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Implicit candidate traits in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election: Replicating a dual-process model of candidate evaluations

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ABSTRACT

A major challenge to understanding the causes and consequences of how citizens assess political candidates is the extent to which relevant attitudinal evaluations are accessible at the conscious and unconscious level. The current research examines a dual-process model of candidate trait perceptions in the context of the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections. We expected that implicit evaluations of the warmth and competence of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton would predict explicit evaluations of the presidential candidates and related political groups, as well as voting behavior. We find that these implicit constructs, especially competence, demonstrated predictive validity for outcomes of interest in the context of the 2016 election, above and beyond explicit analogs, demographics variables, and partisan identification. The larger role of implicit competence, compared to implicit warmth, may be due, in part, to increased assimilation of implicit associations into explicit evaluations on the warmth but not the competence dimension. These findings are suggestive of the possibility that warmth assessments were also consequential in this electoral context, consistent with other research examining the impact of gender stereotypes on evaluations of females in positions of leadership. Implications and future directions for the study of political cognition, gender bias, candidate evaluations, and electoral decision-making are discussed.

1. Introduction

Research in political science investigating voter decision-making traditionally assumes that citizens have introspective access to their attitudes, preferences, and beliefs when making an electoral decision. However, research in psychology indicates that many cognitive processes, associations, and structures that give rise to attitudinal preferences are inaccessible to conscious awareness, either because such mental content is operating at the unconscious level or because it cannot be retrieved through deliberate introspection (Nisbett and DeCamp Wilson, 1977; Winkielman and Schooler, 2011). A major challenge to understanding how citizens assess political candidates, and how these assessments translate into political judgment and behavior, is the extent to which socially and politically relevant psychological processes and attitudinal evaluations are accessible at the conscious and unconscious levels.

Political psychologists have studied how automatic processes relate to attitudes (e.g, Arcuri et al., 2008; Friese et al., 2007; Greenwald et al., 2009; Pérez, 2010, 2013) and have supplemented theories of conscious, explicit processes with theories regarding unconscious,

implicit processes in such areas as voter decision-making (e.g., Lodge and Taber, 2013; Pérez, 2016; for a review, see Ksiazkiewicz and Hedrick, 2013). For example, in the 2012 Presidential Election, Ksiazkiewicz et al., (2018) examined a dual-process model of the unique effects of implicit and explicit trait (i.e., warmth and competence) judgments on vote choice and evaluations of the 2012 presidential candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. They found that implicit candidate-trait associations, especially competence associations, demonstrate predictive validity above and beyond their explicit counterparts, and that implicit trait associations are more consequential for undecided voters. However, this previous study relied upon a convenience sample of respondents recruited from Amazon's MTurk platform in a single electoral context, so the generalizability of the findings to representative samples and other election contexts and candidates remained untested. More generally, implicit trait perceptions of actual candidates, which are the focus of this study, have largely gone unstudied.[1]

The current study seeks to replicate the dual-process model of trait perceptions using a more representative sample and to extend this framework to a new electoral context, a novel set of dependent

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variables, and different political candidates—Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton—by recruiting participants during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Given concerns about the replicability of established effects in the social and behavioral sciences (e.g., Open Science Collaboration, 2015), it is critical to determine whether a similar pattern of results might be observed on an independent, more representative sample. Furthermore, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election involved the country's first female major party candidate, which might have novel implications for the effects of trait evaluations—both implicit and explicit—on voting behaviors. For example, while men in leadership settings are evaluated primarily along the dimension of competence, women in such settings are judged according to both competence and warmth, potentially creating an additional hurdle for Hillary Clinton on the question of character fitness (Fiske et al., 2002a,b). Indeed, gender stereotypes characterizing women as warm and nurturing are inconsistent with preferences regarding the kind of traits citizens desire in political leaders, who are expected to be decisive and outspoken (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). When political communication activates these stereotypes, they can undermine support for female candidates (Bauer, 2015). In the context of the 2016 presidential election, for example, recent finding suggests that both hostile gender attitudes and preference for traditional gender roles was associated with support for Donald Trump (Bock et al., 2017). Thus, perceptions of candidates' warmth may therefore be particularly relevant to electoral behavior in the 2016 general election. This possibility is contrary to what has been observed in prior research investigating evaluations of candidates' traits at both the implicit (Ksiazkiewicz et al., 2018) and explicit level (e.g., Graefe, 2013), which indicates that competence assessments are more consequential than alternative trait assessments.

In our dual-process approach to candidate evaluations, voters hold *both* conscious, explicit impressions of candidate traits and automatic, implicit candidate-trait associations. At the explicit level, perceptions of candidate traits are common to presidential campaign coverage (e.g., Heflick and Goldenberg, 2009; Stanage, 2012), are core features of citizens' cognitive representation of ideal and actual candidates (Kinder et al., 1980; Miller et al., 1986), and are consequential for political behavior (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Funk, 1997, 1999; Peterson, 2005).[2] Implicit associations, however, may not be introspectively accessible (and therefore cannot be measured using self-report) but nonetheless influence voter behaviors (cf. Evans, 2008; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Wilson et al., 2000; but see Gawronski et al., 2006, who argue that individuals may be consciously aware of the source and content of their implicit attitudes but unaware of its impact on judgment and behavior). Thus, a dual-process model of candidate-trait associations is situated at the interface of research on implicit political attitudes (e.g., Friese et al., 2007) and explicit candidate-trait perceptions (e.g., Bartels, 2002) to highlight the importance of implicit candidate-trait associations.

2. Implicit processes in political contexts

The study of implicit political attitudes, including trait associations, can contribute to our understanding of the psychological processes that underlie voter decision-making in a number of ways. First, implicit associations can account for unexplained variance in traditional models of voter decision-making, as in other domains (e.g., Greenwald et al., 2009). Accounting for implicit associations, then, is valuable pragmatically, insofar as it increases the predictive power of models of voter decision-making.

Second, this unexplained variance might not be accounted for by self-reported, explicit attitudes (Hofmann et al., 2005; Nosek and Smyth, 2007). Implicit and explicit processes are psychologically distinct (Greenwald et al., 2009). Thus, from a theoretical perspective, accounting for both implicit and explicit processes together provide a more complete picture of the factors that influence voter decision-making.

Third, and most importantly for the current work, implicit measures are largely unaffected by social desirability bias (Banse et al., 2001; Boysen et al., 2006). In the context of an election where one of the major party candidates is a woman, like the 2016 US presidential election, some voters may have concealed their true explicit assessments in order to appear unprejudiced (Redlawsk et al., 2010). Similarly, some respondents may have felt that it was socially undesirable to express support for Trump (or Clinton) due to some of the controversies surrounding his (or her) candidacy and may, therefore, conceal their true explicit opinions when asked on a survey. Further, some traits (e.g., warmth) may be viewed as normatively less appropriate for judging political candidates (Conover and Searing, 2000; Funk, 1997; Kinder et al., 1980). Consequently, people may be less willing to communicate these "true" judgments (to researchers and others). These problems can be at least partially circumvented by measuring implicit candidate-trait associations.

3. The present study

The major question we addressed in this study is whether implicit trait associations shape explicit political judgment, preferences, and behavior (i.e., incremental predictive validity) during the 2016 presidential election. We examined the incremental effect of implicit evaluations of the warmth and competence of major party candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. This study focused on perceptions of warmth and competence because these traits are influential in the political science literature (e.g., Funk, 1999) and because social psychological research indicates that both are fundamental features of person perception (Cuddy et al., 2008). Across many contexts, warmth and competence perceptions operate orthogonally and correspond with beliefs about the targets' intentions and ability to execute those intentions (Fiske et al., 2007). Indeed, candidates gain votes when they are perceived as likeable (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000) and competent (e.g., Graefe, 2013). Thus, we expected implicit warmth and competence assessments to each predict evaluations of the presidential candidates and related political groups, as well as vote intentions in the 2016 election, above and beyond explicit analogs, demographics variables, and partisan identification (Hypothesis 1). Second, consistent with Ksiazkiewicz et al. (2018), we expected implicit competence assessments to be a stronger and more reliable predictor of outcomes than implicit warmth assessments, especially when covariates are included in the model (Hypothesis 2). We also consider the possibility that implicit warmth may be a more important predictor of voting behavior for elections involving female candidates, consistent with other research on perceptions of females in positions of leadership (Fiske et al., 2002a,b) and the impact of gender stereotypes on female leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993) and political candidates (e.g., Bauer, 2015).[3]

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[2] Political scientists have debated whether voters simply ascribe positive traits to the candidates they support and negative traits to their opponents (e.g., Rahn et al., 1994; cf. Huber, 2015), raising concerns about the endogeneity of these evaluations to existing partisan loyalties and candidate preferences. For implicit associations, however, endogeneity may be less severe because voters lack introspective access to change them in a deliberate or motivated way (Ksiazkiewicz et al., 2018).

[3] These predictions, as well as our methodology and analytical strategy, were pre-registered at Opensciencefeframework.com in September 10–16, 2016, before Survey Sampling International collected our data. We also pre-registered a hypothesis regarding the role of partisan strength as a moderator for the incremental effect of implicit constructs. We observed an inconsistent pattern of moderating effects across models and outcomes, so we do not focus our discussion or analysis on this test. However, the results of these analyses are available upon request.