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Do voters get it right? A test of the ascription-actuality trait theory of leadership with political elites

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ABSTRACT

Are the traits preferred by voters also associated with success in political office? Drawing on the ascription-actuality trait theory of leadership the present study examines whether traits *ascribed* to politicians predict leadership outcomes differently to the *actual* traits they possess. We collected self-ratings of politicians' personality ($N = 138$) using the NEO-PI-R (actual traits) and observer ratings of politicians' facial appearance (ascribed traits) to examine their relationship with (a) leadership emergence, measured using share of vote in election, and (b) in-role leadership effectiveness, rated anonymously by political and local authority colleagues. Facial appearance predicted leadership emergence but not effectiveness. Personality had a more nuanced relationship with leadership outcomes. Conscientiousness predicted effectiveness but not emergence, and Agreeableness revealed a trait paradox, positively predicting emergence and negatively predicting effectiveness. These findings suggest a need to understand the contested nature of political leadership and qualities required for different aspects of political roles.

Introduction

Politicians' traits appear to play an increasingly important role in political leadership (Caprara & Silvester, 2018; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). During the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, not only were candidates compared on physical characteristics, such as height and appearance (McAdams, 2016; Steafal, 2016; Visser, Book, & Volk, 2016), discussion about each presidential candidate's psychological characteristics featured particularly prominently. Whereas Hillary Clinton was described as 'collected', 'experienced' and 'aloof', Donald Trump was labelled 'candid', 'strong' and 'obnoxious'. Likewise, in the 2017 British general election, voters reportedly associated the characteristics 'decisive' 'robotic' and 'intelligent' with Prime Minister Theresa May, whereas her opponent, Jeremy Corbyn, was described as 'principled' and 'dogmatic' yet 'weak' (YouGov, 2017).

A growing body of research has found that, not only do voters frequently judge political candidates on personality traits such as warmth, reliability, decisiveness, integrity and empathy (Bittner, 2014; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Garzia, 2011; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Pancer, Brown, & Barr, 1999; Roets & Van Hiel, 2009), they often infer these characteristics from biological traits such as height and facial appearance, and these inferences can in turn influence how they vote (Hall, Goren, Chaiken, & Todorov, 2009; Olivola & Todorov, 2010;

Sorokowski, 2010; Stulp, Buunk, Verhulst, & Pollet, 2013). However, far less is known about whether the psychological and biological traits favored by voters in elections are the same characteristics that impact on the effectiveness of a politician once in office. More specifically, do the voters making these judgements get it right?

The present study investigates this question by drawing on the ascription-actuality trait theory of leadership (Antonakis, 2011). This theory suggests that, although some traits lead observers to ascribe competence and infer suitability for leadership, these may not be the same as those traits that actually influence leaders' effectiveness once in role. To test this proposal we examined the relationship between self-reported personality characteristics, provided by 138 British local politicians who completed the NEO-PI-R, observer ratings of each politician's facial appearance, and the impact of these on two leadership outcomes, namely: (1) leadership emergence measured using the share of the vote obtained by a politician when elected to office, and (2) their perceived leadership effectiveness in-office assessed using anonymous performance ratings provided by the political and local authority colleagues working alongside them.

The study makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, as far as we are aware, no study has investigated leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness in the same role and with the same individuals to date. The present research addresses this lacuna by testing

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the ascription-actuality theory of leadership with individuals who all occupy the same leadership role (i.e. local politicians) in two situations; one demonstrating leader emergence (i.e. candidates seeking election), and a second which demonstrates leader effectiveness (i.e. performance in political office). Secondly, we examine a biological trait (i.e. facial appearance) alongside personality traits, in order to compare their relative influence on leader emergence and leader effectiveness. Thirdly, although research on the role of personality traits in politics has gained significant traction in recent years (Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Silvester, Wyatt, & Randall, 2014), most studies have used at-a-distance methods where raters observe and assess politician personality using videos, transcripts of speeches, or archival documents (e.g., Tetlock, 1984; Winter, 2005). Very few researchers have captured self-report data from politicians themselves, and we address this gap by asking politicians to *self-rate* their personality using a standardized multi-item multi-trait personality questionnaire: the NEO-PI-R. In addition to these contributions we discuss the salience of traits for political roles and broader implications for democratic process. These include a need to broaden public awareness and understanding of the demands of political work, and potential differences between the individual qualities required for political campaigning and those required when holding political office.

The ascription-actuality theory of leadership

Trait research has seen a revival of interest in the leadership literature over recent years (Zaccaro, 2012). Traits are defined as “psychological or biological characteristics that (a) are measurable, (b) vary across individuals, (c) exhibit temporal and situational stability, and (d) predict attitudes, decisions or behaviors, and consequently outcomes” (Antonakis, 2011, p. 270). Leadership researchers have focused mostly on personality traits and, in particular, the Five Factor Model of personality (Judge & Bono, 2000), but more recently interest has grown in biological traits, such as height (Stulp et al., 2013), facial appearance (Olivola & Todorov, 2010) and even voice pitch (Mayew, Parsons, & Venkatachalam, 2013). Importantly, the trait theory of leadership suggests that certain individuals – due to their possession of specific traits – are both more likely to achieve leadership roles, and to succeed in them (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Zaccaro, 2007).

According to the ascription-actuality trait theory of leadership (Antonakis, 2011), however, there are two routes by which traits can influence leadership emergence and effectiveness. First, observers may infer or *ascribe* traits to an individual or, secondly, an individual may *actually* possess traits that help them achieve and successfully execute a leadership role. The theory predicts that traits associated with leadership emergence may differ from those required for in-role performance, because access to leadership positions often depends on *judgements* about whether an individual possesses the requisite qualities for a leadership position, made by observers in gatekeeper roles (e.g., senior managers, recruiters or voters). Moreover, the characteristics *ascribed* by an observer to a leadership candidate can depend on their proximity to, and knowledge of, the candidate, as well as their ability to accurately infer personality and competence from observable behavior. Likewise, the validity of such judgements will also depend on the rater's knowledge of the leadership role and the qualities it requires.

When observers are physically and socially distant from aspiring leaders and have limited opportunity to interact with, or to observe the individual in different situations, an observer is more likely to rely on implicit leadership theories about the characteristics that make someone ‘leader-like’, and to use these to infer suitability for a particular role (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Popper, 2013). Consequently, observers risk focusing on traits that only *seem* to matter for leadership (e.g., height or attractiveness) that are ‘illusory correlations’, abstract constructs or stereotypical proxies for leadership effectiveness (Antonakis, 2011; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Tversky & Kahneman, 1975). Antonakis (2011; Jacquart & Antonakis,

2015) suggests that this process can occur when there is considerable distance between followers and ‘top-level’ leaders in organizations, such as CEOs. In such cases followers will make inferences about the competence of CEOs using trait-based heuristic processes that rely on limited information about both the individual and the day-to-day requirements of the role.

The second route by which traits are theorized to influence leadership emergence and effectiveness involves traits that leaders *actually* possess and which afford the technical or social skills required to enhance performance in the role, achieve goals and influence others (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Judge et al., 2002). Importantly, although in-role performance can be influenced indirectly by others' inferences about ascribed traits (e.g., gender bias: Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016), the ascription-actuality theory predicts that leadership effectiveness in role is likely to rely more on actual than ascribed traits (Antonakis, 2011).

Testing the ascription-actuality theory with political leaders

Politics presents a particularly good context for testing the ascription-actuality theory of leadership for several reasons. First, there is a clear separation between leadership emergence, which in democratic contexts occurs primarily via elections, and leadership effectiveness as demonstrated by how politicians perform once in office. Secondly, elections are almost entirely reliant on the ascriptions made by voters, most of whom have little opportunity to observe candidates directly, and must therefore rely on information provided second hand via the media, campaign debates, manifestos written by political candidates or, more recently, their Twitter streams (Bhattacharya, Yang, Srinivasan, & Boynton, 2016). Thirdly, the activities that candidates engage in while campaigning are often very different to the activities they must perform when representing and leading others in political office. Whereas in campaigning a candidate must convince the voters they are trustworthy, and that they understand voters' needs and are willing and able to represent them if elected, effective leadership in office is more dependent on the individual's ability to wield political skill, build alliances, negotiate compromises and engage in the ‘darker arts’ of politics (Silvester, 2008; Silvester & Dykes, 2007). As such, political leadership presents an opportunity to test whether ascribed and actual personality traits predict leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness, and to investigate the possibility that traits will differentially predict success in elections and in office. Furthermore, by comparing biological traits (i.e. facial appearance) as rated by observers, and self-rated personality traits from politicians, it is also possible to examine whether the characteristics that voters pay attention to in elections are the same characteristics that are associated with an individual's success in office.

Existing research and theory development

In the following sections, we build on the actuality-ascription trait theory of leadership and existing empirical literature to form hypotheses about the likely differential relationships that biological (i.e. facial appearance) and psychological (i.e. personality) traits have on leadership emergence and effectiveness (see Fig. 1).

Biological traits (appearance)

Discussion of trait-based *ascriptions* of leadership qualities has largely focused on biological traits such as height, gender or facial appearance, because these are especially salient when there is distance between observers and leaders (Antonakis & Eubanks, 2017; Blaker et al., 2013; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Spisak, Homan, Grabo, & Van Vugt, 2012; Stulp et al., 2013). Most studies have investigated the impact of facial appearance on leadership emergence (Olivola & Todorov, 2010), with findings linking appearance to the emergence of both organizational (Bell & McLaughlin, 2006; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003) and political leaders (e.g., Antonakis, 2011; Antonakis &

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