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Does apologizing work? An empirical test of the conventional wisdom

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Abstract: Public figures often apologize after making controversial statements. There are reasons to believe, however, that apologizing makes public figures appear weak and risk averse, which may make them less likeable and lead members of the public to want to punish them. This paper presents the results of an experiment in which respondents were given two versions of two real-life controversies involving public figures. Approximately half of the participants read a story that made it appear as if the person had apologized, while the rest were led to believe that the individual had stood firm. In the first experiment, hearing that Rand Paul apologized for his comments on civil rights did not change whether respondents were less likely to vote for him. When presented with two versions of the controversy surrounding Larry Summers and his comments about women scientists and engineers, however, liberals and females were more likely to say that he should have faced negative consequences for his statement when presented with his apology. The effects on other groups were smaller or neutral. The evidence suggests that when a prominent figure apologizes for a controversial statement, individuals are either unaffected or become more likely to desire that the individual be punished.

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In the summer of 2015, analysts were shocked by the rise of Donald Trump in the Republican primaries. After each one of his seeming gaffes, pundits and other observers wondered whether what are colloquially called the 'laws of political gravity' had finally 'caught up' to the businessman-turned-politician (e.g., Gorenstein, 2015; Schreckinger & Glueck, 2015). Rather than apologizing for his remarks in nearly every one of a seemingly endless string of controversies, Trump has since that time gone on the offensive, defended the original

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comments, doubled down and portrayed each firestorm as a fabricated controversy cooked up by 'losers' (Bump, 2015).

Yet if President Trump's failure to apologize for his statements confounds pundits, this exact same quality is one of the things that endear him to many of his supporters, as, in the words of Rush Limbaugh, "the American people have seen something they haven't seen in a long time, and that is a target stand up and refuse to go away, a target stand up and refuse to apologize" (Rush Limbaugh Show, 2015). The 'gaffe' and the ritual apology have indeed become regular staples of our political life. A politician or other prominent individual makes a controversial statement – usually regarding a sensitive topic such as race, gender or the military – and is attacked for it through the media. Conventional wisdom holds that to limit the damage done to the greatest extent possible, the famous figure must show some kind of repentance, engaging in what has become a predictable 'degradation ritual' in our public life (Bennett, 1981; Carey, 2002; Harris *et al.*, 2006).

While the assumption that apologies help public figures in the midst of controversies is an implicit part of our political culture, it has rarely been tested. Although seeking forgiveness may put one on the path to redemption, it is also possible that it can backfire. Many see strength as an important component of leadership, and apologizing can be perceived as a sign of weakness (Griskevicius *et al.*, 2009; Buss, 2015, pp. 289–292). This is especially true in cases where observers may feel that the original infraction is 'no big deal' or a media-created controversy stirred up by the press or political opponents. Furthermore, some social psychology literature suggests that under certain circumstances the breaking of taboos can be perceived as attractive (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006). A public figure who apologizes may be seen as following a conventional and safer path, and this may increase the desire of others to punish the individual in question.

This paper is the first to test the common belief that it is wise for a public figure to apologize in the midst of a controversy. The experiment involves the recruitment of a sample from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), where individuals read one of two versions of two different real-life controversies involving public figures. In each case, they were told about certain statements by a public figure that caused a backlash. In one scenario, it was implied or explicitly stated that the offender apologized. In the second version, the individual was portrayed as not backing down and defending the comments in question. The ways in which the background information and the original controversy were portrayed were identical in each case, meaning that any differences in what percentage of people wanted to punish an offender could only be the result of how the aftermath was presented.

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Hypotheses and methods

Reactions to apologies in the public realm should be seen from a 'behavioral', meaning having to do with psychological motivations, rather than a 'rationalist' perspective that forms opinions with specific goals in mind (Posner, 1998). This is because in such cases observers know that what they think about the figure in question will not actually influence what happens to him. Just as behavioralist models of voting perform better those that assume people vote for policies that will bring them financial gain, it is most likely that individuals seek 'expressive utility', rather than any specific non-psychological outcome from their opinions (Caplan, 2011; Hanania & Trager, 2017). While we may therefore expect rational behavior among public figures who need to decide whether or not to apologize, there is little reason to believe that individuals seek to achieve concrete goals through expressing that an individual that they cannot influence should be punished. This stands in contrast to game theoretic models in which reactions to apologies are judged in terms of payoffs involving personal interactions, namely restoring social or economic relationships (Fischbacher & Utikal, 2013; Newman & Kraynak, 2013).

The experiments in this paper test three possible hypotheses.

H0: Apologizing after a controversial statement has no effect on whether observers desire to punish the offender.

People often use heuristics to judge individuals and political candidates. Statements are evaluated based on how information is presented, the party identification of the speaker and which reference groups support or oppose the individual in question (Campbell, 1980; Zaller, 1992; Zaller & Feldman, 1992; Huddy, 1998). These factors may overwhelm any effect of an apology. Once an individual hears a story that has ideological content and can understand the appropriate reaction based on who is offended, it is possible that a judgment is made, and it remains constant regardless of whether the person making the controversial statement decides to show remorse. Individuals may brush off apologies as politically motivated and without any informational value about the qualities of the public official or the nature of the comments made (Townsend, 1978). It may also be the case that apologies influence various groups of people in different ways and any effects cancel one another out, as heterodox effects are common across the social sciences (Chandon *et al.*, 2005; Athey & Imbens, 2016).

H1: Apologizing after a controversial statement makes observers less likely to want the offender punished.

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Public figures often apologize in the midst of controversy, and the simplest explanation as to why is that it is in their interests to do so. It is standard in the literature on corporate crisis management to recommend a quick apology for any wrongdoing (Ashcroft, 1997; Timothy Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Hearit (2006, pp. 86–95) reviews President Clinton's behavior in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky scandal and argues that the American people became more forgiving as his apologies became more honest and complete. Psychological research indicates that in personal relationships apologies can restore goodwill between two sides (Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Weiner *et al.*, 1991; Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; Kim *et al.*, 2004). Under certain circumstances, they can make individuals more likeable and increase compliance (Goei *et al.*, 2007). Other studies show that after an individual is harmed an apology can reduce the desire to retaliate (Ohbuchi *et al.*, 1989).

This research, however, may not directly speak to the issue of controversies involving public figures, as previous work theoretically and empirically pertains to relationships between people and harm directly done to individuals. When observing a public spectacle, people may apply a completely different set of standards. Attitudes about what behavior is morally appropriate often depend on the kind of relationship the relevant parties share (Fiske & Rai, 2014). An apology can signal something about the personality and moral qualities of the public figure, making him or her appear more likely to share in the values of the observer, especially if the act is costly, as a public apology may be (Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009; Simler & Hanson, 2017). Research on personal relationships is therefore suggestive and indicates that apologizing might similarly mitigate harm regardless of whether an individual is directly hurt by an action or simply hears something that they consider offensive. Therefore, it is possible that the conventional wisdom is correct and that apologizing for gaffes makes observers less likely to want to punish an individual. Finally, there is a third possibility:

H2: Apologizing after a controversial statement makes observers more likely to want the offender punished.

Although *H2* may appear counterintuitive, the social psychology literature indicates that there are good reasons to believe that a person who backs down in a dispute becomes less likeable to observers, who may in turn become more likely to want to punish that individual. There is research suggesting that overconfidence, even to the point of breaking rules, causes people to view an individual more positively, as does social risk-taking (Kelly & Dunbar, 2001; Farthing, 2005; Wilke *et al.*, 2006; Van Kleef *et al.*, 2011; Lamba & Nityananda, 2014). Males in particular who show social

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dominance and control can be judged more attractively as potential mates (Sadalla *et al.*, 1987; Oesch & Miklousic, 2011). An individual who does not back down in the face of controversy signals confidence by not giving in to social pressure and indicates higher status by refusing to follow the conventional path. Anecdotal evidence suggests that part of President Trump's appeal lies in his refusal to apologize and his unwillingness to be 'politically correct'. While this may only be appealing to a subset of the electorate, research suggests that it might also tap into something deeper in human psychology. An apology might also rationally signal to more easily influenced observers that the individual actually did do something wrong (Sunstein, 2019).

Participants in this survey were recruited in August 2015 through MTurk, which has been increasingly used by social scientists and provides a pool of respondents that under most circumstances is more representative of the population than convenience samples (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2012). Respondents were taken to SurveyMonkey, where they read about two political controversies from the last two decades and asked questions about them ($n = 511$). Using real-life examples prevents the capturing of 'off-equilibrium behavior', potentially making the results more externally valid (Steblay, 1992). Before the main part of the survey, participants were asked to provide their partisan identification, sex and ideological orientation on a five-point scale, from 'very liberal' to 'moderate' to 'very conservative'. The participants were 50.3% male and 48.9% female. The group tended to lean left, with 41.6% identifying as liberal on a five-point scale and only 22.1% as conservative. Among males, 38.7% identified as liberal and 24.6% as conservative, while among females the numbers were 46.0% liberal and 20.0% conservative.

The first text was about Rand Paul's statement in 2010 expressing skepticism over certain aspects of the Civil Rights Act. All participants were shown the following text:

> *In 2010, Rand Paul was running for Senate, and stirred up controversy when he said that private businesses should be allowed to discriminate based on race. In response to questioning, he said "What about freedom of speech? Should we limit speech from people we find abhorrent? Should we limit racists from speaking? ... I don't want to be associated with those people, but I also don't want to limit their speech in any way in the sense that we tolerate boorish and uncivilized behavior because that's one of the things freedom requires." Likewise, according to Paul, belief in freedom requires that we give racists the freedom to discriminate, even when it comes to jobs or providing services.*
>
> *In response to these comments, critics accused Paul of questioning a key provision of the Civil Rights Act and argued that his statements were*

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unacceptable. Many said that he wanted to take the country back to a time of segregated lunch counters and when African Americans were denied basic access to jobs and the ability to access businesses that serve the public.

After this background information, about half of the participants were randomly assigned to read a conclusion that made it sound as if Paul was apologetic about his statements and the rest read another that portrayed him as defiant.

Version 1 (Apologetic):

In response, Rand Paul quickly took an apologetic tone and backtracked, saying he would never repeal the Civil Rights Act. In the years since, observers argue that he has been bending over backwards to make up for his original statements, particularly through minority outreach. He now says he does not question any aspect of the Civil Rights Act. Paul won his Senate seat, and still serves to this day.

Version 2 (Non-apologetic):

In the days after the controversy, Paul refused to explicitly apologize for his statements. He went on the offensive, claiming that his opponents were engaging in unfair political attacks. In response to one interviewer, he said "What is going on here is an attempt to vilify us for partisan reasons. Where do your talking points come from?" Paul won his Senate seat, and still serves to this day.

Both of these accounts of Paul's reaction contain factual information. Rand Paul never apologized for his statements, but began to deny that he ever questioned the Civil Rights Act. His reaction to the controversy can be seen as apologetic, in the sense that he changed his story and has been emphasizing his support for civil rights. But it can also be seen as defiant, since he never offered a formal apology and tends to attack his opponents when this issue comes up (Rosenberg, 2014).

After being shown one of the two versions of the story, respondents were asked, "How offensive did you find Paul's comments when reading about them?" The answer was provided on a five-point scale, with the choices being 'not offensive at all', 'mostly inoffensive', 'neither offensive nor inoffensive', 'somewhat offensive' and 'very offensive'. They were then asked, "How reasonable did you find the comments that caused the controversy?" on a five-point scale from 'very unreasonable' to 'very reasonable'. Finally, respondents were asked whether the controversy made them less likely to vote for Paul. The options were 'definitely yes', 'maybe', 'no effect either way', 'no' and 'it makes me more likely to vote for him'.

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Next, participants were told to read a passage on controversial statements made by Larry Summers about the reasons behind a lack of highly successful female scientists and engineers (Dillon, 2005; Hemel & Seward, 2005):

In 2005 Larry Summers was the president of Harvard University. That year, he participated in a panel on the underrepresentation of women among science and engineering faculty at top universities. He cited certain research that suggested that women were less likely to be among those with the "intrinsic aptitude" for such positions. In other words, biological differences between men and women explained part of the reason why males were overrepresented among highly successful scientists and engineers.

In reaction, the Harvard community erupted in controversy. Members of the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences passed a resolution condemning Summers and many called on him to resign his position. It is believed that the controversy over his statements led to him leaving Harvard a year later. Many disputed the research Summers relied on, questioned the relevance of his statements, and said that they discouraged females from pursuing jobs in science and technology.

Participants were then presented with one of two variants of the conclusion to the story. About half read what sounded like a defense while the rest learned that Summers apologized.

Version 1 (Apologetic):

Summers ended up apologizing for his statements.

"I deeply regret the impact of my comments and apologize for not having weighed them more carefully," Summers wrote in an open letter to the Harvard community.

"I was wrong to have spoken in a way that has resulted in an unintended signal of discouragement to talented girls and women. As a university president, I consider nothing more important than helping to create an environment, at Harvard and beyond, in which every one of us can pursue our intellectual passions and realize our aspirations to the fullest possible extent."

Version 2 (Non-apologetic):

Summers defended himself by saying he believed that "raising questions, discussing multiple factors that may explain a difficult problem, and seeking to understand how they interrelate is vitally important."

Once again, both of these conclusions include information that is true. In the immediate aftermath of the controversy, Summers stuck to his statement and only apologized for any misunderstandings that he had caused. In only a few days, however, his apologies became less equivocal and he began to indicate that he should never have made the comments in question. As in the Paul

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Table 1. Percentages saying that controversy makes them 'maybe' or 'definitely' less likely to vote for Rand Paul.

Demographic	*n*	Apologetic response	Defiant/firm response	Difference
Male	257	59.7	61.0	−1.3
Female	250	67.5	60.6	6.9
Liberal	213	78.9	72.1	6.8
Moderate	174	60.2	64.2	−4.0
Conservative	113	38.6	37.5	1.1
Total	511	63.1	60.9	2.2

text, participants indicated how reasonable and offensive they found the comments by Summers. Participants were also asked, "Should Summers have faced negative consequences for his statements?" The choices were 'definitely yes', 'probably', 'probably not', 'no' and 'I'm not sure'.

Finally, respondents were given two questions to test whether they had read and understood the texts. The first was "Which law did Paul question?" and the second was "Some members of the Harvard community considered the comments by Summers to be offensive to which group of people?" Those whose answers indicated that they did not fully comprehend both controversies by answering 'Civil Rights Act' and 'women' were excluded from the analysis. A total of 82.8% out of 617 respondents ($n = 511$) were able to answer both questions and therefore included in the survey.

Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents saying that they would 'maybe' or 'definitely' be less likely to vote for Paul due to the controversy over his opinions on the Civil Rights Act, the measure of punishment in the first example. As refusing to vote for an individual is the most direct way that members of the public can punish a politician, being less likely to vote for Paul is taken as an indicator of willingness to do so in the first experiment. Overall, it appears that apologizing has a slightly negative effect for the candidate. The results are close to significance for liberals and women ($p = 0.13$ in each case), with statistical significance being calculated through one-tailed tests.

The results provide the most support for *H0*. While there are large differences between ideologies and there is less separation between the sexes, people's attitudes are for the most part unaffected by whether they read about Paul taking an apologetic stance or holding firm to his position. The only possible exceptions are for liberals and females, results that are all the more intriguing when compared to the findings with regards to the Summers controversy shown in Table 2.

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Table 2. Percentages saying that Summers should have 'probably' or 'definitely' faced negative consequences.

Demographic	*n*	Apologetic response	Defiant/firm response	Difference
Male	257	54.1	54.0	0.1
Female	250	73.8	57.5	16.3**
Liberal	213	84.3	70.5	13.8**
Moderate	174	60.9	54.6	6.3
Conservative	113	36.5	30.0	6.5
Total	511	64.2	56.3	7.9*

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. Applying Bonferroni corrections to the p-values based on the two categories for sex and three for ideology still achieves statistical significance for females and liberals at the p < 0.05 threshold.

In Table 2, the gender gap is much larger than in Table 1, which may be expected given the nature of the comments in question. As before, the largest effects are on liberals and females. Women who read the apologetic version of the story were more likely to want to see Summers punished by 16.3%. While 84.3% of liberals wanted to punish Summers when they read about his apology, that number dropped to 70.5% when readers were led to believe that he had held firm to his position. Overall, the results provide strong support for *H2* with regards to women and liberals and support for *H0* among males. There once again appears to be no evidence for *H1*. While certain individuals may be less likely to want to see prominent figures punished after they shows remorse for a controversial statement, there is no support for the idea that it helps to apologize in the aggregate.

Differences in reactions between those who read the two versions of each story are mostly driven by female respondents. This may be because men score higher on 'context independence' than women (Gilligan, 1982; Cross & Madson, 1997). Individuals low in this trait are more affected by the context in which they act, being more likely to update their thoughts, beliefs and behaviors based on influences from the external environment (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Interestingly, which version of the text they were given had no discernable effect on the extent to which readers found the comments by Summers or Paul 'reasonable' or 'offensive'. Therefore, the mechanisms through which an apology makes individuals more likely to want to see an offender punished remain unclear.

Conclusion

As the divergent results for the two cases imply, future research should investigate the extent to which circumstances make it more or less helpful to

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apologize for a controversial statement. A number of factors could account for the different results in the two experiments. The key difference may be in the fact that Summers apologized for a statement expressing a belief in a theory that can be tested empirically, while Paul had originally been criticized for giving a normative opinion. A second possibility is that in the non-apologetic vignette for Paul it explicitly says that he did not apologize, while in the non-apologetic vignette for Summers the same was only heavily implied. Finally, Summers gave reasons for his defense, while Paul went on the attack when questioned about his comments, perhaps unfairly implying that the controversy was the result of a partisan witch hunt.

The two experiments also share some commonalities that may lead to questions about the generalizability of the results: namely, the subjects are white males who violated left wing taboos. Since prejudices based on race, gender and political affiliation are found throughout social psychology, it is plausible that the identities of the public figures or the nature of either controversy helped drive the result (Hanania & Trager, 2019), although the fact that women and liberals in particular became more likely to want to punish after hearing about an apology argues against this possibility. More research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn about when apologies have no effect and when they increase or reduce the desire on the part of observers to punish the figure embroiled in controversy. It is also of note that much of the research on the attractiveness of assertiveness and strength finds results that apply mostly to men, and the fact that Paul and Summers are both males may have also influenced the results for this reason (Oesch & Miklousic, 2011).

Overall, the evidence presented here suggests that the effects of an apology are close to neutral or negative depending on the context and the demographic group. If this is the case, we may wonder why public officials do in fact so often ask for forgiveness in the face of controversy. It is possible that they apologize in order to receive better coverage from the media or even to make a story go away. In one experiment, individuals judging performances in a presidential debate were influenced by the nature of commentary they watched after the fact when compared to a control group not exposed to the opinions of pundits (Fridkin *et al.*, 2007). Likewise, if an individual apologizes for a comment that the media finds offensive, future coverage of that individual may be better than it otherwise would be. This requires the assumption that while members of the public are hostile or indifferent to those who apologize, members of the media will provide better coverage of an individual who shows repentance. There may be little reason to assume that this is the case, however, especially considering that most of the media lean to the left (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Groseclose, 2011) and that liberals in this study appear to be those most likely to want to punish individuals for apologizing.

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Finally, this study cannot discount the possibility that public figures apologize simply out of habit or because they are a following a script that has for the most part gone unquestioned. While we should not ignore the possible wisdom that might be found in the intuitions of those who run and participate in campaigns and work in public relations for a living, it does not appear that there ever has been experimental support for the idea that apologizing is good for public figures steeped in controversy. A belief can be held for a long time and still be untrue if it is never subjected to close scrutiny. There are reasons to believe that it makes sense to apologize in the midst of a controversy, but there are also arguments to be made that the effects of doing so are either neutral or negative. Only more research can tell us when apologizing is a rational part of crisis management and when it only makes things worse.

The results suggest certain courses of action for public figures who might find themselves in a situation like the ones described above. As there is no evidence here that apologies help one in avoiding punishment and some evidence that they hurt, rational individuals should think very carefully about whether they are apologizing because they believe that it will bring them benefits or because it is simply the accepted thing to do (Ashcroft, 1997). Especially in cases in which the individual is apologizing for saying out loud what he or she actually believes, as appears to be the case in the examples above, sticking by a controversial position may not only be better for the public official, but also lead to more honest democratic deliberation across party and ideological lines, while giving voters and others with the ability to hold public figures accountable clearer signals on how to judge powerful individuals (Chambers, 2003; Thomas, 2008). Similarly, organizations that sometimes find themselves in the position to force an apology, such as political parties, corporations and universities, should also keep these results in mind, as what has become a standard practice in crisis management may end up hurting more than it helps.

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