

# RESEARCH STATEMENT

**Pablo Fernandez-Vazquez\***

My research addresses topics in comparative politics, with a focus on electoral competition and democratic accountability. It integrates public opinion data, survey experiments, game theory and text analysis to examine how political communication and incumbent actions influence citizen attitudes. With a specialization in Western Europe, I draw comparisons to other regions in order to test the scope conditions of theoretical arguments and explore the generalizability of empirical patterns.

My primary line of research examines whether citizens believe politicians when they take positions on policy issues. It maps conditions under which campaign rhetoric shapes voter expectations about candidates and thereby influences election results. The existent literature tends to explain the gap between what candidates say in their campaigns and the policies that citizens expect them to enact once elected as a result of low levels of citizen interest or due to ambiguity in the content of campaign messages. My approach, in contrast, highlights how the strategic nature of political communication undermines the credibility of campaign rhetoric. I argue that voters understand how vote-seeking incentives can lead a candidate to campaign on policies that differ from her actual views on the issue. Hence, citizens anticipate such electoral strategies and may not take candidate stances at face value.

My work explores two implications of this argument. First, voters find popular policy promises to be less informative about what a candidate's intentions are than unpopular policy positions. While the former can be the product of short-term electoral calculations, voters often perceive unpopular stances as the more likely expression of a candidate's genuine political views. My job market paper, *The Credibility of Party Policy Rhetoric* (currently under review), tests this prediction in a survey experiment that examines the impact of real statements made by British politicians on the issues of immigration and health care. It shows that respondents discount messages that can help the party increase its electoral appeal. In order to examine whether this logic also applies to primary elections, which are characterized by more ideologically extreme and more politically sophisticated electorates, I have included a similar survey experiment in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The second implication of my argument is that adopting a new position on an issue is more credible if it corresponds to a change in the party's internal organization. In a coauthored manuscript titled *The Informational Role of Party Leader Changes on Voter Perceptions of Party Positions*,

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Zeynep Somer-Topcu and I show that electing a new leader helps political parties convince voters that the party has changed its policy views.

My research agenda makes a contribution to an ongoing debate in political science over the role of campaigns in determining election outcomes once we take into account structural conditions like the state of the economy. The literature that addresses this question tends to focus on the magnitude of campaign effects. My approach, in contrast, emphasizes a mechanism through which campaigns influence election results, namely the changes in voter opinions produced by the campaign rhetoric of candidates. My argument, and the empirical evidence that supports it, also address a limitation of spatial models of electoral competition. While spatial models approach the choice of issue stances as a strategy to advance a candidate's goals, they tend to remain silent on how issue stances translate into voter opinions of what each candidate stands for. My research agenda bridges this gap by uncovering how the strategic nature of campaign communication feeds into voters' responses to candidate rhetoric.

Articles based on this line of research have been published in *Comparative Political Studies* and the *British Journal of Political Science*, or are currently under review. Taken together, this scholarship addresses a common research theme from complementary angles. Therefore, in addition to publishing them as journal articles, I plan to develop a book manuscript that provides a comprehensive analysis of how political rhetoric in campaigns shapes citizens attitudes about candidates. This question is not only highly relevant for how political communication influences election outcomes, but also speaks to broader questions on the nature of democratic representation.

My current research agenda moves beyond candidate rhetoric to analyze the impact of incumbent actions on citizen attitudes and voting choices. The first project focuses on the electoral consequences of corruption scandals to explain why voters frequently re-elect politicians accused of corruption. Whereas voter tolerance for corruption is often attributed to a lack of credible information about incumbent wrongdoing or to generalized cynicism about the honesty of politicians, my approach highlights how responses to scandals hinge on the economic externalities of corrupt decisions. I argue that dishonest officials survive in office as long as a wide segment of the electorate shares in the private benefits of corruption. The first paper in this line of research, recently published with Pablo Barberá and Gonzalo Rivero in *Political Science Research and Methods*, shows that Spanish mayors whose corrupt decisions expanded the local economy by fueling a housing boom maintained high levels of electoral support. I am currently developing a second paper in this line of research that compares corruption scandals in Spain and Brazil to attempt to estimate how local investments in infrastructure or other job creation programs might lead voters to forgive politicians indicted on corruption charges.

Together, these projects consider how voters rationalize corruption at the local level as they cast their ballot.

In order to address the role that the mass media play as providers of information about incumbent actions, I am currently in the early stages of a project that focuses on how media outlets frame government decisions and political events. The first step in this project is a coauthored paper with Joshua Clinton that uses crowd-sourced text analysis to map the ideological slant of major newspapers in both Europe and the United States on a common scale. Using a common metric makes it possible to examine how different national media environments frame global events. While text-based estimates of the ideological position of political actors are now common, this approach has not been consistently applied to media outlets yet. The crowd-sourced coding of text is, moreover, a flexible and fast tool to produce comparable estimates across time and space. I plan to apply this instrument to answer questions about media pluralism across countries and to examine whether the ideological outlook of media outlets influences public opinion.

As a whole, my research makes a contribution to public debates that resonate beyond academia. My work on campaign rhetoric helps interpret journalistic reports about changes in a candidate's issue positions and discuss whether such a strategy is likely to affect public sentiments towards the candidate. My analysis of electoral accountability for corruption scandals, moreover, highlights the importance of the economic returns of corruption as a source of tolerance for dishonest incumbents. It thereby addresses a pessimistic view, widely held by citizens and political elites in Brazil and Spain, according to which certain cultural traits explain the persistence of corruption in these countries. Finally, the analysis of media content on a comparative basis provides a tool to debate whether there are ideological biases in the mainstream media and also whether the digital revolution has increased polarization in the views expressed by media outlets.