some of what I've learned and what I've come to believe. (Human Rights Campaign, 2013)

Clinton never acknowledged her previous statements opposing same-sex marriage. For constituents who were not familiar with her past position, this strategy may have kept them from perceiving any flip-flop at all. However, for those who were familiar with her previous position, her references to "traveling the world," "being challenged to think anew," and her desire to share what she had "come to believe" implied that she had undergone a learning process that changed her mind.

By contrast, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker was much more explicit in 2015 when he changed his position on giving illegal immigrants a path to citizenship. During a Fox News interview he stated, "My view has changed. I'm flat out saying it. I'm—candidates can say that" (Umhoefer, 2015, para. 14). This strategy may have been affected by the fact that Walker was engaged in an interview, and the interviewer was pressing him to explain his shift. Clinton, on the other hand, announced her support of same-sex marriage in a pre-recorded video, so there was no one to challenge her on any apparent contradictions.

Generally, flip-flop justifications fell into two categories. Some justifications were based on the need to adapt to changing facts or circumstances. Other justifications were based on gaining new information or a new perspective on an issue. In all cases, justifications were based on the idea that upholding higher values required a change or compromise on certain specific issues.

Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli provides an example of justification by adaptation to changing facts. In 2013, he argued in favor of allowing nonviolent felons to vote in Virginia. Opponents accused him of flip-flopping because he previously voted against restoring felons' voting rights multiple times as a state senator. Cuccinelli explained that his position changed, in part, because of "what he called 'felony creep'—the trend of state politicians passing laws that elevate to felonies non-violent crimes that should remain as misdemeanors" (Gorman, 2013, para. 11). Cuccinelli admitted he changed his position, but he pointed to external factors to show that he was adapting to a new situation rather than abandoning his core beliefs.

Another Virginian, Governor Tim Kaine, also changed positions, but he justified his change on the basis of new information. For years Kaine supported offshore oil drilling along Virginia's Atlantic coast. When he was selected as Hillary Clinton's running mate in 2016, however, he changed his mind. Kaine's spokeswoman explained:

> As a member of the Armed Services Committee, Sen. Kaine met with DoD (Department of Defense) officials to further discuss the impact that oil drilling would have on our military operations in Hampton Roads, and concluded we should not be undertaking speculative drilling activities that could potentially impact installations in the region (Gorman, 2016, para. 24).

Perhaps Kaine was also motivated by a desire to align his position with that of Hillary Clinton, who opposed offshore drilling. However, using that justification might have made him look like a political opportunist. By citing new information he learned from the Department of Defense, he sought to avoid that appearance.

Similar justifications include changes based on a personal experience (e.g., death of a loved one) or personal growth (e.g., getting older and wiser). Such justifications are based, not necessarily on new facts, but on new perspectives on those facts.

Before moving on, we should note two other examples of justification. When Mitt Romney ran for President in 2012, he was endorsed by Donald Trump and praised Trump's record as a businessman (Jacobson, 2016). However, when Trump ran for president in 2016, Romney strongly opposed him and argued that Trump was not a good businessman. Pressed about the contradiction on NBC's *Meet the Press*, Romney attributed his 2012 comments to good manners:

> You know, he's made a lot of money for himself, and I'm gracious enough in a setting where someone has endorsed me to point out that he's been successful and made a lot of money—he has a lot of hotels and so forth. But you can't also ignore the fact that he's had a lot of failures. (Jacobson, 2016, para. 9)

In essence, Romney argued that his 2012 comments were not entirely accurate, but he implied that it was appropriate to make them in the interests of being gracious.

Another way to justify a flip-flop is to argue that one is settling for the best available option, even though that option is not what one really wants. In 2001 and 2003, Senator John McCain voted against tax cuts proposed by President George W. Bush. However, McCain supported a renewal of those tax cuts in 2006. In 2007, he told Fox News he had always wanted a bill that would cut spending as well as taxes, but now he wanted to keep the tax cuts because repealing them would amount to a tax increase (Holan, 2008). We classify this as a case of justification by *settling*.

In summary, justification may be an effective strategy for explaining a flip-flop if one can offer a plausible account about how circumstances forced a change in position or how personal growth led to a change. However, justification does not involve admitting mistakes. That strategy is considered next.

4.4. *Repent of the original position*

In a religious context, repentance is used to describe a turning away from wrongdoing. In the context of political flip-flops, we use the term to describe how politicians turn away from previous statements they can neither deny nor justify. Repentance, here, means admitting one was previously wrong in order to explain why one is taking a new position. It is similar, in some ways, to Benoit's (2015) concept of mortification. Both mortification and repentance require an acknowledgement that one was wrong. However, mortification (ideally) involves apologizing and seeking forgiveness for hurting others. Repentance, as we are using it, does not necessarily require that others have been hurt, simply that a politician admits to being wrong and rejects a previous position. We did not find examples of Benoit's mortification in our analysis, but we did find 12 cases of repentance.

Repentance seems to be appropriate when a flip-flop is either very significant or (oddly enough) very insignificant. First, we offer an example of an insignificant flip-flop. In 2011, the Virginia House and Senate were embroiled in a debate over redistricting. Republicans controlled the House and had drawn new districts to increase their majority. Democrats controlled the Senate and had done the same. After the governor vetoed the redistricting bill, Republicans offered to make changes to their plan, but Dick Saslaw, the leader of the Senate Democrats, declared, "We are not going to change one period or comma" (Hester, 2011, para. 5). Later, when a compromise was reached, Saslaw was quoted as saying, "I lied…It was an unrealistic choice of words…both sides gave a little" (para. 8). Given the hyperbolic nature of Saslaw's initial comment, no one would take it seriously. Thus, he was free to acknowledge that the statement was not true after a deal was achieved.

A good example of a more serious change is Senator Harry Reid's shift on the issue of birthright citizenship. In 1993, Reid introduced legislation that would revoke birthright citizenship for the children of illegal immigrants. The bill did not pass, and he admitted it was a mistake several years later. In 1999, he called it "way up high…on his list of mistakes," and, in 2006, he described it as a "travesty that [he] called legislation" (Pleva, 2010, para. 9). As a sponsor of the original bill, Reid clearly understood that he would need to take dramatic action if he wanted to distance himself from that particular policy. The embarrassment of admitting a mistake was more manageable than the embarrassment of being linked to the old policy.

In summary, repentance appears to be the best rhetorical option when one's previous position cannot be denied or defended. By repenting of an unpopular or mistaken position, politicians can try to move forward with their agendas and leave embarrassing mistakes in the past. This process is easier, no doubt, when one's key stakeholders support the *new* position rather than the old one.

5. Discussion

This study identified several rhetorical strategies to help politicians represent themselves as reliable in the face of their flip-flops. In this section we suggest several implications of the findings.

5.1. *Suggestions for practitioners*

When public relations practitioners are working with political clients, one of the highest priorities is to help with issues management. By identifying potential issues before they come to a head, practitioners may help clients avoid embarrassing flip-flops later. However, when flip-flops do occur, it is important to help clients explain those flip-flops to their stakeholders.

For minor issues—that is, issues of low salience to key stakeholders—ignoring flip-flops may be acceptable. However, once people begin asking questions about the flip-flop, we think continuing to ignore the issue will make a politician look evasive and untrustworthy. Therefore, even if ignoring the flip-flop is the plan, we suggest preparing a justification for anyone who asks.

If one is falsely accused of flip-flopping, denial is perfectly appropriate. Sometimes politicians are misunderstood, and they have a right to push back against unfair readings of their statements. Parsing, or clarifying previous statements may demonstrate that newer statements do, in fact, line up with older statements. On the other hand, denying a statement should only be done if one honestly did not make it. Modern technology makes it far too easy to prove politicians wrong when they lie about something they previously said. Not only is lying about previous statements unethical, it is a poor strategy for managing one's reputation because it makes one look evasive and untrustworthy.

When circumstances change, or when one's understanding of an issue changes through new information, experience, or personal growth, it is reasonable to justify a flip-flop. Justifications seek to demonstrate that one's principles remain consistent even as the application of those principles adapts to better fit the present situation. In some cases, justification can seek to show that one value has been compromised to accommodate another value (e.g., good manners).

Finally, when politicians make mistakes or have genuine changes of heart, public relations practitioners should encourage them to be transparent. We believe repenting of mistakes is both ethical and strategic because politicians will appear more authentic if they do not try to advocate positions they do not genuinely support.

We realize some politicians might try to use the strategies we have identified to make *false representations* to their stakeholders (i.e., to deceive or manipulate). We caution against that. Not only is it dishonest to give reasons for a flip-flop that are untrue, it is probably only a short-term solution to managing one's reputation. Voters often sense when politicians are inauthentic. Furthermore, in the polarizing world of politics, one's partisan opponents will pounce on any inconsistency, label it as a sign of hypocrisy, and seek to magnify it. The safest course of action is transparency.

5.2. Suggestions for scholars

Going forward, public relations scholars can extend this typology to organizational flip-flops. The partisan nature of politics may affect the rhetorical options politicians have when they change positions. Business leaders or organizations may have different rhetorical options because their rhetorical situations are different.

We also want to acknowledge that the practical suggestions we offered are theoretical at this point. Future research could use experimental methods to test people's reactions to different flip-flop messages. In-depth interviews could also be used to solicit practitioner feedback on this typology and other strategies for addressing flip-flops.

5.3. Limitations

The chief limitation of this study is that the 141 flip-flops analyzed were not collected directly by the authors, but by the journalists at Politifact. In other words, we analyzed others' representations of these flip-flops. This decision was based on the desire to have an objective list of political flip-flops from a respected source, but it does raise the possibility that certain details from the original cases were lost or overlooked in our analysis.

6. Conclusion

Sometimes issues management can help politicians avoid flip-flops, but when it does not, rhetorical strategies must be used to protect a politician's reputation. Our typology for representing reliability is an important step in making this process more systematic and theoretically guided. Politicians should remember, however, that rhetorical strategies work best when they illuminate rather than conceal. Politicians should not use rhetoric to pretend they have good reasons for changing their minds when they are actually motivated only by political opportunism. Politicians should seek to use rhetoric to convey to their stakeholders what is truly in their minds and hearts.

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