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Political Psychology: The Effect of Presidential Candidate Traits on Voters’ Opinions

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Introduction to Research

This study explores how a presidential candidate’s perceived character traits influence voters’ feelings towards that candidate. Research is split as to how much of an effect candidate’s traits have on voting behavior. Some research shows that a candidate’s character traits only have an effect on people of certain demographics (age, education level, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc.). Other research shows that voter behavior can be explained by party-line voting more than it can be explained by candidate evaluations. Other researchers debate whether or not candidate traits have a long- or short-term effect on people’s voting behavior and if the effect of a candidate’s traits will have a more or less significant impact on voting behavior than a candidate’s ideology or party.

- A number of studies have shown that candidate trait evaluations are strong predictors of how people vote in general elections.
- Research has shown that voters respond to and care more about a candidate’s traits in relation to their competence level.
- Some research has shown that one character trait may be more important to voters’ feelings one election year and the next election year it can change and a different trait is more important to voters based on what character traits candidates try to emphasize while campaigning.

My research disproves this study as the candidate- emphasized character trait in the 2012 election did not have the biggest impact on voters’ feelings.

- That being said, this particular research study looked at what specific competence related trait has the biggest impact on voters’ feelings towards presidential candidates.

Hypotheses:

H 1: The more moral, knowledgeable, and leadership ability a Democratic presidential candidate is perceived to have, the more positively voters will feel towards that candidate.

H 2: The more moral, knowledgeable, and leadership ability a Republican presidential candidate is perceived to have, the more positively voters will feel towards that candidate.

H 3: Between the a candidate’s perceived morality, knowledgeability, and leadership ability, perceived leadership ability will have the biggest impact on a voter’s feelings towards that particular candidate.

Data

### Table Interpretation

- The table measures the 2012 Democratic Presidential candidates perceived level of morality, leadership ability, and knowledgeability in reference to the respondent’s feelings toward the Democratic Presidential candidate.
- Perceived morality has a significance level of .000. Respondents feel more positively towards a Democratic presidential candidate that they perceive as moral.
- Perceived leadership ability has a significance level of .000. Respondents feel more positively towards a Democratic presidential candidate that they perceive as being a strong leader.
- Perceived knowledgeability has a significance level of .000. Respondents feel more positively towards a Democratic presidential candidate that they perceive as being knowledgeable.

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Findings

H 1: Democratic Presidential Candidate

The results supported the first hypothesis that the more moral, knowledgeable, and leadership ability a Democratic presidential candidate is perceived to have, the more positively voters will feel towards that candidate.

H 2: Republican Presidential Candidate

The results supported the second hypothesis that the more moral, knowledgeable, and leadership ability a Republican presidential candidate is perceived to have, the more positively voters will feel towards that candidate.

H 3: Leadership Ability > Morality & Knowledge

The results supported the third hypothesis that leadership ability has the biggest impact on a voter’s feelings towards that particular candidate.

Conclusions

- Leadership ability has a stronger affect on respondents’ feelings toward the Democratic presidential candidate than it does on respondents’ feelings toward the Republican presidential candidate.
- This may be attributed to the fact that the Democratic candidate for the 2012 election was an incumbent president, so voters and respondents already saw him as a leader.
- There is a larger gap between the importance of leadership ability and morality on feelings towards the Democratic candidate than there is a gap between leadership ability and morality on feelings towards the Republican candidate.
- From these results, it could be concluded that Republicans do not value leadership ability in presidential candidates much more than they value morality in presidential candidates.
- On sides of the aisle, a voter’s candidate perception had a significant impact on how voters felt toward that particular candidate.
- Future research could look at which character trait out of the five tested in the NES, has the biggest impact on respondents’ positive feelings towards presidential candidates.

References