



Honest politics: Evaluating candidate perceptions for the 2012 U. S. election with the Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure



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ABSTRACT

Mainstream implicit cognition measures such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) have produced a substantial volume of data on political attitudes. However, the associative basis of most implicit measures entail interpretive limitations that may be avoided with a relatively new measure known as the Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure (IRAP). The IRAP is a measure of arbitrarily applicable relational repertoires based on a functional and contextual view of cognition. The current study used the IRAP to assess relational repertoires among college undergraduates in respect to images of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney presented in conjunction with positive and negative evaluative words. The results showed distinct patterns of bias on the IRAP that correlated with various political self-reports. The IRAP also distinguished self-reported intentions to vote for Obama or Romney. Some of the results revealed patterns that would not be apparent with a comparable IAT. The current study provides a supportive basis for the reliability and convergent validity of the IRAP for measuring implicit perceptions of political candidates.

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1. Introduction

Every four years in the United States, the public encounters a flood of political advertising intended to influence voting for the presidential election. These advertisements tend to involve at least one of two messages. One type of message portrays a candidate in a positive fashion by listing his or her accomplishments in life or in political office and connecting them with desirable ideals and values. The other type of message portrays a candidate's opponent in a negative light by detailing ethically or morally questionable behavior in their life or work and attempting to associate them with undesirable attributes and motives.

Governance in the United States is organized by a two-party system. With rare exceptions, voters respond to election ballots in which the only viable contenders for any given political office are a Democrat and a Republican. The dual nature of this system readily leads to candidates being characterized along a single dimension; one in which candidates endorsing a relatively liberal, "left-leaning" ideology identify as Democrats while those endorsing a relatively conservative, "right-leaning" ideology identify as Republicans. Although the organization of American political ideology along this singular dimension has been contested (Ashton et al.,

2005; Treier & Hillygus, 2009), most of the electorate face a voting decision organized by a simple left vs. right portrayal of candidate ideologies.

1.1. Influences on voting decisions

In selecting a candidate, voters do not vote simply on the issues. Many researchers have demonstrated the important influence that perceptions of a politician's character traits have on vote choice (e.g., Bishin, Stevens, & Wilson, 2006; Hayes, 2005, 2010). Candidate trait perceptions are intertwined and influenced by partisan views and ideological stances on issues (Clifford, 2014; Goren, 2007). Just as people quickly and effortlessly make judgments about the character and intentions of people they interact with in their social milieu, voters often rely on heuristics or learned political stereotypes to guide their political judgments (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

The character traits most commonly identified as relevant for presidential elections are leadership, integrity, competence, and empathy (Holian & Prysby, 2014). According to theories of issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996), over time, political parties in the United States have developed reputations for owning, or skillfully handling, particular issues. Taken a step further, Hayes's (2005) theory of trait ownership suggests that the public comes to associate particular character traits with party candidates based on the issues that their party owns. For instance, the Democratic Party is associated with focusing on issues related to social welfare programs and thus

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Democratic candidates have the advantage of being perceived as compassionate and empathetic. On the other hand, the Republican Party is seen as skilled at handling issues related to national security and traditional values; therefore, a Republican candidate may hold an initial advantage of being perceived as strong in leadership and integrity (Hayes, 2005, 2010).

In light of confirmation biases in human information processing, Goren (2007) expands on insights from Hayes's (2005) trait ownership theory by arguing that partisan bias leads party identifiers to criticize the perceived character weaknesses of the opposing party nominee. That is, Republicans tend to view Democratic candidates as weak leaders lacking integrity while Democrats view Republican candidates as insensitive leaders lacking compassion. In addition, Clifford (2014) demonstrated across two experiments that the trait inferences that individuals make about politician's issue stances are shaped by the moral foundation associated with the individual's own personal issue stance. In this way, partisan-based stereotypes, issues stances, and associated moral foundations interact to influence voter's perceptions of the personal attributes of political candidates.

In a recent study examining American National Election Study (ANES) data from the 2012 presidential election, Holian and Prysby (2014) found that partisans were less influenced by trait perceptions unless the opposing candidate's personal traits were perceived as being substantially better than those of their identifying party's candidate. Of note, trait perceptions had the largest impact among voters who identified as Independent. Interestingly, although the average Independent in the sample disapproved of Obama's handling of the economy and identified as slightly conservative, only 37% of Independents thought Romney had better character traits and only 47% voted for him. Holian and Prysby suggest that Independents' poor perceptions of Romney's character traits were an influential force that led them to vote for Obama.

1.2. A functional contextual view of voting

Any given voter brings an extensive and personal history to the voting booth that may have shaped not only the voter's selection of a candidate, but also the trait perceptions, social knowledge, and moral foundations that cognitive perspectives in psychology offer in their explanations of voting. As such, these perspectives tend to provide relatively decontextualized views on voting behavior, as the determinants of the vote are located within the cognitive processes theorized to be relevant to perceptions of political figures. From a contextual behavioral science perspective (Vilardaga, Hayes, Levin, & Muto, 2009), voting may be conceptualized as a behavior influenced by a complex history with respect to the names listed on the ballot. As with any behavior, voters respond in part to the direct stimulus functions of the prevailing situation (e.g., a private booth, the ballot text, the selection apparatus). Furthermore, voting is likely influenced by an extended history of experiences with the candidate names over time (e.g., media reports, interpersonal discussions, political advertisements). A substantial portion of this history would involve arbitrarily applicable relational contingencies, the subject matter of Relational Frame Theory (RFT; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). Perceptions of the candidate names themselves are likely to be acts of deriving stimulus functions based on their participation in relational contingencies. "Barack Obama" is just a collection of letters on a piece of paper, but that text may occasion much more than simple detection of visual features – images, memories, judgments, and emotions may occur that are founded on a rich relational history with these two words and may influence behavior well beyond what would be possible if they were regarded on the basis of their direct stimulus functions alone.

Voters do not vote for names, they vote for what they have learned those names represent. In this sense, the candidate's names occasion a defining characteristic of derived relational responding known as entailment.

According to RFT, there are two types of entailment. *Mutual entailment* is an act of relating stimuli bidirectionally even though only one relation between the stimuli has been conditioned. For example, in the course of a conversation with a trusted acquaintance, a potential voter who is naïve about political parties may be told that Barack Obama is a Democrat. Subsequently, the social category "Democrat" may come to mind after hearing the name Obama, because this relation was directly stated during the conversation. More importantly, the voter may also think of Barack Obama the next time he or she hears the word "Democrats", even though this exact relation was not directly specified in the conversation. This thought would qualify as an instance of mutual entailment. *Combinatorial entailment* is the act of relating stimuli bidirectionally via relations with other stimuli. Continuing with the previous example, imagine the potential voter sometime later hearing on the radio that "the Democrats want to take away our guns". Subsequently, the voter may derive that Obama opposes gun ownership, a relationship that has neither been directly trained nor mutually entailed, as the two stimuli (Obama and gun removal) previously were never mentioned together. This thought would qualify as an instance of combinatorial entailment, because the relation bear no pre-existing relationship except via their relations with other stimuli.

The voter's pre-existing feelings and beliefs regarding gun ownership may occasion a third property of arbitrarily applicable relational responding known as the *transformation of stimulus functions*. Stimuli that participate in a network of stimulus relations may acquire new functions in accordance with a contextual cue for a particular function. For example, imagine that our hypothetical voter feels strongly about guns. This conviction may be regarded as a feature of context that selects particular stimulus functions over others within the voter's relational repertoires in respect to the name Barack Obama. If the voter were a member of the National Rifle Association and an avid gun collector, the name may now evoke negative feelings and evaluations. Alternatively, if the voter was disturbed about incidents of gun violence and supportive of gun control regulations, the name may evoke positive feelings and evaluations. In other words, in the context of evaluating suitability for the office of President of the United States, thinking that Obama wants to reduce gun ownership may be upsetting for some voters and appealing to others. In each case, the reactions would qualify as evidence of the transformation of stimulus functions in respect to the name, and may influence the selection of a candidate on the ballot. An otherwise arbitrary visual stimulus ("Barack Obama") may now bear an evocative function for approach or avoidance, based on a contextual cue interacting with a network of stimulus relations. If the voter already views Barack Obama and Mitt Romney via a relation of difference or opposition, then "Mitt Romney" also may acquire new functions that differ accordingly from those for "Barack Obama". As with mutual and combinatorial entailment, these transformations occur via the ability to generalize relational repertoires in accordance with an extensive network of conditioned and derived stimulus relations.

Thus, for a voter the significance of each name on the ballot may reflect very indirect, distant, and elaborate contingencies in the voter's history. Because the stimuli participating in the network may be related in various dimensions, voting may be influenced by a conglomeration of reinforcing and punishing stimulus functions. Whether voters choose on the basis of one comparison of the candidates or many, the act of choosing may be driven by the relative balance of positive and negative attributes not just for an

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