

Understanding the Dangers of Mind Changes in Political Leadership (and How to Avoid Them)

Kyle G. Fritz

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Abstract: Political leaders may change their mind about a policy, or even a significant moral issue. While genuinely changing one's mind is not hypocritical, there are reasons to think that leaders who claim such a change are merely hypocritically pandering for political advantage. Indeed, some social science studies allegedly confirm that constituents will judge political leaders who change positions as hypocritical. Yet these studies are missing crucial details that we normally use to distinguish genuine mind changers from hollow hypocrites. These details suggest ways in which political leaders can communicate that their mind change is genuine without necessarily being judged hypocritical.

Keywords: leadership; hypocrisy; flip-flop; change of mind; public opinion; morality

We have all changed our minds at some point. Sometimes, we even change positions on a significant moral issue. For instance, perhaps one used to believe that health care was merely a privilege, but after enduring a pandemic and learning about human rights, one decides that health care is actually a human right after all. For most individuals, such mind changes are relatively benign. For leaders, however, such mind changes can be costly. The leader may be labeled as a flip-flop, or even a hypocrite.

This risk seems especially great for political leaders. Consequently, *political leadership* will be my focus in this paper.¹ Typically, leadership is seen as influencing or mobilizing others to pursue some common goal (Hartley 2010: 142). Political leadership places this influence in a formal political system. Following Hartley 2010, I focus on democratic political leadership in particular, where representatives are elected and remain publicly accountable (133). The chief distinguishing feature of this political leadership is its basis of authority; because political leaders are often elected, their formal authority is initially given by the electorate through an election process, and then through continuing support (138). Political leaders maintain this authority through their commitment to act as the electorate's representative, which involves

¹ Although business or religious leaders may also grapple with mind changes and charges of hypocrisy, these leadership contexts involve different constraints and are best dealt with separately.

“represent[ing] the interests not only of all those in their constituency...but also [accounting for] public interests for society as a whole” (139).

Because representative political leaders gain their authority through election, they require continual support from their constituents. As Hartley notes, however, support from these stakeholders may be withdrawn at any time. This puts significant pressure on political leaders to maintain “a critical mass of political support” from their constituents (142).

The need for continued support leads to a potential concern for those political leaders who change their minds on significant issues. We have seen political leaders labeled “flip-flops” for changing positions.² For instance, presidential hopeful John Kerry was widely criticized in this way, most notably because he voted for a military appropriations bill only to vote against it later (Hummell 2010: 1020). More concerning than the label of flip-flop, however, is the related one of *hypocrite*. As Dennis Thompson writes, “No criticism of politicians in liberal democracies is more common than the charge of hypocrisy” (1996: 173). Some have argued that leaders who change their minds about moral issues are seen by constituents as hypocritical and less worthy of support (Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017).

This is especially concerning for political leaders who *genuinely have* changed their mind on an issue. A genuine change of mind is not hypocritical, but political leaders who do change their minds might believe they cannot disclose such mind changes without losing support—or even their leadership position. In fact, fearing backlash and the charge of hypocrisy, political leaders may purposely *pretend* to hold an earlier position publicly while privately believing and behaving according to their new position. In other words, judging political leaders who change their mind as hypocritical may cause them to *become* hypocritical.

² Robison 2017 notes that “‘flip-flops’ in popular parlance often refer to cases where elites switch back and forth on an issue multiple times” (620, n. 2). Like Robison (and others in the literature), however, I use the term loosely to refer to only a single switch.

For the political leader navigating these issues, it is important to understand whether being labeled a hypocrite for changing one's mind is a significant problem. Even if political leaders do not genuinely change their minds about major moral issues often, it can happen. The issues political leaders face are often ethical ones, concerning justice and fairness (e.g., how ought resources be distributed?), autonomy and rights (e.g., how intrusive ought the government be in personal lives?), and harm.³ While leaders will initially have their own opinions about various moral issues, they will also be exposed to far more dissenting views and counterarguments in their leadership than a typical constituent in their echo chamber. Given their role in society and the underpinnings of the foundations of political leadership, it is important to understand how serious the threat of hypocrisy is for political leaders who change their minds—however rare such changes may be.

To answer this question, I lay out some theoretical groundwork in order to evaluate extant studies regarding the problem of mind changes in political leadership. In section 1, I explain the difference between hypocrisy and changing one's mind. Despite this conceptual difference, however, there are some common-sense reasons to be skeptical of political leaders who purportedly change their minds, which I detail in section 2. In fact, several studies have been used to support the claim that the public will still perceive such leaders as hypocritical. I detail these studies in section 3. In section 4, I argue that these studies are often missing key information that we use in our everyday lives to distinguish between genuine mind changers and hypocrites, so we should not yet conclude that these studies show that leaders who change their minds will always (or at least often) be seen as hypocritical. Drawing on this information, in section 5, I explain how leaders can better communicate to the public that their change of mind is genuine. The lesson for political leaders is that they should not yet be afraid to change their

³ Even leaders in business, religion, etc. will likely face these questions on a smaller scale.

minds on significant moral issues, provided they can communicate to their constituents that such changes are genuine.

1. The Difference Between Hypocrisy and Changing One's Mind

Hypocrisy has been discussed across many disciplines—especially political science, psychology, and philosophy. Yet such broad discussion of hypocrisy has led to a variety of understandings of the term. Bhatti, Hansen, and Olsen suggest that psychologists understand moral hypocrisy as imposing stricter standards on others than oneself, while in political science literature, hypocrisy is a contradiction between one's personal conduct and one's represented policies (2013: 411). This may be something of an oversimplification, but researchers in these fields have clearly focused on *inconsistency* in behavior. Some writers claim hypocrisy is not practicing what one preaches (Stone and Fernandez 2008). Others hold that it is saying one thing but doing another (Barden, Rucker, and Petty 2005; Powell and Smith 2013; McDermott, Schwartz, and Vallejo 2015). Still others say that it is publicly upholding a norm but violating that norm privately (Furia 2009; Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky 2010) or holding higher moral standards for others than one does for oneself (Valdesolo and DeSteno 2008; Lammers 2012; Polman and Ruttan 2012). On an inclusive understanding, hypocrisy might be any of these items (Effron and Miller 2015).

While these understandings of hypocrisy may suffice in certain contexts, they fall short of adequately capturing the concept because they only concern pronouncements or behaviors. Philosophers have understood hypocrisy to depend, in part, on one's actual beliefs, intentions, or commitments, not merely one's external, observable behavior. Two individuals may behave exactly the same, yet one's behavior corresponds with her genuine beliefs while the other's does

not. Without an appeal to these internal mental states, we could not distinguish one of these individuals as hypocritical.

To illustrate, let's consider some examples. In Miguel de Unamuno's classic novella, *San Manuel Bueno, Mártir*, Don Manuel is a priest who serves a village faithfully.⁴ He inspires the villagers with his words and cares for them with his actions, and the villagers admire him deeply. Yet Don Manuel has lost his faith. Nevertheless, understanding how important faith is to his parishioners, Don Manuel continues to act as a priest would act. Don Manuel seems noble, even if disingenuous, and it's unclear whether we should call him hypocritical.

Compare Don Manuel with a different priest who has lost his faith. Like Don Manuel, this priest continues to act just the same toward his congregation, but unlike Don Manuel, it is not out of compassion, but self-preservation or complacency. This "false" priest, I suspect, we would clearly count as hypocritical. But notice that if we can only appeal to external behavior in judging hypocrisy, a sincere priest, the conflicted Don Manuel, and the false priest may all behave exactly the same, with their actions matching their pronouncements. The only way we can distinguish them as hypocritical or not is by appealing to their true beliefs and motivations.

Of course, social scientists might respond that their focus on behavior is justified, because they must study what can be observed. As Peter Furia, a political scientist, writes, "It is notoriously difficult to judge the inner motives of even our closest acquaintances, much less those of leaders of large-scale contemporary politics whom we rarely literally 'know'" (2009: 116). All we can do is infer one's actual beliefs given one's behavior. If Don Manuel no longer genuinely believes in God, we would expect him to act differently in private than he used to. He may no longer pray alone, for instance. This is fair enough. But we observe someone in private because we need to know what they *actually believe*, and this is enough to illustrate my point.

⁴ Thanks to Juan Ramon Riojas for pointing me to this literary example.

Many philosophers have already recognized that hypocrisy is partly an internal matter, since it depends upon one's beliefs, attitudes, motivations, or values (Turner 1990: 266, Szabados and Soifer 1999, Isserow and Klein 2017: 191–192, Fritz and Miller 2018). That's not to say that behavior isn't important, but rather that we need to appeal to both behavior and beliefs or judgments in understanding hypocrisy. Whatever their differences, philosophers and social scientists both have highlighted the importance of inconsistency for hypocrisy. Philosophers simply expand this inconsistency to include not only behaviors, but judgments as well.

Inconsistency is not enough for hypocrisy, however (Szabados and Soifer 2004, Fritz and Miller 2018: 120ff, Rossi 2020). It may be inconsistent for me to say that I'm not hungry as I eat some chips, but it would be strange to call me hypocritical for such inconsistency. Some philosophers add to this inconsistency the idea of a *double standard*. Paul Bloomfield defines hypocrisy in this way:

Hypocrisy is when, with regard to circumstances of type Φ , an agent attempts to wrongly take an advantage by judging and/or acting in accord with one standard privately, or in one range of situations in which Φ arises, while judging and/or acting in accord with a different standard publicly, or in a distinct range of Φ situations. (Bloomfield 2018: 70)

The double standard Bloomfield describes is the kind of inconsistency that is a hallmark of hypocrisy. Alternatively, Benjamin Rossi suggests the inconsistency in hypocrisy must express an individual's purported values, while also manifesting some vice, such as pretentiousness, self-righteousness, complacency, partiality, etc. (2020: 73). Either account can help explain why not everyone who behaves inconsistently or holds inconsistent judgments is hypocritical; there is no viciousness in eating chips when I am not hungry, nor am I trying to gain an unfair advantage.

Of course, one may resist some portions of Bloomfield's or Rossi's accounts of hypocrisy. Little hangs on the finer details for my purposes; the key lessons are that (1) hypocrisy is in part an internal matter, involving not only behavior but judgments or other mental states, and (2) hypocrisy involves more than mere inconsistency between these behaviors and judgments. Whether what we add to the inconsistency is gaining an unfair advantage through some double standard, or vicious, value-expressing inconsistency, or some other appeal to unfairness or vice is not something we must settle here.

Once we appreciate these two key lessons, it becomes quite clear that a genuine change of mind is not hypocritical. Many have recognized this point already. David Runciman writes, "Though hypocrisy will involve some element of inconsistency, it is not true that inconsistency is itself evidence of hypocrisy. People often do, and often should, change their minds about how to act, or vary their principles depending on the situation they find themselves in" (2008: 9). We must distinguish between inconsistency for the sake of personal gain or vice, and inconsistency due to updated information. While the former may be hypocritical, the latter is *progress*.

This point is perhaps clearest with respect to everyday, practical reasons. Suppose that while my partner prepares dinner, I announce that I will take out the compost and then the recycling. When my partner tells me there will be quite a few food scraps in five minutes, however, I take out the recycling first so that I can take out all the compost at once afterward. I have changed my mind about what to do, but I am not acting hypocritically.

This point also applies to moral beliefs, which may change in light of other moral reasons or new facts. A white supremacist may believe that white people are superior to others. Yet over time, his personal experiences with people of color show him that he is mistaken. He comes to believe that all people have equal moral worth, and he consequently abandons his beliefs in

white supremacy. Far from being problematic, this is moral progress. One may also change moral beliefs in light of moral arguments. Suppose that Maya believes that eating factory-farmed meat is perfectly acceptable, because animals are not worthy of moral consideration. Yet after taking an ethics course and learning about animal suffering in factory farms, she sees new moral reasons not to eat factory-farmed meat and becomes a vegan. With the right experiences and reasons, it is entirely appropriate for moral beliefs to change.

As I have described them, both Maya and the former white supremacist have genuinely changed their beliefs, demonstrating the importance of internal states for understanding hypocrisy. Yet despite their inconsistency, neither is guilty of some double standard, or some vicious pretense or self-righteousness. This is why they are not hypocritical. Such cases illustrate that changing one's mind and hypocrisy are distinct.

2. Political Pressures and the Perception of Hypocrisy

Even though changing one's mind is not hypocritical, there are various reasons why someone might *believe* that a purported change of mind is hypocritical—especially in political leadership. To understand why, it will help to first distinguish between a few types of hypocrites before examining the pressures of political leadership.

2.1 Varieties of Hypocrites

Richard Nixon famously said, “When the president does it ... that means that it is not illegal” (Nixon 1977). This is the sentiment of what Macalester Bell calls the *exception-seeking hypocrite*. Exception-seeking hypocrites genuinely care about the violation of certain norms, but

they believe it is morally justified for *them* to violate those norms. When others violate such norms, however, it is not justified (Bell 2013: 276).

In contrast, some hypocrites only *pretend* to care about certain norm violations. Genuine blame, however, involves at least some measure of concern for the norm violated. Those who do not think some norm violation is really wrong will not judge those who violate that norm as blameworthy, nor will they feel corresponding anger as a result. So, such hypocrites merely pretend to blame others for violating such norms, perhaps to make themselves appear more righteous. Bell calls such individuals *clear-eyed hypocrites* (2013: 275). These hypocrites clearly have an inconsistency between their beliefs and their actions, but given their lack of genuine care about the moral norms in question, the inconsistency manifests some kind of vice such as pretentiousness. The classic example of such a hypocrite is Molière's Tartuffe, who pretends to care about religious norms merely to appear pious.

A more recent example of clear-eyed hypocrisy in political leadership might be found in Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley. After Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, Cruz and Hawley publicly repeated doubts about the legitimacy of the results. Yet their skepticism was likely feigned; all of the court cases brought forth by the Trump campaign were dismissed for lack of evidence (Reuters 2021), and Cruz and Hawley are intelligent politicians. Pundits have suggested that it is more likely that Cruz and Hawley are vying to be the 2024 Republican presidential candidate, so they must pretend to be outraged at a "stolen" election to appeal to Donald Trump's base (Derysh 2021). If so, Cruz and Hawley would be paradigmatic clear-eyed hypocrites: their outrage is hollow, and there is a problematic inconsistency between their publicly declared attitudes and their privately held beliefs.

The distinction between the exception-seeking hypocrite and the clear-eyed hypocrite lies in whether they genuinely endorse some norm or care about its violation. The former does care about the norm, though she may be mistaken about its scope or application (Price 2010). The latter, however, does not care about the norm. Here again, we see that contrary to Furia 2009, a proper understanding of hypocrisy relies on something internal—one's genuine mental states.

A hypocritical leader may be of either of these types (or indeed, some other type of hypocrite altogether). Many leaders have probably been exception-seeking hypocrites, giving themselves a pass without sufficient moral justification. In fact, Terry Price convincingly argues that many ethical failures of leadership are due to the temptation to see oneself as exceptional (2006). For instance, a leader may reason that although lying is normally wrong, it would not be wrong for *me* to lie, given the high stakes of leadership.⁵ The kind of hypocrite most relevant for our discussion here, however, is the clear-eyed hypocrite. This hypocrite seems valueless, willing to publicly endorse whatever position is to their advantage, regardless of their own personal beliefs—the classic flip-flopper.⁶

To review, although genuine changes of mind are not hypocritical, someone might believe a purported change of mind is hypocritical anyway. Constituents who hear that a political leader has changed her mind may wonder whether that leader is merely a clear-eyed hypocrite. To complicate matters, various political pressures on leaders might make the public skeptical that a change of mind is genuine. It is to these pressures we now turn.

⁵ Notably, such leaders need not be acting viciously when making such exceptions. In fact, they may well be trying to do the right thing (Price 2010).

⁶ An anonymous referee points out that the exception-seeking hypocrite may also be relevant for discussion. A leader may change her mind by arriving at a belief improperly, and then engage in motivated moral reasoning after the fact to justify the change (see Haidt 2001). I set these cases aside, because I am skeptical that the public often accuses repositioning political leaders of motivated moral reasoning. The studies discussed in section 3 also suggest constituents see leaders as clear-eyed hypocrites rather than self-deceived by motivated reasoning.

2.2 Political Pressures of Leadership

Hannah Arendt 1972 famously wrote that truth and politics are not on friendly terms. Politicians lie strategically and often (Buccioli and Zarri 2013). Perhaps the lies even approach clear-eyed hypocrisy. As Tavits points out, political parties have reason to adjust their policies in response to public opinion (2007: 152). The same may be true of individual political leaders. Yet such shifts, whether genuine or not, could be seen as opportunism or lack of character (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2016: 459). After all, democratic political leaders receive their authority from the electorate, so there is significant motivation to tell them what they want to hear, regardless of one's personal beliefs. As then-presidential candidate Gerald Ford said of his opponent, "He wanders, he wavers, he waffles and he wiggles.... Jimmy Carter will say anything to be president" (*Newsweek*, October 25, 1976, as quoted in Allgeier et al. 1979: 171).

A political leader saying whatever will benefit them sounds like clear-eyed hypocrisy. The same accusations Ford made of Carter have echoed through the years in various political leaders who have publicly shifted positions. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand quickly shifted from conservative policy positions to liberal ones when filling Hillary Clinton's Senate seat in 2009. For instance, as a member of the US House of Representatives, Gillibrand earned a perfect rating from the National Rifle Association (NRA) (Dougherty 2009). A few days after being appointed to Clinton's seat, she announced at a rally that her position on guns was flexible (Dobnik 2009). Within roughly a year, she earned an F from the NRA based on her voting record, voting against gun legislation that she sponsored before becoming a senator (Russo 2010). Gillibrand's shift was met with hostility, with several calling her hypocritical (Johnson 2019).

Joe Biden provides another useful illustration. While competing to be the 2020 Democratic presidential nominee, Biden was widely criticized for changing positions on the

Hyde Amendment, which bans the use of federal funds in nearly all abortions (Wolf 2019). In March of 2019, Biden's campaign claimed that he supported the Hyde Amendment, but then in May, Biden told a woman at a campaign event that the amendment "can't stay" (Wolf 2019). Then in the first week of June, Biden's campaign claimed that he misunderstood the question at the campaign event and does, in fact, support Hyde. And then, later in the week, Biden announced that he no longer supports the amendment (Bradner, Zeleny, and Kenny 2019). Although there is clear political motivation to adopt the orthodox Democrat view against the Hyde Amendment, Biden claimed that he was not motivated by political reasons, and that he changed positions only because Republican attacks on Planned Parenthood have left unequal access to abortion (Wolf 2019; Bradner, Zeleny, and Kenny 2019). Nevertheless, few were convinced that Biden's change of mind was sincere.

Whether Gillibrand and Biden were sincere is clouded by the fact that each of them had political pressures to change opinions, and each of them stood to gain significantly from such a change. Given the belief that lying is common in politics, it is unsurprising that these shifts would be viewed skeptically. When coupled with the phenomenon of moral grandstanding, in which leaders adopt a moral view to preen for the public (Tosi and Warmke 2020), we should expect that "moral displays can be taken with a grain of salt even by people who otherwise care deeply about morality" (Monin and Merritt 2012: 173).

This narrative that politicians are self-serving has led to cynicism among citizens, and a low level of trust in political leaders (Boggild, Aaroe, and Petersen 2021; Bertson 2019). Rather than trust what political leaders say, many may simply view their words as Frankfurtian "bullshit"—complete indifference to the truth (Frankfurt 2005). This cynicism has likely been made worse under the presidency of Donald Trump, who is notorious for his lies (Kellner 2018).

Hackneyed though it may be, Trump is perhaps the most salient example of hypocrisy in politics, whether the clear-eyed or exception-seeking variety. When he was still on Twitter, Trump's past tweets contained criticisms of President Obama for everything from playing too much golf to being an incompetent leader who is guilty of the deaths of Americans and should consequently be impeached. Yet after becoming president, Trump himself engaged in these same behaviors, playing golf frequently and overseeing a failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in hundreds of thousands of American deaths.⁷

Of course, while there is a long history of lying in politics, and citizens may be cynical and distrusting of politicians who they see as self-serving, this does not yet establish that a political leader who announces that they have changed their mind will automatically be labeled as a clear-eyed hypocrite. That claim requires empirical evidence, which we will now examine.

3. The Empirical Evidence

The majority of studies on how changes of mind are perceived come from psychologists and political scientists. Psychologists are interested in how *individuals* interpret an alleged position shift and the judgments they make regarding that mind changer. Political scientists focus more broadly on *public perception* of these changes, specifically in political leaders. In both cases, these literatures are directly relevant to understanding how a political leader who changes her mind will be perceived. Both literatures seem to support the claim that political leaders who

⁷ These tweets are collected on the website Reddit, in a subreddit aptly titled "Trump Criticizes Trump": <https://www.reddit.com/r/TrumpCriticizesTrump/>. A more organized treatment can be found here: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/how-donald-trump-s-old-tweets-haunt-him-today-n766366>. A different subreddit, called "This You Comebacks," also collects apparently hypocritical or contradictory statements by individuals, politicians, and corporations: <https://www.reddit.com/r/ThisYouComebacks/>. Of course, whether any particular case is actually hypocritical will depend on various factors that are likely not captured in these attempted "gotcha" moments.

change their mind will be seen negatively at best and as hypocritical at worst, regardless of whether that change of mind is genuine.

Perhaps the earliest study of how changes of mind are perceived comes from Allgeier and colleagues. Introductory psychology students read survey responses from an alleged stranger on two different occasions. For half of the participants, some of the survey responses had changed to reflect a change in attitudes, while the other half remained consistent. Participants evaluated the stranger on the basis of these survey responses. Respondents described the individual who changed survey responses as “less well adjusted, weaker, more indecisive, more insecure, more unstable, and more unreliable than someone who remained unchanged” (Allgeier et al. 1979: 175). While respondents were not evaluating someone in a leadership position, Allgeier and colleagues also found that respondents judged the stranger who changed attitudes as a worse leader than the one who did not (178). Allgeier and colleagues dubbed this negative evaluation of attitude change “the waffle phenomenon” (180).

The waffle phenomenon inspired further research. Carlson and Dolan 1985 found that inconsistent political candidates were evaluated negatively, and political party affiliation did not significantly impact these negative judgments. Of course, these early studies drew from small samples that were not representative. Tomz 2007 surveyed over 1,000 US residents to uncover how constituents felt about leaders who make international threats, but do not follow through with those threats. He found that constituents may “punish” such leaders for their inconsistency through lack of votes or lack of support. In their eyes, such waffling hurts a country’s reputation and credibility (Tomz 2007: 835).

Other studies have suggested that the sort of issue a leader changes their mind on might be relevant to how they are perceived. Political scientist Margit Tavits found evidence that voters

do not mind policy shifts on “pragmatic issues,” but do mind such shifts on “principled issues” (2007). According to Tavits, pragmatic issues concern getting things done, without regard for the means by which those outcomes are achieved (2007: 154). She writes that pragmatic issues primarily concern the economy, such as how to effectively recover from a recession, and are focused on expedience, practicality, or personal self-interest (153). Principled issues, on the other hand, are social or value-based and concern “core beliefs and values” (153). Whether abortion should be permissible and in which cases is an example of a principled issue.

Notably, Tavits is not the only one who makes this distinction. Tamar Kreps and Benoît Monin, who are focused on research in social psychology, also discuss pragmatic reasons for adopting some position as opposed to moral reasons for doing so. Their distinction falls along similar lines: moral reasons concern principles and values, while pragmatic reasons “privilege cost-benefit analyses” such as financial concerns for profit maximization (2011: 103).⁸

Notice that Tavits focuses on *issues* and Kreps and Monin focus on *reasons*. While pragmatic issues may often be supported by pragmatic reasons, and principled moral issues by moral reasons, this need not always be the case. For instance, abortion seems to be a moral issue. Those who support abortion access often appeal to moral reasons, such one’s right to control one’s own body. Nevertheless, one may pragmatically support abortion access because it will result in fewer health care costs to the nation in the long term. Moving forward, I will primarily be concerned with the *reasons* offered for adopting a position on some issue.

⁸ Philosophers may bristle at this distinction. Economic issues may also involve questions about fairness that seem clearly value-based. Similarly, as an anonymous referee points out, whether we understand health care to be a human right may depend in part on whether it is something we can afford to provide to everyone. Consequentialists, especially, may protest that the moral status of an action or policy depends entirely on its consequences, but according to Tavits’s description, consequentialists are focused on pragmatic matters instead. Here interdisciplinary vocabulary becomes challenging. Notably, Tavits acknowledges that not all issues can be neatly divided into pragmatic or principled, since some, such as foreign policy, may be both (2007: 153, n. 3). Just how robust this distinction is is up for debate. Nevertheless, it is one that political scientists and psychologists use, so I trust these rough contours will be helpful enough to guide discussion.

This distinction between the pragmatic and the moral may be important for understanding how purported changes of mind are perceived. After studying data from twenty-three democracies over a forty-year period, Tavits 2007 concluded that voters don't mind policy shifts on pragmatic issues, but they judge shifts on principled issues more harshly. Kreps and Monin 2014 found that when leaders publicly endorse a policy for pragmatic reasons, only to later change policies for different pragmatic reasons, the backlash they receive will likely be limited. Yet if a leader endorses some policy for moral reasons, but later changes policies for pragmatic reasons, they will likely receive significant backlash (Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017). If a leader argues that abortion is immoral because a fetus is a person with the right to life, but then changes positions to support abortion access after learning that greater abortion access will lead to decreased health care costs over time, constituents will likely judge this leader harshly. What explains this?

The answer lies in how individuals see beliefs that are held for moral reasons, or moral beliefs for short. Individuals are deeply committed to moral values and beliefs (Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis 2005; Kreps and Monin 2014; Skitka, Washburn, and Carsel 2015). Moral talk is seen as less flexible and more rigid than nonmoral talk (Bird and Waters 1989: 77–78). In fact, according to Luttrell et al., “Studies have suggested that having a moral basis to one’s attitude is a strength indicator akin to having more knowledge, or accessibility, or certainty” (2016: 83). Moral characteristics are judged to be the most important part of an individual’s identity (Strohming and Nichols 2014). The fact that individuals are deeply committed to moral values and beliefs means that they are more resistant to change and more stable over time (Luttrell et al. 2016: 82). These values are “relatively general, permanent, considered desires” (Freeman and Auster 2011: 17). In contrast, a position held for pragmatic reasons can be more flexible, perhaps

because it depends on contingent data that might easily change over time (Tavits 2007: 153). Moral values and beliefs are stronger and more rigid than other beliefs, and individuals are more committed to these values and beliefs than they are to nonmoral beliefs. Thus, if someone changes their moral beliefs due to purely pragmatic reasons, we have reason to doubt their original belief was due to moral reasons in the first place. In the example above, it seems reasonable to question whether the leader who changed positions on abortion after learning about the cost-benefit analysis was ever truly committed to a pro-life stance for moral reasons. If she were, her beliefs would not change so easily in the face of less weighty pragmatic concerns.

Despite the strength and stability of moral beliefs, the examples of the reformed white supremacist and Maya the vegan suggest these beliefs can and should sometimes change. The reasons that pushed the white supremacist and Maya to change their minds were *also* moral. Provided one has taken a position for moral reasons, one might reasonably decide to change that position for different, weightier moral reasons.⁹ Call this change of position for moral reasons a *moral change of mind*. It is not hypocritical to have a genuine moral change of mind. But the studies so far suggest that audiences do not take kindly to purported changes of mind, especially when they concern a moral issue. The key question, then, is this: will political leaders who undergo a moral change of mind nevertheless be seen as hypocritical, given the reasons for clear-eyed hypocrisy in politics?

Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017 suggest the answer is affirmative. After conducting fifteen individual studies and a meta-analysis on those studies, Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt ultimately found strong support for the hypothesis that leaders who change their moral opinion

⁹ One might change a moral belief after realizing that it was based on false empirical information, but this would not be hypocritical either. To illustrate, one might believe that capital punishment is morally justified only because it deters heinous crime, which is the purpose of punishment. Upon further investigation, one learns that capital punishment does not deter crime after all. Although one maintains the same moral values, the facts no longer support one's moral beliefs, so now believing capital punishment is unjustified is appropriate.

will be seen as hypocritical (2017: 238). They concluded that leaders who change their moral minds were seen by audiences as “more hypocritical, less effective, and less worthy of support” (742).

The individual studies were varied, using different moral issues (marriage equality, immigration reform, the death penalty, environmental initiatives), different designs, and different variables (leader gender, political leader versus business leader) (734). For instance, in one study, participants read the following statement from a leader supporting the death penalty for moral reasons:

I support the death penalty, and it’s a moral issue for me. It’s a matter of justice, and a question of people who have committed an unforgivable wrong getting what they deserve. From a purely ethical perspective, we need to consider the death penalty as a legitimate piece of our justice system. (Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017: 735)

Participants judged the leader across various metrics, such as leader effectiveness, political support for the leader, hypocrisy, courage, and flexibility (736). Then they were told that the leader later changed positions and issued the following statement:

I know that at an earlier time I supported the death penalty, but I’ve given it some more thought, and my views have changed. I oppose the death penalty now, and I’ll tell you why. It’s still a moral issue for me, and a question of justice. I’ve realized, though, that we can never be 100% certain that the convicted party is guilty, and truly defending justice means never taking the risk of killing an innocent victim. Putting all economic concerns aside, you have to acknowledge that the death penalty is not a good thing. (736)

Participants then reevaluated the leader on those same metrics.

Importantly, in the Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt study, the leader provided an explanation to justify their change of position. Not all studies have done this. In a study conducted by Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, respondents were given a biography of a fictional state representative, Jones, who is running for office. In some cases, Jones had changed positions on a policy matter, such as abortion. Respondents were then asked whether they thought Jones is honest and trustworthy enough to be a representative in office. According to Doherty and colleagues, people evaluated a change of position on abortion less favorably than one who has been consistent, and they also evaluated the representative's character more negatively (2016: 463). Yet respondents never read *why* Jones had allegedly changed positions regarding abortion.

There is some reason to think an explanation matters. Levendusky and Horowitz 2012 found that when a fictional president explained to the public why backing down from a threat was in the nation's best interest, he suffered significantly lower audience costs (324). Robison 2017 also found that when a leader provided an explanation for changing positions, the costs were often mitigated (611). Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015 found something similar.

Yet Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt found that with respect to distinctively moral issues, such explanations did *not* help regarding assessments of hypocrisy. They summarized their findings:

[I]n 11 of 15 studies, we found that initially moral leaders were perceived as significantly more hypocritical (all 15 of the effects were in the predicted direction). In 5 of 15 studies, we found that initially moral leaders were perceived as less effective (14 of the 15 studies were in the predicted direction). And in 3 of 5 studies, we found that initially moral leaders received less support (4 of 5 effects were in the predicted direction). (742)

They found no support for the idea that the leader who initially took a moral position and then changed positions was seen as more courageous or more flexible, and even those who agreed

with the leader's new position judged the leader to be hypocritical in most cases (742). Surprisingly, even when leaders tied their later position to the same moral values as in the initial position, as in the example of the death penalty above, they were still judged as hypocritical (747).^{10, 11} Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt draw a grim conclusion for any leader who changes her moral mind: "When leaders have taken a moral position, there appears to be very little they can do to avoid being perceived as hypocritical should they later change their minds" (747).

If the evidence is to be believed, a leader who genuinely changes her mind should be concerned about her ability to lead effectively, since her constituents will not trust her intentions. Notably, the damage to a leader's reputation tends to linger, as attributions of hypocrisy are not likely to be verified given the power differential in place in leader–follower relationships; therefore, "once an individual commits an act of perceived hypocrisy, his or her image may thus be permanently tarnished" (Cha and Edmondson 2006: 72). After all, hypocrites are despised—and even more despised than those who openly lie about their morality (Jordan et al. 2017).

Thus far, we have seen that even though a genuine moral change of mind is not hypocritical, there are common-sense reasons to think that political leaders who allegedly have a moral change of mind are instead clear-eyed hypocrites. The empirical evidence appears similarly damning; followers and constituents will likely think that leaders who announce a moral change of mind are hypocritical regardless.

¹⁰ Although I focus on political leadership here, the findings were the same for business leaders like CEOs (Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017: 739, 747).

¹¹ Why do these results differ from those of, say, Levendusky and Horowitz 2012? One possibility is that Levendusky and Horowitz were not concerned with clearly *moral* issues, but with backing down from international threats. Perhaps the most plausible reason is that Levendusky and Horowitz make it clear in their study that backing down from conflict was the correct decision for the leader, which will almost certainly limit backlash (2012: 334).

Fortunately, however, I do not think the empirical evidence on offer is terribly persuasive. Understanding why will also help uncover ways for political leaders to convey that their change of mind is genuine and not hypocritical posturing for personal gain.

4. Putting Leadership in Context

To understand what is missing in the studies detailed in section three, consider how we as individuals determine whether an individual is being honest with us. We make reasonable inferences about someone's beliefs and values given various external behaviors and context clues. Unfortunately, these clues are missing in the empirical studies that claim to show that leaders will be judged as hypocritical for changing their mind. Some studies give participants the bare minimum information: a leader held one position at some point in the past, and now they hold a different position. More nuanced studies include a timeframe or a reason for the change. These are welcome additions, and as I will explain below, there are good reasons for making them. But they do not go far enough. There is still something missing: the presentation of authentic leadership as embodied in some context over time.

4.1 Embodied Authentic Leadership

Humans are social creatures who are, in most cases, adept at reading bodily social cues. We regularly rely on facial expressions and vocal qualities to infer someone's attitudes. For instance, we can distinguish between a fake smile and a genuine one by observing whether only voluntary muscles are involved, or some involuntary muscles as well (Ekman 2003).¹² We often draw on physical actions to help us make judgments about others. Donna Ladkin and Steven

¹² As I explain in section five, this is not to say that we always know when someone is lying simply by observing their facial expressions or vocal tone.

Taylor explain that “physical actions encompass all of the emotional and intellectual materials associated with them” (2010: 68). As such, “to be perceived as authentic, an actor needs to express the feelings and emotional state he *really* feels, i.e., those congruent with his somatic clues” (68).

Leadership can also be expressed and manifested in the body language and behavior of leaders. This is a key idea behind Ladkin and Taylor’s theory of *embodied authentic leadership*. While it is difficult to pin down a precise, encompassing definition of authentic leadership in the literature, one common theme is that authentic leaders are “genuine people who are true to themselves and to what they believe in” (George and Sims 2007: xxxi).¹³ Authentic leaders must somehow convey their authenticity by revealing their true self through their bodily actions. As Ladkin and Taylor write, “the way in which the leader’s ‘self’ is embodied is a critical determinant of the experience of authentic leadership” (2010: 65).

Embodied authentic leadership incorporates three different elements: self-exposure, relating, and leaderly choices (70). Self-exposure concerns the physical manifestation of one’s inner mental life, which is often expressed through bodily actions: “Just as an actor must feel real emotions in order to express them in a way that will be perceived as authentic, similarly a leader must be attentive to the somatic clues of their body as they experience situations, and then choose how to express them” (70). Expressing one’s emotions in this way can make a leader feel vulnerable, but followers may consequently more easily identify with vulnerable leaders (Kark, Shamir, and Chen 2003).

Expressing one’s attitudes and emotions through one’s physical body is merely one element of embodied authentic leadership, however. It is also important for a leader to relate to her followers. This can happen through expressed vulnerability, but it also involves “being in

¹³ For a thorough treatment of authentic leadership and its various definitions, see Gardner et al. 2011.

relationship...with others, authentically connecting and being influenced by and influencing others on a moment by moment basis” (Ladkin and Taylor 2010: 69). To be perceived as authentic, leadership should be physically and relationally embodied.

Although Ladkin and Taylor focus on authentic leadership rather than moral changes of mind, they emphasize that embodied authentic leadership is crucial to making accurate judgments regarding genuineness: “An individual can reveal their ‘true self’ and relate well to others and the particular moment, but still not be perceived as an authentic leader because they are not experienced as embodying leadership in a way perceived by the group to be ‘leaderly’” (71). Participants in the studies done by Allgeier et al. 1979, or Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2016, or even Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017 may have viewed the leaders as less “leaderly.” Yet taking the notion of *embodied* authentic leadership into consideration, it becomes clearer that participants may have come to a different conclusion if they had *experienced* some leader explain their change of mind.

Embodied leadership may explain why a leader like Barack Obama can announce his change of mind about same-sex marriage and be seen as courageously evolving whereas other leaders in similar positions, like Hillary Clinton, are seen as hypocritical when making the same announcement. Ladkin and Taylor quote Benedict Nightingale’s lavish praise of President Obama in *The London Times*:

There’s astonishingly little of the actor about Barack Obama, and that’s meant as a compliment.... Somehow he has mastered the art of conveying feeling, strong feeling, without seeming emotionally manipulative.... Indeed, you might almost say that he’s leadership incarnate. (Nightingale, as quoted in Ladkin and Taylor 2010: 67)

Perhaps because Obama is generally seen as authentic, followers are more inclined to trust him when he announces a moral change of mind.

In contrast, participants only read lines in the studies above; there are no actors to deliver those lines well or poorly. According to the supplementary materials for the Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt study, in some cases, participants were shown a photo intended to portray the leader, but a stock photo cannot express leadership as embodied. Consequently, participants were unable to see and experience the leader's physical behavior in the context of a relationship. They could not rely on physical cues, such as a sly smile or intensity of voice, nor could they appeal to a sense of communion with the leader to make a reasonable inference about whether there is any viciousness or double standard in the leader's change of position.

As I explained above, in the current political climate, many individuals are primed to be cynical. Consequently, participants may quickly judge a leader with an inconsistent position as hypocritical when they have no further information about the embodied nature of leadership to draw from. Because these studies do not take the embodied nature of authentic leadership as seriously as they should, we should be wary of concluding that constituents will judge leaders who change their moral mind to be hypocritical—at least, not as often as the studies suggest.

4.2 Context Clues

In addition to an individual's body language, behavior, and relationship with us, we also typically draw on context clues to judge an individual's authenticity. What does a leader stand to gain, if anything, from changing their mind on some issue? Has the leader changed their mind on other issues too, or is this a rare occurrence for them? How quickly did they change positions?

As we have seen, political leaders have strong incentives to tell their constituents whatever they want to hear. It is reasonable, then, to be wary of leaders who have a change of mind at an opportune time. Additionally, repeated position shifts—especially on other moral issues—suggests a leader who merely follows popular opinion without convictions of their own. Yet participants in the above studies were not given this contextual information about what a leader stands to gain or lose, or whether they have often changed positions on other moral issues. Reliable judgments about a leader’s integrity require repeated exposure to their positions and behaviors over a substantial period of time (Fields 2007: 198–199, Sidani and Rowe 2018: 630). Consequently, participants were unable to gain a broad picture of the leader, which limits the usefulness of their judgments.

We should also consider how quickly one’s mind changed. Doherty, Dowling, and Miller found that the more recent a change of position was, the more likely participants were to question the leader’s true character or evaluate them negatively (2016: 459). This is a reasonable judgment, since moral judgments are stubborn, and genuine moral change is probably slow. A very quick moral change of mind would reasonably be distrusted. The fact that Biden seemed to change positions on the Hyde Amendment so quickly in such a short amount of time, and the fact that he stood to gain support from more Democrats by doing so, may justify skepticism that Biden’s purported change of mind was authentic.

To be fair, some studies do include this temporal component. Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt clarify in some studies that the change of mind took place up to two years later (2017: 750). Doherty and colleagues wrote that the change happened twenty years later (2016: 459). Even so, it’s unclear whether participants can appreciate this temporal information when participants have not observed the leader’s behavior in various contexts over time, be that two years or twenty.

4.3 A Better Study?

Is it possible to conduct a study that incorporates context clues while respecting authentic leadership as embodied? If possible, it will be remarkably difficult. Barker points out that “[l]eadership, as we experience it, is a continual social process” (2001: 472). Yet leadership studies focus on discrete moments in time to make inferences about leadership in general. The key error here, Barker says, is in “the assumption that an analysis of a collection of these discrete events is equivalent to an analysis of continuous leadership” (472). The studies on change of mind in political leadership are no different. To respect the embodied nature of authentic leadership, participants will need to see and experience a leader’s change of mind.

Notably, one recent study on deception detection by Mattes, Popova, and Evans 2021 moves in this direction. Participants were shown live recordings of politicians and asked to determine whether the politicians were lying. Similarly, one could show recordings of supposed political leaders who have allegedly changed their minds so participants can observe facial expressions and body language. Yet if the recorded individual is merely an actor, the relational aspect of embodied leadership remains uncaptured. Mattes and colleagues excluded from their study participants who knew the recorded politician, yet this very relationship may be key to accurately determining whether a change of mind is genuine.

Contextualizing the issue might also be helpful. Unfortunately, explaining that leaders stand to gain from changing their mind would likely prime a participant to cynically see the leader as hypocritical. But clarifying that the leader stands to *lose* something significant by changing moral positions might result in participants believing the change is authentic.

Lastly, it could be helpful for participants to simply define or explain how they understand hypocrisy and why they judged the leader to be hypocritical. If an individual merely points to the inconsistency, there is reason to discount their judgment. Until we have a study that respects the embodied, contextual nature of authentic leadership, we should not assume that leaders will be judged as hypocrites for a moral change of mind as often as some have claimed.

5. Lessons for Leaders: Conveying Genuine Mind Changes

Let's take stock. Although moral beliefs are resistant to change, there can be good reason to change one's moral mind. And because hypocrisy depends partly on one's actual beliefs and is more than mere inconsistency, genuine change of mind is not hypocritical. Nevertheless, there is a *prima facie* concern that, in light of political pressures and cynicism, leaders who genuinely change their moral mind will still be seen as clear-eyed hypocrites. While some have claimed to offer empirical evidence for that claim, I have argued that the studies lack the necessary contextual clues and fail to appreciate the nature of embodied authentic leadership. Yet there remains the common-sense thought that, given the distrust and cynicism in politics, the public will not look upon moral mind-changers kindly. In this final section, I suggest that leaders can harness the lessons of embodied authentic leadership to better communicate genuine changes of mind to their followers.

The first lesson for leaders is to *appreciate the role that body language has in revealing one's genuine beliefs and act accordingly*. One practical upshot is that a leader should not merely announce a change of mind through a written press statement or an unceremonious social media post. Constituents want to observe a leader's behavior and body language, and the leader should

both provide the opportunity for that observation and have the self-awareness and control to express their attitudes and emotions somatically as well as verbally.

Some may protest that this appeal to body language is problematic. Some individuals faultlessly lack the self-awareness and somatic control that Ladkin and Taylor describe. Others are masters of such control, and may be able to fake their body language to fool the public.¹⁴ In fact, humans are notoriously bad at detecting deception, making this second concern all the more forceful. Studies have been conducted on how accurately individuals can determine when someone lies, even drawing on facial expressions and voices (Rossini 2011, DePaulo et al. 2003, Bond and DePaulo 2006). The results are underwhelming: humans have an accuracy rate of 54% in detecting deception (Bond and DePaulo 2006).

In response, recall that body language is merely one element that leaders should draw on to convey a genuine mind change. Embodied authentic leadership relies on physical expression of self-awareness, but also a relating to followers over time. Those who are deficient in self-awareness and bodily control can rely more heavily on these other components of embodied authentic leadership and the lessons they recommend. Those who are particularly adept at deceitful body language will likely find that it is insufficient to consistently con followers.

Before turning to these other lessons, however, it is worth emphasizing that deception detection studies are often focused exclusively on physical features and behaviors in a discrete moment. Consequently, even those conducting the studies have reservations:

We ourselves have reservations about the literature on deception judgments.... To illuminate lie detection from language and behavior, psychologists have excluded from their research other potential cues to deception. They have restricted the time span over which issues of deception can be pondered, blinded judges to the motivational contingencies surrounding

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising these concerns.

deceit, and neutralized naturally occurring correlates of the propensity to lie.... Outside the laboratory, additional information is important. (Bond and DePaulo 2006: 232–233)

The fact that body language alone is not a foolproof indicator of authenticity need not concern us too much; embodied authentic leadership also involves relating to followers over time.

This brings us to the second lesson for leaders: *build a relationship with followers*. As with any relationship, this must be done slowly, over time. It requires being vulnerable, since this vulnerability can help followers identify with leaders (Ladkin and Taylor 2010: 71). Leaders cannot expect to be trusted or understood if they rarely appear in their followers' lives. As we build a relationship with someone, we appreciate their motivations on a deeper level.

One might reasonably question whether building a relationship is something political leaders can realistically do. Perhaps local political leaders can do this in their communities, but national political leaders are simply too distant to build meaningful relationships with constituents. There is merit to this concern. Yet many political leaders do seek to establish relationships with their constituents through regular town hall meetings, a strong social media presence, and frequent video messages. And again, leaders should not rely solely on a relationship, but should make use of the other lessons here as well. If building a relationship is a challenge for a political leader, they should lean more heavily on the first and third lessons.

That third lesson for leaders is to *fully explain why they changed their mind*, and to *emphasize the complexity of the issue* in their explanation. Although the fictional leaders in the Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt study provided explanations for their mind change, they probably did not offer enough. Mattes, Popova, and Evans 2021 found that participants rely on the amount of detail in an explanation to judge veracity; those who are honest typically give more details. Leaders who offer a few pithy lines of explanation may be dismissed as inauthentic.

Yet it is probably also important for leaders to communicate that the issue on which they have changed their mind is complex—especially if the issue is a moral one. Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2016 found that participants were particularly critical of changes on issues that they saw as easy to understand and evaluate (470). When participants were confident that they had the knowledge and expertise to evaluate some policy area, they assessed position changes more negatively (469). Notably, people were “by far most confident in their ability to assess abortion policy” (466). Of course, abortion is far more complex than the general public might realize, and they should not be so confident in their abilities. A leader who can adequately convey to constituents just how complex a moral issue is may be seen as more competent than hypocritical. Notably, Sorek, Haglin, and Geva 2018 found that leaders who are seen as competent do not suffer as much disapproval when they are inconsistent. Of course, such explanations should not fall entirely on political leaders. Educators, ethicists, and the media must do their part as well. But political leaders can, at least over time, help their constituents appreciate the complexity of moral issues, which may in turn help leaders seem genuine rather than hypocritical should they explain a change of mind on such a complex topic.

None of this is to say that it will be simple for leaders to convince their followers that a change of mind is genuine, even putting these lessons into practice. Nevertheless, such lessons may well limit or eliminate the potential backlash of moral changes of mind. While the matter certainly merits further study, political leaders need not yet anguish about the impact of changing their moral minds on their ability to lead. If a leader can communicate their beliefs well through somatic cues and a strong relationship with followers, along with an emphasis on the complexity

of moral issues, their followers may grant them the freedom to grow and progress morally—something we should all want from our leaders.¹⁵

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