Character Assessment as an Indicator of Vote Choice

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ABSTRACT

Theory: Character Assessment as a means of evaluating candidates is considered in relation to voting behavior.

Hypotheses: Voters' perceptions of candidates' personality affect whether or not they vote for a candidate. Voters are more likely to vote for a candidate with positive personality traits than a candidate with negative personality traits. Character assessment has a stronger effect on voting than party affiliation. Candidates with high levels of interest in the campaign are more likely to use character assessment to determine vote choice than party affiliation.

Methods: Analysis of survey data (character assessment of Bush and vote choice in 2000 Presidential election) from the 2000 National Election Study.

Results: Character assessment is a strong indicator of vote choice. I found that the majority of people who felt that Bush did not have good character did not vote for him. Likewise, the majority of people who felt that Bush did have good character voted for him. However, I found that negative perception of a candidate's character can override party ID in predicting choice, especially for GOP and non-affiliated respondents. High levels of interest in campaigns increase the use of character assessment in candidate evaluation.

What causes people to vote a certain way? This question has long been a point of contention in the field of political science. There is no clear cut answer to this question. Vote choice is a complex decision determined by numerous factors. When looking at these causes, one must consider not only the candidate but the voter as well. The relationship between candidates and voters cannot be neglected. In sum, candidates, issues, and parties are the three factors that dominate voting. Candidates for office must convince people to vote for them; they must appeal to the voters. So what exactly are voters looking for? The evaluation of candidates is composed of a combination of factors. Party affiliation, position on political issues and personality are the primary factors that influence voting behavior. Much research has been done to examine how much each of these factors contributes to vote choice. The studies outlined below offer a number of possible answers to this question.

Many different models have been employed in an attempt to explain voting behavior. However, this research neglects to address the direct relationship between character assessment and vote choice. Much of the research concerning candidate evaluation has failed to acknowledge the significance of personality traits in determining voting behavior. One possible explanation for the lack of research on this topic is the notion among many social and political scientists that "voting on the basis of personality characteristics … is 'irrational'" (Miller, Malanchuk, and Wattenberg, 1986: 522). The Miller et al. study attempts to dispel the notion that evaluating candidates based on personal characteristics is superficial. Using the responses to open-ended questions from the 1952 to 1984 National Election Studies, Miller et al. found that voters form opinions about candidates based on "'personality' characteristics rather than on issue concerns or

partisan group connections" (Miller, Malanchuk, and Wattenberg, 1986: 521). They also found that people with higher education are more likely to make statements about a candidate's personality than issue statements. Furthermore, voters who are more politically informed are most likely to make personality statements because they are better able to make in-depth inferences about candidates. Using social cognition theory, the study argues that people perceive candidates using five different performance-related schemas: competence, integrity, reliability, charisma, and personal. They were able to classify most comments from the NES surveys within these five categories, indicating that most people use schemas or categories when making judgments about candidates. Unlike previous research which argues that the criteria voters use to evaluate candidates is temporary, Miller et al. show that voters continue to use the same characteristics they associate with political success to evaluate candidates over time.

In his 1991 book, *The Reasoning Voter,* Samuel Popkin proposed that "voters care about the competence of the candidate, not just the candidate's issue positions, because they do not follow most government activity and because they care about what the candidate can deliver from government" (Popkin, 1991: 61). Popkin found that voters resort to "information shortcuts" such as personality traits to bypass their limited knowledge about campaigns, candidates, and politics (Popkin, 1991: 44). According to his research, traits such as competence have the potential to override any other mode of candidate evaluation. "Since the voter only has limited information, he or she may vote for a candidate who seems capable of managing the affairs of the country even if that candidate is not the 'closest' to the voter's specific issue preferences" (Popkin, 1991: 61). Popkin also points out that voters adapt to the political and social climates of the times.

Different personality traits may weigh more heavily than others depending on the issues the public is concerned with during an election period.

In a 1999 study on candidate evaluation, Carolyn Funk argues that candidate trait models vary according to candidate and situation, but acknowledges that there are certain traits which are universally used to evaluate candidates (Funk, 1999). Funk used the same method employed in a previous study by Kinder (Kinder, 1983, 1986). Using the results from the National Election Studies from 1984 to 1996, candidate trait ratings were divided into four categories: competence, leadership, integrity and empathy. Funk evaluates first, whether making distinctions among character traits is useful for candidate evaluation models, and second, whether the importance of trait attributes in candidate evaluation varies from candidate to candidate. The study found that employing a candidate evaluation model with distinctions between different character traits was beneficial. Competence and leadership were shown to be universally relevant with regards to candidate evaluation, while integrity and empathy varied from candidate to candidate. Overall, criteria for candidate evaluation were shown to vary by candidate and electoral context.

This conclusion is also supported by a 2000 study, *Uncertainty and Candidate Personality Traits* by Michael R. Alvarez and Garrett Glasgow. While testing the relationship between uncertainty about personality traits and candidate evaluation it was discovered that "political context plays a role in determining when some candidate traits may be more politically relevant than others" (Alvarez & Glasgow, 2000:46). The study examined the effects of uncertainty on candidate evaluation. The tendency among voters to use "simple" cues such as personality traits to evaluate candidates can be explained by

the high level of uncertainty about the issue positions of candidates (Alvarez & Glasgow, 2000:26). Alvarez and Glasgow propose that there is also a high level of uncertainty about the personality traits of candidates. The study employed answers to direct survey questions from the 1995 and 1996 National Election Surveys to determine respondent's subjective uncertainty in relation to their evaluation of certain candidate personality traits. The study shows that uncertainty about the personality traits of candidates reduces issue-based evaluation of candidates and also has a negative impact on candidate evaluation.

The influence of the personal characteristics of voters on candidate evaluation and voting behavior is examined by Gian Vittorio Caprara and Philip G. Zimbardo in a 2004 study, *A Congruency Model of Political Preference*. Caprara and Zimbardo emphasize the significance of value and trait based evaluation of candidates. Using evidence from previous studies as well as a survey of Italian Parliament members, Caprara and Zimbardo concluded that voters tend to select candidates who have similar personality traits as themselves. Furthermore, they found that personality traits tend to be harmonious with voter's political parties. The growing personalization of politics is offered as one possible explanation for the movement away from issue-based evaluation of candidates and towards more personalized methods of evaluation.

This paper attempts to examine the role of character assessment as a means of evaluating candidates and determining vote choice.

STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Based on existing research about the role of candidate personality traits in the evaluation of candidates, I expect to find that:

(1) Character assessment is a significant indicator of vote choice. Voters are more likely to vote for a candidate they associate with positive personality traits than a candidate they associate with negative personality traits.

(2) Evaluation of a candidate's character traits is a stronger predictor of voting behavior than party affiliation.

(3) People with higher interest in the campaign are more likely to use character evaluation to determine vote choice than people with low interest in the campaign.

METHODS

The study looks at evaluations of presidential nominee George W. Bush from the 2000 election period. The data come from the National Election Study (NES) for 2000, conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies. I feel that examining the correlation between character assessment and vote choice for one candidate is sufficient to demonstrate the strength of the relationship.

The dependent variable is the vote cast by the respondent in the 2000 United States Presidential election.[1] The independent variable is an evaluation of the candidate's character. The character variable is a composite of seven different personality traits used to rate the candidate. The qualities used to describe the candidates were "moral," "really

cares," "knowledgeable," "strong leader," "dishonest," "intelligent," and "out of touch."

Respondents were asked to rate how well the traits described the candidate on a scale of 1

to 4 (ranging from extremely well to not too well).[2] The sum of the responses was used

to create a measure of character ranging from 7 to 28.[3] The scale was then divided into 3

categories (low opinion, mid-range opinion, and high opinion) to demonstrate the

character of the candidate. Subjective party identification[4] as well as level of interest in

the campaign are included as controls in order to determine the relative strength of

character assessment as a predictor of voting behavior.

    I used a bivariate crosstabulation to analyze the relationship between perception

of Bush's character and vote cast for President. This test produced a bivariate percentage

table demonstrating the percent of respondents from each value of the character variable

who either voted for Bush or did not vote for Bush. The lambda statistic was calculated

to indicate the strength and direction of the relationship. A chi square test was then

performed to ensure the statistical significance of the bivariate crosstabulation.

    Next, a multivariate crosstabulation was performed to determine the effect of the

control variable (party affiliation) on the original relationship between perception of

Bush's character and vote cast for President. Using this test, I generated a multivariate

percentage table showing the results from the original bivariate percentage table

organized according to party affiliation. This table was analyzed to ensure the

significance of the results from the original crosstabulation. In other words, ensuring that

the results of the original crosstabulation are caused by the independent variable

(character evaluation) and not party affiliation. I used Lambda and chi square

calculations to determine the strength and significance of each relationship in the table.

The same test was then repeated using interest in campaign as a control variable.

RESULTS

Does the assessment of a candidate's character play a significant role in

determining vote choice?

Figure 1. Relationship between Character Evaluation of Bush and Vote Choice in 2000 Presidential Election.

	Opinion on Bush's Character		
Vote cast for President	**Low**	**Mid-Range**	**High**
George W. Bush	3%	35%	86%
Al Gore and Others	97%	65%	14%

Source: National Election Studies, 2000, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.
Note: Vote Cast recoded to two values
Lambda = .527 (p <.001)
Chi square = 295.555 *** p < .001

Figure 1 presents data on the relationship between character evaluation and vote choice in

the 2000 Presidential election.

As shown in Figure 1, there is a strong correlation between character evaluation

and vote choice. An overwhelming majority of respondents who rated Bush low on the

character scale did not vote for him (97%). Likewise, the majority of respondents who

felt that Bush had high character did vote for him (86%). Interestingly, Figure 1 shows

that most respondents who felt Bush had mid-range character did not vote for him. This

data strongly supports my primary hypothesis that voters are more likely to vote for a

candidate they associate with positive personality traits than a candidate they associate

with negative personality traits. As ratings of Bush on the character scale increase, so does the likelihood of voting for him. It also reveals that negative perception of a candidate's character has a stronger influence on vote choice than positive perception of a candidate's character. It seems that a negative impression of a candidate will have more of an impact on vote choice than a positive impression. Perhaps voters feel more strongly about what they don't want in a candidate, rather than what they do want. This might be explained by the trend towards retrospective voting and away from prospective voting (Fiorina, 1981).[5] Negative voting seems to have become the norm in today's society. It has become more important to vote against a candidate one does not support than to determine which candidate one does support.

With the link between character evaluation and vote choice established, it is important to look at the effect of other variables on the relationship. Does party affiliation override character evaluation in determining vote choice? Figure 2 shows the data for vote choice and character evaluation, with the added control of subjective party identification.

Figure 2 shows that even with the addition of party identification as a control variable; character evaluation still plays a significant role in determining vote choice. However, the level of significance varies across party lines. Republicans had the weakest significance, with character evaluation accounting for a 16% discrepancy in vote for Bush (lambda = .000, chi square = 26.594 p < .001).

Figure 2. Percent who Voted for Bush in the 2000 election by Character Evaluation and Subjective Party Identification

	Opinion on Bush's Character		
Party Identification	**Low**	**High**	
Democrat	4%	24%	Lambda = .000
			chi square = 21.911***
Republican	83%	99%	Lambda = .000
			Chi square = 26.594***
Other	33%	84%	Lambda = .435
			Chi square = 72.816***

Source: National Election Studies, 2000, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.
Note: Party Identification recoded to three values; Character recoded to two values
*** p < .001

For Democrats, character evaluation resulted in a 20% difference in vote for Bush (lambda = .000, chi square = 21.911, p<.001). The strongest significance was for those respondents who were neither Democrat nor Republican. For respondents who fell into the "other" category, character evaluation accounted for a 51% difference in vote for Bush (lambda = .435, chi square = 72.816, p < .001). This data supports my second hypothesis, namely that evaluation of a candidate's character traits can be a stronger predictor of voting behavior than party affiliation, especially for GOP and non-affiliated respondents. Party affiliation plays a dominant role in determining vote choice, but character evaluation is shown to be a prevailing factor as well.

Previous research has suggested a negative impact of uncertainty about candidates on vote choice. As stated in the literature review, the Alvarez et al. study found that uncertainty about the personality traits of candidates reduces issue-based evaluation of candidates and also has a negative impact on candidate evaluation. Thus, my decision to

introduce another control variable into the mix: interest in campaign. Figure 3 shows the

relationship between vote choice, character evaluation and interest in campaign.

Figure 3. Percent who Voted for Bush in the 2000 election by Character Evaluation and Interest in Campaign

Interest in Campaign	Opinion on Bush's Character		
	Low	**High**	
Not Much	43%	93%	Lambda = .234
			Chi square = 20.831***
Somewhat	31%	80%	Lambda = .410
			Chi square = 97.096***
Very Much	19%	90%	Lambda = .696
			Chi square = 183.072***

Source: National Election Studies, 2000, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.
Note: Character recoded to two values
*** p < .001

Figure 3 shows that there is an overwhelming correlation between interest in the

campaign and the use of character evaluation in determining vote choice. For people

who were somewhat interested in the campaign, character evaluation accounted for a

29% difference in vote for Bush (lambda = .410, chi square = 97.096, p<.001). The

strongest effect was for people who were very much interested in the campaign; character

evaluation accounted for a 71% difference (lambda = .696, chi square = 183.072,

p<.001). However, my findings were not statistically significant for people who were not

very interested in the campaign. This makes sense, as people who are not very interested

in a campaign are unlikely to (a) pass judgment on a candidate and/or (b) vote. The data

demonstrate that the more interested people are in campaigns, the more likely they are to

use character as a method of evaluating candidates and determining vote choice. This not

only supports my third hypothesis, but also corroborates the idea proposed by Miller et al.

that voters who are more politically informed are likely to make personality statements

because they are better able to make in-depth inferences about candidates.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown evidence that character assessment plays a significant role

in determining vote choice. All three of my hypotheses were supported by the data. I

have found that: (1) Voters are more likely to vote for a candidate they associate with

positive personality traits than a candidate they associate with negative personality traits.

In addition, negative perception of a candidate's character has a stronger influence on

vote choice than positive perception of a candidate's character; (2) Evaluation of a

candidate's character traits can be a stronger predictor of voting behavior than party

affiliation, especially for voters who are neither Democrat nor Republican; (3) People

with higher interest in a campaign are more likely to use character evaluation to

determine vote choice than people with low levels of interest in a campaign. However,

the relationship is not supported for respondents who were not very interested in a

campaign.

Knowing the factors that determine voting behavior is important for candidates

trying to appeal to voters.   As Funk stated, "presidential campaigns pay a good deal of

attention to the development of candidate trait images" (Funk, 1999, II).   My findings

provide rationale for the continued emphasis on personality in campaigning.

However, there are certain limitations to this study that must be acknowledged.

The imprecision of survey questions must be taken into consideration. Personality traits

are subject to different interpretation by every respondent, thus it is impossible to have one standard measure of a candidate's character. Also, it is possible that these results are the product of the "political context" of the election, although most research points to the relevance of major character traits over time (Alvarez & Glasgow, 2000:46). Will these results hold up when examining a Democratic candidate or perhaps a female candidate for president?

This study is only a starting point for research on the direct relationship between character assessment and vote choice. With the link between character assessment and vote choice established, there is much opportunity for further research on this subject. The implications of this study, and future studies on the subject, will have a major effect on the manner in which candidates campaign, and should further dispute the notion that party affiliation is the sole contributing factor in determining vote choice.

APPENDIX A

Evaluation of Bush's Character by Personality Trait

	Moral	Really Cares	Knowledgeable	Strong Leader	Dishonest	Intelligent	Out of Touch
Not Well at All	6%	20%	8%	10%	36%	6%	21%
Not too Well	21%	33%	22%	24%	41%	18%	38%
Quite Well	52%	37%	54%	50%	18%	57%	29%
Extremely Well	21%	9%	16%	16%	5%	19%	12%

Source: National Election Studies, 2000, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.
Note: Results are based on responses from NES in which respondents were asked to rate how well the traits described the candidate.

NOTES

1. Responses were originally coded 1 if the individual voted for Al Gore, 3 if the individual voted for George W. Bush, 5 if the individual voted for Pat Buchanan, 6 if the individual voted for Ralph Nader and 7 for Other. In order to facilitate analysis, the responses were recoded 1 if the individual did not vote for Bush and 2 if the individual did vote for Bush.

2. The responses were coded as follows, 1 for extremely well, 2 for quite well, 3 for not too well and 4 for not well at all. The two negative traits, "dishonest" and "out of touch" were assigned negative values for the purpose of creating the character variable. See Appendix A for a detailed percentage table of responses.

3. A score of 7 indicating positive personality traits and a score of 28 indicating negative personality traits.

4. Responses were originally coded 1 for Republican, 2 for Democrat, 3 for Independent, 4 for other party and 5 for no preference. In order to facilitate analysis, the responses 3, 4 and 5 were combined and recoded as value 4, "other party".

5. Retrospective voting involves looking at the actions of previous candidates and basing vote choice on these actions. Prospective voting is a more active process which involves looking at the current circumstance and the future. It involves matching a candidate with one's own ideology.

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