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Kristina M. Harrison
University of Southern Mississippi, Kristina.M.Harrison@usm.edu

Shawn Thelen
Hofstra University, Shawn.T.Thelen@hofstra.edu

Boonghee Yoo
Hofstra University, boonghee.yoo@hofstra.edu

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Kristina Harrison, Ph.D.
University of Southern Mississippi

Shawn Thelen, Ph.D.
Hofstra University

Boonghee Yoo, Ph.D.
Hofstra University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to improve researcher and practitioner insight of how voters' political ideology influences their evaluation of candidate brand image. Understanding how candidate brand image and political ideology are linked in a single election is valuable. This research assesses this relationship over three election cycles (2016, 2018, 2020) allowing us to understand, through a longitudinal analysis, not only the strength of these relationships also which ideologies are un/stable in their association with specific political candidates/parties.

Political candidates use marketing strategies to create and maintain their brand image, and thus, turn themselves into "brandidates." Brandidates are political candidates that brand themselves through storytelling based on the wants of targeted consumer/voter groups (Harrison et al. 2022; Kaneva and Klemmer 2016).

Traditional research on political branding has been examining mostly the impact, use, or creation of the politician brand image to win the election. Unlike those existing studies that focus on how to build a political brand image, this research examines how voter political ideology is related to the branded image candidates build for themselves. Research into antecedents of political brand image rarely investigates voters' perceptions of candidates' political ideology (Hultman, Ulusoy, and Oghazi 2019 – a noted exception). In our research, political ideology will be measured in its multiple facets and political brand image will be measured in a reliable set of items.

HYPOTHESE AND METHODOLOGY

Ten constructs are employed to measure the aspects of political ideology: political cynicism, caring for immigrants, immigrants as a burden on society, consumer ethnocentrism, incumbent-based trust, trust in the government form, longing for a better future, nostalgia longing for the past, free trade resentment, and financial insecurity. These constructs, established as independent variables, are included because they represent a liberal versus conservative continuum in political ideology. The dependent variable is support for either the democratic (Clinton/Biden based on the year) or republican (Trump all three election cycles) candidate. Since our interest is understanding the predictability of candidate image over time, the specific candidate representing

each party for an individual election does not matter because the analysis of the mean average differences between candidates is not a goal of the current study.

A national sample was collected from intended voters utilizing Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) during three different election cycles (2016, 2018, and 2020). M-Turk provides a "more diverse and representative sample than other potential samples" (Vardsveen and Wiener 2021); thus, would be considered appropriate for a U.S. general election. Final sample sizes were 501 likely voters in 2016, 726 for 2018, and 835 for 2020.

RESULTS

Six total regression analyses were run, three election cycles by two candidates, revealing that variables varied in significance in explaining support for democratic and republican candidates. Interestingly, select aspects of political ideology are influential for all six regressions analyses: incumbent-based trust, immigrants as a burden on society, longing for a better future, and trust in the government form. Two issues were found to be significant for five of the models: caring for immigrants and consumer ethnocentrism. The remaining variables were significant in fewer models; financial insecurity, political cynicism, and free trade resentment, were significant in three models: nostalgia/longing for the past was significant in one model.

As expected, some issues influenced preference for the republican and democratic candidates in opposing ways. This indicates that political candidates/parties can and should take different views on issues in order to represent the beliefs of their constituents. Immigrants as a Societal Burden was a positive variable for republican support but negative for democrats for all three elections. Consumer Ethnocentrism and Trust in Government Form were consistently a significant and positive variable for republican support but an unstable, i.e., not consistent, for democrats. Caring for Immigrants was negatively related to republicans in 2018 and 2020 but positively to democrats in all three periods.

Some aspects of political ideology were significant for both parties and in the same direction: Longing for a Better Future and Incumbent-Based Trust, both positive throughout. Political Cynicism was negative for republicans in 2018 and 2020 and for democrats in 2016 and 2018. The patterns shown in the regression models suggest that the aspects of political ideology can be classified by two dimensions. The first dimension is *the direction of the influence*, which is positive, negative, or insignificant to the brand image of each political candidate. The second dimension is *stability over time*.

Contribution to Literature & Practice

There are multiple contributions of this study to the literature and for practical application. First, we develop comprehensive measures for the aspects of political ideology by integrating existing reliable measures to the concept of political ideology. Second, we test whether the image of a brandidate is greatly explained by political ideology alone. Third, based on the relationship between the measures and political brand image, we identify which aspects of political ideology are conservative versus liberal and stable versus unstable. This research is viewed through the lens of social cognitive theory that states human behavior is a dynamic interaction between

personal factors, behaviors, and the environment (Bandura 2001; Dellande et al. 2004). Additionally, we contribute practical implications for political marketers showing how to use political ideology to craft a political candidate brand image and create a relatable "brandidate."

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristina Harrison is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the School of Marketing at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, MS. Her doctorate in Marketing is from Old Dominion University (2019). Dr. Harrison has published at numerous conferences as well as in a handful of journals including *Journal of Business Research* and the *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice.* Her research interests include Cross-Cultural Consumer Behavior, Public Policy related to consumer well-being, Sales ethics, and Corporate Social Responsibility.

Shawn Thelen is a Professor of Marketing and International Business at Hofstra University. His research has appeared in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Business Research, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Service Management, Business Horizons, and Marketing Education Review*. His primary areas of research are Digital Marketing, Health Care Marketing, and Political Marketing.

Boonghee Yoo is the RMI Distinguished Professor in Business and Professor of Marketing, Hofstra University. His research interests include brand equity, online retailing quality, luxury branding, marketing scale development, and cross-cultural consumer behavior. His research has been published in journals including *Journal of Academy of the Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Advertising Research, Psychology &*

Marketing, Journal of Marketing Education, Journal of Service Research, Advances in Consumer Research, and Journal of International Consumer Marketing. He has served in the Editorial Board of the *Industrial Marketing Management* and the *Journal of Business Research*.