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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 particular candidate.
- Research is split as to how much of an effect candidates' 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

H 1: Morality, Leadership, Knowledge & the Democratic Presidential Candidate

Model	Coefficient (B)	Stand. Coefficient	Significance
PRE: Pres Dem. cand trait moral	-2.27	-0.132	0
PRE: Pres Dem. cand trait strong leadership	-8.889	-0.459	0
PRE: Pres Dem. cand trait knowledgeable	-1.611	-0.078	0

*Significant at <.05
R square for the model is .381

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.*

H 2: Morality, Leadership, Knowledge & the Republican Presidential Candidate

Model	Coefficient (B)	Stand. Coefficient	Significance
PRE: Pres Rep. cand trait moral	-2.104	-0.161	0
PRE: Pres Rep. cand trait strong leadership	-2.958	-0.217	0
PRE: Pres Rep. cand trait knowledgeable	-0.852	-0.056	0.004

*Significant at <.05
R square for the model is .150

Table Interpretation

- The table measures the 2012 Republican Presidential candidate's perceived level of morality, leadership ability, and knowledgeability in reference to the respondent's feelings toward the Republican Presidential candidate.
- Perceived morality has a significance level of .000. *Respondents feel more positively towards a Republican presidential candidate that they perceive as moral.*
- Perceived leadership ability has a significance level of .000. *Respondents feel more positively towards a Republican presidential candidate that they perceive as being a strong leader.*
- Perceived knowledgeability has a significance level of .004. *Respondents feel more positively towards a Republican presidential candidate that they perceive as being knowledgeable.*

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 between morality, knowledgeability, and leadership ability, a candidate's perceived 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 toward 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.

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