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Can Grammar Win Elections?

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*The wording of political messages is known to affect voting behavior, including judgments about whether or not candidates will be elected. Yet the question remains whether voting behavior can be influenced by fine-grained grammatical details of political messages. In this paper, two studies examined how subtly different grammatical forms in descriptions of political candidates' past actions can affect attitudes about electability. Specifically, participants read about a senator who was seeking reelection and then indicated whether they thought the politician would be reelected. In Study 1, the senator had done either negative or positive actions, and these were described using imperfective (*was *VERB* + ing*) or perfective (VERB* + ed*) aspect. In Study 2, the senator had done a negative and a positive action, one of which was described using imperfective and the other with perfective aspect. Results revealed that imperfective descriptions of negative actions resulted in greater confidence that the candidate would not be reelected. Imperfective descriptions also led people to think that the candidate had done more negative action. When a negative and positive action were described together, grammar again influenced electability such that people reasoned in line with whatever action was highlighted by imperfective aspect. In both studies, subtle differences in grammar influenced whether people thought a political candidate would be reelected. These findings provide novel insights about how language can shape thought in the political realm.*

KEY WORDS: Political communication, Framing, Psycholinguistics, Grammar, Voting

Millions of dollars are spent on campaign ads each year. Yet surprisingly little is known about how the linguistic details in these messages influence people's attitudes about political candidates and whether they will be elected. Here we offer new results to show that altering grammatical information can lead to different opinions about electability.

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We know that the linguistic content of political messages can influence attitudes about candidates running for office (e.g., Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). People base their voting decisions on criteria emphasized by news coverage (e.g., Druckman, 2004; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), and their votes can be biased by the editorial slant of the newspaper they read (e.g., Druckman & Parkin, 2005). People reject incumbent candidates if times are portrayed as bad (e.g., Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). They turn away from candidates or vote for no one if presented with an excess of negative language (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Garramone, 1984). Their candidate preferences are more entrenched when opposition is emphasized (e.g., Bizer & Petty, 2005). They reject candidates who contradict their metaphorical conceptions of politics and government (e.g., Lakoff, 1996). What we do *not* know is how the finer-grained linguistic details in political messages influence voters. Can grammatical information affect attitudes about candidates and whether they are electable, and if so, how?

In English and many other languages, information about the temporal organization of events is provided by aspectual markers that accompany verbs. For past events, imperfective aspectual markers (*was* VERB + *ing*) emphasize the ongoing nature of actions, and perfective aspectual markers (VERB + *ed*) emphasize the completion or end state of actions (e.g., Comrie, 1976; Frawley, 1992; Madden & Zwaan, 2003; Magliano & Schleich, 2000). These grammatical markers can influence how people think about past events, especially the way they unfold in time. In interpreting imperfective descriptions of past events, people take an internal perspective (e.g., Ferretti & Katz, 2010). In interpreting descriptions of motion events, for example, people tend to situate a character who is moving along a trajectory toward a destination in the middle range of a trajectory with imperfective information (Morrow, 1985, 1990). Also, details such as the individuals, objects, and locations of the events are more accessible after processing imperfective event descriptions (e.g., Carreiras, Carriedo, Alonso, & Fernández, 1997; Ferretti, Kutas, & McRae, 2007; Madden & Therriault, 2009; Truitt & Zwaan, 1997).

In addition, when processing event descriptions people infer that more action occurs with imperfective descriptions than with perfective descriptions. For instance, people estimate that more houses were painted after reading "*John was painting houses last summer*" than after reading "*John painted houses last summer*" (Matlock, in press). People also remember past actions more easily, and are more likely to continue them in future behavior, after imperfective descriptions than perfective descriptions (e.g., Hart & Albarracín, 2009; Magliano & Schleich, 2000).

In the current work, we investigated the role of grammatical information in the interpretation of political messages, precisely, whether and how imperfective "*was* VERB + *ing*" and perfective "VERB + *ed*" would influence attitudes about electability. The focus on electability here represents an effort to examine how grammar affects perceptions about a politician's behavior and ultimately, electability. Furthermore, since our stimuli feature fictitious candidates without party labels we are able to examine these beliefs about electability in a manner that is akin to a primary

election where electability is a primary ingredient of vote choice (Abramowitz, 1989). Given these fictitious, party-less candidates, we ask whether the imperfective form, which draws attention to details and the ongoing process of actions, could lead to different attitudes about electability than the perfective form.

And might this effect be more pronounced for negative political messages versus positive? Many existing results suggest that this is likely. Negative information arouses emotions (e.g., Westen, 2007), captures attention (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenhauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001), and affects perceptions of political candidates (e.g., Basil, Schooler, & Reeves, 1991; Lau, 1982; Nicholson, Segura, & Woods, 2002; see Lau, Sigelman, & Brown Rovner, 2007, for a broad perspective). Multiple mechanisms may lead people to be especially sensitive to the way that information is communicated in linguistic descriptions of negative events (we return to this issue in our discussion).

Finally, can grammatical information ever influence inferences about actions themselves? Would, for instance, a phrase such as *was taking hush money* lead people to believe that more dollars were taken than a phrase such as *took hush money*? These questions are important because voters rely on information about the past to infer what politicians will do in future elected positions (e.g., Fiorina, 1981).

Two studies were designed to explore these issues. In each, participants read about the past actions of a senator who was seeking reelection. They then decided whether he would be reelected. Next they provided a confidence rating for the decision. Participants also provided a numeric estimate about the actions (e.g., amount of hush money in Study 1).

Study 1

Participants read a short passage about a fictitious politician who did (perfective) or was doing (imperfective) past actions that were either negative or positive. Based on previous research showing that an increment toward a negative pole may carry more weight in decision making than "the same" increment toward a positive pole (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), we hypothesized that grammatical form may more strongly influence people's judgments about negative past actions than about positive past actions. Further, people may pay closer attention to negative events than to positive events (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001), perhaps heightening the effect of any particular linguistic construal of the past event. Thus, our main prediction was that the politician would be evaluated more negatively when negative past actions were described with imperfective rather than perfective grammatical markers.

Method

Participants. A total of 369 undergraduate students at the University of California, Merced, received partial course credit in an introductory cognitive

science course or an introductory psychology course. All participants were proficient English speakers in a university community. Fifteen of these individuals provided illegible responses or did not finish the task, leaving 354 participants.

Materials, Design, and Procedure. Participants completed a questionnaire that appeared on a single page in a booklet that contained a large set of unrelated tasks. Participants were randomly assigned a booklet and informed that they had five days to complete and return the entire booklet (standard practice for this type of task; any potential shortcomings of the method, such as "overthinking it," would be evenly distributed across conditions due to random assignment). Participants were also instructed not to discuss the task with others and assured that their identity would be anonymous.

Participants first read a short description of a fictitious senator who was up for reelection. The senator did or was doing negative or positive actions (see Appendix for the four description versions). For example, he *was taking hush money* or *took hush money*, and for positive actions, he *was collecting donations* or *collected donations*. Then these participants answered two questions, "*Will this candidate be reelected?*" (circled Yes or No) and "*How confident are you about your decision regarding reelection?*" (used a 7-point scale, ranging from "*Not at all confident*" (1) to "*Very confident*" (7)). Next they answered a question about the financial dealings of the senator, either "*Please estimate the total amount of hush money (in dollars)*" (in the negative valence condition) or "*Please estimate the total amount of donation money (in dollars)*" (in the positive valence condition). The senator was fictitious to avoid bias about actual political candidates.

Results

First, we examined valence of past actions and electability. Not surprisingly, participants viewed the senator as more electable when past actions were positive (80%) versus negative (22%), $\chi^2(1,\ N = 354) = 119.94,\ p < .001$. Twenty-one percent of the participants did not conform to this pattern, and indicated that the candidate would be reelected if he had done negative actions ($N = 41$), or not be reelected if he had done positive actions ($N = 33$).

Second, we analyzed people's confidence about their electability decision. Electability decisions were weighted by confidence, resulting in a scale ranging from −7 (Strongly Confident "No" vote) to +7 (Strongly Confident "Yes" vote). Histograms of this weighted decision are shown in Figure 1a (negative actions) and Figure 1b (positive actions). Here we were interested in analyzing data from participants whose decision aligned with the action valence. (Note that it would be cumbersome in the current task to ascertain why some individuals chose to respond that the candidate would be reelected if he had done negative actions, or not reelected if he had done positive actions. Possibilities could include cynicism about politicians or skepticism about election outcomes.) Thus, only the responses that aligned with valence were submitted to further analyses in this study.

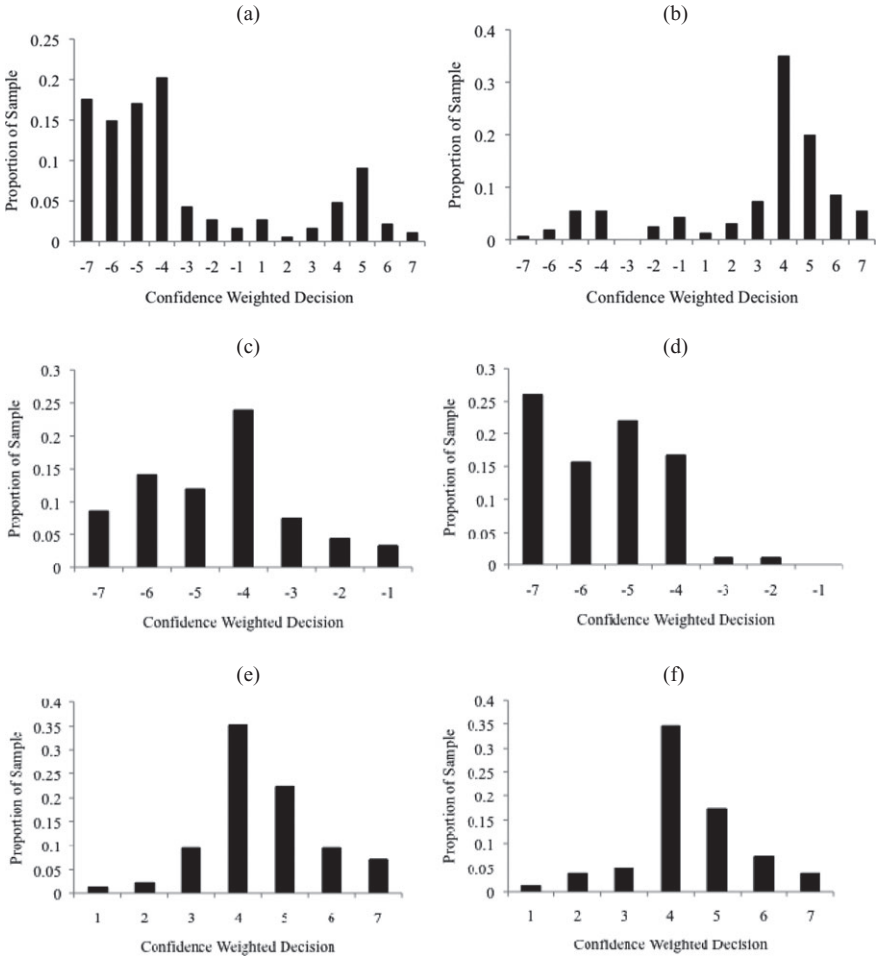

Figure 1. Confidence weighted electability decisions: (a) Negative Events, (b) Positive Events, (c) Don't reelect decisions, Negative Perfective, (d) Don't reelect decisions, Negative Imperfective, (e), Reelect decisions, Positive Perfective, (f) Reelect decisions, Positive Imperfective. Proportion of sample is plotted on the y-axis.

Data bearing on whether grammatical aspect influences electability appear in Figure 1c–f (i.e., the confidence weighted scores for decisions that were consistent with the action valence). Because some of these data were skewed, and also showed some heteroskedasticity across conditions, we took a conservative approach and did a nonparametric analysis. Conclusions remain the same using parametric analyses.

Confidence ratings were divided into "Weak confidence" (rating of 3 or less extreme), "Middle confidence" (rating of 4), and "Strong confidence" (rating of 5 or more extreme) groups. As shown in Figure 2a, participants' confidence about

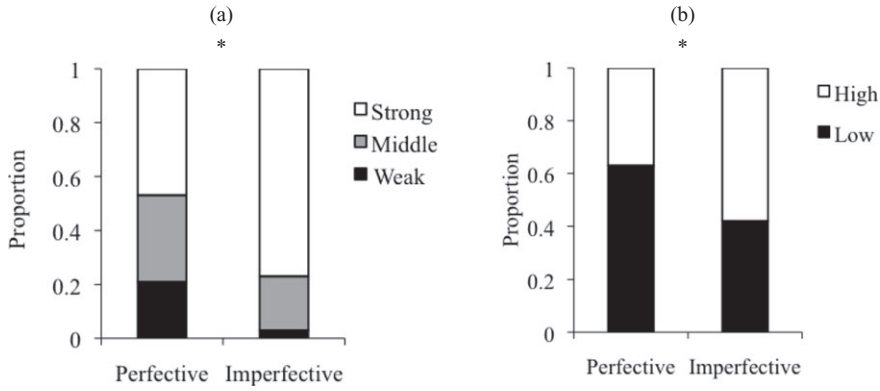

Figure 2. Grammatical aspect changes how people view a politician's negative actions: (a) Voter confidence in deciding not to reelect a politician, (b) Median split judgments of hush money taken. Proportion of sample is plotted on the y-axis.

electability varied depending on the grammatical markers used to describe the senator's past actions. Participants were more strongly confident about their "no" decisions when the senator *was doing* negative actions (77%) than when he *did* negative actions (47%), $\chi^2(2, N = 147) = 18.27$, $p < .001$. They were about equally confident for their "yes" decisions when the senator *was doing* (45%) and when he *did* (39%) positive actions, $\chi^2(2, N = 133) = .65$, *n.s.*

Third, we analyzed estimates for money taken (hush money) or collected (donations) by the senator. Unsurprisingly, these distributions were highly skewed. We again took a conservative analysis approach, and conclusions remain the same using parametric analyses.

We divided responses into "Low" and "High" money groups based on the median estimate value of the respective decisions. The median estimate for hush money ($100,000) structured the two groups for negative financial actions, and the median estimate for donations ($50,000) structured the two groups for positive financial actions. Grammatical form influenced the inferences that people made about money. Dollar estimates were higher when the senator *was taking* hush money (58% were above overall median) versus *took* hush money (37% were above overall median), $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 6.74$, $p = .009$ (Figure 2b). For positive actions, there was no difference (47% versus 53%, $\chi^2(1, N = 133) = .36$, *n.s.*).

Finally, using independent participants in a separate manipulation check, we confirmed that our "negative" and "positive" stories differed in valence. Forty-six participants who were among the English speakers who use Amazon's Mechanical Turk Service (mturk.com; individuals can choose to complete tasks posted by community members) read one story selected randomly from the four versions used in the main study (Negative perfective, Negative imperfective, Positive perfective, Positive imperfective). After reading the story, participants answered the question

"*Please use the scale below to indicate what you think of the senator's actions*" using a 15-point scale ranging from "*Very Negative*" (1) to "*Very Positive*" (15).

As expected, participants judged the negative stories ($M = 3.48$, $SE = .64$) to be more negative than the positive stories ($M = 11.91$, $SE = .52$), $t(44) = 10.21$, $p < .001$. Further, grammatical aspect itself (perfective versus imperfective) did not influence participants' judgments of negativity, overall or within each kind of story (all ps $> .18$).

In sum, people were more confident in voting not to reelect a senator who *was doing* negative actions than a senator who *did* negative actions. They also inferred that more negative action was involved when the past event was described using imperfective aspect compared to perfective aspect.

Study 2

In everyday life, politicians do good and bad things. Here we were interested in cases involving both a positive and negative outcome. In this study, the senator was responsible for an eminent domain policy with a negative *and* a positive outcome. All participants read about both outcomes, but some read about an imperfective negative outcome and a perfective positive outcome (*was removing homes and extended roads*) and others, about a perfective negative outcome and an imperfective positive outcome (*removed homes and was extending roads*) (see Appendix). We hypothesized that the overall eminent domain policy would be interpreted more negatively when the negative action was in the imperfective than when the negative action was in the perfective.

Method

Participants. A total of 127 members of the Stanford University community were paid to participate. Most were students recruited from a database of people who are interested in experimental studies. Data from participants whose age was greater than 3 SDs above the mean age ($N = 5$) and from individuals who returned incomplete surveys ($N = 2$) were excluded, leaving a total of 120 participants.

Materials and Procedure. Participants read a passage about a fictitious senator who was seeking reelection and who had implemented an eminent domain policy with a negative and a positive outcome (home removal and road extension, respectively), and then answered the same questions as in Study 1. The task appeared on a single page in a booklet of unrelated materials. Participants had a week to complete the task.

Results

As shown in Figure 3, participants who read about "*removing homes*" were more likely to respond that the candidate would *not* be reelected (60%) than participants who read about "*removed homes*" (44%). The pattern was reliable,

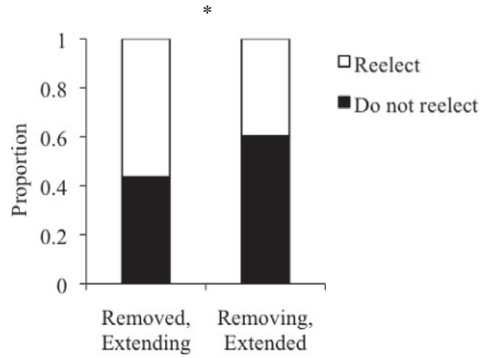

Figure 3. Grammatical aspect influences electability (Study 2). Proportion of sample is plotted on the y-axis.

$p = .049$ (Fisher's exact test, one-tailed, was used given our directed prediction). Participants were about equally confident in their decisions in the two conditions. There were no reliable differences in estimates about the number of roads extended or homes removed. Thus, again, grammatical information influenced attitudes about electability. In this case, despite having read about both components of an eminent domain policy, participants were biased by the use of the imperfective: They judged a politician to be less electable when the negative outcome of his policy was highlighted using imperfective aspect compared to when it was described using perfective aspect.

As in Study 1, we again queried independent participants ($N = 22$) about the valence of the senator's actions, using the same procedure and valence scale as Study 1. In this case, participants judged each version of the story to be about equally negative ("*removed*" $M = 6.18$, $SE = .50$; "*was removing*" $M = 8.00$, $SE = 1.21$, $t(13.32$(assuming unequal variances)$) = 1.39$, *n.s.*). It appears that the effect of grammatical aspect on electability may be somewhat insidious when reasoning is based on scenarios with mixed outcomes. When making explicit valence judgments, people see both the good and the bad, but grammatical aspect may implicitly color judgments about the political candidate himself.

General Discussion

Our studies suggest that grammar can influence electability. In Study 1, a change in the grammatical form of negative action descriptions resulted in a change in reasoning about a political candidate. People were more confident in their "no" vote and provided higher dollar estimates for hush money when negative actions were described using imperfective than perfective. They were not sensitive to grammar when reasoning about a candidate's past positive actions. In Study 2, grammar again influenced electability, such that people reasoned about electability in line with whatever action was highlighted by imperfective aspect. Over 50% of people

judged a candidate who "removed homes and *was* extend*ing* roads" to be electable while under 50% did so when the verb markers *–ed* and *–ing* were reversed.

Why did the imperfective form result in higher confidence ratings and larger money estimates than did the perfective form, for negative actions in particular? Several explanations are worth considering. First, people may pay more attention to negative events than to positive events (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001), making any mental representation driven by a linguistic construal relatively more robust for negative events. Further, the contrast between two negative alternatives is often perceived to be larger than the contrast between two "equally spaced" positive alternatives (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), and so any contrast due to grammatical form may have been amplified for negative events.

The effects of negative information and imperfective information on decision making may be additive. The combination of negative information and imperfective information could have made for strong attitudes, including pronounced confidence about "no" votes. This is plausible given that negative information arouses emotions and captures attention (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Westen, 2007) and the imperfective form widens scope (Frawley, 1992) and draws attention to details of actions (e.g., Carreiras et al., 1997; Ferretti et al., 2007; Madden & Therriault, 2009; Truitt & Zwaan, 1997). With heightened attention to negative details, it may be especially easy for voters to confidently reject a candidate.

Another possible explanation may be the fact that people generally prefer to avoid losses when there are unknown outcomes (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). More negative actions could be construed as risky and lead to stronger confidence that a "no" vote was the right choice. In the same vein, the imperfective form may have prompted a sense of "ongoingness" of the politician's negative actions while the perfective form may have provided closure on negative actions. If a political candidate *did* negative events in the past, those actions could have been perceived as over and done with, and less likely to influence the future. With positive information, there are no risks or adverse consequences and thus no reason to have a strong opinion about a "yes" vote.

These mechanisms—heightened attention to negative details and risk aversion—may also operate when voters reason about mixed outcome scenarios as in Study 2. Here, the combination of imperfective and negative information ("*removing*") appeared to shift attention away from beneficial policy outcomes and lead to more decisions that the candidate would not be elected.

Further research on the fine-grained linguistic details of political messages must be conducted for a full understanding of how language influences everyday thought in the political realm. Our novel results are an initial attempt to detail these important effects of language and suggest that under certain conditions grammatical information affects whether a political candidate is electable. Future research should examine a wider range of actions, including future actions and policy proposals, as well as other fine-grained grammatical features of political messages.

Investigations of grammar using linguistic data from real political campaigns will also be informative.

Voters appear to be sensitive to fine-grained linguistic details when judging political candidates. When the past actions of a candidate were negative, descriptions using imperfective aspect damaged the candidate's electability more than descriptions using perfective aspect. Because "scandals" involving political candidates are a hot topic in media coverage and campaign ads, insight into the power of the grammar used to communicate negative information will likely improve our understanding about how linguistic media shapes voting patterns. The current findings are consistent with previous psycholinguistic results and extend our understanding of the role of grammar in political decision making.

Appendix

Study 1 Stimuli.

Action valence	Grammatical form	
	Perfective (verb + *ed*)	Imperfective (*was* verb + *ing*)
Negative	Mark Johnson is a Senator in the United States Senate. He is up for reelection. He graduated from the University of Texas, Austin with a degree in political science. Mark's first term as a United States Senator is almost complete. Last year, Mark had an affair with his assistant and took hush money from a prominent constituent. ($N = 92$)	Mark Johnson is a Senator in the United States Senate. He is up for reelection. He graduated from the University of Texas, Austin with a degree in political science. Mark's first term as a United States Senator is almost complete. Last year, Mark was having an affair with his assistant and was taking hush money from a prominent constituent. ($N = 96$)
Positive	Mark Johnson is a Senator in the United States Senate. He is up for reelection. He graduated from the University of Texas, Austin with a degree in political science. Mark's first term as a United States Senator is almost complete. Last year, Mark rekindled his relationship with his wife and collected donation money for the American Cancer Society. ($N = 85$)	Mark Johnson is a Senator in the United States Senate. He is up for reelection. He graduated from the University of Texas, Austin with a degree in political science. Mark's first term as a United States Senator is almost complete. Last year, Mark was rekindling his relationship with his wife and was collecting donation money for the American Cancer Society. ($N = 81$)

Study 2 Stimuli.

Negative outcome with imperfective aspect

Mark Johnson is a Senator in the United States Senate. He is up for reelection. Last year, his district faced rush hour traffic problems. Under eminent domain Mark was removing homes and extended roads in his district. Traffic conditions improved. (N = 58)

Negative outcome with perfective aspect

Mark Johnson is a Senator in the United States Senate. He is up for reelection. Last year, his district faced rush hour traffic problems. Under eminent domain Mark removed homes and was extending roads in his district. Traffic conditions improved. (N = 62)

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