Does Apologizing Work? An Empirical Test of the Conventional Wisdom

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Abstract:

*Politicians and other public figures often apologize after making controversial statements. While it is assumed that they are wise to do so, this proposition has yet to be tested empirically. There are reasons to believe that apologizing makes public figures appear weak and risk averse, which may make them less attractive as people and lead members of the public to want to punish them. This paper presents the results of an experiment where respondents were given two versions of two real-life controversies involving comments made by public figures. Approximately half of the participants read a story that made it appear as if the person had apologized, while the rest were led to believe that the individual stood firm. In the first experiment, involving Rand Paul and his comments on the Civil Rights Act, hearing that he was apologetic did not change whether respondents were less likely to vote for him. When presented with two versions of the controversy surrounding Larry Summers and his comments about women scientists and engineers, however, liberals and females were much more likely to say that he definitely or probably should have faced negative consequences for his statement when presented with his apology. The effects on other groups were smaller or neutral. Overall, the evidence suggests that when a prominent figure apologizes for a controversial statement, the public is either unaffected or becomes more likely to desire that the individual be punishe*d.

In the summer of 2015, analysts were shocked by the rise of Donald Trump in the Republican primary polls. After each one of his seeming gaffes, pundits and other observers wondered whether the "laws of political gravity" had finally "caught up" to the businessman-turned-politician (e.g., Schreckinger & Glueck 2015; Gorenstein 2015). Rather than apologizing for his remarks in nearly every one of a seemingly endless string of controversies, Trump has gone on the offensive, defended the original comments, doubled down, and portrayed each firestorm as a fabricated controversy cooked up by "losers" (Bump 2015).

Yet if Trump's failure to apologize for his statements confounds pundits, this exact same quality is one of the things that endear him to many of his supporters, as the following quotation demonstrates.

> *Your average Republican who steps in it–and, by the way, it's always the media and the establishment that define whether somebody has stepped in it, not the American people. If the media find what Trump said outrageous, that's all you need, and if the establishment finds that it's outrageous, that's all you need.*
>
> *And then you act like everybody thinks so. And then the perp apologizes, begs forgiveness, and is never to be seen or heard from again. Trump didn't do any of that. He doubled down. He doubled down on his criticism of McCain. He tried to switch the focus of the issue from him and McCain to Veterans Affairs. In doing so, the American people have seen something they haven't seen in a long time, and that is a target stand up and refuse to go away, a target stand up and refuse to apologize.* (Rush Limbaugh Show 2015)

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The "gaffe" and the ritual apology have indeed become regular staples of our political life. A politician makes a controversial statement—usually regarding a sensitive topic such as race, gender, or the military—and is attacked for it through the media. Usually the individual apologizes, and the debate becomes not whether the statement hurt the politician, but how much. Conventional wisdom holds that to limit the damage done to the greatest extent possible, a public figure must show some kind of repentance. The public apology is so common that linguists and communications specialists have even studied it as a predictable "degradation ritual" in public life (Harris, Graigner, & Mullany 2006; Carey 2002; Bennett 1981).

While the assumption that apologies help politicians in the midst of controversies is an implicit part of our political culture, it has rarely been tested. Although seeking forgiveness may put one on the path to redemption, it is also possible that it can backfire. Many see strength as an important component of leadership, and apologizing can be perceived as a sign of weakness. This is especially true in cases where observers may feel that the original infraction is "no big deal," or a fake controversy stirred up by the media or political opponents. Furthermore, social psychology literature suggests that under certain circumstances social risk-taking and the breaking of taboos can be perceived as attractive. A politician who apologizes is following a conventional and risk-averse path, and this may increase the desire of others to punish the individual in question.

This paper is the first to test the common belief that it is smart to apologize in the midst of a political controversy. The experiment involves the recent recruitment of a sample from MTurk, where individuals read one of two versions of two different real-life controversies involving public figures. In each case, they were told about certain

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statements by a public figure that caused a backlash. In one scenario, it was implied or explicitly stated that the offender apologized. In the second version, the individual was portrayed as not backing down and defending the comments in question. The ways in which the background information and the original controversy were portrayed were identical in each case, meaning that any differences in what percentage of people wanted to punish an offender could only be the result of how the aftermath was presented.

Methods and Hypotheses

Participants in this survey were recruited through MTurk, which has been increasingly used by social scientists and provides a pool of respondents that is in most respects more representative of the population than most convenience samples (Mason & Suri 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling 2011). Participants were taken to Survey Monkey, where they read about two political controversies from the last ten years and asked questions about them (n = 511).

The first text was about Rand Paul's statement in 2010 expressing skepticism over certain aspects of the Civil Rights Act. All participants were shown the following text:

> *In 2010, Rand Paul was running for Senate, and stirred up controversy when he said that private businesses should be allowed to discriminate based on race. In response to questioning, he said "What about freedom of speech? Should we limit speech from people we find abhorrent? Should we limit racists from speaking? . . . I don't want to be associated with those people, but I also don't want to limit their speech in any way in the sense that we tolerate boorish and uncivilized behavior because that's one of the things freedom requires." Likewise,*

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according to Paul, belief in freedom requires that we give racists the freedom to

discriminate, even when it comes to jobs or providing services.

In response to these comments, critics accused Paul of questioning a key

provision of the Civil Rights Act and argued that his statements were

unacceptable. Many said that he wanted to take the country back to a time of

segregated lunch counters and when African Americans were denied basic access

to jobs and the ability to access businesses that serve the public.

After this background information, about half of the participants were randomly

assigned to read a conclusion that made it sound as if Paul was apologetic about his

statements, and the rest read another that portrayed him as defiant.

Version 1 (Apologetic):

In response, Rand Paul quickly took an apologetic tone and backtracked,

saying he would never repeal the Civil Rights Act. In the years since, observers

argue that he has been bending over backwards to make up for his original

statements, particularly through minority outreach. He now says he does

not question any aspect of the Civil Rights Act. Paul won his Senate seat, and still

serves to this day.

Version 2 (Non-apologetic):

In the days after the controversy, Paul refused to explicitly apologize for

his statements. He went on the offensive, claiming that his opponents were

engaging in unfair political attacks. In response to one interviewer, he said

"What is going on here is an attempt to vilify us for partisan reasons. Where do

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your talking points come from?" Paul won his Senate seat, and still serves to this

day.

Both of these accounts of Paul's reaction contain factual information, but are spun differently. Rand Paul never apologized for his statements, but began to deny that he ever questioned the Civil Rights Act. His reaction to the controversy can be seen as apologetic, in the sense that he changed his story and has been emphasizing his support for civil rights. But it can also be seen as defiant, since he never offered a formal apology and tends to attack his opponents when this issue comes up (Rosenberg 2014).

After being shown one of the two versions of the story, respondents were asked "How offensive did you find Paul's comments when reading about them?" The answer was provided on a five-point scale, with the choices being "not offensive at all," "mostly inoffensive," "neither offensive nor inoffensive," "somewhat offensive," and "very offensive." They were then asked "How reasonable did you find the comments that caused the controversy?" on a 5-point scale from "very unreasonable" to "very reasonable." Finally, respondents were asked whether the controversy made them less likely to vote for Paul. The options were "definitely yes," "maybe," "no effect either way," "no," and "it makes me more likely to vote for him."

Next, participants were told to read a passage on controversial statements made by Larry Summers about the reasons behind a lack of highly successful female scientists and engineers (Dillon 2005; Hemel & Seward 2005).

In 2005 Larry Summers was the president of Harvard University. That

year, he participated in a panel on the underrepresentation of women among

science and engineering faculty at top universities. He cited certain research that

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suggested that women were less likely to be among those with the "intrinsic aptitude" for such positions. In other words, biological differences between men and women explained part of the reason why males were overrepresented among highly successful scientists and engineers.

In reaction, the Harvard community erupted in controversy. Members of the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences passed a resolution condemning Summers and many called on him to resign his position. It is believed that the controversy over his statements led to him leaving Harvard a year later. Many disputed the research Summers relied on, questioned the relevance of his statements, and said that they discouraged females from pursuing jobs in science and technology.

Participants were then presented with one of two variants of the conclusion to the story. About half read what sounded like a defense, while the rest learned that Summers apologized.

Variant 1 (Non-apologetic):

Summers defended himself by saying he believed that "raising questions, discussing multiple factors that may explain a difficult problem, and seeking to understand how they interrelate is vitally important."

Version 2 (Apologetic):

Summers ended up apologizing for his statements.

"I deeply regret the impact of my comments and apologize for not having weighed them more carefully," Summers wrote in an open letter to the Harvard community.

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"I was wrong to have spoken in a way that has resulted in an unintended signal of discouragement to talented girls and women. As a university president, I consider nothing more important than helping to create an environment, at Harvard and beyond, in which every one of us can pursue our intellectual passions and realize our aspirations to the fullest possible extent."

Once again, each of these conclusions includes information that is true. In the immediate aftermath of the controversy, Summers stuck to his statement and only apologized for any misunderstandings that he had caused. In only a few days, however, his apologies became less equivocal and he began to indicate that he should never have made the comments in question.

As in the Paul text, people indicated how reasonable and offensive they found the comments by Summers. Participants were also asked "Should Summers should have faced negative consequences for his statements?" The choices were "definitely yes," "probably," "probably not," "no," and "I'm not sure." Before the survey, participants were asked to provide their partisan identification, sex, and ideological orientation on a five-point scale, from "very conservative" to "moderate" to "very liberal." Finally, respondents were given two questions to test whether they had read and understood the texts. Those whose answers indicated that they did not fully comprehend both controversies were excluded from the survey.

This experiment tests three possible hypotheses.

H0: Apologizing after a controversial statement has no effect on whether observers desire to punish the offender.

People often use heuristics to judge individuals and political candidates. Statements are evaluated based on how information is presented, the party identification of the speaker, and which reference groups support or oppose the individual in question (Zaller 1992; Zaller & Feldman 1992; Huddy 1998; Campbell 1980). These factors may overwhelm any effect of an apology. Once an individual hears a story that has ideological content and can understand the appropriate reaction based on who is offended, a judgment is made, and it remains constant regardless of whether the person making the controversial statement decides to show remorse. An apology may have some effect either way, but it can be overwhelmed by all other factors regarding the content of the message and how it is presented. It may also be the case that apologies influence various groups of people in different ways, and any effects cancel one another out.

H1: Apologizing after a controversial statement makes observers less likely to want the offender punished.

Politicians often apologize in the midst of controversy, and the simplest explanation as to why is that it is in their interest to do so. It is standard in the literature on corporate crisis management to recommend a quick apology for any wrongdoing (Timothy Coombs & Holladay 2006; Aschcroft 1997). Hearit (2006, 86–95) reviews President Clinton's behavior in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and argues that the American people became more forgiving as his apologies became more honest and complete. Psychological research indicates that in personal relationships, apologies can restore good will between two sides (Bennett & Dewberry 1994; Kim et al. 2004; Schlenker & Darby 1981; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidnas 1991). Under certain circumstances, they can make individuals more likeable and increase compliance (Groei

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et al. 2007). Other studies show that after an individual is harmed, an apology can reduce the desire to retaliate (Ohbucki, Kameda, & Agarie 1989).

This research, however, may not directly speak to the issue of controversies involving public figures, as previous work theoretically and empirically pertains to relationships between people and harm directly done to individuals. When observing a public spectacle, people may apply a completely different set of standards. However, the previous research is certainly suggestive, and indicates that apologizing might similarly mitigate harm regardless of whether an individual is directly hurt by an action or simply hears something that they consider offensive. Therefore, it is possible that the conventional wisdom is correct, and that apologizing for gaffes makes observers less likely to want to punish an individual.

H2: Apologizing after a controversial statement makes observers more likely to want the offender punished.

Although this theory may appear counterintuitive, the social psychology literature indicates that there are good reasons to believe that a person who backs down in a dispute becomes less likeable to observers, who may in turn become more likely to want to punish that individual. There is research suggesting that overconfidence, even to the point of breaking rules, causes people to view an individual more positively, as does social risk-taking (Van Kleef at al. 2011; Wilke et al. 2006; Kelly & Dunbar 2001; Farthing 2005; Lamba & Nityananda 2014). Males in particular who show social dominance and control are judged more attractively as potential mates (Oesch & Miklousic 2011; Sadalla, Kenrick, & Vershure 1987). An individual who does not back down in the face of controversy shows confidence by not giving in to social pressure, and takes a risk by

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refusing to follow the conventional path. Anecdotal evidence suggests that part of Donald Trump's appeal lies in his refusal to apologize and his unwillingness to be "politically correct." While this may only be appealing to a subset of the electorate, research suggests that it might also tap into something deeper in human psychology.

Results

Table-1 shows the percentage of respondents saying that they would "maybe" or "definitely" be less likely to vote for Paul due to the controversy over his opinions on the Civil Rights Act. Overall, it appears that apologizing has a slightly negative effect. When the results are broken down by demographics, the results for liberals and females trend towards significance ($p < .13$).

Table-1. Percentage Saying Controversy Makes Them "Maybe" or "Definitely" Less Likely to Vote for Paul

Demographic	n	Apologetic Response	Defiant/Firm Response	Difference
Male	257	59.7	61	-1.3
Female	250	67.5	60.6	6.9
Conservative	113	38.6	37.5	1.1
Moderate	174	60.2	64.2	-4
Liberal	213	78.9	72.1	6.8
Total	511	63.1	60.9	2.2
Note:		*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001		

The results support H0. While there are large differences between ideologies and less separation between the sexes, people's attitudes are for the most part not affected by whether they read about Paul taking an apologetic stance or holding firm to his position. Rather, ideology is a much better predictor of how much influence the comments have.

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The only possible exceptions are for liberals and females, results that are more intriguing when compared to the findings with regards to the Summers controversy.

Table-2. Percentage Saying Summers Should Have "Probably" or "Definitely" Faced Negative Consequences

Demographic	n	Apologetic Response	Defiant/Firm Response	Difference
Male	257	54.1	54	0.1
Female	250	73.8	57.5	16.3**
Conservative	113	36.5	30	6.5
Moderate	174	60.9	54.6	6.3
Liberal	213	84.3	70.5	13.8**
Total	511	64.2	56.3	7.9*
Note:		$*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001$		

Table-2 shows the percentage of respondents in each demographic saying that Summers should have "probably" or "definitely" faced negative consequences for his comments about the lack of female scientists and engineers. Here, the gender gap in offense taken is much larger than in Table-1, which may be expected given the nature of the comments in question. As before, the largest effects are on liberals and females. Women who read the apologetic version of the story were 16.3% more likely to want to see Summers punished. While 84.3% of liberals wanted to punish Summers when they read about his apology, that number dropped to 70.5% when readers were led to believe that he had held firm to his position. Overall, the results provide strong support for H2 with regards to women and liberals and support for H0 among males. There once again appears to be no evidence for H1. While certain individuals may be less likely to want to see a prominent figure punished after he or she shows remorse for a controversial statement, there is no support for the idea that it helps to apologize in the aggregate.

Differences in reactions between those who read the two versions of each story are almost completely driven by female respondents. The literature suggests that men score high on "context independence" than women (Cross & Madson 1997; Gilligan 1982). Individuals low in this trait are more affected by the context in which they act, being more likely to update their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors based on influences from the external environment (Markus & Wurf 1987). With regards to both controversies, apologizing made women more supportive of punishment, without having any affect on men. Interestingly, which version of the text they were given had no discernable effect on the extent to which readers found the comments by Summers or Paul "reasonable" or "offensive." It remains unclear, therefore, the mechanisms through which an apology makes individuals more likely to want to see an offender punished.

As the divergent results for the two cases imply, future research should investigate the extent to which circumstances make it more or less helpful to apologize for a controversial statement. It may be that the effect was greater in the Summers example because Rand Paul is a well-known political figure. It also might be the case that the key difference lies in the fact that Summers apologized for a statement expressing a belief in a theory that can be tested empirically, while Paul had originally been criticized for giving a normative opinion. Finally, Summers gave reasons for his defense, while Paul went on the attack when questioned about his comments, perhaps unfairly implying that the controversy was the result of a partisan witch-hunt. More research is needed before conclusions can be drawn about when apologies have no effect, and when they increase or reduce the desire on the part of observers to punish the embroiled figure.

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The evidence presented here suggests that seeing a public figure apologize either increases the desire to punish him or her, or has no effect at all. If this is the case, we may wonder why politicians do in fact so often ask for forgiveness in the face of controversy. It is possible that politicians apologize in order to receive better coverage from the media or even make a story go away. Political punditry can apparently affect voters' preferences. In one experiment, individuals judging performances in a presidential debate were influenced by the nature of commentary they watched after the fact, when compared to a control group not exposed to the opinions of pundits (Fridkin et al. 2007). Likewise, if an individual apologizes for a comment that the media finds offensive, future coverage of that individual may be better than it otherwise would be. Such an argument requires the assumption that while members of the public are hostile or indifferent to those who apologize, members of the media will provide better coverage of an individual who shows repentance. Yet there is no reason to assume that this is the case, especially since most of the media leans to the left (Groseclose 2011: Groseclose and Milyo 2005), and liberals in this study appear to be those most likely to want to punish individuals for apologizing.

Finally, we cannot discount the possibility that politicians apologize simply out of habit, or because they are a following a script that has for the most part gone unquestioned. While we should not ignore the possible wisdom that might be found in the intuitions of those who run and participate in campaigns for a living, it does not appear that there ever has been experimental support for the idea that apologizing is good for public figures steeped in controversy. A belief can be held for a long time and still be untrue if it is never subjected to close scrutiny. There are reasons to believe that it makes

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sense to apologize in the midst of a controversy, but there are also arguments to be made that the effects of doing so are either neutral or negative. Only further research can tell us when apologizing is a rational part of crisis management and whether it sometimes only makes things worse.

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