

The Authentic A**hole: Candidate Consistency, Causality, and the Vote

Sofia Breitenstein, Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals

John Kenny, University of East Anglia

Jac Larner, Cardiff University

Dieter Stiers, KU Leuven

Michael Lewis-Beck, University of Iowa

Keywords: authenticity, vote intention, consistency, survey experiment, policy position, immigration

Abstract

Despite politicians' authenticity being increasingly invoked in public discourse to explain their electoral fortunes, empirical research on the trait in electoral studies remains nascent. Here we advance our knowledge through a vignette survey experiment carried out on a national British sample. Firstly, we demonstrate that respondents are more likely to perceive a hypothetical politician as authentic when that politician resists political pressure in order to maintain a consistency between their stated policy positions and their political actions. This is the case whether respondents agree with their policy position or not. We also show that a candidate being perceived as authentic carries electoral benefits for them. Furthermore, consistency between a politician's policy position and their actions enhances citizens' perception of authenticity, consequently increasing the likelihood that they will vote for that politician. This study contributes to understanding authenticity in politics, offering valuable insights into the causal mechanisms of its electoral implications.

Acknowledgments:

A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2023 MPSA Annual Conference, and we thank all participants for their helpful comments and suggestions. The data for this paper were collected following an award from the UK's Political Studies Association's Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties (EPOP) group.

Authenticity is increasingly invoked as a desirable trait in political discourse.¹ While gaining more attention,² empirical research on how perceived authenticity shapes electoral behavior remains sparse. Previous research has shown authenticity is a measurable trait distinguishable from others,³ and one conceptually important for explaining people's attitudes and behaviors.⁴ A recent review however recommends that research "should focus on the significance of perceived authenticity or inauthenticity and its antecedents in the context of people's voting decisions."⁵

Here, we argue that politicians who consistently act in line with their policy position are perceived as more authentic, and these heightened authenticity perceptions influence their electoral success. We test these expectations using a novel pre-registered survey experiment

¹ Andrea Whittle, Frank Mueller, and Chris Carter, "Authenticity and Political Leadership," *IPPR Progressive Review* 28 (2021): 140–52.

² James Stanyer, "Authenticity in Politics and Political Communication Research: Analytic Concept and Political Issue," in *Cultures of Authenticity*, ed. Marie Heřmanová, Michael Skey, and Thomas Thurnell-Read (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022), at 271.

³ Dieter Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity: 'To Thine Own Self Be True,'" *Political Behavior* 43 (2021): 1181–1204; and Viktor Orri Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician and Political Trust: An Authenticity Gap in British Politics?," *Political Studies* 69 (2021): 858–80.

⁴ Diego Ceccobelli and Luigi Di Gregorio, "The Triangle of Leadership. Authenticity, Competence and Ordinariness in Political Marketing," *Journal of Political Marketing* 21 (2022): 113–25.

⁵ Simon M. Luebke, "Political Authenticity: Conceptualization of a Popular Term," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 (2021): 635–653, at 648.

on a nationally representative British sample producing three substantial findings. First, respondents perceive candidates to be authentic when their political actions are consistent with their previously stated policy preferences. Second, this holds even when voters disagree with the candidate's policy position. This resiliency appears unique to the trait of authenticity, as it does not hold for empathy or competence. Finally, respondents are more likely to vote for a candidate they perceive to be authentic.

Our findings hence support political commentators focusing strongly on authenticity as an important determinant of a candidate's electoral success. It appears that authenticity is generally a sought-after quality, with voters favoring politicians who demonstrate coherence between their promises and actions.

Authenticity as a Candidate Trait

Authentic individuals remain true to themselves and are not afraid to reveal their thoughts and values. As such, an authentic politician is consistent in their core values, attitudes, and behaviors, even when it may be politically expedient to change them.⁶ The importance of

⁶ Ben Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19 (2016): 489–504.

consistency is well established in conceptualizations of authenticity⁷ yet the causal link between consistency and political authenticity has yet to be tested.⁸

For politicians, consistency over time helps them to stand out from the stereotypical image of the “fake” or “scripted” politician who is most concerned about image management and saying what they think people want to hear rather than what they actually believe.⁹ For

⁷ Jones "Authenticity in Political Discourse"; Luebke, "Political Authenticity"; Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; Ceccobelli and Di Gregorio, "The Triangle of Leadership"; Meredith Salisbury and Jefferson Pooley, "The #nofilter Self: The Contest for Authenticity among Social Networking Sites, 2002–2016," *Social Sciences* 6 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6010010>, 10; Ian Sheinheit and Cynthia J. Bogard, "Authenticity and Carrier Agents: The Social Construction of Political Gaffes," *Sociological Forum* 31 (2016): 970–93; and Simon M. Luebke and Ines Engelmann, "Do We Know Politicians' True Selves From the Media? Exploring the Relationship Between Political Media Exposure and Perceived Political Authenticity," *Social Media + Society* 8 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221077030>.

⁸ Authentic politicians are also argued to possess ordinariness and conviction; see Luebke and Engelmann, "Do We Know Politicians' True Selves From the Media?"; and Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity'."). We focus solely on consistency given our research design and space constraints.

⁹ Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; Whittle, Mueller, and Carter, "Authenticity and Political Leadership"; and Maiken Umbach and Mathew Humphrey, *Authenticity: The Cultural History of a Political Concept* (Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

example, several studies show that those who stray from political speech norms by using politically incorrect or colloquial language are frequently evaluated as more authentic.¹⁰ In this sense, authenticity tends to be associated with individuals who are perceived to be independent of the political party machinery of spin doctors and communication consultants.¹¹ A good example of this and the electoral benefits it can bring is former leader of the UK Labour party Jeremy Corbyn who, during his 2015 leadership campaign, was often portrayed as being authentic due to his consistency and commitment to his core beliefs—especially when these went against the positions held by the parliamentary party.¹² Indeed, he was argued to have “constituted the antithetical embodiment of the compromise and spin of

¹⁰ Gunn Enli and Linda Therese Rosenberg, "Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic," *Social Media + Society* 4 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764430>; Sophia Hatzisavvidou, "'The Climate Has Always Been Changing': Sarah Palin, Climate Change Denialism, and American Conservatism," *Celebrity Studies* 12 (2021): 371–88; Andrea McDonnell and Mark Wheeler, "@realDonaldTrump: Political Celebrity, Authenticity, and Para-Social Engagement on Twitter," *Celebrity Studies* 10 (2019): 427–31; and Michael Rosenblum, Juliana Schroeder, and Francesca Gino, "Tell It like It Is: When Politically Incorrect Language Promotes Authenticity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 119 (2020): 75–103.

¹¹ Ceccobelli and Di Gregorio, "The Triangle of Leadership," 116.

¹² Frank Mueller, Andrea Whittle, and Gyuzel Gadelshina, "The Discursive Construction of Authenticity: The Case of Jeremy Corbyn," *Discourse, Context & Media* 31 (2019): 100324. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2019.100324>.

Labour leaders in years past.”¹³ By acting independently of their parties to remain consistent, politicians can “signal that they have principles and are trustworthy, so constituents may see speaking out against the party as an indication of other positive candidate characteristics”¹⁴ including authenticity. And British voters have been shown to have a strong preference for Members of Parliament (MPs) who are willing to speak or vote against their party.¹⁵ Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Politicians who are consistent in the face of political pressure are perceived as more authentic than inconsistent politicians.

Despite its apparent desirability, authenticity is not always normatively good. For one, it may come at the expense of other desirable characteristics such as humility and the capacity to build consensus.¹⁶ Moreover, a candidate’s authenticity is independent of their values, attitudes, or policy preferences; indeed, authentic candidates could have reprehensible values

¹³ Jake Watts and Tim Bale, "Populism as an Intra-Party Phenomenon: The British Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21 (2019): 99-115 , at 107.

¹⁴ Nick Vivyan and Markus Wagner, "What Do Voters Want From Their Local MP?," *The Political Quarterly* 86 (2015): 33-40, at 36.

¹⁵ Vivyan and Wagner, "What Do Voters Want From Their Local MP?"; and Rosie Campbell et al., "Legislator Dissent as a Valence Signal," *British Journal of Political Science* 49 (2019): 105–28.

¹⁶ Umbach and Humphrey, *Authenticity*, 69.

or behave unacceptably.¹⁷ For politicians themselves, dissenting from one's party's position to be "true to themselves," despite its potential electoral appeal, can also come with substantial individual risk given the disciplinary tools that parties have at their disposal, including discounting the politicians' policy priorities, overlooking them for promotions or even removing the party whip—and associated privileges—from them.¹⁸ We propose a very hard test by arguing that even consistent politicians that hold an incongruent policy view can be perceived as authentic. This motivates:

Hypothesis 1b: Politicians who are consistent in the face of political pressure are perceived as more authentic than inconsistent politicians *even if they hold incongruent views*.

Previous research has demonstrated a substantial relationship between certain candidate traits and vote intention,¹⁹ with empathy and competence having particularly strong effects on vote

¹⁷ Janan Ganesh, "Authenticity Is the Political Snake Oil of Our Age," *Financial Times* (September 11, 2017), <https://www.ft.com/content/996fbb84-96d7-11e7-b83c-9588e51488a0>; and Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," 499.

¹⁸ Jonathan B. Slapin et al., "Ideology, Grandstanding, and Strategic Party Disloyalty in the British Parliament," *American Political Science Review* 112 (2018): 15-30, at 17.

¹⁹ Amanda Bittner, *Platform or Personality?* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Marina Costa Lobo and John Curtice, eds., *Personality Politics?: The Role of Leader Evaluations in Democratic Elections* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

choice.²⁰ Similarly, cross-sectional survey analysis shows that authenticity can provide a substantial electoral benefit.²¹ While it is the case that individuals' partisanship may color their perceptions of politicians' authenticity,²² one study focusing on leading candidates at the Democratic Party Iowa Caucus in 2020 notably showed significant, positive associations between authenticity perceptions and vote intention even in a contest without partisan differences of voters or candidates.²³ As with other traits, authenticity can be a useful heuristic for voters: knowing that a candidate is unlikely to be swayed means that future behavior is more predictable. As existing analysis has not addressed the causal relationship

²⁰ Alexander Bor and Lasse Laustsen, "Candidate Evaluations across the Aisle: Cross-cultural Evidence That Out-partisans Value Candidate Warmth More than In-partisans," *European Journal of Political Research* 61 (2022): 878–900; and Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*.

²¹ Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; Simon M. Luebke and Ines Engelmann, "Perceiving Politicians as True to Themselves: Development and Validation of the Perceived Political Authenticity Scale," *PLOS ONE* 18 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285344>; and Diana Zulli and Terri L. Towner, "The Effects of 'Live,' Authentic, and Emotional Instagram Images on Congressional Candidate Evaluations," *Social Media + Society* 7 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211062917>.

²² David R. Pillow et al., "Not Simply in the Eye of the Beholder: Authenticity as a Product of Candidate Preference and Unfettered Speech," *Political Psychology* 39 (2018): 849–68; and Paul R. Brewer et al., "Public Perceptions Regarding the Authenticity of the 2012 Presidential Candidates," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44 (2014): 742–57.

²³ John Kenny, Jac Lerner, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, "Candidate Authenticity and the Iowa Caucus," *Electoral Studies* 73 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102390>.

between authenticity and vote intentions, we test the causality of these associations. This leads us to our second set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Authenticity increases the likelihood of voting for a politician.

Hypothesis 2b: Perceived authenticity of politicians mediate the effect of consistency on vote intention.

Data and Methodology

To test our expectations, we use a pre-registered survey experiment.²⁴ Survey experiments are ideal to test causal claims and allow us to combine the “internal validity of experiments with the external validity of a representative population sample.”²⁵ Our experiment was fielded May 25–26, 2022 by YouGov on a national British sample consisting of 1,717 voting age (18+) respondents (see table B1 in Appendix B for information on the sample’s sociodemographic characteristics). As a highly personalized and increasingly candidate-centered party system²⁶ the UK is a suitable case for such research.

²⁴ The experimental design and analysis plan was pre-registered at aspredicted.org; see <https://aspredicted.org/7yt2-wmh2.pdf>.

²⁵ Diana C. Mutz, *Population-Based Survey Experiments, STU-Student edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Ian McAllister, "The Personalization of Politics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann null, vol. 10 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 571–88.

Respondents were presented with a vignette regarding a hypothetical councillor.²⁷ The vignettes varied in whether the politician was in favor of/against a stricter immigration policy, and whether—under political pressure—they consistently voted in line with this position or not. The policy position of this politician and those of the respondents were coded on whether they are congruent (both have the same position) or incongruent (have different positions). Thus, respondents were randomly assigned to four treatment groups (1) a politician with a congruent policy position that acts consistently with this position, (2) a politician with a congruent policy position that acts inconsistently with this position, (3) a politician with an incongruent policy position that acts consistently with this position, (4) and a politician with an incongruent policy position that acts inconsistently with this position (See Table 1 for the vignette).

Table 1. Wording of the experiment

Common introduction

“Ben is an elected councillor of a local authority in Britain. He has been in office since 2019. Before this, he was a lawyer.

Treatments

congruent/incongruent:

At the elections, he campaigned on a platform [of/against] implementing a stricter immigration policy saying that he would do everything possible [so that fewer immigrants enter Britain/to prevent the reduction of immigrants entering Britain].

Consistent:

Since being elected, he has consistently voted [in favour of/against] measures to reduce immigration even when under intense political pressure to vote [against /in favour of] them.

Inconsistent:

Since being elected, he has sometimes voted [against/in favour of] measures to reduce immigration when under intense political pressure to do so.

²⁷ We chose the local rather than the national level to make the hypothetical candidate more plausible given that there are approximately 20,000 councillors in Britain. Moreover, we kept constant the sex of the councillor as a man.

The policy position regards immigration. First, by using a timely issue with high public salience respondents are more likely to be aware of this issue and to have opinions. Though immigration policy largely rests at the national level, immigration has been salient at British local elections and local authorities do take policy stances on immigration-related matters. For example, in the months prior to the survey many local authorities prominently pledged to not enforce central-government policy on deporting non-British unhoused individuals, commonly referred to as “rough sleepers”.²⁸ This salience of immigration allows us to randomly assign respondents a candidate that has an incongruent or congruent position to them. Second, immigration tends to be highly emotive, with fewer neutral responses. Finally, it poses a strong test for our argument that citizens differentiate between a candidate's policy position and their perceived authenticity. For competence and empathy, respondents generally perceive their favored candidate as more competent and empathic than opposition candidates. But citizens might perceive a candidate as authentic although they disagree with them.

After reading the vignette, respondents were asked how likely they would be to vote for this candidate if they ran in the next election (our main dependent variable). They were also asked about how much they perceived the candidate to be authentic (our main mediator) on a seven-point agree/disagree scale. In our analysis, this has been coded so that higher values represent perceiving the candidate as more authentic and lower values as less authentic. They were additionally asked on the same scale to assess the candidate on two

²⁸ Rachael Dobson and Sarah Turnbull, "In or against the State? Hospitality and Hostility in Homelessness Charities and Deportation Practice," *International Journal of Law in Context* 18 (2022): 25–40.

alternative mediators used as robustness checks: competence and empathy (see Appendix B for additional information on the questionnaire).

Results

Average Treatment Effects

The average perception of the authenticity of the councillor is 4.06 on a 1-7 scale. Figure 1 depicts the mean perception of authenticity across different treatment groups. In line with expectations (Hypothesis 1a), consistency clearly determines respondents' perception of authenticity. Politicians with consistent behavior are perceived as more authentic than inconsistent ones. This is so even if the consistent politician holds an incongruent policy position to the respondent (Hypothesis 1b). These results are corroborated with an OLS regression (see Table A4 in Appendix A).

Interestingly, the consistent politician with an incongruent policy position is perceived as more authentic than the inconsistent politician with the same policy position as the respondent. However, for competence and empathy, only politicians that hold the same policy position as respondents and are consistent are considered more competent and empathetic (see figure A1 and A2 in Appendix A). Politicians with different policy positions to respondents are perceived as less competent and empathetic even if they are consistent.

Figure 1. Mean perception of politician as authentic across treatment groups

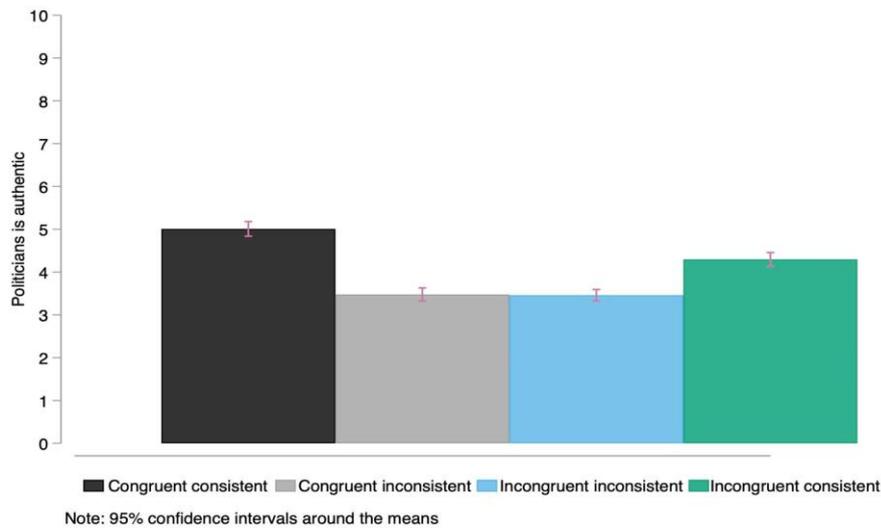
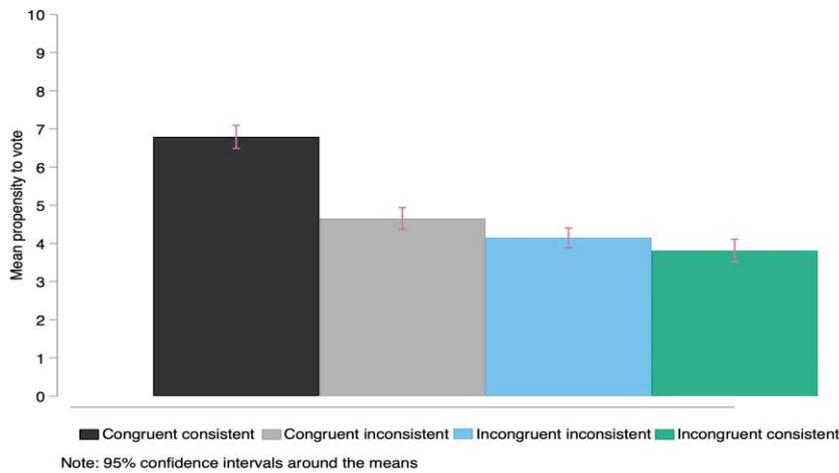


Figure 2 shows the mean likelihood of voting for the politician described among participants assigned to different treatment groups. The average likelihood of voting for the councillor is 3.87 on a 0–10 scale (where ten indicates that the respondent would definitely vote for them). However, the average support is significantly higher for the politician with a congruent policy position that consistently votes in favor of this position (5.79). The politician that holds a congruent policy position but behaves inconsistently receives significantly lower average support (3.65) than the consistent politician, similar to the support of the incongruent politicians. These results indicate that the perceived authenticity of the politician determines the vote intention, as the congruent consistent councillor is both perceived as more authentic and gathers greater electoral support. To test whether authenticity is in fact the driver of vote intention, as proposed in Hypothesis 2, in the next section we turn to mediation analysis.

Figure 2. Mean likelihood of voting for the politician described in the vignette across the different treatment groups



Mediation Analysis

Our design allows us to test the causal mechanism between consistency, authenticity and voting intention by implementing the multiple mediation analysis proposed by Imai and Yamamoto²⁹ and so identify to what extent respondents' voting intentions are determined by changes in authenticity. As authenticity perceptions could also be influenced by other mediators, such as competence and empathy perceptions, we follow the framework proposed by Imai and Yamamoto on multiple causally dependent mechanisms using the *multimed* function.³⁰ The mediation model includes the following pre-treatment covariates: age, sex,

²⁹ Kosuke Imai and Teppei Yamamoto, "Identification and Sensitivity Analysis for Multiple Causal Mechanisms: Revisiting Evidence from Framing Experiments," *Political Analysis* 21 (2013): 141–71.

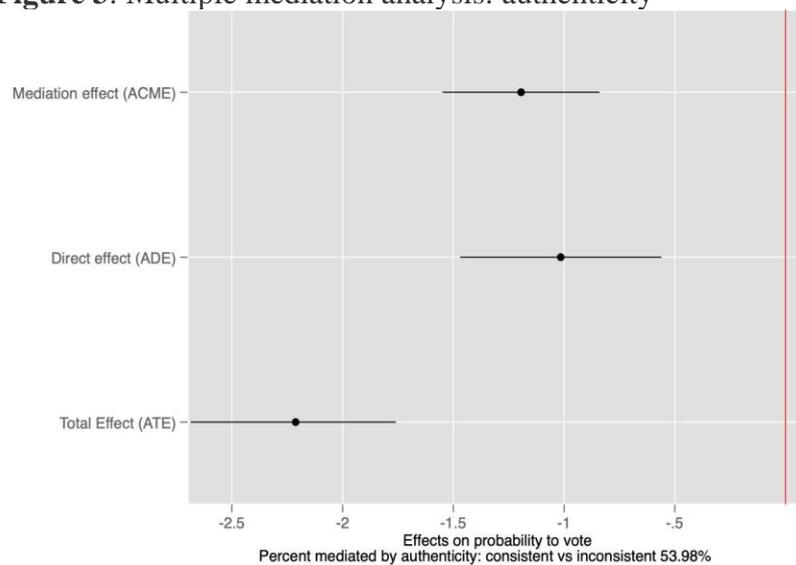
³⁰ Dustin Tingley et al., "Mediation: R Package for Causal Mediation Analysis" *Journal of Statistical Software* 59 (2014): 1–38

ideological position, education, region, and social grade to achieve the sequential ignorability assumption.

We estimate three measures of interest based on a varying-coefficient linear structural equation model,³¹ all depicted in Figure 3. The upper part shows the average causal mediation effect (ACME), i.e., how much of the change in likelihood of voting for the candidate is transmitted through a change in authenticity. In the middle, we see the average direct effect (ADE), the rest of the causal effect that is not transmitted through authenticity. The lower part displays the total causal effect, the total change in the intentions to vote that is attributable to our treatments (obtained by adding ACME and ADE).

In each section, the first line shows the results of the comparison between the inconsistent and the consistent treatments and the second between the incongruent and the congruent.

Figure 3: Multiple mediation analysis: authenticity



Note: The figure shows the ACME: how much of the change in likelihood of voting for the candidate is transmitted through a change in authenticity. ADE: the rest of the causal effect that is not transmitted through authenticity. ATE: total causal effect, the total change in the intentions to vote.

³¹ For more information see Imai and Yamamoto, “Identification and Sensitivity Analysis.”

The results show that the relationship between consistency and vote intention is significantly mediated by changes in the perceived candidate authenticity. 54% of the effect of a consistent councillor on the vote intention is mediated by the change in authenticity (taking the inconsistent treatments as the baseline). An increase in perceived candidate authenticity is essential in explaining why consistency is preferred by voters. Consistency between a candidate's action and their policy position leads to a substantial increase in the perception of candidate authenticity, which in turn has a sizable positive effect on the likelihood to vote for them.

Conclusion

We set out to test whether people consider politicians as more authentic if they are consistent in their policy views. We manipulated politicians' policy stances to either be in line with those of the respondents or not in order to test whether favorable candidate assessments are rooted in policy congruence—which would raise serious endogeneity issues.

We show that, as expected, people consider politicians more authentic if they are consistent in their policy behavior. Our results hence support the charge of Whittle et al.,³² that “perceived inconsistency is the death knell for the authentic politician.” Importantly, this is unrelated to policy congruence: our respondents considered consistent politicians authentic, irrespective of whether they had the same or an opposite policy view. This is in stark contrast to competence and empathy, where only the consistent congruent candidate scores higher, and the consistent candidate with incongruent policy views scores as low as inconsistent candidates. These results indicate that authenticity may be more exogenous than the commonly investigated traits of competence and empathy—while previous research indicates

³² Whittle, Mueller, and Carter, "Authenticity and Political Leadership," 151.

that it also shows less empirical overlap with these other traits than those traits do between each other.³³ Taken together, a politician favoring policy views that are incongruent to the views of their voters can be considered authentic by them, as citizens distinguish these two dimensions. Finally, perceived authenticity plays an important role in mediating the effect of politicians' (in)consistent behavior and policy stances on their electoral support. Our findings hence support political commentators focusing strongly on authenticity as an important determinant of a candidate's electoral success. Authenticity, it seems, is usually a desirable trait to have, and voters endorse politicians who align with their policy positions and display consistency between their promises and their actions.

Questions do remain open for further study. Firstly, given that we know that voters can be more forgiving when politicians change their positions on some issues than when they change them on others,³⁴ future work may wish to examine whether the relationships we demonstrated in relation to immigration are similar or different when it comes to (in)consistency on other—perhaps less salient—issues. Moreover, increasing the geographical scope of the analysis beyond Britain would allow for an adjudication as to what extent such mechanisms are generalizable. Lastly, while the use of a hypothetical politician has clear advantages, examining these relations in the context of perceptions of actual politicians who have flip-flopped would be beneficial.

Overall, authenticity emerges as a central cue for voters, following multiple paths of influence that sometimes surpass the influence of rival traits. When a candidate shows more

³³ Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity."

³⁴ David Doherty, Conor M. Dowling, and Michael G. Miller, "When Is Changing Policy Positions Costly for Politicians? Experimental Evidence," *Political Behavior* 38 (2016): 455–84.

policy consistency, they gain in authenticity, which translates into more votes. In turn, that authenticity tends to be stable, even allowing a candidate who may hold repugnant positions to succeed. This helps explain the persistence of what we have dubbed the authentic a**hole, in the face of tough odds.