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Reactions to Supporters of the 2016 Presidential Candidates

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Reactions to Supporters of the 2016 Presidential Candidates

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Abstract

Two experiments were carried out to explore responses to supporters of 2016 Presidential candidates. In Study 1, a field experiment was carried out on the effect of political affiliation on an individual's willingness to reciprocate a smile. The prediction that more participants (90 females, 90 males) on the SHU campus would return a smile to confederates wearing Trump vs. Clinton vs. a Neutral t-shirt was not supported. In Study 2, 253 participants volunteered to participate in a social perception experiment in which they rated confederates wearing a neutral, Trump, or Clinton for President t-shirt. In line with the hypothesis, MANOVA results showed that Trump supporters were perceived as more prejudiced ($p < .003$) and Clinton supporters as more liberal ($p < .000$).

Objectives

1. Determine whether friendly behavior, a smile, is differentially reciprocated as a function of an individual's endorsement of a political candidate for President.
2. Examine perceptions of supporters of 2016 presidential candidates.

Introduction

During and after the 2016 Presidential election mainstream and social media pointed to the ever-increasing political polarization of Americans, with both Presidential candidates characterized negatively – Trump as racist and sexist and Hillary as self-protected and too liberal (Choma & Hanoch, 2016; Doherty, 2017; Elovitz, 2016; Gentzkow, 2016). Social psychological research in turn suggests that people are likely to attribute a candidate's characteristics to those of their followers (Back & Lindholm, 2014; Scherer, Windschitl, 2014). Study 1 tested the hypothesis that an apparent Trump supporter on the SHU campus would receive more reciprocated smiles than those of Clinton or neutral supporters. Study 2 tested the hypothesis that supporters of Presidential candidates will be perceived similarly to the candidates they endorse.

Study 1

Participants

The participants were 90 females and 90 males walking in public areas of the campus of Sacred Heart University during October 2016.

Procedure

Three female confederates, undergraduate students in their 20's, walked in public areas of the SHU campus, wearing either a Hillary for President, Trump for President, or a plain white t-shirt, smiling at every fourth person approached. Ten females and ten males were approached in each condition by each confederate. Confederates recorded whether or not the smile was reciprocated.

Results

The percentage of participants who returned or did not return a smile is shown in Table 1. Contrary to the hypothesis, the results showed that participants were more likely to return a smile to confederates wearing a Hillary for President (68%) or a plain t-shirt (71%) than a Trump for President (50%) t-shirt, $\chi^2(2, N = 180) = 7.03, p < .05$

Table 1

Percentage of Returned Smiles as a Function of Supporters' T-Shirt Candidate

	Confederates' Political T-Shirts		
	Clinton	Trump	No Label
Response	<i>n</i> = 60	<i>n</i> = 60	<i>n</i> = 60
Smile	68%	50%	71%
No Smile	32%	50%	29%

Study 2

Participants

Respondents contacted in undergraduate classrooms (120 females, 133 males) during October 2016 volunteered to participate in a survey monkey study of person perception. They ranged between 17 and 44 years of age, with a mean of 20.2 and a median of 20 years of age. Political affiliation of respondents was broken down as follows: 74 Republican, 60 Democratic, 96 Independent, 4 Libertarian, and 15 Other.

Procedure

Voluntary participation in the survey was indicative of their conformed consent and results were made available to them by contacting the principal investigator. Participants were randomly assigned to rate the characteristics of one of 12 stimulus persons – one of two males or two females pictured wearing a *Hillary for President*, *Trump for President*, or a plain t-shirt. Pictures below show one of the females and males in each condition. Ratings on 7-point likert scales were obtained on 15 dependent measures.

Confederates/ Stimulus Persons



Results

In partial support of the hypothesis, a 2 (Sex of Supporter) x 2 (Presidential Candidate) analysis provided significant main effects for two dependent measures - prejudiced, $F(2, 253) = 6.11, p < .003$, and conservative, $F(2, 253) = 9.31, p < .000$. Post hoc tests showed that Trump supporters were seen as more prejudiced than those who endorsed Hillary ($p < .03$), or no candidate ($p < .001$). Hillary supporters were rated as less conservative than both Trump supporters ($p < .001$) and those with no endorsement of a candidate ($p < .01$). Less clearly in relation to the hypothesis, a significant main effect occurred on the follower measure, $F(2, 253) = 3.67, p < .03$. Trump supporters were rated higher on this trait than those not endorsing a candidate ($p < .02$).

Participants' ($n = 101$) responses to the question about sharing their thoughts about the election were categorized by two judges into 4 categories with 96% agreement: (a) Neutral/Unsure (20%) - *I just received my ballot in the mail and I'm still not sure who I want to vote for a week before the election; Very confused on who to vote for as this is my first election and the candidates do not show much promise*; (b) Pro Trump/Anti Hillary (11.8%) - *I believe this country is in need of an unconventional leader and Trump is just that. His success in business is an indication of his abilities as a leader; Hillary for prison*; (c) Pro Hillary/Anti Trump - *Go Hillary; Our country, global economy and world will collapse under the presidency of Donald Trump. A successful businessman who is driven, smart, and successful – yes he is. However nowhere near qualified to be president. He has offensive views, vulgar ways, zero consideration for the less fortunate both domestic and abroad and is one of worst men in our world. I don't love Hillary but we cannot allow such a man in office. (13.8%)*; (d) Negative about Candidates/Election (54%) - *Don't want/like either candidate; I personally do not want to vote for either candidate and the Presidential election has become a media scandal. Citizens are more concerned with the entertainment of Hilary and Trump running instead of the implications of either candidate running for President.*

Discussion

Taken together the results of Study 1 and Study 2 demonstrate the impact of political stereotypes on the behavior and perceptions of ordinary citizens. Although contrary to the hypothesis, the fact that confederates wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the *Hillary for President* logo received more returned smiles shows that partisanship influences behavior at the level of the small exchanges that characterize public social interactions. It is also important to note that the findings were predictive of Hillary winning in the blue state of Connecticut – a reciprocated smile may thus portend election results! The findings of Study 2 further demonstrate how stereotypes about political candidates influence views of their supporters – Trump as prejudiced and Hillary as liberal. The fact that the majority of the participants' open-ended answers were negative about the candidates and the election is consistent with the portrayal of the candidates by the mainstream and social media, as well as what is now known about the Russian influence on negative portrayals of Clinton. In the future this research could be extended by exploring regional differences and more diverse samples of individuals.

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