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## The Role of Elite Accounts in Mitigating the Negative Effects of Repositioning

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### Abstract

Repositioning by political elites plays a key role in a variety of political phenomena, including legislative policymaking and campaigning. While previous studies suggest that repositioning will lead to negative evaluations, these studies have not explored the role of elite communications in structuring mass responses. We argue that this omission is problematic because elite explanations for their actions may limit the costs associated with 'flip-flopping' by persuading some citizens to update their attitudes so that they agree with the elite's new stance and also by molding beliefs about the motives of the elite when repositioning. We present evidence supportive of this argument obtained from two large experiments conducted on samples of American adults. Ultimately, we show that elites offering a satisfactory justification for their change can avoid most, if not all, of the evaluative costs that would otherwise occur. This study thus has important implications not just for this particular element of elite behavior, but also related questions concerning governmental accountability and representation.

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Repositioning by elected officials and candidates is an important element of democratic politics.

Policy switches underlie both spatial models and empirical patterns of party competition (Downs 1957; Karol 2009; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008).<sup>2</sup> Policy switches also play a key, if contested, role in

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<sup>2</sup> Data and all replication code for the analyses presented herein can be found at the Political Behavior Dataverse.

accounts of governmental accountability and responsiveness (Stokes 1999). Repositioning features prominently in electoral campaigns in the form of charges of ‘flip-flopping’.<sup>3</sup> These accusations, in turn, have important implications for policymaking insofar as they constrain elected officials from changing positions to compromise and thereby fan the flames of elite polarization and gridlock (Fenno 1986; Tomz and Van Houweling 2012b). Understanding repositioning is thus a critical subject of inquiry for those interested in the broader functioning of representative democracies.

Previous studies concerning the potential electoral consequences of repositioning primarily suggest that policy switches will lead to worse evaluations of the elite in question (e.g. Hoffman and Carver 1984; Sigelman and Sigelman 1986; Tomz and Van Houweling 2012a). We may then expect that rational legislators concerned with re-election would be hesitant to switch positions. However, empirical investigations of position change among elites actually show a good deal of repositioning occurring (Espino and Canon 2009; Karol 2009). There thus seems to be a potential discord between the actual behavior of legislators and what we might expect given the existing literature on the evaluative consequences of repositioning. How can we understand this apparent deviation?

There are certainly multiple reasons why repositioning may not have the negative consequences existing work suggests it should, thereby freeing rational legislators to change positions. For instance, work by Doherty et al. (n.d.), Croco (n.d.), and Van Houweling and Tomz (2012a) suggests that a constituency overwhelmingly in favor of a position on a highly salient issue would scarcely punish a repositioning elite that adopts the modal position of the constituency. Meanwhile, not all policy switches will be made public thereby limiting the ability of citizens to punish the elite for their change.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that ‘flip-flops’ in popular parlance often refer to cases where elites switch back and forth on an issue multiple times, while our current investigation focuses on a single switch (as does existing work on this subject; e.g. Croco n.d.; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller n.d.; Hoffman and Carver 1984; Tomz and Van Houweling 2012a). As we discuss in the conclusion, the number of switches is an important area for future work on this subject.

Our focus is on an element of repositioning that has not received much empirical attention: the role of communications. In cases where a policy switch does earn public attention and the threat of electoral harm grows, repositioning elites are likely to have the opportunity to explain their decision and attempt to frame the switch in a positive light. Our central question is whether such explanations can play a role in limiting the potential negative consequences of repositioning.

We argue that explanations can indeed play a role in explaining the reaction of citizens to repositioning. In particular, explanations may limit the negative consequences of repositioning for at least two reasons. First, they may persuade some individuals that the new position of the legislator is the better one (e.g. McGraw 1991), thereby limiting proximity-related costs. Second, explanations may also target beliefs about the motives for the change in position, thereby limiting costs since individuals may grant decision makers leeway when they are perceived as positively motivated (see: Tyler 2011). Over the course of two experiments conducted on large samples of American adults we find that (1) repositioning without an explanation does lead to evaluative costs and (2) providing an explanation for the switch mitigates these costs. In the aggregate our results suggest that explanation giving may primarily work through persuasion, i.e. by reducing proximity costs. Ultimately, this study suggests that political elites may have more room for electorally-safe compromise than the conventional wisdom might allow.

### **Is Being a “Flip-Flopper” Such a Bad Thing?**

Assessing the electoral consequences of repositioning can be difficult given that repositioning may be strategic in nature and because other aspects of the political environment may also be affecting elite evaluations. For this reason, the most precise causal estimates for the effects of repositioning stem from studies that utilize an experimental design wherein various aspects of the elite are held constant but policy consistency is randomly varied (Allgeier et al. 1979; Carlson and Dolan 1985; Croco and

Gartner 2014; Doherty et al. n.d.; Hoffman and Carver 1984; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Sigelman and Sigelman 1986; Tomz and Van Houweling 2012a, 2012b). The modal finding of these studies is that an elite who has changed positions is evaluated significantly worse than one who has remained consistent. Interestingly, prior work shows that repositioning tends to have negative evaluative consequences both among those who lost *and* gained proximity from the change, albeit to a larger extent among the former group (e.g. Doherty, Dowling, and Miller n.d.; Hoffman and Carver 1984). Repositioning thus appears to harm evaluations for two reasons: (1) for instrumental reasons having to do with proximity and (2) because individuals may prefer consistency insofar as it can be used as a cue for making easy inferences regarding the future trustworthiness of the elite (Kartik and McAfee 2007; Tomz and Van Houweling 2012b).

Existing work suggests that repositioning will negatively affect elite evaluations, which may motivate elites to remain consistent instead of risking a loss of votes due to policy switching. This supposition is consistent with the literature on issue evolution which argues that elites will be consistent in the positions they take and thus that parties will change position on an issue gradually due to member replacement (e.g. Carmines and Stimson 1989; Wolbrecht 2000). However, Karol (2009) convincingly demonstrates that member conversion, i.e. policy switches, frequently drives party position change in the United States. Indeed, his analyses demonstrate that it is not uncommon to see policy switches by legislators that are both rapid in nature and also *unstable*, with many members of a party switching from one side of an issue to the other and then fairly quickly changing back. If negative evaluations always followed from repositioning, or even just most of the time, then it is unclear why

rational legislators would engage in such behavior. This discord between the two literatures suggests investigating in further detail the potential limits on the negative consequences of repositioning.<sup>4</sup>

### **Justifying Repositioning**

To better understand repositioning we suggest investigating the efforts made by elites to explain their behavior when switches become public. Elites are generally sensitive to the need to explain themselves to constituents and are more likely to take an action when they believe they have an explanation that will assuage potential concerns among the public (Bianco 1994; Fenno 1978). Notably, explanations feature prominently in many cases of repositioning as several examples demonstrate. John Kerry was infamously hampered in 2004 by a poor explanation for vote switching ("I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it."; Roselli 2004). Hillary Clinton has attempted to recast her policy switches as emanating from "new information" (Cillizza 2015) while Mitt Romney often described his changes as "heart-felt changes of opinion" (Babington 2011). And Senator Rob Portman (R-OH) justified his decision to change position on same-sex marriage by appealing to Biblical values of equality (Cirilli 2013). The thinking behind these examples can be best summarized in the following quote by a Democratic strategist: "There are levels of flip-flops....As long as you can explain what you are doing and why, [repositioning is] fine" (Sullivan and Johnson 2015). If explanations mollify constituents when a policy switch becomes public, then this suggests one plausible reason why legislators engage in the behavior despite the risk of vote losses: a confidence in

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<sup>4</sup> There also exists a literature on the effects of repositioning by European political parties. The effects of such changes on voting behavior appear to be highly contingent in nature and may only show up over extended periods of time (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011, 2014; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Tavits 2007).

their ability to explain the action.<sup>5</sup> However, prior work on policy switches has not explored whether such explanations affect the consequences of repositioning on evaluations.<sup>6</sup>

Existing work from contexts other than repositioning strongly suggests that explanation giving can indeed be a powerful blame management tool (Broockman and Butler n.d.; Chanley et al. 1994; Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015; McGraw 1991; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995; McGraw, Timpone, and Bruck 1993). There are two general, and interrelated, caveats to this claim. First, much as with persuasive messages more generally (e.g. Zaller 1992), explanations only work to the extent that they are *accepted* or held to be satisfactory. Second, some types of explanation are more likely than others to be accepted (McGraw 1990, 1991). *Justifications*, as opposed to excuses or denials, tend to do particularly well on this front. When offering a justification, the elite accepts responsibility for the decision but attempts to reframe it in a new and more positive light; Yes I did X, but I did it because of Y (where Y could be an appeal to shared norms and values or the potential instrumental benefits of the action). We focus on this type of explanation.

Prior work on explanation giving suggests one reason for expecting justifications to mitigate the costs of repositioning: persuasion. Elites who offer a justification for a switch provide reasons for preferring the new position to the old. Strategic elites may thus be able to take advantage of the relatively weak attitudes of many citizens on public policy to prompt a re-evaluation of the policy to the favor of the elite's new stance (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Indeed, McGraw (1991) shows that

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, it is possible that explanations play this role even without affecting the mass public. In other words, legislators may switch positions when they think they can explain the switch even if explanations don't generally work.

<sup>6</sup> One potential exception is Levendusky and Horowitz (2012), who investigate a particular context: a President who backs down from a commitment to enter a foreign conflict. Study participants evaluated the fictional President worse than a consistent one *unless* the inconsistent President indicated that they changed course due to the presence of new information. This should provide added confidence to the importance of explanations. However, people treat legislators and executives differently (Sigelman et al. 1992). Presidents are also given greater leeway for foreign affairs than other issues (Sirin and Villalobos 2011). Presidents may be a highly credible source on that particular issue; it is unclear whether similar effects will emerge elsewhere. The present study thus builds on Levendusky and Horowitz (2012).

satisfactory justifications change policy evaluations, while Broockman and Butler (n.d.) demonstrate that this may occur even when the justification is rather bare-bones in nature. As we noted earlier, repositioning tends to have a larger negative effect among those who disagree with the elite's new position (i.e. those who lose proximity). Justifications may thus work by pulling some audience members closer to the elite's new position, thereby limiting proximity based punishments.

Providing a justification for repositioning may work in a second way. Individuals are not only concerned with the instrumental outcomes of elite decisions. Rather, individuals are also deeply concerned with the *process* by which such decisions are reached (Bøggild and Petersen 2016; Hibbing and Alford 2004; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Ramirez 2008). Importantly, individuals are more likely to accept a decision they do not agree with when they believe it was reached via fair procedures (Gangl 2003; Tyler 2011; Tyler and Blader 2003). A particularly crucial element of procedural fairness judgments concerns the motive attributions made by individuals regarding the decision maker; individuals are particularly likely to judge procedures fair, and accept resulting decisions, when they perceive that the decision maker was motivated by positively valenced motives (Tyler and Degoe 1996). In the political arena, such motives include a desire to make good public policy, represent constituents, and advance common values, while negatively valenced motives include political self-interest (Doherty 2015). Notably, justifications are also likely to target these beliefs. By highlighting particular ends the elite signals the goals they deem important and, hence, the motives behind their actions. Thus, providing a justification may also remedy the costs of repositioning by prompting audience members to believe that positively valenced motives underlie the change in position.

Based on the foregoing, we formally postulate the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Elites who change their position on an issue without an explanation will be rated more negatively than those who are consistent, all else equal



**H2:** Justifications will mitigate the negative evaluations of repositioning, all else equal,

**H3:** Justifications will lead to more positive evaluations of the elite's final policy, all else equal

**H4:** Justifications will be associated with beliefs that the policy switch was motivated by positively valenced goals, all else equal

### **Experimental Design**

We fielded two experiments to investigate the role of justifications in understanding repositioning. In both experiments subjects were exposed to a vignette wherein a political elite was randomly portrayed as either consistent or not on an issue and, in the latter case, to provide a justification or not. The first experiment was conducted in June 2014 with a sample of 1550 American adults recruited from Survey Sampling International's (SSI) national panel of survey respondents. The sample is broadly representative of the American mass public in terms of its demographic and political characteristics, although better educated and with a Democratic tilt. The second experiment, meanwhile, was conducted in June 2015 with a total of 1078 subjects. Study participants were a convenience sample recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. While such samples, including our own, tend to be younger, better educated, and more liberal than the mass public as a whole, validation exercises suggest that MTurk samples generate results comparable to studies using other sampling methods (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Mullinix et al. 2015). Moreover, we did not have *a priori* reasons to expect these variables to moderate our hypotheses (Druckman and Kam 2011). We provide summary statistics for both samples in Online Appendix A.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, in Online Appendix D we provide results showing that our analyses are robust to the inclusion of demographic

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<sup>7</sup> Online Appendix A also provides results from randomization checks for both experiments (in both cases, our included predictors were jointly insignificant i.e. conditions were balanced); results from manipulation checks; details on the measurement of the variables used in our analyses; summary statistics for both of our dependent variables by treatment condition; and results from a pre-test for the explanations used in Study 1.

variables and that age, education, and partisanship/ideology do not meaningfully moderate the relationships shown in subsequent sections.

### **Study 1: Repositioning by a Candidate**

Participants in Study 1 read about an anonymous candidate for office (Candidate A) and their position history on the Dream Act, a piece of legislation concerning immigration policy in the United States. No identifying information was offered about Candidate A to isolate the effects of repositioning itself (see also: Tomz and Van Houweling 2012a). Participants then answered a series of evaluative measures about the candidate before recording their own issue attitude and answering a battery of demographic and political measures to conclude the survey.

The position history and presence/type of justification associated with Candidate A was randomly assigned across participants; treatment wordings are contained in Table 1. There were four variants of the position history treatment: Consistent Support (e.g. Support, Support), Consistent Opposition, and two repositioning variants (Support/Oppose and Oppose/Support). The presence and type of justification was also randomly varied. Candidate A either provided no justification for the switch, one rooted in norms of societal fairness, or one where Candidate A compared the potential positive and negative policy outcomes associated with passing the bill.<sup>8</sup>

**[Insert Table 1 Around Here]**

### **Study 2: Repositioning by a Congressperson**

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<sup>8</sup> Also included in the design, but omitted from analyses in-text, are separate conditions wherein Candidate A was consistent and provided an explanation for the position they consistently took. Given that our interest is in comparing repositioning sans justifications and repositioning with them, we will not investigate these conditions in-text. The consistent version of Candidate A explored in text is one that *does not* offer a justification for their position taking. Our conclusions would be the same if the consistent/justification sub-sample were also included; see Appendix OB for a replication of in-text analyses with this subsample included. Given that the mean values on our DVs tend to be slightly lower among those who also received a justification from the consistent candidate, omitting this subsample biases *against* supporting our hypotheses.

We fielded a second experiment to add confidence to the generalizability of the first study's results. The experimental vignette in the second experiment focuses on a different type of elite, a different issue, uses different justifications, and was conducted at a different point in time. The vignette also included much more contextual information about the elite in question, including the elite's partisanship. Finally, we included a baseline condition in which the elite's position history (consistent or otherwise) is not mentioned. The inclusion of this condition enables us to estimate whether respondents are penalizing repositioning and/or rewarding consistency. Ultimately, if results similar to Study 1 emerge in this very different experimental context, then we can be even more confident in the influence of justifications on evaluations in policy switching contexts.

All respondents in Study 2 read a vignette concerning a member of the House of Representatives; see Table 1 for treatment wordings. The vignettes provided identical background information on the Representative save for two aspects that were randomly varied. First, for half the sample the Representative was a Democrat while the other half read about a Republican. Second, the position history of the Representative on a specific bill, a real patent reform bill titled the TROL Act, was also randomly assigned. A *Baseline* condition received no information on this topic, a *Consistent Representative* condition was told that the Representative had been accused of repositioning but that a PolitiFact investigation had cleared the Representative, and the final three versions indicated that this accusation had merit. The Representative offered a justification for their switch in two of these three *Repositioned Representative* conditions, one focused on the motivating presence of new information and the other an appeal to the personal conscience of the elite. As a final point here, it should be noted that the specific position of the Representative is never mentioned in the vignette. Thus, if providing a justification does mitigate the costs of repositioning, we can have added confidence that they do so for reasons beyond persuasion as there is no position here for the elite to persuade the audience to adopt.

## Key Variables

Respondents to both studies were asked to answer a feeling thermometer and a battery of trait items regarding the elite. In Study 1, respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed/disagreed that Candidate A was honest, intelligent, a strong leader, open-minded, and compassionate, while in Study 2 they were presented with the intelligent, open-minded, and strong-leader trait items. In both studies the thermometer and trait items load onto a single dimension via factor analysis; our core dependent variable is this factor variable ( $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ ).<sup>9</sup>

To assess the potential persuasive influence of the justifications, all respondents in Study 1 were asked on the post-test to record their attitude toward the Dream Act on a 7-point scale from strongly oppose to strongly support ( $M=3.96$  [95% CI: 3.86, 4.05]), although for the analyses below we have rescaled the variable from -3 to 3, with responses greater than 0 indicating support for the Dream Act. All respondents in Study 1, and those receiving a justification in Study 2, were also asked about the motives of the elite. In Study 1, respondents were asked to indicate how important five motives were for why Candidate A took their *final* position. Responses to these five questions load onto two dimensions via a factor analysis (as in Doherty 2015): *Representation Motives* (to help all Americans; to help constituents) and *Political Motives* (to pander to voters; increase political influence; win office/re-election). Meanwhile, participants in Study 2 were asked to rate the importance of 9 motives for why Representative A *changed positions*, with three dimensions emerging: *Representation Motives* (help all Americans; help constituents; make good policy), the *Policy Motives* of the representative (ideological reasons; own policy preferences; own personal values), and *Political Motives* (winning re-

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<sup>9</sup> In Study 1, this single factor has an eigenvalue of 3.76 and explains 62.6% of the variance among the items; factor loadings of the individual items ranges from a low of 0.74 (thermometer) to a high of 0.83 (strong leadership). In Study 2, the single dimension has an eigenvalue of 2.59 and explains 64.8% of the variance across the items; factor loadings range from a low of 0.76 (open-minded) to a high of 0.84 (feeling thermometer). In Online Appendix B we provide replications of our results focused on the individual items of this scale (see Tables OB11-12).

election; pandering to voters; influence of special interests). Higher scores on each dimension indicate a greater perceived importance for the type of motive in accounting for the elite's behavior.

## **Results**

We divide our analyses as follows. We first discuss the influence of repositioning when no justification is provided, before exploring the role of justification provision. In so doing we examine Hypotheses 1 and 2 which state that a policy switch sans explanation will harm elite evaluations, while the provision of a justification will mitigate these costs. We conclude by examining Hypothesis 3 (justifications persuade) and Hypothesis 4 (justifications lead to more positive motive attributions). Our analyses will focus on comparisons of mean evaluations by treatment vignette given random assignment.<sup>10</sup>

### **Does Repositioning Without an Explanation Hurt Evaluations?**

We begin with Figure 1 where we plot the mean rating given to the elite in both studies by experimental condition (top set of subgraphs) as well as the difference in evaluations between those reading about a repositioning elite and those reading either the Consistent (Study 1) or Baseline (Study 2) vignette (middle set of subgraphs). The evidence in Figure 1 is consistent with H1 (repositioning leads to evaluative costs) in both studies. In Study 1, Candidate A was evaluated -0.30 [95% CI: -0.49, -0.11] standard deviations worse when repositioning then when consistent. Likewise, the repositioning representative in Study 2 was evaluated worse than the baseline representative by -0.40 [-0.58, -0.22] standard deviations. Figure 1 also shows that the mere allegation of repositioning can carry costs as seen in the evaluation of the consistent candidate in Study 2. Recall that the experimental vignette in this condition indicated that allegations of repositioning had been raised but that they lacked merit. This

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<sup>10</sup> These analyses are robust to alternative specifications including analyses with demographic and political control variables (see Online Appendices B & D).

version of the representative was nevertheless evaluated significantly worse than the baseline version (difference: -0.28 [-0.45, -0.10]). Ultimately, the clear takeaway from Figure 1 is that repositioning without an explanation is a costly endeavor.

**[Insert Figure 1 Around Here]**

### **Does Offering a Justification Mitigate the Evaluative Harm of Repositioning?**

Repositioning without a justification incurred evaluative costs, but can providing a justification mitigate these costs as suggested by H2? We return here to Figure 1 which also provides the difference in evaluations between those that read about a repositioning elite that did not offer a justification and evaluations made by those that also read a justification. Ultimately, Figure 1 strongly suggests that providing a justification can mitigate the costs of repositioning, although in both studies one of the justifications performed better than the other in so doing.

In Study 1, Figure 1 shows that respondents in the Societal Fairness condition did not evaluate the candidate significantly worse than those in the Consistent Candidate condition (difference: -0.15 [-0.34, 0.04]), with evaluations ultimately sitting somewhere in the middle between the Consistent and Repositioned (No Justification) conditions. In other words, this justification appears to have cut the costs of repositioning in half on average. On the other hand, the Comparison of Ends justification did not have as much success with evaluations remaining significantly worse than those given to the consistent candidate (difference: -0.26 [-0.44, -0.08]) and scarcely different from those offered in the No Justification condition (difference: 0.03 [-0.15, 0.22]). Intriguingly, the more effective Societal Fairness justification was rated as more satisfactory by respondents on the post-test than the Comparison of Ends justification, albeit not significantly so (difference: 0.12 [-0.17, 0.41]). Ultimately, Study 1 suggests that providing a justification *can* ameliorate the costs of repositioning, but it is not a sure bet.

The results from Study 2 provide further support for Hypothesis 2. Respondents assigned to read the New Information justification did not evaluate the representative worse than those in the Baseline condition (difference: -0.04 [-0.22, 0.14]), while they did evaluate the representative substantially better than respondents reading about a repositioning representative that offered no explanation (difference: 0.36 [0.18, 0.54]). In other words, this account appears to have completely recouped the costs of repositioning. Meanwhile, the Personal Fairness justification also cut the costs of repositioning albeit not fully so. While respondents in this condition evaluated the representative better than those in the No Justification counterfactual (difference: 0.25 [0.07, 0.43]), repositioning still exacted some limited costs for the representative compared to the Baseline condition (difference: -0.15 [-0.33, 0.03]). As with Study 1, the better performing justification was evaluated as more satisfactory on the post-test (difference: 0.34, [0.04, 0.63]). Together, the results from these two studies suggest that justification provision may play a role in explaining when the mass public will punish repositioning. Costs are particularly likely either when no account for the change is offered or perhaps when a poor one is employed.<sup>11</sup>

### **Explaining Explanations: Persuasion**

In the preceding discussion we have seen that justifications may, in the aggregate, recoup the evaluative costs of repositioning. How does providing a justification lead to this outcome? In H3 we suggest one possibility: persuasion. The justification may ameliorate the negative evaluative costs of repositioning by shifting some audience members in the direction of the elite's new position and thus

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<sup>11</sup> One question of potential interest is how background characteristics of the audience influence reactions to repositioning both with and without a justification. Recent work on motivated reasoning, for instance, might suggest that individuals likely to disagree with the elite's new position, and those from the opposite partisan team, might punish the elite the most for repositioning and reward them the least when a justification is offered (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Lodge and Taber 2006). We provide analyses on this front in Online Appendix B. Repositioning appears to have hurt evaluations to an equal degree across issue and partisan lines and perhaps helped the most among those that agreed with the Candidates final position in Study 1 and among *non* co-partisans in Study 2.

limiting the potential proximity-related costs of repositioning. We investigate this possibility in Figure 2 where we provide mean issue attitude reports by condition and specifically according to the randomly assigned nature of the candidate's position change (i.e. from Support to Oppose or vice versa). In Figure 2 we use respondents in the Consistent Candidate condition as a comparative baseline for benchmarking the potential persuasive effects of the justification as we do not have a pure control in the sample. In Figure 2 we also break down results by respondent ideology to gain further clarity on the potential persuasive role of the justifications. It is one thing, for instance, if individuals shift their opinions toward the elite's position when the policy switch coincides with the individual's predispositions (i.e. when there is little friction preventing the change); it is quite another if the inverse also occurs (i.e. moving liberals in a conservative direction and vice versa). If elites can only budge those that are predisposed to agree with them, for instance, then this may limit the contexts in which elites can successfully use a justification to escape blame for repositioning. And, indeed, existing work on motivated reasoning suggests that respondents should be more willing to resist and reject incoming messages inconsistent with their predispositions, potentially adopting more extreme attitudes in the *opposite* direction as a result, e.g. a backlash effect (Lodge and Taber 2006; Redlawsk 2002).<sup>12</sup>

### [Insert Figure 2]

We see some limited evidence in support of Hypothesis 3 in Figure 2. We begin with the Societal Fairness justification where, consistent with expectations, attitudes are more positive in the Oppose to Support condition than in the Consistent comparison group by approximately 0.48 [0.05, 0.91] scale points. An examination of the ideology subgraphs demonstrates that it was primarily

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<sup>12</sup> Respondent ideology is measured on the post-test. A cleaner test of this relationship would be to use a pre-test measure to prevent the possibility of treatment contamination. Thus, some caution must be used when interpreting the sub-group analyses in Figure 2 although we can note that ideology does not substantially vary across conditions and we do not have a priori reasons to expect the treatment to influence respondent ideology.



liberals driving the aggregate change just mentioned with moderates contributing to the aggregate shift to a smaller degree. Conservatives in this condition, on the other hand, were apparently unmoved relative to the Consistent benchmark. On the other hand, there is no evidence of an aggregate shift in opinion in the Support to Oppose version of this treatment (difference: -0.04 [-.45, 0.37]). While both liberals and moderates show attitudes more oppositional to the Dream Act than their peers in the consistent condition, neither change is substantive. Thus, Figure 2 provides at best circumscribed evidence in favor of H3 when it comes to this justification.

The evidence in favor of persuasion is even weaker in the Comparison of Ends treatment. In the aggregate there is no evidence of attitudes shifting toward the candidate's new position.<sup>13</sup> An examination of the ideological subgroups shows some more circumscribed evidence of attitude shifts although not always in the direction favored by the candidate. For instance, liberals evidence more positive attitudes toward the Dream Act in *both* position history treatments when the Comparison of Ends justification was offered, although not significantly so; the respective differences from the Consistent Condition are 0.30 [-0.42, 1.01] for the Support to Oppose and 0.48 [-0.29, 1.25] for the Oppose to Support conditions. Likewise, Conservatives exhibit greater opposition in *both* of these conditions, although again neither difference from conservatives in the consistent condition would be statistically significant (Support to Oppose: -0.26 [-0.92, 0.40]; Oppose to Support: -0.44 [-1.12, 0.24]). Thus, one reason for the aggregate stability is the diverging opinions of liberals and conservatives when presented with this justification. One potential explanation for these patterns stems from the nature of the justification in question. As Table 1 shows, in this justification the Candidate provides a reason to be in favor of the Dream Act and a reason to be against it while signaling which one the candidate

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<sup>13</sup> The difference between these conditions and those in the Consistent Candidate A condition is -0.04 [-0.44, 0.37] for Support to Oppose and 0.03 [-0.38, 0.44] for Oppose to Support.

found persuasive. What may have occurred is that liberals/conservatives used the consideration that coincided with their predispositions to effectively counter-argue the elite's message leading to backlash effects.

Figure 2 thus provides some partial, but limited, support for H3. Offering a justification can, in some cases, shift opinions toward the position of the elite. Figure 2 also supports the view that the predispositions of the audience will interact with these efforts, with attitude shifts most likely when there is no conflict between the elite's new position and audience predispositions and the potential for backlash otherwise.

### **Explaining Explanations: Motive Attributions**

Persuasion is one reason why providing a justification may limit the costs of repositioning, albeit one that only found modest support in the preceding analyses. The basic results of Study 2 suggest something else may also contribute to the effectiveness of justifications; after all, no specific policy position was mentioned in this study.<sup>14</sup> In H4 we suggested an alternative possibility—that justifications would lead respondents to believe the change was motivated by positively valenced motives, specifically representation and policy motives.<sup>15</sup> We investigate this possibility in Figure 3 where we plot the average importance given to each of our motive dimensions across the two studies by experimental condition. The top half of Figure 3 provides results from Study 1 and shows the mean importance given Political (left hand subgraph) and Representation (right-hand subgraph) motives by treatment condition (y-axis). The bottom half of Figure 3, meanwhile, covers results from Study 2 and

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<sup>14</sup> It is possible that respondents were using the partisanship of the Representative to make inferences regarding whether they were losing or gaining proximity from the change in question. However, persuasion should nevertheless have been more difficult given that no specific position was mentioned. Moreover, the relatively low salience of patent reform and, thus of the parties' positions on the issue, may further augur against the persuasion explanation.

<sup>15</sup> As we show in the Supplementary Materials, these two motive dimensions are positively related to the respondent's evaluations toward the vignette elite in both studies, while the political motives dimension is unrelated to the evaluation dimension in Study 1 (as in Doherty 2015) and negatively so in Study 2; see Tables OB9-10.

shows the mean importance given to each type of motive (y-axis) separately for the two experimental conditions that received a justification.

**[Insert Figure 3]**

Study 1 provides the most comprehensive data for investigating Hypothesis 4. Notably, we find scant evidence in support of H4 in Figure 3. The positively valenced Representation Motives were not judged to be significantly more important in explaining the Candidate's final position in the Societal Fairness (difference: 0.01 [-0.17, 0.18]) or Comparison of Ends (-0.07 [-0.24, 0.11]) conditions than in the No Justification counterfactual.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, respondents in these two conditions do place greater importance on the Candidate's *Political* motives than those in the No Justification counterfactual (Societal Fairness: 0.17 [-0.01, 0.35]; Comparison of Ends: 0.22 [0.04, 0.39]). These results are inconsistent with H4.

The results from Study 2, meanwhile, also do not provide strong evidence in favor of H4. One potential comparison of interest in this study is the relative importance given to the motives, i.e. whether respondents placed greater emphasis on either of the two positively valenced motive dimensions (policy and representation) than on political motives in explaining the elite's change of position. While respondents in the Personal Fairness condition do place greater emphasis on the policy motives of the representative (difference: 0.26 [0.05, 0.47]), respondents in the New Information condition indicated that these motives were *less* important than political motives in explaining the representative's change of position (difference: -0.26 [-0.42, -0.08]). The other two comparisons were

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<sup>16</sup> A one-way ANOVA of this outcome variable yields an F-statistic of 1.09 ( $p = 0.35$ ).

both insignificant statistically and substantively. On the whole, then, Figure 3 provides little support for the claim that justification provision mitigates costs by shaping motive attributions in the aggregate.<sup>17</sup>

### **Concluding Discussion**

Repositioning is an important component of democratic politics. However, previous studies of its potential electoral consequences have not explored a key element of the political environment surrounding the publication of such switches: efforts by elites to justify their position change. The key conclusion of this study is that this is an important omission. Across two experiments conducted with different samples, at different times, and with different procedures, we show that justifications can mitigate some, if not all, of the evaluative costs of repositioning. We believe that focusing on the role of elite communications in this context not only helps us understand the potential reaction of the mass public to particular instances of repositioning, but also enables us to understand the fairly frequent policy switching of elites (Karol 2009). Elite actors, our study suggests, may reposition to a greater degree than one would expect because they believe that they possess a reasonable explanation for doing so. As our experimental results demonstrate, this belief may not be unreasonable. In the remainder of this article, we will discuss potential questions regarding study design and generalizability as well as the study's broader implications.

One question that may arise is whether the results obtained here are limited to the issues used in the experiments. We suspect they are not. Some prior work suggests that repositioning may elicit

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<sup>17</sup> In the theory section we intimated that account satisfaction should moderate these relationships, e.g. we would expect to see persuasion and positive motive attributions among those that accepted the account but not among those that rejected the justification. We assessed satisfaction on the post-test which makes a clean analysis of this possibility difficult at best given that individuals may have many reasons to report satisfaction with the justifications not least of which is the possibility that they are rationalizing from positive evaluations of the elite to satisfaction rather than vice versa. In the Online Appendix we report results wherein we condition on post-test account satisfaction—both in its ‘raw’ form and in analyses which use a version pre-processed via a coarsened exact matching process (Blackwell et al. 2009). The results reported there are consistent with expectations (e.g. more persuasion and more positive motive attributions alongside higher levels of account satisfaction). However, given the very real methodological drawbacks of using a post-test (matched or unmatched) satisfaction measure, we leave a fuller explication of those results to the Online Appendix.

different responses depending on whether the issue is economic rather than moral (Tavits 2007), easy rather than hard (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller n.d.), and across levels of issue salience (Tomz and Van Houweling 2012a). Immigration reform and patent reform appear to vary along these dimensions, with immigration reform being an issue higher in salience and perhaps more likely to elicit moral consideration than the more technical (i.e. hard), remote, and ‘pragmatic’ issue of patent reform. Notably we saw similar patterns across both types of issues. While other elements of the issue, such as issue ownership (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010), could also conceivably matter, and deserve further attention, the existing evidence suggests that the results from Studies 1 and 2 are not limited to the present set of issues.

Future work may profitably focus on other elements of the communicative environment in which elite justifications are offered. Acceptance of elite justifications should be a function of audience characteristics, source factors such as perceived credibility, and the competitive environment in much the same way that these factors work in other persuasive contexts (e.g. Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001). Not all speakers will be able to use justifications and their effectiveness is likely to vary across contexts. Perhaps of most interest is the role of competing messages concerning the cause(s) of a policy switch. Participants in our study heard only the most favorable recording of the decision’s cause, i.e. the elite’s, but instances of repositioning are also likely to feature charges from political competitors that the elite was motivated by strategic goals (see, for instance: Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009, 688). The outcome of such competitive framing events will likely depend on the source of the message opposing the elite’s explanation and its ‘strength’. Ratings of account satisfaction in Study 2 were significantly higher when the elite was a co-partisan (as we discuss in Online Appendix B), which is consistent with prior work on partisan motivated reasoning (Leeper and Slothuus 2014). It thus seems likely that a competing negative message about the causes of a particular

policy switch will be disregarded by co-partisans. In political contexts wherein the repositioning elite is faced with a clear majority of co-partisans, this competition between messages is perhaps unlikely to hurt elite evaluations. On the other hand, charges of flip-flopping may come from co-partisan sources as well. In such cases, it may be that the relative strength of the competing arguments matters most; if the two arguments are roughly matched, then they should balance each out (Chong and Druckman 2007). However, this is a speculative point in this particular context given the lack of research on how justifications and strategic causal frames interact to influence elite evaluations.

Finally, we have suggested that elite justifications may work because they affect the policy preferences of audience members and/or because of their effects on the motive attributions of these individuals. In the aggregate our empirical results were mixed at best in explaining the effectiveness of the justifications, although our analyses using a post-test measure of account satisfaction provided stronger support for our expectations (see fn. 16). Future work may profitably advance our understanding the role of elite justifications by mimicking recent work on competitive framing and randomly providing respondents with either a ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ justification (as in Chong & Druckman, 2007); doing so would provide a more causally compelling investigating of the potential mechanisms at play. In addition, future work may profit by exploring alternative mechanisms unexplored here. Repositioning elites, for instance, may elicit affective responses such as anger that may drive negative evaluation and which may be soothed, or not, by satisfactory explanations for the change in question. Alternatively, Tyler and Blader (2003) suggest that fair procedures may generate positive outcomes such as group identification and cooperation because they elicit feelings of pride and respect. Providing a justification may be a signal of respect from elite to constituent and work via this pathway. Understanding the potential mechanisms at work is crucial for understanding when elites be

given the most, versus the last, leeway when acting publicly and hence their subsequent legislative behavior.

We conclude by discussing the broader implications of this study. The charge of ‘flip-flopping’ is often used in such contexts as a tactic for damaging opponents while interest groups place faith in the effectiveness of this charge in motivating elected officials to sign various campaign pledges (Tomz and Van Houweling 2012b). However, this study suggests that policy switches may be less consequential for evaluations than previously thought (see also: Doherty et al. n.d.; Vavreck 2015). Our results suggest that repositioning elites will not be greatly harmed by a policy switch, should it become public knowledge, provided that they can give a satisfactory explanation for their change. This last clause, of course, is the heart of the matter as it suggests further conditioning factors affecting repositioning’s effects. Elites offering a generally dissatisfactory explanation, such as an excuse or denial (McGraw 1991), are unlikely to receive the benefits described here. Nor are representatives who make a move that goes against the issue preferences of the majority of their constituents or officials who face a constituency stacked with partisans from the other side, although in the present gerrymandered landscape of American politics this may not be that great a worry for legislators. This study thus suggest a somewhat complicated calculus facing elected officials who wish to make a switch, but one that does not foreclose the possibility of changing positions and saving one’s electoral neck at the same time. This in turn has potential legislative consequences; insofar as representatives are hesitant to compromise on legislation because it would entail a clash with their prior statements or actions, then this study suggests that there may be more room for electorally-safe compromise than the conventional wisdom might allow.

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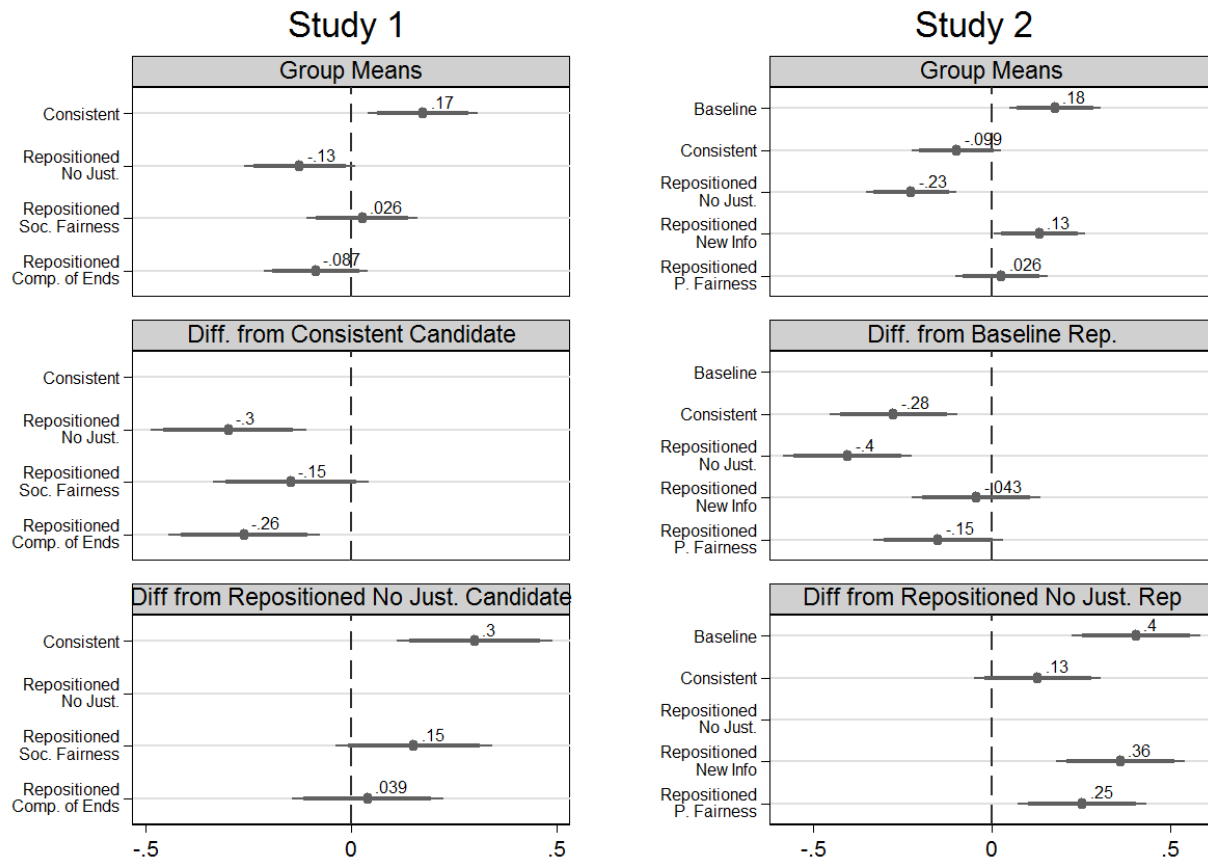
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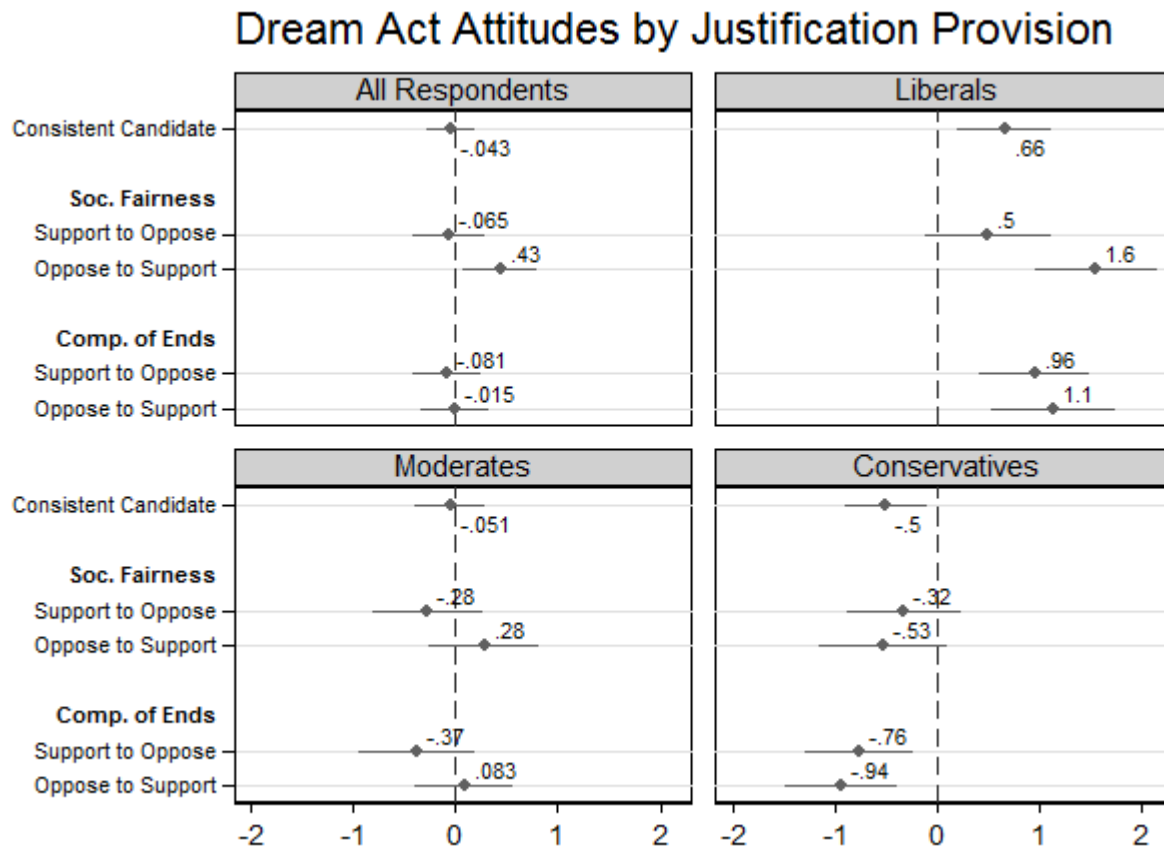
**Table 1: Experimental Vignettes with Treatments in Brackets**

Study 1	Study 2
<p>We would like your views about a candidate, Candidate A, whose name will remain confidential.</p> <p>Non-partisan groups often survey candidates about the issue of immigration reform and the Dream Act in particular. When asked about the Dream Act two years ago, Candidate A indicated [support for/opposition to] passing the Dream Act. Candidate A's position was [the same/different] when recently surveyed; that is, Candidate A [continues to support/oppose] [now opposes/supports] passage of the Dream Act.</p> <p>[If in Justification Condition: [Justification: Support/Oppose, Societal Fairness: When asked about the change in position, Candidate A wrote: "I've changed my position because I have come to believe that the current system is unfair to individuals in other countries who wish to legally migrate to the United States. I now believe that passing the Dream Act would ultimately create a less fair immigration system.]</p> <p>[Justification: Oppose/Support, Societal Fairness When asked about the change in position, Candidate A wrote: "I've changed my position because I have come to believe that the current system is unfair to individuals taken to this country as children. I now believe that passing the Dream Act would ultimately create a more fair immigration system."]</p> <p>[Justification: Support/Oppose, Comparison When asked about the change in position, Candidate A wrote: "I have changed my position because, although the Dream Act would enable more children of immigrants to gain a college education, it would also impose a significant strain on government services."]</p> <p>[Justification: Oppose/Support, Comparison: When asked about the change in position, Candidate A wrote: "I have changed my position because, although the Dream Act would impose a significant strain on government services, it will also enable more children of immigrants to gain a college education." ]</p>	<p>We would like your views about a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Representative A, whose name will remain confidential.</p> <p>Representative A is a member of the [Democratic/Republican] Party and has been in Congress for three terms having previously served as a state representative for twelve years. While a member of the state legislature, Representative A served on the Appropriations Committee, which oversees budgeting, as well as the Energy Committee, where Representative A was Chair of the committee. After twelve years of service, Representative A was elected to serve in Congress. Since entering Congress, Representative A has continued to work on issues concerning the nation's energy infrastructure by serving on the House Energy and Commerce Committee.</p> <p>Each term The Americans for Democratic Action provides a score concerning the voting record of legislators. The score ranges from 0-100 with higher scores indicating a more liberal voting record. In its most recent publication, Representative A received a score of [80/20] from the ADA.</p> <p>[If in a Treatment Condition: Recently, Representative A has been charged with flip-flopping on how they said they would vote on the TROL Act, a bill that would reform the patent system. [Consistent Condition: However, a PolitiFact investigation found that this charge had no merit. The investigation described Representative A as voting in full consistency with their promises on this issue.] [Repositioned Conditions: A PolitiFact investigation found that this charge had merit. The investigation reported that Representative A had indeed voted differently than they said they would on the issue.]</p> <p>[If in Fairness Conditions: When asked about the report, Representative A said: "It's true that I changed my mind on this issue. However, as we debated the bill it grew clear that what was at stake was simple fairness and I had to change positions unless I betrayed one of my core beliefs."]</p> <p>[If in New Information Conditions: When asked about the report, Representative A said: "It's true that I changed my mind on this issue. However, I believe it is important to not ignore new information when it arises and as more details emerged about the bill it became clear that I needed to change course."]</p> <p>Representative A continues to return to their home district at least once a month to meet with constituents and supporters. Representative A spent seven years practicing law before running for office. Representative A has been married for thirty years and has three children – two sons (Jason and Eric) and one daughter (Jessica).</p>

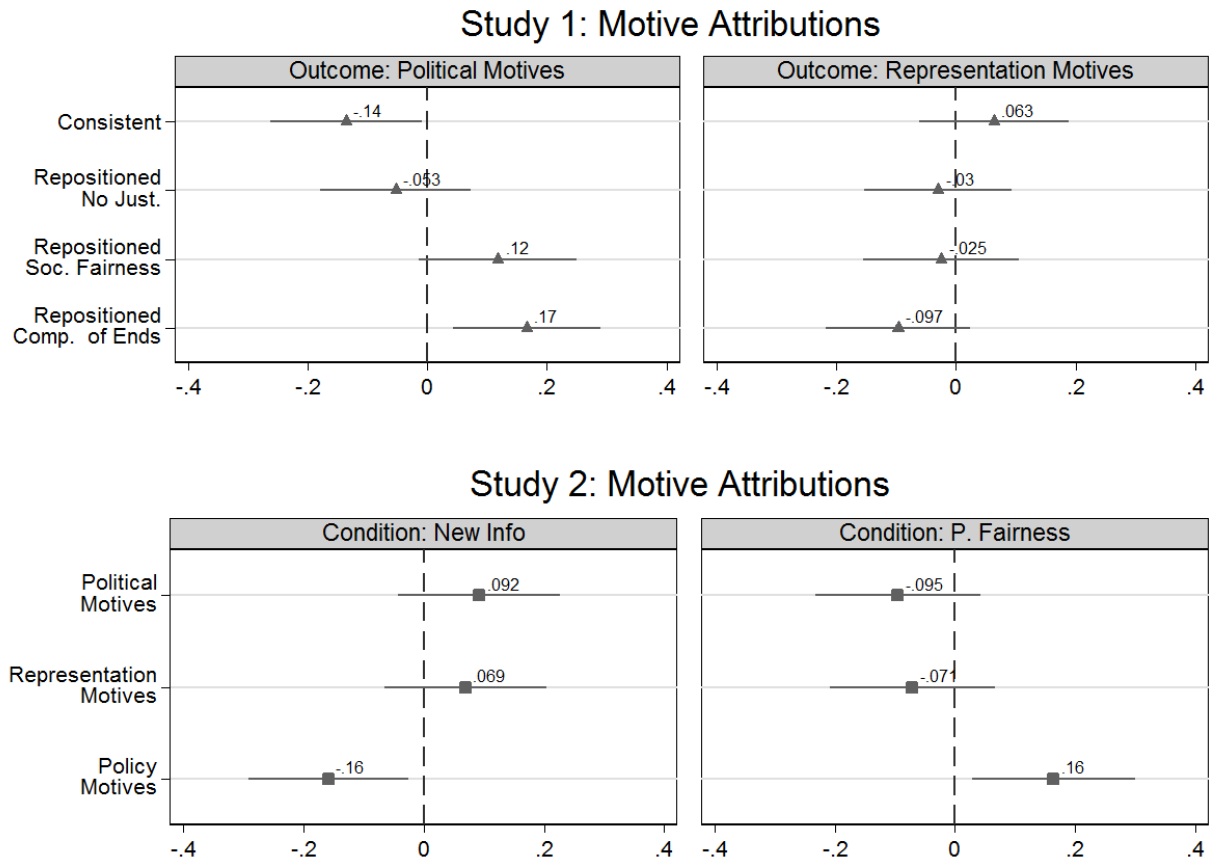
**Figure 1: Mean Evaluations by Experimental Condition, Experiments 1 & 2**

**Notes:** The top graphs show the group means on the elite evaluation measure ( $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ ) across experimental condition along with 95% and 90% confidence intervals. The middle graphs show the difference in evaluations with the Consistent and Baseline elites as the baseline, while the bottom graphs also focus on difference in evaluations but this time with the Repositioned (No Justification) condition as the baseline.



**Figure 2:** Justifications and Persuasion

**Notes:** Markers provide the respondent's post-test attitude report in Study 1, scaled so that 0 = "Neither Support Nor Oppose," positive scores indicate support, and negative scores opposition to the Dream Act (range: -3 to +3). Separate graphs are provided for Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives.

**Figure 3:** Motive Attribution by Condition

**Notes:** Markers provide the mean importance given to the various motive attributions for why the Candidate took their final position and why the Representative changed positions, each scaled so that  $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ . The top graph provides separate graphs for the two motive variables with the y-axis covering the four experimental condition groups, while the bottom graph provides separate graphs for the two treatment groups of relevance and the y-axis provides the three outcome variables.