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The accessibility and utility of candidate character in electoral decision making

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Abstract

In U.S. elections, the competence and integrity of candidates for office are among the factors that influence both the choices made by voters and the subsequent outcomes of electoral contests. Although past research has demonstrated that candidate character is highly consequential, much less is known regarding how, and under what conditions, information about character influences the individual-level candidate evaluation. We explore these questions using data from a series of computer-based laboratory experiments and a national survey. Results reveal that attitudes regarding competence and integrity are highly accessible, and that information about competence and integrity strongly influences assessments of candidates. However, no evidence was found that candidate character functions as a default basis of candidate evaluation to be used when information regarding political considerations such as partisanship and ideology are unavailable.

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1. Introduction

Voters cannot foresee all decisions their prospective representatives will be called on to make, and, even if they could, full information about these decisions is not available. Hence, voters must select representatives and then hope that those persons will serve their interests responsibly. But on what basis do citizens develop confidence in their choices, and how well are these decisions made? In approaching these questions, we begin with two assumptions. First, voters face strong incentives to simplify the choice among candidates. Voters often do not gather and process large stocks of information about competing candidates, but instead reduce the vote choice to simple criteria such as partisanship, experience, and perhaps the candidates' stances on a few key issues. Second, candidates differ from one another in quality. Candidates vary in experience, trustworthiness, and a host of other characteristics.

If we view the vote in political terms, citizens seek representatives who share their beliefs at a broad (partisanship, ideology) or specific (issues) level. But factors that are not explicitly political also may matter. Classic studies on Congress and voting show that U.S. House members develop apolitical ties to their constituents (Fenno, 1978), and that such efforts to cultivate “the personal vote” are rewarded when incumbents run for reelection (Cain et al., 1987). Extending this line of inquiry, we focus on one component of the personal vote, candidate character. We examine the degree to which character perceptions are cognitively accessible to voters, along with the corresponding impact of these perceptions on candidate evaluations.

The quality, or character, of a candidate is defined in terms of *competence* and *integrity*.¹ We assess the role of candidate quality in voting via a series of computer-based experiments and with data from a 2002 national survey. These data permit study of the ease or difficulty with which respondents react when called upon to process cues regarding the competence and integrity of political candidates, and the subsequent impact of competence and integrity on participants' judgments regarding those candidates. We begin by outlining our reasoning for why candidate character may, and arguably should, influence voters' evaluations.

2. A role for competence and integrity?

Many of us know too little about medicine and auto repair to have philosophical disputes with their practitioners, yet we find doctors and mechanics in whom we have confidence. One aspect of this confidence is our belief that our doctors and mechanics are skilled in their fields. Ideally, they will display mastery of the subject matter at hand, and respond to lists of symptoms with effective corrective actions. A

¹ For additional discussion of this conceptualization of candidate quality, see Mondak (1995). It should be clear that this view of “quality” focuses on a candidate's general traits, and that this treatment differs from electoral research that defines quality in terms of strategic attributes such as past political experience and access to campaign revenues.

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