

Lowering Expectations: How Candidate Demeanor Affects Voter Attitudes

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Abstract

Demeanor is the verbal and nonverbal style that politicians adopt when appearing before a public audience. I theorize that voters react negatively when a public figure exhibits demeanor that violates behavioral expectations, which are set by contextual norms. However, a candidate may develop a reputation for atypical demeanor after repeated normative violations, causing them to be judged by different standards. Specifically, candidates who have a reputation for atypical demeanor are shown to suffer less severe backlash when they violate behavioral norms. In contrast, candidates who do not have such a reputation are punished to a greater degree when they behave atypically because these episodes are unexpected to voters. Experimental evidence demonstrates that demeanor can have important effects on voter evaluations of candidates, and that candidate reputation plays a key conditioning role on these effects. These findings have implications for how electorally-minded candidates might behave to most effectively present themselves to voters.

Introduction

When communicating with the public, politicians are faced with choosing not only what to say, but also how to say it. Decisions regarding the former—that is, message content—are valuable for agenda setting (Cohen 1995), shaping public attitudes (Ragsdale 1984, Shaw 1999), and influencing government actions (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008). Yet, the choice of how to present oneself—a politician’s *demeanor*—is of equal importance. Indeed, there is evidence that linguistic patterns (Slatcher et al. 2007, Pennebaker and Lay 2002) and physical mannerisms (Bucy 2000) influence how people evaluate public figures.

The television era is replete with episodes spotlighting the importance of demeanor. Former Presidents Nixon (in 1960) and Obama (in 2012) endured setbacks from lethargic debate appearances, leading both to strategically change course (Nixon by refusing debates in the 1968 and 1972 campaigns, Obama by being more energetic in the remaining 2012 debates). Ross Perot’s political decline was marked by a widely-viewed 1993 debate with Vice President Al Gore over the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), during which Gore frequently goaded Perot into angry outbursts. Perot’s public favorability sharply diminished, and his effort to sway voters against NAFTA backfired (Michelson 1998).

More recently, the 2016 presidential election exposed voters to extraordinary displays of behavior, including attacks on topics traditionally considered off limits (e.g., personal

appearance, family members); unusual subjects of discussion (e.g., Trump Steaks); and memorable nonverbal displays (e.g., Governor Kasich’s exaggerated gesticulations or Donald Trump’s mocking of a physically handicapped reporter). Following the election of Republican Donald Trump, observers noted an increase in the use of profanity by Democrats (e.g, Roarty 2017; Merica 2017). This pattern may represent an attempt to co-opt stylistic qualities seen as successful, which is consistent with findings that politicians recognize the strategic importance of presentation and adjust style depending on context (Jones 2016).

Previous scholars have examined aspects of candidate demeanor, yet we lack a thorough comprehension of how a politician’s style affects public opinion. Existing work tends to focus on particular behaviors (e.g., emotional displays, nonverbal behavior) or specific settings (e.g., interpersonal vs. single speaker). The end result is a collection of loosely related findings that are not well integrated. Moreover, there is little theorizing about candidate-level factors. Most empirical studies investigate the effects of alternative stylistic behaviors, but not the candidate qualities that could determine their magnitude.

Across several different experimental designs, this study explores the concept of demeanor and its effect on candidate evaluation. Overall, demeanor that violates norms of expected behavior (particularly in a negative way) is punished by voters. Further, the size of these effects is conditioned by two candidate-level characteristics. First, candidate partisanship moderates reactions: copartisan candidates are punished less severely than outpartisans. Second, a candidate’s prior reputation matters. The harmful effect of poor demeanor on voter evaluations attenuates following prior such displays. Collectively, the findings illustrate robust demeanor effects and demonstrate the situations in which politicians can “get away” with acting inappropriately.

Defining Demeanor

Three aspects of demeanor distinguish it from related concepts in the literature: first, Demeanor refers to the stylistic qualities of a candidate’s behavior. Second, demeanor is behavioral in nature, including only actions that are under a candidate’s control and observable to voters. Finally, both verbal and non-verbal displays are part of a candidate’s demeanor. I discuss each component in greater detail below.

Demeanor concerns the manner in which a message is conveyed, as opposed to the substance of a message. Like some previous research (e.g., Mutz 2015, Jones 2016), I assume it is possible to distinguish behavioral style from political substance. The two are sometimes linked in that demeanor represents alternative styles through which substance can be conveyed. For instance, a candidate might advocate for a policy by strictly discussing its merits, while another might do so while also levying personal disparagements at opponents of the program. In the latter case, the non-substantive components of communication add distinctive demeanor content beyond the substantive message. I aim to isolate the effects of these demeanor-relevant aspects of communication.

Demeanor comprises observable behaviors that are under a candidate’s control, and is therefore distinct from stable dispositions such as personality traits or a candidate’s physical appearance. Thus, facial expressions are considered part of a candidate’s demeanor, whereas aspects of facial appearance (e.g., attractiveness, masculinity) are not. It is important to note that while demeanor is conceptually distinct from a candidate’s internal

psychological traits, demeanor may influence the trait *inferences* voters make about that person. Previous research on traits shows that perceptions of competence (Todorov et al. 2005), power/warmth (Laustsen 2017), and character weakness (Goren 2002) can affect voter preferences over candidates. A candidate’s behavioral style—i.e., his or her demeanor—may influence the inferences voters make regarding personality traits such as these (a proposition I take up directly in Study 1).

Finally, demeanor encompasses both the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of a candidate’s behavior. Verbal style includes aspects such as the tone or cadence of speech, the emotionality expressed toward a subject matter, the overall cordiality of discourse, and the degree of personalization used to connect with an audience. For example, officials can make statements in a detached manner, or might instead invoke personal circumstances or those of opponents (e.g., “[policy] means a lot to me” or “[person] does not care about [policy]”). In general, non-substantive speech elements are part of a politician’s demeanor and may affect audience perceptions. Nonverbal displays generally do not convey a specific, substantive political message. Nonetheless, the behaviors visible to an audience (e.g., spatial positioning, facial expressions, gesticulation) can impart information about a speaker’s thoughts, intentions, and emotional state.

To date, much of the literature relevant to demeanor has focused on nonverbal expression. For example, Lanzetta et al. (1985) categorize behavior into anger/threat, fear/evasion, and happiness/reassurance categories based on the emotion being expressed (e.g., anger) and the social signals communicated (e.g., threat). Different candidate displays are shown to affect physiological indicators of audience members, such as facial expression, skin conductance, and heart rate (McHugo et al. 1985). At the same time, candidates possess varying degrees of effectiveness in transmitting desired emotional cues (Sullivan and Masters 1988), while response to behavioral displays varies based upon the audience’s political predispositions (Sullivan 1996). These two sets of findings suggest that the effect of nonverbal behavior may differ according to characteristics of both the speaker and the audience, but to date this claim has not been explored systematically.

In addition to research on nonverbal behavior, there is evidence that politicians have distinctive linguistic styles (e.g., Slatcher et al. 2007, Pennebaker and Lay 2002, Jones 2016), which can influence public attitudes. Research by Diana Mutz shows that witnessing norm-violating incivility reduces political trust (Mutz and Reeves 2005) and the perceived legitimacy of opposing views (Mutz 2015). Bucy (2000) examines reactions by presidents to news events, showing that reactions deemed inappropriate in terms of either relevance or emotional tone are perceived to be less honest, credible, and trustworthy than appropriate ones. Behavior inappropriately tailored to a setting may also backfire by causing viewers’ emotional experiences to go in a direction opposite the intent of the speaker (Bucy and Bradley 2004).

These studies generate important insights regarding the potential influence of aspects of candidate demeanor on public opinion, but they focus on the effect of isolated behavioral displays. This approach fails to consider whether repeated norm violations have the same (i.e., an additive) effect. As a result, the existing literature cannot account for why some politicians enjoy success despite regular breaches of etiquette, while others suffer significant electoral backlash after a single episode of inappropriate behavior. My theory explicitly considers the role of past behavior (a candidate’s *reputation*) in determining the severity of

voter backlash in response to subsequent displays of atypical behavior.

Demeanor Atypicality and Reputation

I argue that demeanor will affect voter attitudes when candidates make unexpected displays. This expectation derives from numerous studies in social psychology demonstrating negative affective reaction to unexpected behavioral interactions.¹ Thus, *typicality* represents a key factor determining when demeanor will affect attitudes. *Typical* demeanor is defined by consistency with existing norms of social behavior, and it encompasses any display that does not stand out to voters as abnormal. Behavior of this kind is unlikely to affect audience perceptions of a candidate. In contrast, demeanor that is *atypical* will violate viewer expectations, potentially influencing the way a situation or candidate is perceived. I expect that voters generally react negatively to atypical demeanor.²

Demeanor Hypothesis (H₁): Candidates who display atypical demeanor will suffer audience backlash (e.g., in terms of favorability or trait evaluations) compared to those who exhibit typical behavior.³

Though people usually expect politicians to abide by behavioral norms (Mutz 2015), public figures who frequently violate norms may be bound by a different set of expectations. When voters repeatedly associate a particular politician with atypical displays, these behaviors will become less unexpected. In turn, reactions to future atypical displays by candidates with this type of reputation should become muted, as what was once surprising becomes ordinary. The salience of a candidate’s reputation should grow in proportion to the number of past transgressions, decreasing the marginal impact of subsequent displays. This account is consistent with well-established patterns of neurological (Breiter 1996) and affective (Dijksterhuis and Smith 2002) habituation, whereby “[r]epeated application of a stimulus results in a progressive decrease in some parameter of a response to an asymptotic level” (Rankin et al. 2008, p.136).

To the extent that past displays matter in this way, research on candidate behavior is missing a crucial element. Namely, an action that violates the expectations voters hold for one candidate might not do so for another. Infrequent offenders are likely to be punished for demeanor that violates prevailing norms. On the other hand, candidates who have conditioned audiences to expect breaches of etiquette could become immune to negative repercussions if voters widely internalize these lowered expectations. The empirical implication is that a reputation for atypical expression will attenuate the relationship between

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1. For example, Burgoon and Walther (1990) test social interactions along dimensions of touch, conversational distance, and posture, finding that unexpected interpersonal exchanges are evaluated more negatively. Likewise, Mendes et al. (2007) show that conversational partners who violate linguistic expectancies (e.g., an Asian person speaking with a southern accent) cause response patterns consistent with threat.
 2. Communication research shows that violations of verbal (Burgoon, Denning, and Umphrey 2002) and nonverbal (Burgoon and Hale 1988) expectations both can induce negative evaluative response, as well as physiological reaction (Mendes et al. 2007, Le Poire and Burgoon 1996). Because the effect of atypical displays should be similar whether verbal or nonverbal in nature, merging these two categories under a single heading (i.e., *demeanor*) is justified.
 3. Figure A.1 of the appendix illustrates several examples of the atypical category.

displays of atypical demeanor and voter evaluations.

Reputation Hypothesis (H₂): The negative effect of a display of atypical demeanor will be conditioned by a politician’s demeanor reputation. Politicians who have a reputation for atypical behavior will be punished less for future displays than those who have not established this reputation.

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between demeanor and candidate evaluations described by the Demeanor and Reputation hypotheses. The Y-axis indicates how favorability is affected by an atypical display made by a given candidate; that is, the marginal effect of a particular display (the axis is inverted so that higher values on the Y-axis indicate a larger negative effect on favorability). The X-axis indicates the number of prior atypical displays made by the candidate in question. Candidates with many prior displays will have formed a public reputation for atypical behavior, whereas those with few prior displays will not have. Thus, the charted curve reflects how demeanor effects attenuate for candidates with a reputation for atypical behavior. A candidate who has made very few or no prior atypical displays (the segment labeled *a* on the X-axis) will suffer relatively large, negative effects. If a candidate proceeds to make additional such displays, the marginal effect of each will begin to decrease as voters become used to his/her behavior (segment *b*). Eventually, if the number of atypical displays becomes extreme, the candidate will develop a strong behavioral reputation. At this point, the effect size of subsequent displays diminishes to a negligible level (segment *c*).

In the following sections, I present results from a series of studies providing evidence of the Demeanor (H₁) and Reputation (H₂) Hypotheses. The experiments feature a wide variety of demeanor displays and involve different public figures, including U.S. Senator Marco Rubio, Vice President Joe Biden, and former New York Congressman Michael Grimm.

Empirical Results

Study 1: Design

The purpose of Study 1 was to explore how individuals react to atypical demeanor. Subjects were exposed to different types of candidate demeanor ranging from typical to very atypical, and asked to make a series of judgments about that behavior. Study 1 also tests the Demeanor Hypothesis (H₁) by examining how demeanor affects candidate trait judgments.

Subjects were recruited from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) labor market in July 2016, and paid a small fee each in exchange for filling out a questionnaire lasting approximately 10 minutes (N=111). MTurk samples have become common in public opinion research (e.g., Clifford and Piston 2017; Milita et al. 2017), and although MTurk samples are not nationally representative, they exhibit greater variation on several individual-level characteristics compared to other convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; also see Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner 2015; Mullinix et al. 2015). The primary experiment within the questionnaire was a within-subjects design exposing each respondent to three separate videos of Florida senator and former Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio. These segments (edited from various public appearances by Rubio) were between 45 and 60 seconds in length, each depicting Rubio engaging in a distinct set of stylistic behaviors.

The three treatment videos were designed to expose subjects to several different behavioral patterns that voters encounter in the political environment. The *Typical* demeanor clip features Rubio at a campaign event in New Hampshire. The senator invokes familiar patriotic themes, does not discuss any substantive matters regarding policy or other topics, and does not display any noteworthy nonverbal behavior. The second condition (“*Atypical-Rude*”) depicts behavior similar to the type studied by incivility researchers (e.g., Mutz and Reeves 2005, Mutz 2015). In this video, Rubio is at an outdoor rally attacking one of his opponents in the 2016 Republican presidential primary, Donald Trump. Rubio is seen ridiculing Trump for misspellings in social media posts and also insults his physical appearance. Again, the clip is edited to exclude any substantive messages by Rubio. Finally, the “*Atypical-Strange*” condition is intended to assess the effect of atypically awkward behavior on voters who observe it. This video is an excerpt of Rubio delivering the Republican Party’s official response to President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union address. In this clip, Rubio displays unusual nonverbal behavior at multiple points, first pausing midsentence to wipe his mouth, then awkwardly reaching off camera for a bottle of water. This behavior is unusual for an elected official delivering a nationally televised address, but differs substantially from the *Atypical-Rude* category in the nature of its atypicality. Respondents viewed all three clips in randomly assigned order. Figure A.2 of the supplemental appendix depicts the three video conditions of Study 1.

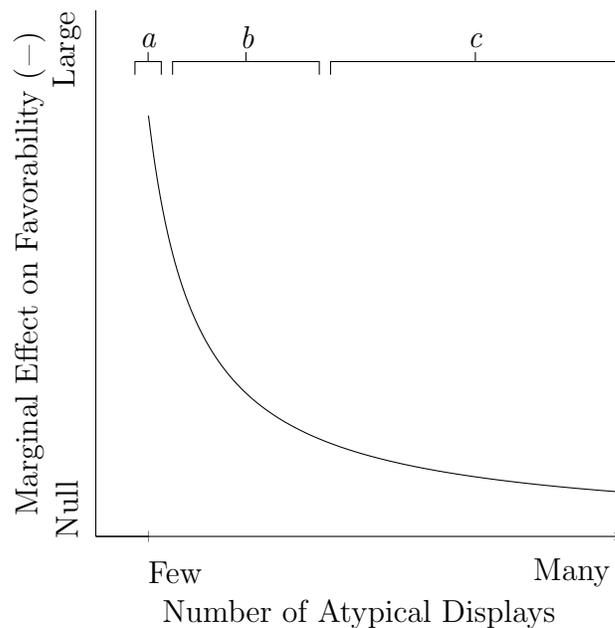


Figure 1 The Effect of Atypical Demeanor on Voter Evaluation of Candidates.

Note: Y-axis represents the marginal effect of an atypical display, with higher values indicating larger negative effects, and lower values representing smaller negative effects. X-axis represents the number of prior atypical displays.

Different Stages of Effects:

- a. Large initial effects
- b. Decreasing effects
- c. Negligible effects

Study 1: Results

The first outcome I examine is perception of typicality. Based on the importance of behavioral expectations, subjects should notice differences in Senator Rubio’s behavior across the three videos. I test this proposition with an item immediately following each video, which asked “[t]hinking about Rubio in the previous video clip, would you say that his behavior is typical or not typical for a presidential candidate?” There were four response options ranging from “not at all typical” (coded as 1) to “very typical” (coded as 4). The top row of Table 1 shows response patterns across the three experimental conditions.

Table 1 Rubio Outcome Measures (Study 1)

	Typical	Atypical-Rude	Atypical-Strange
Typicality	3.59 (0.05)	2.34*** (0.09)	2.56*** (0.10)
Leader	2.29 (0.17)	1.82** (0.17)	2.15 (0.18)
Intelligent	2.86 (0.18)	2.45** (0.14)	2.82 (0.19)
Cares	2.05 (0.19)	1.69* (0.15)	1.97 (0.17)
Moral	2.45 (0.17)	2.14* (0.17)	2.44 (0.18)
Knowledgeable	2.48 (0.18)	2.28 (0.18)	2.60 (0.18)
Honest	2.19 (0.17)	2.17 (0.19)	2.18 (0.15)
N	37	29	45

Note: Cell entries are sample means. Standard errors in parentheses. *Typicality* scored “not at all typical” (1) to “very typical” (4). All other variables scored “describes [Rubio] not well at all” (1) to “describes [Rubio] extremely well” (5).

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Difference of means in comparison to Typical category, one-tailed.

Typicality judgments of Rubio’s behavior in each clip varied in the expected manner. Subjects perceived the behavior displayed in both of the “atypical” clips as much less typical of somebody in Rubio’s position compared to the “typical” clip. In the *Typical* condition, the mean typicality score was 3.59. In contrast, mean typicality was only 2.34 in the *Atypical-Rude* condition and 2.56 in the *Atypical-Strange* group. The observed differences in comparison to the Typical group were large (1.25 for *Atypical-Rude*, 1.02 for *Atypical-Strange*) and

highly significant (both t_{110} , one-tailed $p < .01$). As expected, people distinguished between typical and atypical displays.

In addition to the within-subjects video treatments, the randomized order of the clips allowed for a between-subjects analysis to explore how Rubio’s demeanor affected inferences about his personality traits. After subjects viewed the first of the three videos (but before seeing the other two), they were asked a battery of candidate trait evaluation items mirroring those featured in past American National Election Studies (ANES) questionnaires (Kinder 1983). These questions read “[i]n your opinion, does the phrase ”[trait item]” describe Marco Rubio extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all?” where the trait items asked in random sequence were “he is moral,” “he provides strong leadership,” “he cares about people like you,” “he is knowledgeable,” “he is intelligent,” and “he is honest.” Because these items were asked after each subject had viewed only one randomly selected video clip, it is possible to estimate the effect of the *Atypical-Rude* and *Atypical-Strange* treatments relative to the *Typical* condition. These results appear in the remaining portion of Table 1.

The pattern of responses to the trait battery indicates that the *Atypical-Rude* condition affected trait inferences in the manner predicted by the Demeanor Hypothesis. Across all six trait items, subjects judged Rubio more poorly upon viewing the *Atypical-Rude* video than upon viewing the *Typical* Demeanor clip (i.e., comparing the first and second columns in Table 1). These differences were significant for four out of the six items (leadership, intelligence, caring, and moral). In contrast, there are no significant differences in the comparison of trait judgments between the *Typical* and *Atypical-Strange* conditions (e.g., the first and third columns).

The results of Study 1 demonstrate that subjects perceive variation in the typicality of demeanor displays. Importantly, there is substantial difference in how different types of atypical demeanor affect attitudes. Behavior that was unusually rude was punished by subjects in their trait perceptions of Rubio. In comparison, although subjects recognized Rubio’s demeanor as atypical in the *Atypical-Strange* condition, there was no similar backlash in terms of trait judgments. The heightened effect of atypical rudeness is unsurprising in light of existing research on negative information. People are faster at recognizing negative, rather than positive, stimuli (Dijkserhuis and Aarts 2003), and there is a wealth of evidence showing that negative information is more powerful than positive information (e.g., Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1997; Lau 1985; Soroka and McAdams 2015). Thus, voters may be likely to react to unusually negative demeanor differently than behaviors that are unusual for other reasons. Personal insults or derisiveness (e.g., Rubio’s remarks toward Trump) may be perceived differently than strange gestures (e.g., Rubio’s awkward pause for water), abnormal shows of enthusiasm, irregular attempts at humor, or other atypical behaviors that are not inherently negative.

Study 1 identifies trait perceptions as one domain in which demeanor has important substantive effects, and provides evidence supporting the Demeanor Hypothesis. The remaining studies broaden the empirical scope and expose subjects to information on a candidate’s past behavior in order to test the Reputation Hypothesis.

Study 2: Design

Whereas Study 1 showed that atypical demeanor worsens trait judgments (consistent with the Demeanor Hypothesis), Study 2 continues by investigating the effect of this type of behavior on the broader evaluative variable of candidate favorability. It also expands the scope of inquiry by introducing a manipulation designed to test the Reputation Hypothesis (H₂).

Students enrolled in political science courses ($N=235$) at Stony Brook University were recruited for a lab experiment in April 2016. Subjects received extra credit in exchange for their participation. Like the first study, Study 2 employed edited videos as its primary stimuli. In this case, however, the scenario featured multiple speakers instead of just one. The clips were from the October 2012 U.S. vice presidential debate between Vice President Joe Biden and Republican vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan. Through most of the debate, Biden's behavior was unusually animated. Biden was frequently seen interrupting, smirking, or laughing in a ridiculing manner during Ryan's allotted time to speak. Indeed, Biden's behavior was more widely discussed in post-event commentary than the substance of the debate. One article summarized the controversy as follows:

Vice President Joe Biden was either a happy warrior or a smirking boor, but his demeanor in the vice presidential debate with Rep. Paul D. Ryan dominated talk among campaign surrogates afterward as Democrats expressed glee over Biden's irreverent performance and Republicans expressed a combination of shock and puzzlement. As the Romney-Ryan campaign staff watched the debate Thursday night, spokesman Michael Steel said, "I think there was a lot of incredulity. What is he doing? Why is he doing that? There were a couple of times when it just seemed really inappropriate." Steel said Ryan had expected Biden to interrupt him, and had prepared for that, but "the laughter was certainly not something we expected" (Landsberg 2012).

Study 2 draws upon this event to examine whether this type of unconventional behavior affects candidate evaluations. Subjects were randomly assigned to view one of two stimulus videos edited together from different parts of the debate, each lasting about 90 seconds. Through most of the video, Biden and Ryan were shown on opposite sides of the screen in separate camera shots. The side-by-side format allowed for Biden's demeanor to be manipulated while keeping Ryan's constant. In the *Typical Demeanor* condition, Biden's demeanor was typical for a debate setting, showing little visible reaction to Ryan as he was speaking. In the *Atypical Demeanor* condition, Biden's demeanor was visibly derisive toward Ryan's ongoing response, including ridiculing smirks and silent laughter.⁴ In both conditions, subjects listened to the moderator's question about Medicare before each candidate gave a response. An open-ended attention check asked subjects to identify the topic of discussion (Medicare), and was answered correctly by nearly all subjects.⁵ A seven-point candidate favorability item ("strongly favorable" to "strongly unfavorable") followed the video and attention check.

4. The video treatments for both conditions appear in Figure A.3 of the supplemental appendix.

5. Because the treatment was overwhelmingly successful, all cases were retained for the analysis.

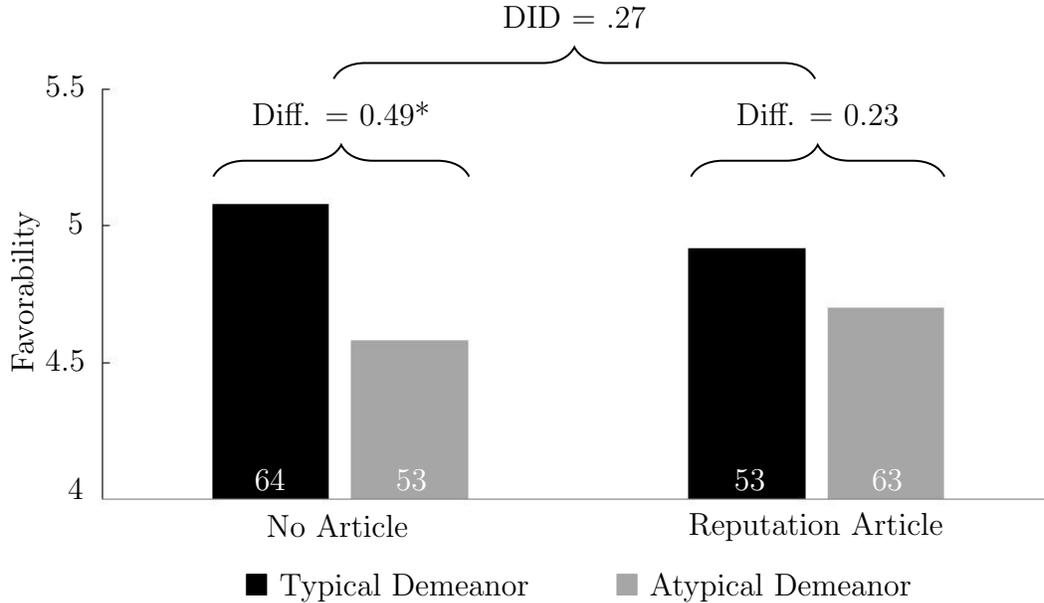


Figure 2 Mean Biden Favorability by Condition (Study 2)

Note: Bar height indicates mean favorability toward Biden. *Favorability* scored “strongly favorable” (1) to “strongly unfavorable” (7). Number of subjects in each condition indicated within bars.

* one-tailed $p < .05$.

Additionally, Study 2 featured a second manipulation presented prior to the video. According to the Reputation Hypothesis, information about Biden’s reputation should change expectations of his behavior, and condition subject reactions upon being exposed to his atypical demeanor. Thus, a second treatment conveyed that Biden was known for atypical demeanor. A random half of the participants were assigned to read an excerpt from an online article describing Biden and Ryan’s contrasting styles. The text (reproduced in Figure A.4 of the supplemental appendix) described Biden as prone to breaches of normal campaign behavior, and Ryan as predictable and detail-oriented. The Reputation Hypothesis predicts that reading this article will reduce the effect of Biden’s atypical demeanor.

Study 2: Results

Figure 2 presents mean favorability ratings across all four conditions (coded with higher values indicating greater favorability toward Biden). The black bars depict subjects in the *Typical* condition, with the grey bars representing the *Atypical* condition. The two leftmost bars show the favorability ratings for people who viewed the debate video by itself, while the two rightmost bars show the ratings for people who also read the article (and were therefore warned in advance to expect atypical behavior from Biden).

The Demeanor Hypothesis predicts that politicians will be punished for violating the norms of expected behavior, and this is exactly the pattern shown in Figure 2. Subjects who witnessed Biden expressing atypical demeanor rated him less favorably than those who witnessed typical demeanor by about half a point on the favorability scale (t_{115} , one-tailed $p < .05$, without article). Thus, despite the relatively unobtrusive treatment, there was still a considerable, negative audience reaction to Biden’s conduct.

The second manipulated factor corresponds to the presence or absence of the article establishing Biden’s reputation for unconventional behavior. The main effect of the article was slightly negative and insignificant (no direct effect was expected). Of interest is whether the article conditioned demeanor effects as predicted. In the absence of the reputational prime, Biden’s atypical demeanor reduced favorability ratings (compared to the *Typical* condition) by .49 points. Consistent with the Reputation Hypothesis, the magnitude of this effect attenuated for the group that did view the article (.22 vs. .49). As predicted, Biden was punished less for atypical behavior when a prior history for such displays was established. While the effect of atypical behavior is larger in the *No Article* than the *Article* condition, the difference in difference (DID) estimate of this effect fails to reach common thresholds of statistical significance.⁶ Overall, Study 2 further supports the Demeanor Hypothesis, and offers suggestive evidence in support of the Reputation Hypothesis.

Study 2 is a conservative test of demeanor’s effect on candidate evaluation. Biden’s behavior during Ryan’s response is the only difference between the *Typical* and *Atypical* conditions, and the manipulation is strictly nonverbal in nature. This subtle treatment has the advantage of depicting a common instance of atypical demeanor (nonverbal interruption) in a realistic setting. While there was a nontrivial, significant effect on favorability, it is likely that more severe normative violations will induce more severe subject response.

Study 3a and 3b: Design

The final two studies use a shared set of video stimuli, which are described below. Study 3a was administered November and December of 2016, and involved 215 undergraduate political science students at Stony Brook University. Study 3b was fielded in May 2017, and featured a sample of 614 MTurk workers. Like Study 2, both experiments examine how candidate favorability is affected by displays of atypical demeanor. However, two distinctions are important to note. First, whereas Study 2 manipulated demeanor by changing behavior within the same scene (i.e., a single segment of the Biden-Ryan debate edited differently across conditions), Studies 3a and 3b manipulate demeanor using scenes from different events. More specifically, a random subset of subjects was exposed to a video clip depicting atypical behavior, while this “target clip” was withheld from control subjects. A second notable feature of Studies 3a and 3b is that each includes new manipulations not found in the prior studies. Study 3a randomizes the partisanship of the public official in focus, allowing for examination of how the “match” between subject-candidate party identification influences demeanor effects. Study 3b employs a new reputation treatment. Here, expectations are manipulated by having some subjects view prior episodes of atypical demeanor (compare to Study 2, in which reputation was established with a news article).

The audiovisual stimuli for Study 3a and 3b were compiled from a variety of clips featuring former Congressman Michael Grimm of New York, a Republican who served from 2011 to 2015. A total of nine clips appear at different points in the experimental conditions, depicting Grimm in a wide variety of contexts (e.g., mundane, endearing, offensive). A

6. The DID estimate is derived from an ordinary least squares model predicting Biden favorability with variables indicating *Atypical* condition, *Article* condition, and their interaction (i.e., assignment to both.) The DID estimate produced by the interaction term was .27 (s.e.=.38).

collage showing each scene and its label is included in the upper portion of Figure 3. Studies 3a and 3b both test the effect of demeanor by first exposing subjects to segments with typical demeanor to form the basis of their evaluations of Grimm, and then exposing a random subset to a clip in which Grimm displays atypical demeanor (the target clip). Importantly, no additional substantive information (e.g., policy stances, value statements, ideological expression) is conveyed during the atypical material, which was edited to exclude this type of content. The dependent variable (immediately following the video) is a seven-point scale of favorability toward Grimm. Given random assignment to condition, any observed differences in evaluations of Grimm can be attributed to the demeanor he displays in the target clip.

Study 3a

Before viewing the main audiovisual portion of the experiment, subjects read a brief introduction to Congressman Grimm. This screen identifies Grimm as the subject of the video to follow, and mentions his position as a former House member. Additionally, subjects were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which Grimm was described as a Republican (his actual affiliation), a Democrat, or a House member (e.g., no mention of his partisanship).⁷ Assigned prior to the primary treatment video, this design can reveal whether subjects perceived Grimm’s demeanor differently when they shared common partisanship.

Immediately following the introductory screen, participants viewed one of two videos showing Grimm in various situations. The middle portion of Figure 3 outlines these two conditions. In one group, subjects viewed a video in which Grimm’s behavior was ordinary throughout the entire duration (the “*Typical Demeanor*” condition). This control video consisted of three clips. The first features Grimm in an interview discussing proposed immigration legislation to allow graduating foreign students to remain in the United States after obtaining their college degree. The second clip is a news report discussing emerging fraud charges against Grimm. The congressman is seen defending himself against the allegations at a public press conference. In the final clip, Grimm gives his closing statement at a debate with his challenger in the 2014 election. There is nothing particularly noteworthy about Grimm’s demeanor in any of these segments.

Another group of subjects began by viewing the same sequence, but at its conclusion saw the target clip, in which Congressman Grimm displayed atypical demeanor (the “*Atypical Demeanor*” condition). This clip begins with a news reporter asking Grimm for comment on the ongoing controversy surrounding his criminal accusations. Grimm politely but brusquely declines to answer the question, ends the interview, and exits the frame. After the reporter concludes the segment, Grimm—upset over the reporter’s prior line of questioning and unaware that the television camera remained filming—reenters the shot in an aggressive manner and berates the reporter. The outburst culminates with Grimm threatening to throw the reporter off the balcony of the Capitol rotunda. This target clip exposes treated subjects to a clear display of atypical verbal and nonverbal demeanor by Grimm. The target clip does not introduce any new substantive information on Grimm, as the legal issues briefly

7. The video treatments for Study 3a did not mention Grimm’s actual party affiliation, and no subjects assigned to the Democrat condition indicated awareness of the factual discrepancy in Grimm’s partisanship in open-ended, post-survey feedback items.

Hurricane Sandy Relief



Animal Adoption



Immigration



Street Argument^a



Interrupting in Debate^a



Town Hall Argument^a



Indictment News Clip



Debate Closing Statement



Incident With Reporter^b



Study 3a

	Typical Demeanor (2:13)	Atypical Demeanor (3:02)
Immigration	•	•
Indictment News Clip	•	•
Debate Closing Statement	•	•
<i>Incident with Reporter^b</i>		•

Study 3b

	I No Rep. No Target (3:51)	II No Rep. Target (4:40)	III Rep. No Target (5:14)	IV Rep. Target (6:03)
Hurricane Sandy Relief	•	•	•	•
Animal Adoption	•	•	•	•
Immigration	•	•	•	•
Street Argument^a			•	•
Interrupting in Debate^a			•	•
Town Hall Argument^a			•	•
Indictment News Clip	•	•	•	•
Debate Closing Statement	•	•	•	•
<i>Incident with Reporter^b</i>		•		•

Figure 3 Grimm Video Conditions (Studies 3a and 3b)

Note: Video duration in parentheses. See appendix Figure A.5 for URLs to view full videos.

^a Atypical reputation clips ^b Atypical target clip

mentioned by the reporter were already discussed at length in an earlier section of the video. The only difference across the two conditions is the target clip, meaning that any observed change in favorability ratings can be attributed to the atypical demeanor Grimm displays therein.

As predicted by the Demeanor Hypothesis, there is strong evidence that exposure to Grimm’s atypical demeanor reduced favorability ratings. Grimm received relatively high marks from those in the *Typical* group (mean favorability rating = 4.94) despite the fact this condition conveyed damaging information about Grimm’s legal problems. The outlook is dramatically different in the *Atypical* group. Among subjects who viewed the congressman’s incident with the interviewer, average favorability drops well into the lower half of the scale (mean rating = 2.64). This demeanor effect represents more than two full points on the seven-point scale (difference = 2.29, t_{212} , one-tailed $p < .01$).

Furthermore, the effect of Grimm’s atypical demeanor remains strong even in the face of partisan cueing. In order to analyze the effect of the partisanship manipulation, I separate the sample into three groups depending on how Grimm’s partisanship compared to a subject’s reported party identification. The “inpartisan” group ($N = 38$) includes those subjects who identified as Republican and were assigned to the Grimm-Republican condition, as well as subjects who identified as Democrats and were assigned to the Grimm-Democrat condition. The “outpartisan” group ($N = 48$) is composed of subjects who had a partisan affiliation that differed from the congressman’s. Finally, Grimm’s partisanship went unmentioned for a random third of the sample. These subjects, regardless of their own party identification, are assigned to the group labeled “[n]o partisanship” ($N = 71$).⁸ Figure 4 plots the treatment effect across the three partisanship groups, along with the overall sample treatment effect.

The effect of atypical demeanor remains negative and significant within each category, yet there is substantial variation in the size of these effects based on subject-candidate partisan orientation. For the condition in which no party label is provided, those assigned to the *Typical* condition view Grimm more favorably than those in the *Atypical* condition by an average of 2.24 points (t_{69} , one-tailed $p < .01$). This difference is similar to the overall sample treatment effect. Outpartisans punished Grimm to a somewhat greater extent, with the atypical treatment effect rising to 2.49 (t_{46} , one-tailed $p < .01$) in this group. In contrast, Grimm was punished far less by inpartisans, with the *Typical* vs. *Atypical* difference dropping to 1.54 for these subjects (t_{36} , one-tailed $p < .01$). Compared to the overall sample, the adverse effect of atypical demeanor was smaller by a significant margin among inpartisans.⁹ This pattern provides initial evidence that certain candidate characteristics (shared partisanship in this case) can make voters less reactive to atypical demeanor.

8. The size of these three groups (157) sums to less than the overall sample size (215) because subjects who identified as independent or who did not know their partisanship could not be sorted when Grimm was either a Democrat or Republican.

9. This estimate is derived from an ordinary least squares model predicting Grimm favorability with indicators for assignment to the *Atypical* condition, membership in the inpartisan group, and their interaction (i.e., the presence of both) as the only predictors. The DID estimate produced by the interaction term was .91 (s.e.=.45).

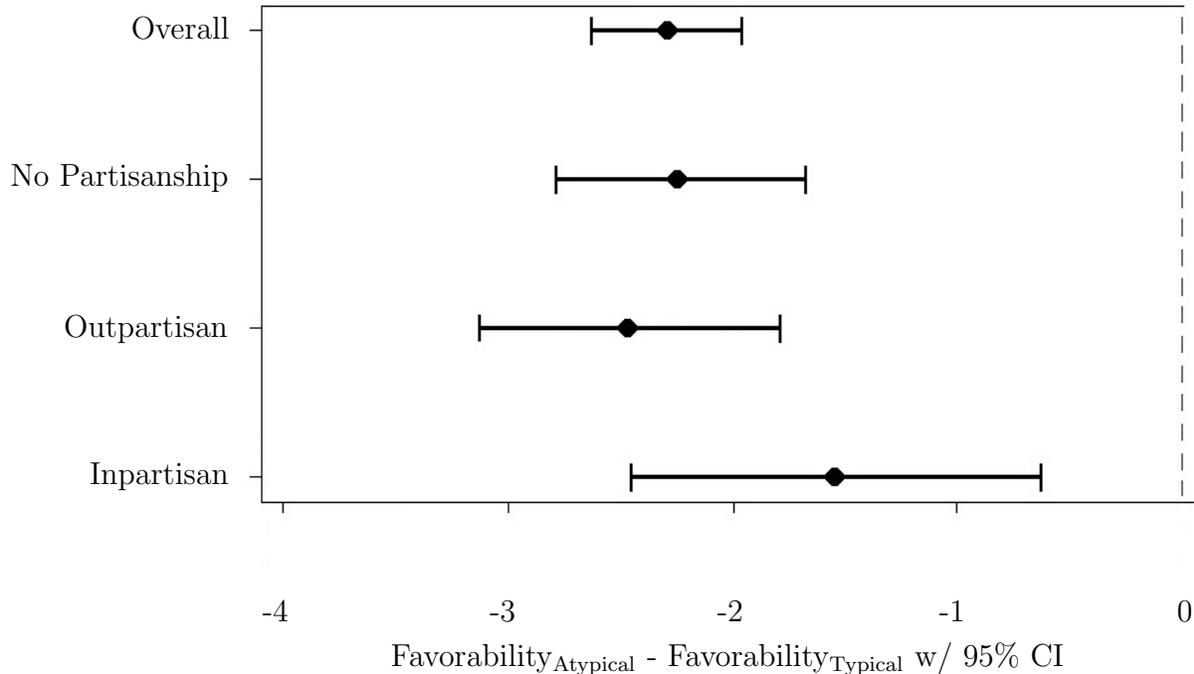


Figure 4 Favorability Differences across Typical and Atypical Demeanor Conditions (Study 3a)
 Note: Points represent difference in mean favorability between Atypical and Typical conditions for each partisanship group. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Study 3b

As with previous experiments, Study 3b uses a randomly assigned, atypical target clip to gauge the main the effect of demeanor on favorability. The target clip was identical to the one used in Study 3a, showing Grimm expressing atypical demeanor toward an interviewing reporter. Previously, Study 2 provided suggestive evidence that candidate reputation can influence the size of demeanor effects on favorability, though the interaction failed to reach statistical significance. Study 3b offers a more robust test of the Reputation Hypothesis. Since candidate reputation is an attenuating factor, the extent of moderation is necessarily constrained by the size of the direct effect of demeanor. For this reason, the considerably large effect of Study 3a’s target clip makes it useful for testing the Reputation Hypothesis.

Study 3b augments the design of Study 3a with a manipulation intended to influence subject expectations regarding Grimm. Because reputation develops through prior exposure to a candidate’s behavior, Study 3b exposes a random set of subjects to additional instances of Grimm’s atypical demeanor prior to the target clip. Demeanor effects can thus be gauged in either the presence or absence of prior exposure. Those assigned to the “Reputation” condition viewed three clips that were intended to establish Grimm as having a reputation for atypical behavior. In the first clip, Grimm is campaigning on a local street in his district, during which time an argument breaks out between him and a supporter of a rival candidate. The two yell back-and-forth insults for a few moments before a bystander eventually steps between them. The next clip shows Grimm during a debate with the Democratic challenger

for his congressional seat in the 2014 election, Domenic Recchia.¹⁰ Grimm interrupts Recchia several times, and eventually makes a sarcastic insult aimed at Recchia’s lack of rhetorical polish (“you speak very well, too.”). The final clip in this sequence is from a local town hall event where Grimm fielded questions from constituents. During a heated exchange, one audience member attempts to interrupt Grimm, who harshly quiets him with a thinly veiled threat (“[h]ave a little respect and if you don’t have any, I’ll be glad to teach it to you.”). As with the other studies, the reputational clips were edited to reveal no new substantive information about Grimm’s issue positions, political values, or governing philosophy. Exposure to these clips should impart a sense of Grimm’s behavioral style and establish his demeanor reputation.¹¹

Subjects in Study 3b were therefore randomly assigned to one of four conditions representing the two manipulated factors: the presence or absence of the target clip showing atypical demeanor, and the presence or absence of the earlier video clips establishing Grimm’s reputation. These treatments produce the four conditions shown in the lower portion of Figure 3: no reputation clips and no target clip (**I**), no reputation clips with the target clip (**II**), reputation clips without the target clip (**III**), and reputation clips with the target clip (**IV**).¹² Immediately after viewing the assigned video, subjects reported their favorability toward Grimm.

I test the Reputational Hypothesis (H_2) by examining the effect of the target clip in the presence or absence of the reputation clips.¹³ The effect of the target clip should diminish when reputation for atypical demeanor has been established. A difference in difference comparison of the target clip’s effect in the presence or absence of the reputational clips tests this prediction. In terms of Grimm favorability, H_2 predicts that: **I–II** > **III–IV**.

The results provide strong support for the Reputation Hypothesis, and the effect of past behavior on audience reactions to subsequent displays. Figure 5 depicts patterns of favorability in Study 3b, with each bar representing mean Grimm favorability within a single condition. The effect of the atypical target clip in the absence of any prior atypical displays was -1.81 (t_{301} , one-tailed $p < .01$; *No Reputation/No Target* vs. *No Reputation/Target*, **I** vs. **II**). However, this effect attenuates substantially in the conditions in which Grimm is seen behaving rudely earlier in the video. In the presence of the reputation clips, the negative impact of the target clip is reduced to 1.15 (t_{309} , one-tailed $p < .01$; *Reputation/No Target*

10. This debate is different from the one featured in the “debate closing statement” video clip.

11. Unlike Study 3a, Grimm’s partisanship was unmentioned in the opening text. Two additional common clips were included in each video condition: one depicting Grimm advocating for Hurricane Sandy relief funds, and another in which he encourages animal adoption while posing with a Yorkshire Terrier puppy. These new clips helped establish a positive baseline impression of Grimm to prevent floor effects in the difference in difference comparison reported below.

12. The videos are of varying length due to the different combination of clips across conditions. Placebo clips to equalize length were not included because even non-political content could have introduced additional, potentially confounding considerations into subject evaluations of Grimm.

13. Because Study 3b’s reputation treatment exposes subjects to additional examples of Grimm’s atypical demeanor, this manipulation may have a direct effect on favorability toward Grimm (in addition to moderating the effect of the target clip on favorability). No direct effect emerged for the earlier reputation treatment of Study 2 because that manipulation only described Biden’s reputation, rather than exposing subjects to examples of his atypical behavior.

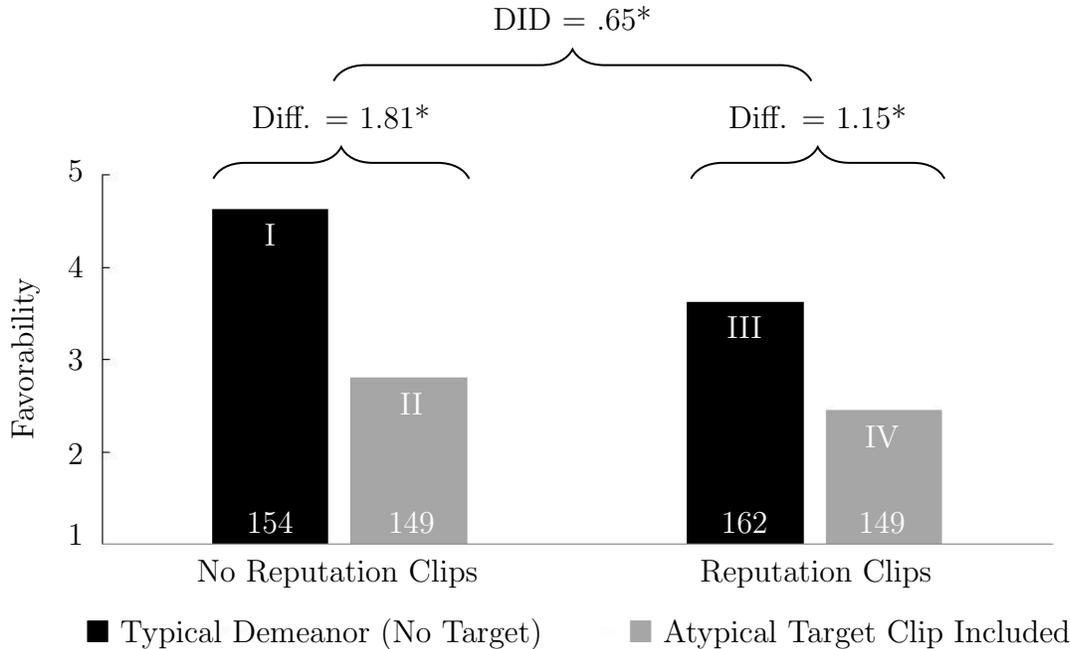


Figure 5 Mean Grimm Favorability by Condition (Study 3b)

Note: Bar height indicates mean favorability toward Grimm. Favorability scored “strongly favorable” (1) to “strongly unfavorable” (7). Number of subjects in each condition indicated within bars.

* one-tailed $p < .01$.

vs. *Reputation/Target*, **III** vs. **IV**). The DID coefficient obtained from these results ($[I-II] - [III-IV]$) is sizable and statistically significant (.65, two-tailed $p < .05$).¹⁴ Those who had previously witnessed Grimm misbehave still punished him for the serious transgression depicted in the target clip, but did so by about two-thirds of a point less than those who were seeing Grimm display atypical demeanor for the first time. This is exactly the relationship predicted by the Reputation Hypothesis. Overall, Study 3b reinforces previous findings concerning the direct effects of atypical demeanor, and provides strong evidence in support of candidate-level reputational effects.

Conclusion

Across four studies, candidate demeanor had a substantial influence on how voters think about politicians. Audiences notice atypical behavior and are repulsed when such displays are negatively-tempered. The displays tested in this series of studies—ranging in severity from mocking, interruption, and profanity all the way to physical intimidation and verbal threat—demonstrate the effect of atypical demeanor across a range of political contexts. Moreover, the patterns were consistent across different outcome measures (e.g., favorability, trait judgments).

14. The significance test of the DID score is derived from an ordinary least squares model predicting Grimm favorability with variables indicating assignment to the reputation clips, assignment to the target clip, and their interaction (i.e., assignment to both) as the only predictors. The DID estimate produced by the interaction term was .65 (s.e.=.28).

The effect of candidate behavior can be dramatic, yet the contextual determinants of these effects have important implications for electoral politics. First, demeanor effects reflect partisan biases. Those predisposed toward supporting a candidate (inpartisans) are more forgiving of norm violations than those predisposed toward opposition (outpartisans). Additionally, as hypothesized, a candidate’s reputation moderates audience reactions to atypical demeanor. The repercussions of poor demeanor diminish when viewers habituate to this behavior from a particular figure. Textual priming produced suggestive evidence of this relationship (Study 2), with a stronger pattern emerging when actual prior exposure was manipulated (Study 3b).

These findings illustrate the strategic considerations that candidates must take into account when crafting their public image. Some politicians have been damaged by poorly received behavioral displays, while others have thrived despite eccentric personas. Appropriate contextual tailoring of demeanor can determine success or failure. For candidates who choose to make atypical displays—for example, to gain attention, generate excitement, or signal authenticity—minimizing negative voter reactions is of crucial importance. Thus, the moderators of demeanor effects (e.g., copartisanship and prior reputation) can determine when, where, and for whom atypical displays might be opportune.

Politicians who confine atypical demeanor to friendly audiences will be able to reduce backlash because those favorably predisposed react less severely. In rally settings, for example, expletives and insults can be used to engage the crowd, while adverse response is mitigated due to group composition. Herbst (2010) points to Sarah Palin’s rally appearances during the 2008 presidential race as an example of strategic incivility. Palin often invoked an unusually harsh and blunt style, which helped roil enthusiasm within the Republican base. The finding that inpartisans are less prone to punish atypical demeanor means that targeting these displays to this group can generate excitement while negating repercussions.

The role of reputation suggests that candidates who adopt an all or nothing approach may be at an advantage compared to those who vacillate between typical and atypical demeanor. Candidates who never make atypical displays need not worry about the associated audience backlash by default. At the other extreme, although a politician who habitually violates norms will likely suffer reduced public favorability, the reputation gained from this behavior may eventually become so salient that the marginal effect of further atypical displays becomes negligible. Upon reaching this point, tactics involving insults, obscenity, and crassness can be used to energize supporters and attack opponents with little downside. Mixed strategies in which atypical demeanor is used occasionally but insufficiently to develop reputation will be least advantageous. Candidates adopting this approach stand to suffer the full brunt of audience resentment, but may not realize the strategic benefit from atypical demeanor when used intermittently. Further examination of the benefits of atypical demeanor (relative to its disadvantages) is an important direction for future research.

Finally, the subject of candidate demeanor intersects with other literatures. For instance, the key role of typicality perceptions makes group stereotypes (e.g., based on race or gender) potentially relevant. If people expect different behavioral patterns from non-traditional politicians, this may redefine what “typical” entails in such cases. Similarly, though the current study focuses on American politicians, typicality will also vary in countries where the norms of political conduct are different. Expanding the current scope of this research

to other areas will be valuable for understanding the effects of candidate demeanor on voter attitudes.

Overall, the behavior of public figures connects broadly to how citizens perceive the political world. Presentation matters in leaders' efforts to gain public faith, effectively advocate for issues and movements, and succeed against competing appeals from the opposition. The responsiveness of politicians to public reaction suggests a potentially complex process of reciprocal influence between stylistic choices and mass attitudes. While there remains much to learn about this relationship, the present study demonstrates the theoretical and empirical value of focusing on demeanor.

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Supplementary Appendix



Figure A.1 Examples of Verbal and Nonverbal Atypical Demeanor

Congressman Joe Wilson interrupts President Obama's joint congressional address in 2009. This display was atypical for its violation of norms against audience interruption during a formal address. Though most noteworthy for its vocalized component, Wilson also makes atypical nonverbal gestures during the incident.

URL: <https://youtu.be/UL51prMN7Nk>

Howard Dean's scream following the 2004 Iowa Caucuses. Intended to reassure supporters after a disappointing third place finish in Iowa, Dean made a raucous address universally panned by observers as extreme in its delivery. The speech is most famous for Dean's guttural yell during one moment of particular intensity (nonverbal demeanor was also atypical during this crescendo).

URL: <https://youtu.be/TauduP3Tvd8>

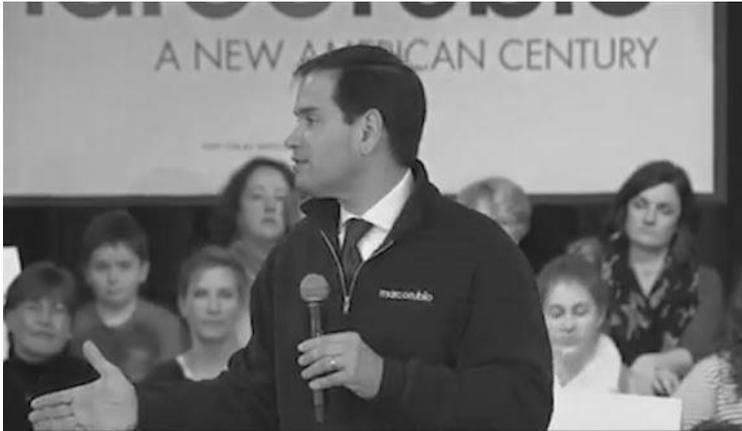
Al Gore intrudes on George W. Bush's space during a presidential debate in 2000. This town hall-style debate between Bush and Gore allowed the candidates freedom to roam the stage. During one widely-covered incident, Gore encroached noticeably far into Bush's personal space while the latter candidate spoke. Bush acknowledged his opponent's unusually close proximity with a curt nod toward Gore, prompting laughter from the live audience. Gore's behavior was poorly received by commentators as disrespectful and domineering.

URL: https://youtu.be/sF3Sp7LAy_A

George W. Bush attempts African dance. As part of festivities marking Malaria Awareness Day in 2007, Senegalese dancers and musicians from the KanKouran West African Dance Company were invited to perform in the White House Rose Garden. President Bush made various efforts to actively participate in the performance, mimicking the dancers' routine and occasionally coopting instruments. Bush's unusual mannerisms and expressions during the event were lampooned in political and entertainment media.

URL: <https://youtu.be/eXimyYCcoso>

Typical



Atypical-Rude



Atypical-Strange

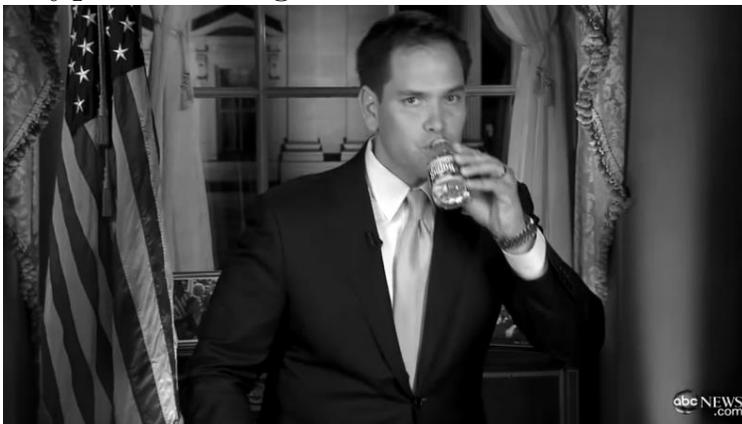


Figure A.2 Video Conditions (Study 1).

Note: The video clips for Study 1 can be viewed at the following URLs:

Typical: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4QMZMUBTcI>

Atypical-Rude: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FsfjdW8d-w>

Atypical-Strange: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkTuiMQ5jnM>

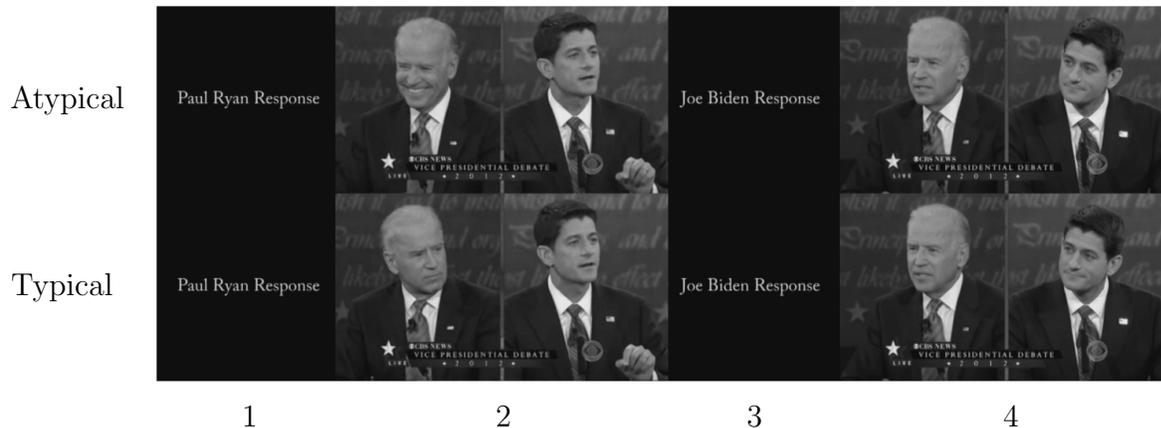


Figure A.3 Progression of Video Conditions (Study 2)

Note: The two videos used in Study 2 can be viewed juxtaposed with one another at the following URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xndJudPOZ4

Clash of Style and Substance Looms in Vice Presidential Debate

Vice-presidential debates typically don't matter very much in the scheme of things, but Thursday's match-up between Paul Ryan and Joe Biden is attracting an unusual amount of attention, and it is sure to be a fascinating clash of styles in a number of ways. Both candidates will be under significant pressure to perform well, but for differing reasons.

Vice President Biden is tasked with putting the Democrats' campaign back on track after their calamitous first debate, which the panel of experts at Election Debates awarded to Mitt Romney by a vote of 5-1 and which has universally been judged to be the poorest debate showing of Obamas career. Unfortunately, Biden has a longstanding reputation for making gaffes on the campaign trail, and is often accused of being overly loquacious—in plain English, of being a blowhard.

But while Democratic activists and supporters would relish the prospect of his humiliating Paul Ryan, undecided voters will want to see the younger man rebutted on the facts rather than belittled for his “youth and inexperience.” Finally, he should avoid getting dragged into dry or overly technical arguments with the other man. Ryan is widely agreed to be strong on detail, but while there is much in his record of policy advocacy to attack, particularly as chairman of the Congressional Budget Committee, audiences will quickly turn off if the two men start squabbling over figures.

Figure A.4 Expectations Treatment Text (Study 2)

The full video for each condition can be viewed at the following URLs:

Study 3a:

Typical Demeanor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3NuukJt5Jw>
Atypical Demeanor: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_ub-dDj71E

Study 3b:

I. No Reputation/No Target: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHFPX8DkzAI>
II. No Reputation/ Target: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CveS5C1vBY>
III. Reputation/No Target: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUjglIbxxA>
IV. Reputation/Target: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqSrwio8g4o>

Figure A.5 Video Conditions (Studies 3a and 3b)