Article

With Heart and (No) Mind? How Recipients Negatively Infer Missing Information About Politicians and How This Affects the Assessment of the Speaker

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Abstract

Two fundamental dimensions underlie person perception: warmth and competence. We conducted three experiments to investigate how a positive or negative emphasis of only one of these dimensions (i.e., of only warmth or only competence) affects the perception of the other (complementary) dimension, and how voting intentions are influenced by these emphases. The results show that when a politician is described positively in only one of the two dimensions, people assess the complementary dimension more negatively. In addition, the negative emphasis of only one of the two dimensions also leads to a more negative assessment of the complementary dimension. Furthermore, we explore how these one-dimensional person descriptions affect the assessment of the speakers uttering them. Politicians who describe their opponents in negative terms are also evaluated negatively. On the contrary, politicians who judge others in positive terms are not necessarily evaluated positively.

Two fundamental dimensions underlie the perceptions of others (*the Big Two*): warmth and competence[1] (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012; Bruckmüller & Abele, 2013; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, &

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Kashima, 2005; Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008). Assessments on both of these dimensions occur automatically and are (culturally) universal, accounting for over 80% of the variance in perceptions of others (Asch, 1946; Fiske et al., 2007; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968). When encountering others, individuals first assess the degree of helpfulness or harmfulness of their intentions (in order to assure that a counterpart is friend and not foe). Second, they evaluate the targets' ability to carry out these intentions (Bergsieker et al., 2012; Fiske et al., 2007). Thus, the warmth dimension reflects all traits related to the valence of the intentions of a target person as well as her or his ability to build up social connections (e.g., friendliness, warm-heartedness, sociability). By contrast, the competence dimension covers traits related to a target's ability to realize these intentions appropriately (e.g., intelligence, skill, industriousness; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Bergsieker et al., 2012; Fiske et al., 2007).

The dimensions of warmth and competence are central to perceptions of politicians as well. Yet, in the context of political communication, these two dimensions are at times split up in further subcategories (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Consiglio, Picconi, & Zimbardo, 2003; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Funk, 1996; Miller & Shanks, 1996). However, Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Zimbardo (2002) demonstrate that those additional traits cluster along the Big Two. Therefore, in the present study, we focus on the two aforementioned fundamental dimensions of person perception: Imagine if a politician were presented to you as being intelligent, hard-working, and very competent. In this case, how warm-hearted would you consider her or him to be? And vice versa, if a politician were described as warm-hearted, sociable, and candid, how competent would you consider her or him to be?

Recent studies indicate that individuals "draw negative inferences from positive descriptions that omit one of the two fundamental dimensions of social perception" (Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012, p. 77). This effect occurs even when the description contains only positive information. Using three experiments, the present study explored how a positive or negative emphasis of only one of the two fundamental dimensions (i.e., of only warm-hearted or only competent) influences the perception of the other (complementary) dimension of a politician. First, we observed how people assess a politician who is described positively in only one of the two dimensions (i.e., only as warm-hearted or only as competent) and how this description influences voting intentions. Second, we examined how the negative description of a politician in one of the dimensions (i.e., only as unfriendly or only as incompetent) affects the assessment of the complementary dimension. Above all, recipients form their impressions of speakers on the basis of how these characterize others by transferring the reported traits to the speaker herself or himself (Mae, Carlston, & Skowronski, 1999; Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998). Hence, third, we analyzed how the positive or negative description of a politician influences the perception of the speaker.

The Innuendo Effect

If someone is described only as warm-hearted, or only as competent, recipients tend to assess this person more negatively in the complementary dimension (Kervyn et al.,

2012). Kervyn et al. (2012) tested this assertion by describing a fictitious person as "very nice, sociable, and outgoing" (warm); "very smart, hard-working, and competent" (competent); or "overall positive." The participants assessed persons described as warm as more warm-hearted, but they also judged them to be less competent than were members of the overall positive control group. In contrast, for persons described only as competent, the opposite was observed: Participants assessed the targets as competent, but also as less warm-hearted. The authors refer to these results as *innuendo effect*.

Thus, an innuendo effect occurs when a person is characterized positively in only one of the two fundamental dimensions. People use this one-sided emphasis when describing someone about whom they have ambivalent information—for instance, when the person they are describing is warm-hearted, but rather incompetent. In this case, the speaker is subject to conflicting conversational norms: on the one hand, the description should be both as accurate and as truthful as possible (*accuracy norms*; Bergsieker et al., 2012; *Maxims of Quantity and Quality*; Grice, 1991; Kervyn et al., 2012).[2] On the other hand, one does not necessarily want to disparage others. According to politeness theory, individuals desire both to be autonomous ("negative face wants") and to be accepted and liked ("positive face wants"). Therefore, in conversation they are concerned to meet their own face wants and those of their counterparts. Ascribing negative characteristics to someone threatens positive face wants of the target person; correspondingly, such negative characterizations are considered to be impolite what, in turn, could be sanctioned (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 2011; Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2013). For instance, the target person could react angrily or a negative description could rub off on the speaker, threatening her or his own face wants (*kill-the-messenger effect*; Skowronski et al., 1998). Hence, when conversational norms are in conflict, people tend to forego the Maxim of Quantity and leave negative qualities out of the description (*anti-negativity norms*; Bergsieker et al., 2012; Brown & Levinson, 2011). This is also embodied in the popular saying: "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" (Kervyn et al., 2012, p. 77).

Recipients are both implicitly and explicitly aware that speakers respond to this conflict of norms by omitting one dimension on purpose and consequently infer from person descriptions (and omissions) specific traits of that person (*spontaneous trait inferences* [STI]; Crawford, Skowronski, Stiff, & Leonards, 2008; Skowronski et al., 1998).[3] Therefore, they infer that people being described in such a one-sided fashion must be worse in the other dimension than persons described equally positively in both dimensions (*concept of implicature*; Grice, 1991; Speaks, 2008).[4] Hence, recipients consider a person who is only described as particularly warm-hearted to be more incompetent, and vice versa. The fact that people are, at least implicitly, aware of this inference is shown by studies on impression management: To create the impression of competence, people behave as less warm-hearted; in contrast, if people wish to be perceived as warm-hearted, they downplay their competence (Holoien & Fiske, 2013).

How one perceives a person also influences how one behaves toward that person. Kervyn et al. (2012) show how the innuendo effect affects intentions: In a university context, participants tended to more readily invite a person described as "competent"

into their working group than a person described as "warm" (and therefore was assessed less competent). For a travel group, however, participants preferred a person described as "warm" to a person described as "competent" (and therefore was judged less warm-hearted). These effects are particularly relevant within the context of political communication. First, politicians are often subject to characterizations of their personal traits in press coverage (e.g., articles, portraits, or interviews) as well as in their self-portrayal (e.g., political advertising, press releases); voters mostly form impressions of politicians' personalities based on these medially conveyed information (Anderson & Brettschneider, 2003; Dunaway, Lawrence, Rose, & Weber, 2013; West, 2004). Second, these impressions of politicians can influence voting intentions (Anderson & Brettschneider, 2003; Bartels, 2002; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Funk, 1997; Miller & Shanks, 1996).

Both competence and warmth are central in shaping voting intentions. If a political candidate is assessed as competent, then the overall attitude toward this candidate is positive, and one is more likely to vote in favor of the candidate; in addition, traits associated with warmth also lead to a more positive impression and enhance voting intentions, as recipients expect such politicians to be concerned about voters' issues (Anderson & Brettschneider, 2003; Mondak, 1995). However, it is not entirely clear which of the two dimensions—competence or warmth—is the strongest predictor of behavioral intentions in general, and of voting intentions in particular. In a social environment, the effect of warmth on behavioral intentions is generally stronger than that of competence, and thus influences the quality of the encounter more strongly (i.e., friendly or hostile); in contrast, competence only determines whether others are capable of carrying out their behavioral intentions, be they positive or negative (Fiske et al., 2007; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). When assessing political candidates, in particular, the competence of candidates is often judged to be more relevant than their warmth; thus, competence should influence voting intentions more strongly than should warm-heartedness (Funk, 1997; McDermott, 2005).

Correspondingly, politicians try to build up a good impression on both dimensions. However, when referring to political opponents, they sometimes overstep the bounds of social anti-negativity norms by ascribing them negative qualities (*negative campaigning*; Fernandes, 2013; Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007; Nai, 2013). As negative information is more salient and weights heavier in impression formation, these negative trait descriptions may affect voting intentions more strongly (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Respectively, studies on negative campaigning demonstrate that politicians attacked are deemed less positive in the aftermath (Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2005; Basil, Schooler, & Reeves, 1991; Jasperson & Fan, 2002; Lau et al., 2007). So far, no studies have been conducted on how the negative description of a politician in only one of the two dimensions of perception affects perceptions of the other dimension (Lau et al., 2007). One possibility would be that the innuendo effect is reversed in cases of negative attributions of an opponent in only one of the dimensions, with the negative attribution resulting in a positive assessment of the other dimension; thus, describing politicians as unfriendly could result in them being assessed as more competent, and

vice versa. That might explain why people assess targets of negative campaigning sometimes even more favorable (Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989; Lau et al., 2007). There is also rather mixed evidence for effects of negative characterizations on voting intentions, with some attacks leading individuals to rather vote for the attacker and some inducing them to rather support the target; hence, the examination of the proclaimed reversed innuendo effect may also shed some light here (Brader, 2005; Kaid, 1997; Lau et al., 2007; Sides, 2006).

Spontaneous Trait Transference [STT]

Recipients form opinions about speakers on the basis of how these speakers describe others; to a certain extent, recipients transfer the negative or positive qualities that these speakers assign to others to the speakers themselves (STT; Mae & Carlston, 2005; Mae et al., 1999; Skowronski et al., 1998). Skowronski et al. (1998) presented participants passport photos as well as a short text next to each photo, in which the people in the photos either described themselves or others in ways that reflected strongly on moral character (e.g., "Today he was walking to the store and he saw this puppy. So he kicked it out of his way," to represent cruelty). Two days later, participants were asked to evaluate the characters of these people. The opinions they had formed were influenced by the qualities described in the texts, regardless of whether the description referred to the person in the accompanying photo, or to another person. This effect occurred even when participants were able to correctly recall whether the people in the photos had described others. Furthermore, this also happened even when participants were informed about the STT, suggesting that this phenomenon is very stable and does not occur intentionally (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005).

  Underlying STT is a three-stage cognitive process: If a speaker describes another person (e.g., "X is friendly toward others"), recipients must first interpret this mode of behavior, and from this, extract the corresponding quality (*trait activation*; e.g., "X is friendly toward others, so she is warm-hearted"). Recipients then make a conceptual association between the quality (e.g., warm-heartedness) and the speaker (*trait association*). This association between the speaker and the quality in question then influences the assessment of the speaker, with recipients assuming that this same quality applies to the speaker (*trait influence*). Therefore, recipients tend to assess speakers as having the same traits that those speakers ascribed to others, transferring the qualities ascribed by the speaker to the speaker herself or himself (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005; Mae et al., 1999; Skowronski et al., 1998). Correspondingly, research shows that STT is a mere associative process, meaning recipients simply link the speaker with the traits she or he describes, which implicitly affects the impression of the speaker (other than STI, which is based on attributional processes). While politeness theory suggests that recipients may consider a speaker to be generally rude when describing someone in a negative way (Brown & Levinson, 2011), STT, on the contrary, proposes that only the same traits a person is described with are transferred to the speaker (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005).

Most people are aware that they can be tainted by their descriptions of others. For this reason, they often withhold negative information, describing others in only one of the fundamental dimensions; as discussed earlier, this results in the innuendo effect (Kervyn et al., 2012). However, it is not clear whether the innuendo effect can also spread to the speaker: Will a politician who describes another politician as warm-hearted be assessed as more warm-hearted, but also as less competent? And will a politician who portrays another politician as competent be considered to be more competent, yet less warm-hearted? Depending on the answers to these questions, describing an opponent in positive terms in the hope of avoiding negative STT could still have considerable negative consequences for the speaker herself or himself.

Experiment 1

We first examined whether the innuendo effect occurs when describing politicians. In the present study, we were interested in how politicians are assessed with regard to competence and warmth when they are only described in one of the two dimensions. We supposed that the omission of one of the fundamental dimensions of perception would lead to a poorer rating of the other dimension. In contrast to Kervyn et al. (2012), we were interested not in the comparison of a competent or warm-hearted person with a person described on the whole as positive, but rather with the comparison of a competent or warm-hearted person with a person about whom there was no information regarding one of the two dimensions. We expected that recipients would assess politicians described as warm-hearted as being less competent than those in a control group (for whom a description regarding character was not given; Hypothesis 1a [H1a]). Conversely, we expected recipients to assess politicians described as particularly competent as being more unfriendly than those in a control group (for whom a description regarding competence was not given; Hypothesis 1b [H1b]).

Method

We recruited 139 students (54.7% female; age: $M = 24.54$ years, $SD = 7.05$) through a university-based email distribution list (undergraduate as well as postgraduate level). Participation was voluntary and unpaid; the students received no extra course credit for their participation. Participants were asked to read a press release of approximately 300 words, in which personnel changes within a parliamentary committee were described. Specifically, the press release explained how a staff shortage had required the appointment of a new member to the committee. This fictitious character, Matthias Vogt, was described either not in detail (control group [CG]; $n = 46$; we only presented his name, explained that he has been elected as a new member of the state parliament and a short description of his upcoming tasks), as warm-hearted (Experimental Group 1 [EG1]; $n = 46$), or as competent (Experimental Group 2 [EG2]; $n = 47$). This Member of Parliament (MP) was described for the dimension of warmth using the adjectives "likeable," "warm-hearted," and "friendly" (EG1) and on the dimension of competence using the adjectives "competent," "hard-working," and "intelligent" (EG2; also

see Bruckmüller & Abele, 2013; Fiske et al., 2007; Kervyn et al., 2012). These statements were presented in the text in four different places (e.g., "Matthias Vogt is considered to be a very likeable MP"). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions.

Participants were informed that they were taking part in a study on the quality of press releases. After having read the press release, participants completed a survey. In addition to various distraction questions regarding the quality of the press release, they were asked to assess the politician. The participants' impressions of candidate competence were assessed by presenting them with three statements ("Matthias Vogt is competent," "Matthias Vogt is a capable politician," and "Matthias Vogt is intelligent"), to which they responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (α = .88). Moreover, participants had to indicate their impressions of the candidate's warmth by rating him by means of three statements: "Matthias Vogt is friendly," "Matthias Vogt is outgoing," and "Matthias Vogt is warm-hearted" (5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, α = .87). All measures were derived from Bruckmüller and Abele's (2013) study on the cluster structure of the Big Two (also see Fiske et al., 2007; Kervyn et al., 2012).

Results

Before testing our hypotheses, contrast analyses were conducted to establish whether our experimental manipulation was successful (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). As predicted, participants rated the politician described as warm-hearted as more likable ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.58$) than the control group ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.62$), $t(136) = 7.09$, $p < .001$, $r_{effect\ size} = .47$.[5] Participants also assessed the politician described as competent as more competent ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.85$) than the control group ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.62$), $t(91) = 1.41$, $p = .16$, $r_{effect\ size} = .12$, although the group difference was marginally not significant.

To address H1a and H1b, we again computed contrast analyses. Consistent with our innuendo hypothesis, participants considered the politician to be less warm-hearted when he was praised for high competence ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.65$; control group: $M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.62$), $t(136) = 2.32$, $p = .02$, $r_{effect\ size} = .15$; this result supports H1a (Figure 1). Furthermore, participants rated the politician described as warm-hearted as significantly less competent ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.92$) than the control group ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.62$), $t(90) = 2.61$, $p = .011$, $r_{effect\ size} = .21$.; thus, these findings support H1b.

Discussion

Our results provide evidence of a strong innuendo effect in the political context: The participants did indeed rate a politician described as warm-hearted as less competent, and a politician portrayed as competent as less warm-hearted. This finding confirms and expands on prior results by Kervyn et al. (2012). The study shows that the effect does not only occur in the comparison of a competent or warm-hearted person with a person described on the whole as positive, but rather in the comparison with a person about whom there was no information regarding one of the two dimensions. However,
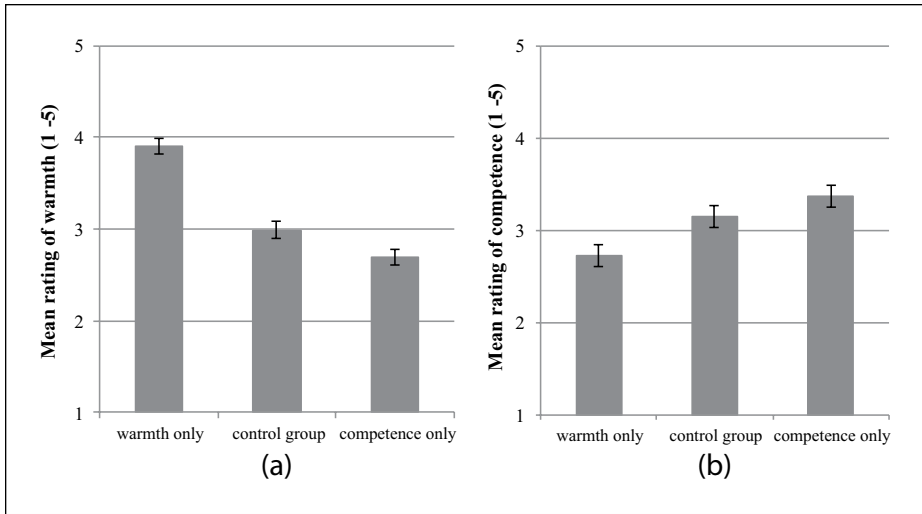
Figure 1. Mean ratings of (a) warmth and (b) competence by description of the politician (warmth only, control group, competence only).
Note. Error bars represent standard errors.

in the political context, it is not only the perception of politicians that is crucial, but also the extent to which perceptions affect intended voting behavior. We tested the influence of perceptions on voting intentions in the next experiment.

Experiment 2

In the second experiment, we were interested in the extent to which the innuendo effect influences intended voting behavior, as well as the extent to which the description of another person is transferred to the speaker. Both warmth and competence are considered to be predictors of voting intentions (Funk, 1997; Kahn, 1993; McDermott, 2005). Referring to the innuendo effect, we assumed that if a politician was described as warm-hearted, this would have a negative influence on voting intentions due to the correspondingly more negative assessment of the politician's competence (Hypothesis 2a [H2a]). If a politician was described as competent, we assumed that this would have a negative influence on voting intentions due to the correspondingly more negative assessment of the politician's warmth (Hypothesis 2a [H2b]).

Recipients also transfer the qualities ascribed by speakers to others onto the speakers themselves (Mae & Carlston, 2005; Skowronski et al., 1998). Hence, we first expected that the description of a politician as warm-hearted or competent would transfer to the speaker, who would be assessed as warm-hearted or competent, respectively (Hypothesis 3a [H3a]). It was unclear, however, whether the innuendo effect would also transfer to the speaker, whereby politicians who described others as warm-hearted or competent would also be assessed as less competent or less warm-hearted,

respectively. As there is currently no research from which to derive specific hypotheses, we propose the following research question: How does the description of a politician as warm-hearted or competent affect the perceived competence or warm-heartedness, respectively, of the speaker (Research Question 1a [RQ1a])?

Method

We recruited 307 participants (53.3% female; age: $M = 37.11$ years, $SD = 14.64$) using an online access panel for social science research. Participation was voluntary and unpaid. Again, participants read a press release of about 300 words, which consisted of an interview with a political speaker, explaining how a staff shortage had required the appointment of a new member to the committee. The press release described a prevailing staff shortage, which resulted in a new member being appointed to a parliamentary committee. The (fictitious) interviewee, Gunnar Jäckel, was introduced as the speaker of the committee. In his interview, Jäckel first explains that the committee is short-staffed and details the duties the new member will have. He then presents MP Matthias Vogt, who is being appointed as a new member to the committee. Vogt (who is also fictitious) is described either not in detail (CG; $n = 102$), as warm-hearted (EG1; $n = 99$), or as competent (EG2; $n = 106$), using the adjectives "likeable," "warm-hearted," and "friendly" (for EG1), and "competent," "hard-working," and "intelligent" (for EG2). These descriptive statements appear in the text in four different places (e.g., "Matthias Vogt is considered to be a very likeable MP"). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions.

As in the first experiment, we operationalized participants' assessment of Vogt's competence by measuring the extent of their agreement to the statements "Matthias Vogt is competent," "Matthias Vogt is a capable politician," and "Matthias Vogt is intelligent," using the same 5-point Likert-type scales as in Experiment 1 (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; α = .88). We then measured participants' assessment of Vogt's warmth by measuring the extent of their agreement to the statements "Matthias Vogt is friendly," "Matthias Vogt is outgoing," and "Matthias Vogt is warm-hearted" (α = .87). Voting intention was assessed by measuring the extent of participants' agreement to the statement "I would vote Matthias Vogt into city council."

To assess attitudes toward the speaker, participants had to rate their agreement with the statements "Gunnar Jäckel is competent," "Gunnar Jäckel is a capable politician," and "Gunnar Jäckel is intelligent" (α = .79). Participants' assessment of Jäckel's warmth was measured by the extent of their agreement with the statements "Gunnar Jäckel is friendly," "Gunnar Jäckel is outgoing," and "Gunnar Jäckel is warm-hearted" (α = .80).

Results

Again, we conducted contrast analyses to check whether the manipulation was successful. As expected, participants assessed the politician described as warm-hearted as more likable ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.77$) than the control group ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.62$),

Table 1. Zero-Order Bivariate Correlations.

Model 2 (n = 200)	1	2	3	4
1. Described as warm	1	—	—	—
2. Rating of warmth	.59***	1	—	—
3. Rating of competence	−.18**	.04	1	—
4. Voting intention	−.17**	.11	.51***	1

Model 3 (n = 207)	1	2	3	4
1. Described as competent	1	—	—	—
2. Rating of warmth	−.17*	1	—	—
3. Rating of competence	.19**	.34***	1	—
4. Voting intention	−.04	.33***	.57***	1

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

$t(189) = 10.23$, $p < .001$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .60$. Furthermore, participants also rated the politician described as competent as more competent ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.56$) than the control group ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.94$), $t(172) = 2.81$, $p = .006$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .21$. Therefore, our treatment was successful.

H2a and H2b were analyzed using linear structural equation modeling. We first checked whether the description of a politician as warm-hearted had a negative effect on people's voting intentions, due to an implied negative impression of the candidate's competence. To do this, we entered the treatment as a dummy variable into the model (0 = CG, 1 = described as warm-hearted). Zero-order correlations of all constructs included in the model are presented in Table 1. The model offered a good fit for the data, $\chi^2(17, 200) = 20.24$, $p = .26$, comparative-fit-index (CFI) = 1.00, root-mean-square-error-of-approximation (RMSEA) = .03, standardized-root-mean-square-residual (SRMR) = .03. Figure 2 shows the structural equation results for the warmth condition: When the speaker described a politician as warm, participants rated the politician as more warm-hearted ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$), but also as less competent ($\beta = -.21$, $p = .006$).[6]

Although the assessment of the politician as warm-hearted did not affect participants' voting intentions ($\beta = .07$, $p = .29$), there was a strong positive correlation between the assessment of competence and voting intentions ($\beta = .57$, $p < .001$). Consequently, there was no significant indirect effect on voting intentions mediated by the assessment of warm-heartedness ($\beta_{\text{ind\_w}} = .04$, $p = .29$, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval [BCCI] [−.04, .12]); however, a significant indirect effect on voting intentions mediated by the evaluation of competence emerged ($\beta_{\text{ind\_c}} = -.12$, $p = .03$, 95% BCCI [−.23, −.01]), confirming H2a. Taken together, these findings represent a paradox, as recipients were less likely to vote for a politician praised for his warmth, because they assumed him to be less competent.

In the second model, we checked whether the description of a politician as competent had a negative effect on voting intentions, due to an implied negative impression
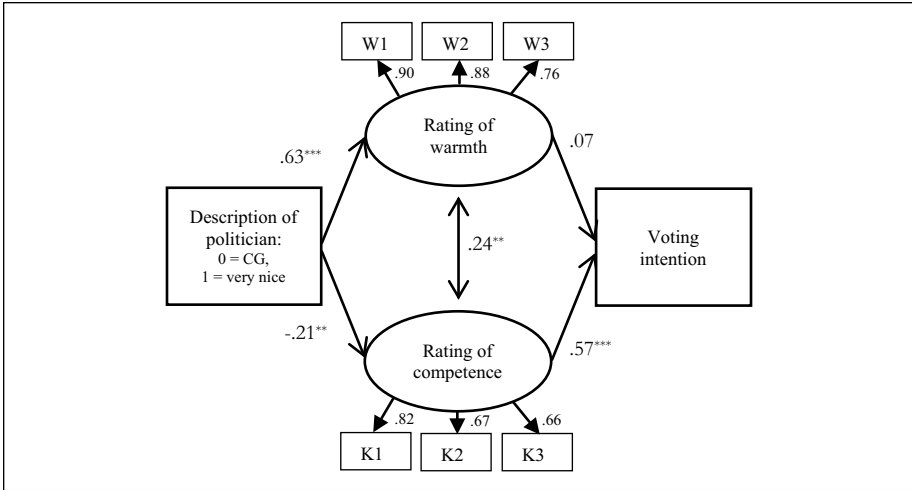
Figure 2. Structural equation model—Warmth only condition (*n* = 200).
Note. Coding of treatment: 0 = control group, 1 = described as very nice.
**p < .01. ***p < .001.

of the candidate's warm-heartedness. To do this, we entered the treatment as a dummy variable into the model (0 = CG, 1 = described as competent). The hypothesized model (Figure 3) showed an acceptable fit, $\chi^2(17, 207) = 26.42$, $p = .07$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .03. As expected, when only described as competent participants rated the politician not only more competent ($\beta = .18$, $p = .01$), but also considered him to be less warm-hearted ($\beta = -.19$, $p = .01$). As with the previous analysis, an assessment of competence had a significant effect on recipients' voting intentions ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$), while an assessment of warmth was correlated less strongly with voting intentions ($\beta = .17$, $p = .02$). Once again, only a significant indirect effect on voting intentions mediated by the assessment of competence emerged ($\beta_{ind\_c} = .10$, $p = .001$, 95% BCCI [.04, .16]). However, contrary to our expectations, there was no indirect negative effect on voting intentions mediated by the assessment of warmth ($\beta_{ind\_w} = -.03$, $p = .07$, 95% BCCI [−.07, .003]), thus leading to the rejection of H2b.

We further expected that the description of a politician as warm-hearted or competent would result in the speaker being assessed as warmer or more competent, respectively (H3a). A contrast analysis was conducted and indicated that our treatment affected the assessment of the speaker's competence, $t(304) = 2.12$, $p = .04$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .12$. However, contrary to our expectations, the speaker was judged as even less competent when he characterized the politician as competent ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.73$; CG: $M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.71$). To check whether the description of a politician as warm-hearted would spill over to the speakers' perceived warmth, we again performed a contrast analysis revealing a significant effect of our treatment, $t(304) = 3.91$, $p < .001$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .22$. The speaker was rated more warm-hearted when he described the politician as
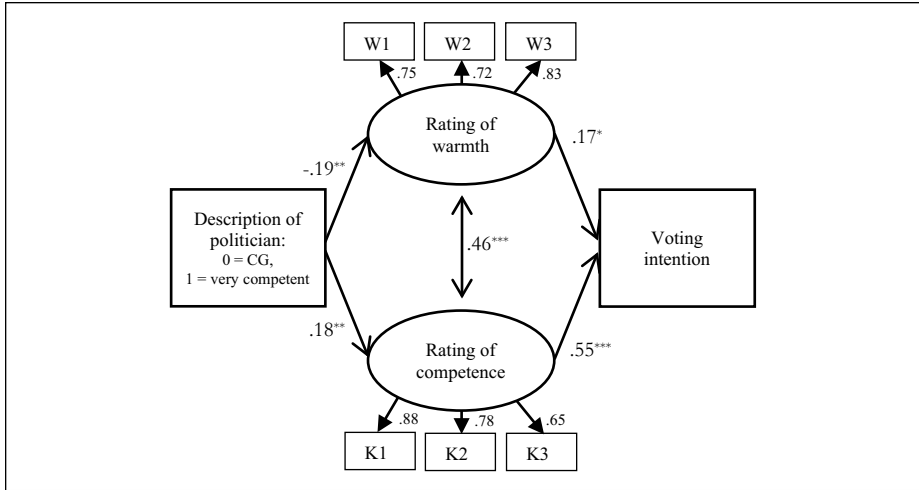
Figure 3. Structural equation model—Competence only condition (*n* = 207).
Note. Coding of treatment: 0 = control group, 1 = described as very competent).
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

warm-hearted (*M* = 3.20, *SD* = 0.76; CG: *M* = 2.80, *SD* = 0.71). In this respect, we can only partially confirm H3a: The description of another person as warm-hearted did indeed result in the speaker also being perceived as warmer. The description of an individual as competent, however, even resulted in a slightly negative assessment of the speaker's competence.

In order to provide an answer to RQ1a, which asked how the description of a politician as either warm-hearted or competent would affect the assessment of the complementary dimension of the speaker (competence or warmth, respectively), we also conducted linear contrast analyses. However, neither the description as competent, $t(304) = 0.08$, $p = .94$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .00$, nor the description as warm-hearted, $t(304) = 1.55$, $p = .12$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .09$, influenced the evaluation of the respective complementary dimension of the speaker. Thus, there was no innuendo effect transferred on the speaker (RQ1a).

Discussion

The results of this experiment also indicate a strong innuendo effect.[7] In addition, the experiment showed how different treatments can influence voting intentions: In both models, the extent to which the politician was assessed as competent was a considerably stronger predictor of participants' voting intentions than the assessment of the politician's warm-heartedness, which influenced participants' voting intentions only slightly, if at all. Hence, if only a politician's warmth is praised, this results in the paradoxical finding that recipients are less likely to vote for this politician, because they

consider him to be less competent. Although, following this logic, a positive statement regarding the politician's competence will have a negative effect on the assessment of his warmth, the positive effect on perceived competence is more important, as warmth only predicts voting intentions to a very limited extent.

The perception of the speaker was not influenced very much by our treatment: When the speaker described the politician as competent, this did not affect the assessments of his warmth, but had a weak negative effect on the evaluation of the speaker's competence. When the speaker described the politician as warm-hearted, this led to the speaker being assessed as warmer; however, the speaker's perceived competence was not affected. Thus, there was no innuendo effect for the speaker. Yet, based on these findings, it appears that it may benefit the speaker to describe his or her opponent as warm-hearted.

Experiment 3

Given the mixed findings on effects of negative campaigning on the politician attacked (as reported above), with her or him being either rated more negatively or more positively after an attack (Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Lau et al., 2007), we wanted to know whether the existence of an innuendo effect might help explain these inconsistencies. Therefore, we asked, how does the description of a politician as unfriendly or incompetent affect assessments of her or his competence or warmth, respectively (Research Question 2a [RQ2a]), and how does this influence recipients' voting intentions (Research Question 2b [RQ2b])?

Another aim of the study was to determine the extent to which recipients draw upon descriptions of people to form opinions about speakers. We know from research on negative campaigning that the negative portrayal of political opponents can affect attitudes toward the communicating person or party (Carraro & Castelli, 2010; Lau et al., 2007; Pinkleton, 1998). A majority of studies on effects of negative campaigning suggests a so-called "backlash effect," meaning that statements attacking (the traits of) a politician also generally lead to a more negative attitude toward the attacking politician (Jasperson & Fan, 2002; Sonner, 1998). Research on STT even suggests that the same negative traits the political opponent is described with are transferred to the speaker (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005). We therefore expected that the description of a politician as unfriendly or incompetent would result in the speaker being assessed as unfriendly or incompetent, respectively (Hypothesis 3b [H3b]). We also asked how the description of a politician as unfriendly or incompetent affects the perceived competence or warm-heartedness, respectively, of the speaker (Research Question 1b [RQ1b]).

Method

We recruited 237 participants (56.3% females; age, $M = 36.21$, $SD = 14.43$) using an online access panel for social science research. Participation was voluntary and unpaid. This time, participants had to read a journalistic interview and were told that it had

been publicized in an online-newspaper. We did not use a press release this time, as attacking a political opponent is not that common in this format compared with a journalistic interview. The content of this interview was similar to that in Experiment 2, describing a personnel change leading to a new member being appointed to a parliamentary committee. The fictitious character was described either not in detail (CG; *n* = 48), as unfriendly (EG1; *n* = 48), as very unfriendly (EG2; *n* = 47), as incompetent (Experimental Group 3 [EG3]; *n* = 48), or as very incompetent (Experimental Group 4 [EG4]; *n* = 47). On the dimension of warmth, the politician was described using the words "not exactly congenial" and "quite unapproachable" (EG1), as well as "not congenial at all," "very withdrawn," "unfriendly," and "unapproachable" (EG2). On the dimension of competence, the MP was described using the words "not overly competent" and "not the most hard-working" (EG3), and "not intelligent," "idle," "incompetent," and "unreliable" (EG4; also see Bruckmüller & Abele, 2013; Fiske et al., 2007). These statements were presented in the text in four different places in each version. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the five conditions.

We used the same 5-point Likert-type scales (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) as in Experiments 1 and 2 to measure participants' assessments of competence, using the statements "Matthias Vogt is competent," "Matthias Vogt is a capable politician," and "Matthias Vogt is intelligent" (α = .88); participants' assessments of warmth were measured using the statements "Matthias Vogt is friendly," "Matthias Vogt is outgoing," and "Matthias Vogt is warm-hearted" (α = .87); voting intentions were measured using the statement "I would vote Matthias Vogt into the city council."

Participants' assessment of the speaker followed the same procedure as that in Experiment 2. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale, the speaker's competence was assessed using the statements "Gunnar Jäckel is competent," "Gunnar Jäckel is a capable politician," and "Gunnar Jäckel is intelligent" (α = .86); participants' assessment of warmth was assessed using the statements "Gunnar Jäckel is friendly," "Gunnar Jäckel is outgoing," and "Gunnar Jäckel is warm-hearted" (α = .77).

Results

We conducted contrast analyses to assess whether the treatment was successful. If the politician was described as slightly incompetent, participants rated him as less competent (M = 2.31, SD = 0.80) than the control group (M = 2.97, SD = 0.68), $t(139)$ = −4.31, p < .001, $r_{\text{effect size}}$ = .32; if he was described as very incompetent, participants also assessed him less competent (M = 1.91, SD = 0.78) than the control, $t(139)$ = −6.78, p < .001, $r_{\text{effect size}}$ = .50, and even less competent the "slightly incompetent group," $t(139)$ = −2.51, p = .013, $r_{\text{effect size}}$ = .18. On the other hand, if the politician was described as slightly unfriendly, participants assessed him as less friendly (M = 1.94, SD = 0.74) compared with the control condition (M = 2.99, SD = 0.51), $t(140)$ = −6.71, p < .001, $r_{\text{effect size}}$ = .48; if the politician was described as very unfriendly, he was also assessed less friendly (M = 1.99, SD = 0.98) compared with the control group, $t(140)$ = −6.32, p < .001, $r_{\text{effect size}}$ = .45; however, he was not rated less friendly compared with the "slightly unfriendly group," $t(140)$ = 0.35, p = .72, $r_{\text{effect size}}$ = .03.

Table 2. Zero-Order Bivariate Correlations.

Model 4 (n = 143)	1	2	3	4
1 Treatment (unfriendly)	1	—	—	—
2 Rating of warmth	−.45***	1	—	—
3 Rating of competence	.06	.27***	1	—
4 Voting intention	−.15	.36***	.49***	1

Model 5 (n = 142)	1	2	3	4
1 Treatment (incompetent)	1	—	—	—
2 Rating of warmth	−.22**	1	—	—
3 Rating of competence	−.50***	.28***	1	—
4 Voting intention	−.28**	.36***	.49***	1

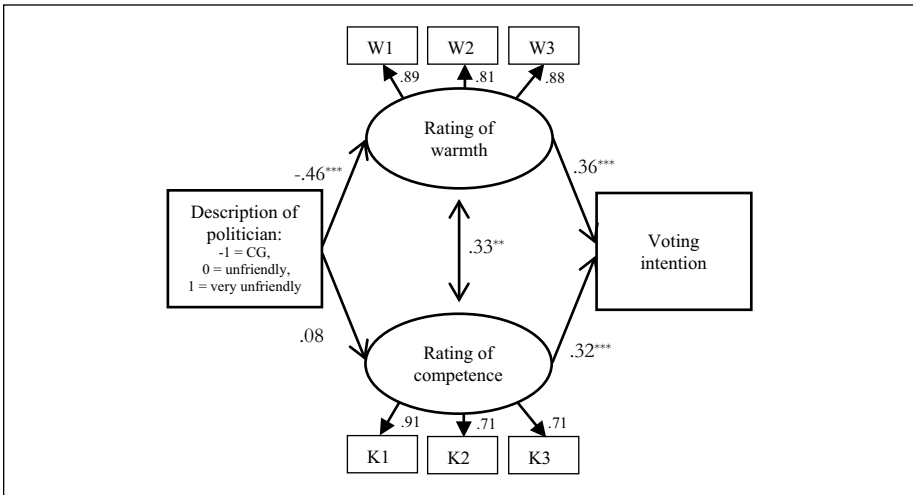*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Figure 4. Structural Equation Model—Unfriendly condition ($n = 143$).
Note. Coding of treatment: −1 = control group, 0 = described as unfriendly, 1 = described as very unfriendly.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

We analyzed RQ2a as well as RQ2b using structural equation modeling. We first tested the effect of describing a politician as unfriendly on participants' assessments of competence (and, mediated by assessments of competence, on voting intentions). The treatment was entered into the model in three stages (−1 = CG, 0 = described as slightly unfriendly, 1 = described as very unfriendly).[8] Zero-order correlations of all constructs included in the model are presented in Table 2. The model showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(17, 143) = 18.63$, $p = .35$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .03. Figure 4

Table 3. Mean Ratings of Speaker's Competence and Warmth by Description.

	Control group (n = 48)	Warmth slightly negative (EG1; n = 48)	Warmth very negative (EG2; n = 47)	Competence slightly negative (EG3; n = 48)	Competence very negative (n = 47)
Competence	3.05[a] (0.90)	2.94[a,b] (0.72)	2.32[c] (0.83)	2.74[a,b] (0.65)	2.65[b] (0.81)
Warmth	2.70[a] (0.69)	2.79[a] (0.69)	2.33[b] (0.96)	2.33[b] (0.78)	2.29[b] (0.67)

Note. Means with different superscript letters differ significantly among groups (*p* < .05). EG = Experimental Group.
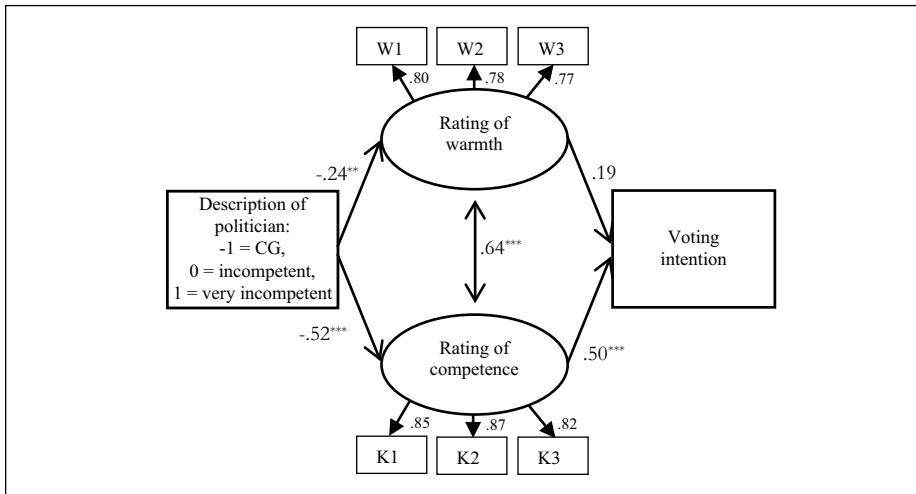

Figure 5. Structural equation model—Incompetence condition (*n* = 142).
Note. Coding of treatment: −1 = control group, 0 = described as incompetent, 1 = described as very incompetent.
**p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

shows the structural equation results for the unfriendly condition. However, describing the politician as unfriendly did not affect perceptions of his competence (β = .08, *p* = .38), and, therefore, there was no indirect effect on voting intentions mediated by the rating of competence (β_{ind_c} = .03, *p* = .45, 95% BCCI [−.04, .09]).[9]

In a second step, we analyzed how the description of a politician as incompetent affected how participants assessed his warmth (and mediated by this assessed warmth, their voting intentions). Again, we included the treatment in three stages in the model (−1 = CG, 0 = described as slightly incompetent, 1 = described as very incompetent). Zero-order correlations of all constructs included in the model are presented in Table 2. The model was an excellent fit for the data, $\chi^2(17, 142) = 21.89$, *p* = .19, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .03. Figure 5 shows the structural equation results: When the politician was described as incompetent, he was also assessed less warm-hearted

($\beta = -.24$, $p = .007$); yet, there was no indirect effect on voting intentions mediated by the rating of warmth ($\beta_{ind\_w} = -.05$, $p = .09$, 95% BCCI [$-.10$, $.01$]).

H3b predicted that the speaker was associated with the negative traits that he ascribed to the other politician. To test this hypothesis, two ANOVAs were conducted. Results showed significant effects for both competence, $F(4, 232) = 6.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, and warmth, $F(4, 232) = 4.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Post hoc mean comparisons on the effect of the treatment on the speaker's perceived competence indicated significant differences ($p < .05$) between CG and EG2, as well as between CG and EG4 (Table 3). Post hoc mean comparisons were also conducted for effects on the speaker's perceived warmth. The analyses revealed significant differences between CG and all EGs ($p < .05$), with the exception of EG1 (Table 3).

Although slightly negative statements about the competence or warmth of a politician appeared to reflect very little on the speaker, strongly negative comments about another politician made recipients more likely to form more negative opinions of the speaker, partially confirming *H3b*. Thus, regardless whether the politician made very negative statements about the competence or the warmth of another politician, the recipients assessed the speaker more negatively in both dimensions; that is to say, they rated him as both less competent and less warm-hearted (RQ1b).

Discussion

The third experiment demonstrated that a negative emphasis of one of the two dimensions did not result in the politician being perceived more positively on the omitted dimension; on the contrary, when the politician was described as incompetent, participants also assessed him as less friendly. In contrast, the description of a politician as unfriendly had no effect on his assessed competence. If participants considered the politician to be competent, they were more likely to vote for him; the description of a politician as warm-hearted only had a significant positive effect on voting intentions to the extent that the politician was portrayed as unfriendly. Therefore, the negative portrayal of a politician on either dimension had negative consequences on his assessed character, and on participants' voting intentions.

In addition, the negative description of another politician tainted the speaker himself. If the speaker portrayed another politician as incompetent, the speaker was rated more poorly on both dimensions. This also occurred when the politician was described as unfriendly. For the speaker in our study, a negative description in one dimension extended to the other dimension (*halo effect*; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Thorndike, 1920). This was particularly evident when the speaker offered a very negative description of the politician.

General Discussion

The study showed that when a politician was described positively in only one of the fundamental dimensions of person perception (only as competent or only as warm-hearted) while information regarding the other dimension was omitted, the politician

tended to be rated more poorly in the omitted dimension. As competence turned out to be a stronger predictor of voting intentions than warmth, a paradoxical finding emerges: If a candidate is praised for his warmth, recipients will assess that politician as less competent and are less likely to vote for him. As in other social settings warmth turns out to be a stronger predictor for behavioral intentions, further studies should investigate whether our finding that competence has a stronger impact can be transferred to the political context in general (Bauer, 2013; Fiske et al., 2007).

However, the innuendo effect does not function in reverse: A politician described as incompetent is not perceived as more warm-hearted, and a politician described as unfriendly is not considered to be more competent. In fact, rather the opposite is the case: The description of a politician as incompetent leads to even poorer ratings in the dimension of warmth. This indicates a halo effect (Thorndike, 1920), by which a description in one dimension spreads to the other dimension. When a politician is described as incompetent, people might think that he is not appropriate for holding a public office and therefore rate him as less warm-hearted. Being described as unfriendly, however, does not affect the rating of his competence; thus, people may have no reason to assume that a dislikable politician cannot perform his duties properly.

A second central finding of this study concerns STT, with positive characteristics only slightly extending to the speaker. Only when the politician was described as warm-hearted, participants perceived the speaker as somewhat warmer. In contrast, describing a politician as competent had neither an effect on the assessment of the speaker's warmth nor on his competence. Language expectancy theory provides an additional explanation for this finding (Burgoon, Cohen, Miller, & Montgomery, 1978; Burgoon, Dillard, & Doran, 1983; Burgoon, Jones, & Stewart, 1975): The theory proposes that individuals have gained normative expectations about appropriate communication. If a speaker violates these expectations in a negative way, the persuasiveness of a message can be inhibited. However, if he exceeds the expectations, a persuasive message can be even more effective (Burgoon et al., 1983). Building on these assumptions, a speaker who positively refers to the competence of a politician meets the recipients' expectations on appropriate political communication. However, a positive reference to a politician's warmth might be unusual and provides information that surpasses recipients' expectations; therefore, recipients might perceive him to be friendly.

Negative descriptions, in contrast, reflected considerably on the speaker: When the speaker described the politician as incompetent or unfriendly, recipients gave him a more negative rating in both dimensions. This could also be explained by politeness theory as well as by language expectancy theory: As the speaker does not conform to anti-negativity norms, according to which one should conceal a person's negative qualities, the speaker is sanctioned for this violation and is therefore assessed more negatively overall. Thus, people do not only transfer the explicit negative information on the speaker, but also infer negative characteristics on the omitted dimension (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005; Skowronski et al., 1998). This finding echoes those of previous studies on negative campaigning and might help to interpret apparently

counterintuitive findings and help to better understand backlash effects on the attacker (Lau et al., 2007). Moreover, negative information appears to be more strongly factored than positive information into the assessments of both the person being referred to and the speaker. Why does the negative description of a politician have a far stronger influence on the perception of the speaker than positive statements about a politician? This finding can be explained by a general *negativity bias*, meaning that negative information is given greater weight than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

Some limitations of the present study need to be addressed. First, we used both a fictitious politician and a fictitious political speaker as the main protagonists in our stimuli; this was necessary to assure that participants had no prior attitudes toward these persons. In this way, we constructed a *minimal-information election* (Fleitas, 1971), a situation in which participants have little to no pre-existing information or attitudes toward a candidate, and must therefore base their opinions on the little information presented to them. One drawback of such a stimulus is that the effects presented can be overestimated. However, with regard to STT, a transfer of the relevant qualities also occurs when persons already known to the participants are described by other people (Mae et al., 1999). Second, this study focused on the assessment of a politician regarding his competence and warmth; however, researchers at times split up these two dimensions in further subcategories (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). Yet, as competence and warmth constitute the basis of many dimensions upon which people form opinions on political actors, we feel that these two dimensions were appropriate for our study (Caprara et al., 2002).

Thus, the focus on the Big Two might be a starting point: We suggest that future studies take into account subcategories of the two fundamental dimensions of perception of politicians. In addition, research could also examine if the sex of a politician described moderates the innuendo effect as well as the mediated effects on voting intentions (Bauer, 2013). Finally, it remains open whether the innuendo effect also works for self-descriptions: Future studies could, for instance, explore whether the effect also occurs when politicians describe themselves as only competent or as only warm-hearted.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. The dimensions are termed, for instance, *socially good/bad* and *intellectually good/bad* (Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968), *morality* and *competence* (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998), or communion and agency (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007).

However, as the attributes summarized within the dimensions are invariably similar (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), we refer to them more generally as *warmth* and *competence* (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005).

2. Grice (1991) suggests four basic principles guiding conversation and guaranteeing efficient communication: For instance, telling the truth (*Maxim of Quality*), leaving nothing out (and also not adding irrelevant information; *Maxim of Quantity*). Furthermore, one should provide relevant information (*Maxim of Relevance*) and argue in a plausible way (*Maxim of Manner*).

3. Thus, the innuendo effect can be considered as a special case of spontaneous trait inferences [STI] and is therefore rather based on an attributional process that requires cognitive work (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005; Wells, Skowronski, Crawford, Scherer, & Carlston, 2011).

4. For recipients to recognize that a speaker implies a subtle message with her or his description, three premises have to be fulfilled. Recipients first have to be aware that the speaker follows the maxims of conversation and second that the implicit proposition is needed in order to assure that the speaker does not violate those maxims. Third, they have to assume that the speaker thinks they are able to notice that the proposition is true (Grice, 1991; Speaks, 2008).

5. Furr (2004) refers to the coefficient $r_{\text{effect size}}$ as "perhaps the most straightforward effect size for a given contrast" (p. 8). It is a more conservative estimate than r_{contrast} and computed as the correlation between participants' observed scores and the contrast weights that reflect the predicted pattern of data (Furr, 2004). Reporting $r_{\text{effect size}}$ is especially recommended when there are more than two conditions (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000) in a contrast-analytic comparison.

6. We used Mplus software for all calculations performed. The significance tests for the indirect effects were calculated by means of bootstrapping (20,000 samples).

7. The positive correlation between warmth and competence in both models does not contradict this finding and is possibly caused by the valence of the overall impression of the politician which varies between participants (e.g., due to their attitude toward politics and politicians). Thus, while the overall impression is positive, stating that the politician is competent lowers his perceived warmth (relative to saying nothing about his competence or warmth).

8. We tested for linear relationships between independent and dependent variables included in our models. For the competence condition, linear trend analyses reveal significant effects on both warmth, $F(1, 141) = 7.00$, $p = .01$, and competence, $F(1, 141) = 45.90$, $p < .001$, whereas the quadratic trend analysis turned out to be non-significant for both warmth, $F(1, 141) = 0.14$, $p = .71$, and competence, $F(1, 141) = 1.04$, $p = .31$. For the warmth condition, there are on the one hand neither significant linear, $F(1, 142) = 0.50$, $p = .48$, nor significant quadratic effects, $F(1, 142) = 0.01$, $p = .93$, on competence. On the other hand, there is a significant linear, $F(1, 142) = 39.98$, $p < .001$, as well as a significant quadratic, $F(1, 142) = 16.58$, $p < .001$, effect on warmth. As the linear effect is clearly more pronounced, we decided to include the treatments in three stages into both models (effect coding: −1, 0, 1).

9. Again, we used Mplus software for all calculations performed. The significance tests for the indirect effects were calculated by means of bootstrapping (20,000 samples).

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