



Flip-flopping Politicians

How Voters Punish and Reward a Changing of Opinion



Sophie Laing, Advisor: Professor Schildkraut

“Kiss of death for a campaign” - ABC News, 2011 article¹
 “One of the dirtiest words in American politics” -CNN, 2011 article²

Flip-flopping is not a new insult on the political scene, neither is it one that is rigidly defined. While a strict definition of flip-flopping involves quick and abrupt reversals of opinion, the label is thrown at politicians who change their opinions, often no matter the time frame. While opinion change can reveal very positive character traits such as flexibility and open-mindedness, a review of the media’s usage of the term during political campaigns demonstrates that the term is used as an insult; labeling politicians as insincere, untrustworthy, or poll-pandering.

Important Research Questions:

- Do we really punish flip-floppers as much as the media says we do?
- How do the rationale candidates give for flip-flopping affect voter responses?
- Do we value consistency over all else?
- If we punish flip-floppers, how does this affect representatives’ responsiveness?
- How does the gender of the candidate affect voter reactions to flip-flopping?

Literature Review highlights

- Analysis of roll call voting data from the US Senate has shown that flip flopping senators do indeed face significant electoral costs.³
- Research supports the idea that flip-flopping is generally punished by voters, and affects evaluations of both policy and character.⁴
- Significant electoral costs no matter the issue type (although the trait “strong leader” suffers more when a candidate repositions on abortion than on taxes), and in fact this cost is larger than effects of sharing a candidate’s race, gender, or religion.⁵
- Research has shown that respondents do not punish male and female politicians differently who change their minds about a foreign conflict. Instead, current policy is the most important aspect to respondents.⁶
- In an experiment, the gender of the senator did not have an independent influence on people’s likelihood of voting for the sitting senator.⁷
- However, all kinds of “good” politicians are seen as more masculine than feminine, and traditional masculine traits were more beneficial to a candidate seeking national office.⁸



Methods

This project involves a literature review, four case studies (John Kerry in 2004, Kristen Gillibrand in 2009, Mitt Romney in 2012, and Hillary Clinton in 2016), and an experimental survey via Qualtrics. The survey is specifically interested in how rationale given for flip-flopping and the candidate’s gender affect our reactions to flip-flopping. The survey is *currently collecting responses from Tufts undergraduates*.

8 possible scenarios, presented as “news excerpts”

	Female Candidate	Male Candidate
No flip-flop	??	??
Flip-flop, no reason given	??	??
Flip-flop, moral explanation	??	??
Flip-flop, constituency explanation	??	??

My hypotheses:

- Female candidates will be rated less favorably than male candidates for flip-flopping.
- Candidates who justify their flip-flop based on constituency preferences will be rated less favorably than those who provide moral explanations, or provide no reason.



Experimental design continued.....

Independent variables:

- Gender of respondent
- Party identification
- Policy proximity
- Issue importance
- Issue knowledge
- Trust in government to handle policy

Dependent variables:

- Favorability rating
- Trait assessments
- Vote choice
- Vote expectation

Bibliography:

- [1 http://abcnews.com/blogs/politics/2011/10/flip-floppers-make-better-presidents-and-great-rip-flops-of-all-time/](http://abcnews.com/blogs/politics/2011/10/flip-floppers-make-better-presidents-and-great-rip-flops-of-all-time/)
- [2 http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/09/opinion/zelizer-rip-floppers/](http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/09/opinion/zelizer-rip-floppers/)
- Debacker, Jason Matthew. “Flip-flopping: Ideological Adjustment Costs.” *Economic Inquiry*, (Jan. 2015) Volume 53, Issue 1, pp. 108-128, pp.108.
- Tomz, Michael, and Robert Van Houweling. “Political Repositioning: Detailed Synopsis.” July 2012, pp.5.
- Tomz, Michael and Robert Van Houweling. “Political Repositioning: A Conjoint Analysis,” Preliminary Draft, August 2014, pp. 2,3. and Tomz, Michael and Robert P. Van Houweling. 2010. “Candidate Repositioning.” Unpublished manuscript, pp. 21.
- Croco, Sarah E. and Scott Sigmund Gartner. 2014. “Flip-Flops and High Heels: An Experimental Analysis of Elite Position Change and Gender on Wartime Public Support.” *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*. Volume 40, Issue 1, pp. 1, 14.
- Fridkin, Kim L. and Patrick J. Kenney. *The Changing Face of Representation: The Gender of U.S. Senators and Constituent Communications*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2014, pp.153.
- Huddy, Leonie and Nayda Terkildsen. “Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Feb., 1993), pp. 119-147, pp. 121.
- Flip-flop image: <http://www.accessoriesmagazine.com/55888/national-retailer-rip-flops-into-election-season-literally#.VhY9rwQbww>
- John Kerry windsurfing <http://freebeacon.com/politics/still-the-long-face/attachment/john-kerry/>
- John Kerry face <https://plus.google.com/10540094967610400260/photos/photo/611161247683899938?pad=611161247683899938&oid=10540094967610400260>
- Mitt Romney face <http://stevejonas25.blogspot.com/2012/04/crazy-legs.html>
- Hillary Clinton face <http://blog.photolamus.com/2015/08/03/most-influential-women-in-the-world/>
- Kristen Gillibrand <http://www.msmbc.com/the-cycle/the-rip-flopping-nature-kristen-gillibrand>