Understanding the Importance and Structure of Trait Inferences

in Candidate Images

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There is renewed interest in the role of candidate characteristics and candidate images in the voting literature. The importance of reactions to presidential candidates has long been mentioned in the voting literature (see Campbell, Gurin and Miller 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). Yet, relatively little research attention has been devoted to understanding where candidate images come from or which aspects of candidates are most important in determining vote preferences.

Candidate characteristics is a broad and loosely defined term. It is sometimes used to refer to fixed characteristics such as candidate gender or incumbency in office and, other times refers to more subjectively-determined characteristics such as visibility or trustworthiness. My focus, here, is on the subjectively-determined characteristics which are sometimes referred to as candidate images. One of the most basic components of candidate images is their perceived trait qualities. Traits are, in fact, a basic component of our images of other persons of all kinds whether family member, acquaintance, or public figure. Traits can refer to stable personality dispositions such as being an extroverted person, or qualities such as being moody or shy which vary depending on the situation.

Traits can be thought of as summary judgments culled from specific observations of others. We may observe a politician in a televised debate and infer that he or she is adept at handling questions or mean-spirited in attacking an opponent, for example. Those impressions are based on summaries across a whole range of minute behaviors of the politician including both nonverbal gestures and verbal responses to questions.

Judgments about the traits of a political figure, or any other person, tend to be made spontaneously as information is encountered. Impressions of presidential candidate Michael Dukakis as weak or silly occurred without any additional prompting to many viewers of the political advertisements portraying him in an army tank. And once inferred, traits tend to stay in memory long after the details on which they were based have been forgotten. Snippets of behavior --such as Richard Nixon's sweaty brow during the 1960 presidential debates-- can lead to specific and lasting impressions about the trait qualities of politicians.

It seems particularly important, then, to evaluate the role of traits in candidate evaluations. The desirability of such bases for candidate evaluations is not at issue here. Rather, the goal is to understand the ways in which trait judgments about politicians actually do affect overall evaluations and vote preferences. Below, I review recent research which bears on the nature and role of trait judgments in candidate evaluations. I first consider the prevalence of traits and the availability of information about the traits of politicians. Next, I review the evidence showing the importance of candidate traits in models of vote choice, and explore in detail the structure of trait judgments about politicians. Particular attention is given to the relative importance of different kinds of traits for overall candidate evaluations. Recent experimental evidence is presented which demonstrates a direct causal role of trait judgments in candidate evaluations and tests the relative importance of different trait dimensions for evaluating political figures. The latter section of the paper provides more detailed consideration of the current measures of candidate traits in the National Election Studies and suggests possible refinements for future studies.

The Prevalence of Traits Inferences

When we watch a political officeholder or other public figure on television, we tend to engage in what is called "impression formation". Impression formation is the process of inferring characteristics of the person based not only on what we observe but also on implicitly held notions of the characteristics implied by what we observe. This same inference process occurs whether we are observing public figures on television, a college professor in the classroom, or a new acquaintance at a social gathering. The characteristics inferred about another are largely made up of personality traits or dispositions. So for example, when political candidates are seen kissing babies and shaking hands, many will infer that they are caring and friendly. And when former Secretary of Defense, Al Haig, was quoted as saying "I'm in charge" following the assassination attempt against President Reagan, many inferred that he was power-hungry or overly controlling.

People are quick to infer traits from even minimal information about a politician. Page (1978) observed the widespread willingness of the public to make trait judgments about political

figures despite otherwise low levels of political information held by the mass public. Over 90% of respondents in a 1980 NES survey were able to rate presidential candidates on a series of trait terms such as intelligent, compassionate, and decent (Kinder 1986). Even open-ended responses to questions about political leaders are dominated by comments related to the personal attributes of the figure. Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk (1986) report that over 70% of the responses to the likes and dislikes questions in the NES surveys concern personal attributes, mostly in trait terms, of the presidential candidates. A minority of comments refer to the candidate's issue positions or party. Similar open-ended questions in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have found closer to 90% of comments referred to the trait qualities of party leaders (Bean 1993; Brown et al. 1988; Clarke et al. 1979). So, whether or not other information is known about political candidates, nearly everyone is aware of and willingly describes political leaders in terms of traits.

Evidence from the psychological literature suggests that we make trait judgments about others spontaneously, even without full awareness of doing so (Carlston 1980; Gilbert, Pelham and Krull 1988; Newman and Uleman 1987; Uleman and Moskowitz 1994). Trait judgments, then, are a naturally-occurring and common response to observing politicians, and any other person. Once made, these trait judgments tend to last in memory long after the details on which they were based have been forgotten (Wyer, Srull and Gordon 1984). References to Bill Clinton as "Slick Willie" or Richard Nixon as "Tricky Dick", for example, come from specific and lasting impressions about the trait qualities of these politicians. The prevalence and persistence of trait judgments in memory suggests that trait inferences make up a large part of candidate images and, as such, may provide an important basis for candidate evaluations.

Sources of Information for Trait Inferences

One of the unique aspects of impressions about politicians, unlike those for family and acquaintances, is that they are largely mediated by news coverage. Public perceptions of politicians are based almost solely on indirect knowledge and information sources. Content analyses of the news media indicate that information on personal qualities of political candidates is abundant, much

to the consternation of those who view issue positions as the most desirable basis for political judgments (e.g., Stempel and Windhauser 1991). Media users do appear to acquire trait-relevant information about political figures. Bartels (1993) demonstrated that those who use media sources for political information make distinctive judgments about the trait qualities of presidential candidates compared to infrequent media users. Recent use of talk shows and "soft" news programs by presidential campaigns may have further increased the availability of information on the personal qualities of candidates (Arterton 1993).

Trait inferences are by no means dependent on news coverage of personal qualities, however. All sorts of observed and reported behaviors convey information which can be used to form (and update) trait impressions of a candidate or officeholder. Politicians are seen at ceremonial plant openings, giving speeches on the campaign trail, making policy statements on the nightly news, or reacting to a challenger's statement; any of these may serve as a basis for specific trait impressions of the politician.

Trait judgments can be made quickly and easily on the basis of something as simple as group membership such as sex, race, and geographic origin or physical appearance. Gender stereotypes about traits such as assertiveness, integrity, and caring often affect impressions of male and female politicians, for example (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Physical attractiveness has long been known in the psychological literature as an important determinant of impressions about others (Eagly et al. 1991). More subtle appearance cues can have important trait implications as well. Rosenberg and McCafferty (1987) showed that the angle and focus of photographic images lead to significant differences in ratings of a hypothetical politician's competence, trustworthiness, likeableness and general suitability for office.

Quite literally, any information about a politician can serve as a source for trait inferences about him or her. More pieces of information tend to allow for richer, more differentiating impressions of a politician. So presidents and other incumbents, especially those in national offices, are liable to have richer and more detailed public images than those of less salient politicians.

Our ability to form impressions of political figures is not dependent on particular kinds of information. We can make trait inferences of political figures whether we have a lot or only a little information on which to base the judgments; even a little indirect information is sometimes sufficient.

The Importance of Traits for Predicting Candidate Evaluations

Before going into detail about the content of trait judgments, it is important to assess whether traits inferences, in general, make an independent and non-trivial contribution to models of candidate choice or overall evaluations. Much of the voting literature remains concerned with the relative importance of different kinds of considerations in vote choice and especially, the extent to which citizens follow normative criteria in their vote. Regression models have consistently shown a significant and independent impact of trait judgments on candidate evaluations; many have also shown a greater relative impact of traits on overall evaluations than other factors such as issue positions, group associations, or economic conditions.

In the US, trait ratings of presidential candidates were found to be significantly related to vote choice (Kinder 1986; Markus 1982). Trait images constructed from open-ended responses on candidate likes and dislikes have had a significant impact on vote choice for presidential as well as House and Senate candidates (Miller and Miller 1976; Miller 1990). Similar findings have emerged in countries with parliamentary systems. Trait ratings of party leaders in Britain and Australia have been shown to be significantly related to vote preference even after controlling for party identification (Bean and Mughan 1989). Summary measures of party leader images from open-ended responses have been found to be significant predictors of vote choice in Australia and New Zealand as well (Bean 1993).

More than just significant predictors of the vote, trait ratings have proven to be important independent predictors relative to other influences. Miller and Miller found "personal characteristics" to have a greater relative impact on vote choice than did references to either issues or to party affiliation of the candidate across more than twenty years of NES surveys in the US.

Detailed analyses of the 1980 and 1984 elections using the NES studies showed a substantial role of candidate traits in explaining individual vote choice; the unique predictive power of comparative trait judgments was on a par with policy and performance assessments, though it was weaker in 1984 than in 1980 (Shanks and Miller 1990, 1991). Stewart and Clarke (1992) estimated that trait images of party leaders uniquely accounted for approximately 13% of the variance in Conservative or Labour party voting based on the 1987 British Campaign Study; a figure considerably greater than the unique predictive power of issues or economic conditions.

Research across different leaders, years, countries, and measures provides converging evidence of the importance of candidate traits in predicting global, or overall, evaluations even after controlling for other factors. Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been given to candidate traits in the voting literature. Consideration of candidate characteristics in the congressional voting literature, for example, has rarely specified the content of such characteristics beyond evaluations of likeability or general characteristics such as incumbency and prior experience holding public office (e.g. Abramowitz 1988; Brown and Woods 1991; Kenney and Rice 1988). A more thorough consideration of the role of traits in candidate evaluations is needed including how, why and which traits matter most in candidate evaluations as well as what factors alter their relative importance in the vote.

The Nature of Trait Inferences

Having established the general importance of trait judgments as predictors of candidate choice or global candidate evaluation, we can now consider the nature of trait inferences in more detail. There is an infinite number of traits, but the kinds of traits used to evaluate politicians tend to fall into one of a few broad categories. Though, there is only limited agreement on what these categories entail. Below, I review three lines of research which bear on the question of the dimensions underlying trait judgments about politicians. First, psychological literature has identified two dimensions underlying trait judgments about others in general, using multidimensional scaling methods. These are sociability and intellectual competence. Second,

factor analyses of open-ended responses about political leaders has suggested four trait dimensions labeled competence, integrity, reliability, and charisma (and a fifth category of non-trait attributes). Third, a priori categories of trait ratings of political leaders have focused on four dimensions of trait judgments including competence, leadership, integrity and empathy. These have sometimes been collapsed into two categories of competence and integrity. Leadership has been combined as part of a competence dimension; empathy has been combined as part of integrity.

Each approach identifies a few broad categories which seem to underlie trait judgments. While a competence category emerges in each of these approaches, there is less agreement on other trait dimensions in candidate evaluations. Part of the difficulty in identifying a core set of underlying dimensions lies in the interrelationships among them. None of these content dimensions appear to be completely orthogonal to each other; each is interrelated in content and also to an evaluative, positive or negative, dimension. Taking all the past findings together, I argue that three separable dimensions are important to candidate evaluations: competence, trustworthiness (or integrity) and warmth (or sociability).

Uncovering Core Dimensions of Trait Inferences

Each of three different approaches has been taken to identify the underlying structure of trait inferences about politicians. Each has offered somewhat different solutions to the question of what core dimensions distinguish the spontaneous trait judgments of political figures.

Multidimensional Scaling of Traits. Implicit personality theory research in psychology has explored the structure of people's naive beliefs about which trait characteristics seem to "go with" other traits. This research suggests that a person's warmth and competence are nearly universally important aspects in judgments about others. One approach to identify the structure of people's beliefs about others, required subjects to sort a large number of trait terms into piles, each representing distinct persons. Multidimensional scaling of the distance measures between traits suggested two sorts of traits tended to be placed together: those reflecting either a sociability or

intellectual competence dimension (Rosenberg, Nelson and Vivekananthan 1968, Rosenberg and Sedlak 1972).

These two trait dimensions are relatively independent of each other but not completely orthogonal, and each has an evaluative dimension as well. Positive traits on the sociability dimension included happy, sociable, warm, good-natured, honest, sincere and helpful. Negative traits on the sociability dimension included boring, unhappy, dishonest, irritable, moody and unpopular. On the intellectual competence dimension, positive traits included skillful, determined, industrious, intelligent; some of negative traits were impulsive, squeamish, submissive, naive, clumsy, wasteful, frivolous, unintelligent, foolish.

Kim and Rosenberg (1980) also allowed subjects to choose their own trait terms and to describe specific people known to them personally. They found some support for further subcategories within the two content dimensions of sociability and intellectual competence, although there was a fair amount of individual variation in the use of specific subcategories. No content category was found to be independent of an evaluative dimension, however. A likeableness or positive/negative evaluative dimension was found across all individuals and methodologies.

Open-ended Responses. Arthur Miller and his colleagues analyzed responses to the open-ended questions on candidate likes and dislikes in the NES surveys from the 1950's to the 1980's (see Miller and Miller 1976; Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk 1986). A factor analysis of these responses yielded 5 dimensions labeled competence, integrity or trustworthiness, reliability, charisma or leadership appeal, and other personal characteristics.

Competence refers to positive or negative comments about experience and ability. Integrity refers to candidate honesty and sincerity. Reliability includes impressions as dependable, stable, decisive and strong. They suggest that comments classified under reliability reflect a bridge between competence and integrity concerns; reliability relates more to a professional trust to carry out the duties of the office and act in a way that serves the public interests, while integrity refers to honesty and sincerity as a person. The dimension alternately labeled charisma or leadership appeal included comments such as able to get along with or communicate with others, inspiring, and has

dignity, humility, and patriotism. The category called "personal characteristics" is a residual category of other comments related to personal qualities such as past military experience, age, health, religion, wealth, and past occupation.

Of these dimensions, competence, integrity and reliability were more frequently mentioned than comments related to charisma or other characteristics. These three categories were also more closely related to global, thermometer, evaluations of the candidates.

An update and extension of this work (Miller 1990) compared open-ended responses to the candidate likes and dislikes items for Presidential, House and Senate candidates using data from the 1988 NES and Senate Election Study. This study also categorized comments mentioning responsiveness to constituents and service to the district or state. Responsiveness comments were much more frequent in the Congressional cases than in the presidential case, especially for incumbent candidates. As with the presidential case, the three categories considered more relevant to performance assessments-- competence, integrity and reliability-- were more frequently given than charisma or other personal characteristics.

Similar open-ended questions have been used to gauge reactions to party leaders in parliamentary systems. Such studies have relied on a priori categories and so have not replicated the factor analysis found in the American case. Bean (1993) analyzed responses to open-ended questions of likes and dislikes of party leaders from election studies in Australia and New Zealand. Responses were coded into five categories based on Miller et al.'s factor analytic findings and other past research. While there tended to be a distinctive pattern of qualities attributed to each leader, competence and integrity were more likely to be mentioned across all leaders than other qualities.

The most frequently given likes and dislikes of party leaders in four Canadian election studies referred to integrity, a mix of strength and charisma-related comments labeled "dynamism", and "political skills" at communicating with party colleagues, opponents or the press (Brown et al. 1988). The frequency of references to competence was more variable across years while empathy and responsibility-related comments were less common than the other categories.

Trait Ratings. Kinder and his colleagues led a more direct effort to assess the role of trait judgments in candidate evaluations. They analyzed trait ratings made of presidential candidates in the NES surveys (Kinder 1983, 1986; Kinder et al., 1980). A handful of items were selected after careful pilot testing of large numbers of trait terms as well as open-ended solicitation of traits used to evaluate presidential candidates. The items were chosen to reflect a priori dimensions of trait assessments based on the psychological literature. Reports of affective reactions to candidates were also explored at the same time and included in models of global evaluation.

Confirmatory factor analyses found four separable dimensions underlying trait ratings of presidential candidates: competence, leadership, integrity and empathy. Competence refers to ratings as hard-working, knowledgeable and intelligent. Leadership items included inspiring, provides strong leadership, and commands respect. Decent, moral, and sets a good example tapped the integrity dimension. Compassionate, kind, and "cares about people like me" tapped the empathy dimension.

Integrity was the most consistently strong predictor of overall evaluation across candidates though competence, and empathy were also important. Kinder also explored terms reflecting "stability" which partially overlapped with those in Miller et al.'s reliability dimension. The stability index appeared to have low reliability as an index and was not a significant predictor of global evaluations; consequently, stability was dropped from further analyses.

These four categories have sometimes been collapsed into two dimensions of competence and integrity. A confirmatory factor analysis from the 1983 NES pilot study found the empathy factor to be so highly correlated with the integrity factor as to be judged virtually indistinguishable. Likewise, the leadership factor was closely related to competence (Kinder 1986).

Kinder's treatment of integrity tends to equate it with a sociability or warmth dimension based on the interrelationship between integrity and empathy measures. The multidimensional scaling literature provides further justification for this; as mentioned above, honesty and sincerity were treated as part of a sociability dimension in those findings. Miller et al., however, find evidence of two forms of trustworthiness judgments underlying candidate evaluations. What they

call reliability is closer to a competence dimension because it relates more to a professional trust to carry out the duties of the office and act in a way that serves the public interest. Their integrity category is closer to the kind of warmth judgment made of persons more generally because it relates more to honesty and sincerity as a person. So it's not clear whether trustworthiness is closer to a warmth or competence dimension. Trustworthiness is not easily equated with either dimension.

A Re-evaluation of the NES Trait Ratings. Now that the NES trait ratings have been asked across several election years, it seems a good time to re-assess whether the conclusions hold for presidential candidates, more generally. I have conducted further analyses from the 1984-1992 NES studies, focusing especially on the 1988 and 1992 studies, which shed some light on the structure of trait judgments and the validity of the current NES measures.

The results in Table 1 show the relationships among the four factors--competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy--for each available year and candidate after purging measurement error. As this table illustrates, part of the difficulty in identifying a set of core dimensions underlying trait judgments is that no content dimension is wholly orthogonal to the others. All of the four trait dimensions are highly intercorrelated.

These correlations were derived from a confirmatory factor analysis using a maximum likelihood estimation model. At least two measures were available for each latent factor. The competence factor was measured by ratings of knowledgable and intelligent. Leadership was tapped by ratings as provides strong leadership and inspiring. (In 1992, a third rating on "gets things done" was also used to tap the leadership dimension). Integrity was measured by ratings of moral and decent, or for some years honest. Empathy was measured by ratings as compassionate and cares about people like you. Each measure was assumed to be due to only one latent factor; none of the measures were allowed to have correlated error terms.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Previous analyses suggested that empathy and integrity measures were so closely intercorrelated as to be virtually indistinguishable. The present results confirm a strong relationship between ratings on empathy and integrity. The correlation coefficient relating empathy and integrity measures was the strongest among the four factors and averaged .89 across all candidates and years. However, empathy is equally highly correlated with the leadership factor, which is sometimes combined with competence. The relationship between empathy and leadership was only a bit less strong; the correlation ranged from .71 to .90, with an average of .84.

The other factors were better differentiated with average correlations in the .7, rather than the .8, range. The lowest, though most variant, correlations were between the integrity and leadership factor. McCann (1990) showed similar relationships among trait ratings across the NES 1984 Panel Study.

To further test whether these trait dimensions were distinguishable, I tested the comparative fit of the 4-factor model against both a single factor and 2-factor model of trait judgments. The two factor model combining leadership and competence ratings as one factor and integrity and empathy measures as a second factor had been suggested in Kinder's analyses on the 1983 Pilot Study and in earlier factor analyses from the 1980 NES study (Markus 1982). A single factor model serves as a benchmark that content dimensions of traits are distinguishable from a general valence factor.

The results shown in Tables 2 through 6 provide clear support for 4 separable dimensions of trait judgments. The 4-factor model fit the data significantly better than did either a single factor or a 2-factor model. These models were tested separately for candidates Bush, Dukakis, and Jackson in 1988 and Bush and Clinton in 1992. While there is some variation in fit across candidates, the improvement in fit for the 4-factor model compared to the 2-factor one was significant in every case.

Insert Tables 2-6 about here.

Three Overlapping Dimensions. Across all of these studies, candidate images appear to be distinctive and consistent with real differences in the qualities of different political figures. Both Kinder and Bean, for example, report patterns of trait ratings which appear to fit with real differences in political leaders. The public viewed Ted Kennedy, for example, as relatively low on measures of integrity in the 1980 NES Study, presumably as a holdover from his involvement at Chappaquidick. Views of President Carter were positive on integrity qualities but low on competence measures. In 1984 and later, President Reagan was seen as more negative on empathy measures though positive on other dimensions. All are images which seem consistent with real differences in the qualities of these men as political officeholders.

Candidate images do appear to cluster around a small number of trait dimensions. There is considerable consensus but also some disagreement on how best to distinguish the content dimensions of trait judgments about politicians.

Competence has consistently emerged as a separable category of trait judgments. Research on perceptions of people in general suggests that competence is universally important in evaluations of others. Political behavior researchers have agreed that judgments of candidate competence are distinct from other kinds of trait judgments and are important indicators of global candidate evaluations. Competence has sometimes encompassed qualities related to strength and leadership as well.

Trust or integrity has also commonly emerged from the political behavior literature as separable and important in candidate evaluations. Psychological literature has treated trust-related qualities in conjunction with sociability or warmth. Ratings of candidate integrity have also been found to be closely related to judgments of empathy. But, factor analyses from open-ended responses separated two forms of trust judgments; one closer to competence and another closer to sociability or warmth. It seems particularly desirable to separate trust judgments from related

dimensions in a political context due to civic norms which define public officeholders as those trusted to serve as public representatives. Civic norms make it likely that trustworthiness remains a salient aspect of candidate images and evaluations.

A third separable dimension of trait images is described here as warmth. A warmth dimension has been alternately labeled charisma, harmony, empathy, or sociability. Evidence from multidimensional scaling of traits finds that warmth, or sociability, is a common dimension underlying trait judgments about other persons, in general. Warmth qualities emerged as a separate factor from open-ended responses about presidential candidates as well as about party leaders in Australia and New Zealand. And, empathy was found to be an important aspect of candidate images, though it was closely related to trust and leadership dimensions in direct ratings of candidate traits. So warmth has repeatedly emerged as separable from other trait dimensions and a common, even if not the most common, reaction to political figures.

Which Traits Matter in Candidate Evaluations

Agreeing on the structure of trait inferences which underlie candidate images is not synonymous with identification of whether these trait dimensions impact overall evaluations. I briefly consider the evidence supporting each of these trait dimensions -- competence, trustworthiness, and warmth-- as important determinants of candidate evaluations.

Competence

Competence is an important aspect of trait images of other people, in general. Competence is apt to be an especially important dimension in impressions of political figures. As Page (1978) noted, competence qualities such as being experienced, knowledgeable, and skilled are directly related to an officeholder's leadership abilities. Evaluations of political officeholders are based, at least in part, on their ability to perform as public representatives and political leaders. Competence assessments seem particularly relevant for this purpose. Popkin (1991) suggests, for example, that competence assessments are a useful short-hand for judging a presidential candidate's ability to provide desirable collective benefits once in office.

Competence qualities are frequently mentioned in people's reports of what they like and dislike about political leaders (Brown et al. 1988; Glass 1985; Kinder 1986; Kinder et al. 1980; Miller and Miller 1976; Miller et al. 1986, Miller 1990). Between 1952 and 1984, competence qualities were cited more frequently than any other category of personal attribute in the NES surveys (Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk 1986).

Competence measures have repeatedly been found to be a significant determinant of vote choice or global evaluations even after controlling for other factors (Kinder 1986, Markus 1982, Miller et al. 1986, Rahn et al. 1990, Shanks and Miller 1990). Competence of party leaders has proven to be a significant determinant of voting in parliamentary systems as well (Bean 1993, Bean and Mughan 1989, Stewart and Clarke 1992).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness with its components of good moral judgment, sincerity, and honesty, may be quite important in our evaluations of persons more generally (see e.g., Anderson 1968). Trustworthiness appears to be a separable and important aspect of impressions of political figures as well. Integrity or trustworthiness is seen as a relevant basis for evaluating political candidates (along with competence) according to civic norms (Page 1978, Popkin 1991).

Trust is clearly one of the most commonly reported qualities desired of ideal politicians (Kinder et al. 1980). A CBS News/New York Times poll, for example, taken in October 1987 found 40% of respondents volunteered honesty and integrity as the single most important personal quality that the next president should have. Responses reflecting competence were mentioned by only about 10% with another 10% mentioning strength and leadership qualities as most important. This question was asked of registered voters with similar results in April 1992. 43% named honesty and integrity as the most important personal quality that the next president should have.

Measures of candidate integrity or trust have proven to be significant predictors of global candidate evaluations and vote choice, even after controlling for other factors (Bean 1993, Brown et al. 1988, Glass 1985, Kinder 1986, Markus 1982, Miller et al. 1986, Shanks and Miller 1990).

Warmth

A sociability or warmth dimension is an important aspect of impressions of other people, in general. The evidence is less clear whether warmth is an important aspect of impressions of political figures. Warmth has frequently emerged as a separate category in candidate images, but warmth-related qualities have been mentioned less frequently than other qualities in survey reports about political figures (Kinder et al. 1980; Kinder 1986; Glass 1985; Miller et al 1986).

Warmth, under various labels and measures, has frequently emerged as a significant predictor of vote choice after controlling for other factors. However, the relative impact of warmth on vote choice has generally been less than that of other candidate traits such as competence or integrity (Bean 1993, Brown et al. 1988, Kinder 1986, Miller et al 1986).

Warmth is not a particularly normative basis for political judgments, though a tendency to like those with positive warmth qualities such as friendly, sociable, or good-natured is common for people in general (see Eagly 1984, Gilligan 1982). Civic norms favor competence and integrity over warmth, or other personal qualities, in evaluations of political figures. Warmth seems irrelevant to the task of evaluating the best candidate for the job (see Bean 1993, Brown et al. 1988, Page 1978, Popkin 1991, Wattenberg 1991). Candidates, themselves, are particularly concerned with appearing both competent and trustworthy (see e.g., Fenno 1978).

Why would warmth and sociability be such an important dimension of trait evaluations of people in general but not of politicians? Political observers have often asserted the importance of candidate warmth, charisma and empathy for electoral success. Analyses of Reagan's unprecedented popularity, for example, often centered on his personal warmth and charisma (Weisman 1984).

One possibility is that warmth qualities are less likely to be reported as important in public opinion surveys due to self-presentation or social desirability concerns but are equally important in forming judgments of candidates. Open-ended survey questions, then, would be likely to underestimate the role of warmth qualities in candidate evaluations. There is some evidence that the

NES-style questions on likes and dislikes yield fewer responses overall and are less likely to include trait inferences than other question formats. Warmth qualities are less likely to be reported in response to these questions (McGraw, Stenner and Fischle 1994; Rahn, Krosnick and Breuning 1994).

Survey ratings with specific requests for trait assessments on warmth would presumably avoid some of these social desirability concerns. Kinder's research using trait ratings, however, found that competence traits had the greatest overall impact on overall evaluations across three presidential candidates. Empathy traits were less important, though still statistically significant predictors.

Another possibility is that warmth traits are less likely to differentiate political figures and consequently are more variable in their importance for candidate evaluations. There is some evidence that politicians, in the abstract, are assumed to be fairly sociable and warm (see Funk 1993). Clearly there are political figures who are widely viewed as cold and unsociable. In those cases, judgments of warmth may have greater predictive power. Warmth appears to be an important dimension of candidate trait images but may have less relative importance than competence or trustworthiness averaging across political figures.

Establishing a Causal Impact of Traits on Candidate Evaluations

Correlational data have helped establish the importance of candidate traits, in general, and suggest that presidential candidates are evaluated along dimensions manifestly related to their performance as political officeholders. There remains, however, some concern that responses to these sorts of questions reflect rationalizations of global evaluations rather than a direct causal role of traits on candidate evaluations. Supporters of a candidate may assume or perceive that he/she holds a whole host of positive traits because of their overall preference for him/her. So it is not always clear whether trait judgments are causing global evaluations or the reverse.

Controlled comparisons of politicians are needed in order to fully address whether trait inferences have a causal role in global evaluations. I have conducted a series of experiments using

written descriptions of hypothetical US Congressmen which demonstrate 1) the direct causal role of trait inferences on global evaluations of political figures 2) the separability and relative importance of competence and warmth dimensions in global evaluations and 3) important differences in the ways those with more and less political information evaluate candidates (see Funk 1993, 1994).

Description of the Experimental Design. Results from the two key experiments in a series of related studies are discussed here. Each of these experiments tested whether Congressmen who have positive competence qualities are evaluated more favorably overall than those who have positive warmth qualities. They also tested the relative importance of competence and warmth in the context of either negative or neutral integrity information learned after initial impressions had been formed.

These experimental contexts give a fuller consideration to the potential role of candidate warmth in overall evaluations. Evidence for the role of warmth is based on reactions to (hypothetical) Congressmen rather than reasons for liking or disliking them. This situation should reduce some of the social desirability concerns present in the survey situation. The experiments, then, test the relative importance of the more normative, candidate competence versus warmth under conditions which should give warmth a fair chance.

Impressions of Congressmen with differing traits were formed on the basis of written descriptions of their trait qualities. The descriptions were worded in the context of plausible political information such as their House committee assignments, public speaking skills, and legislative activities[1]. The experimental manipulation used to create warm or competent politicians comes from the trait terms used in those descriptions. When positive trait information is provided on a single dimension, perceivers tend to assume that positive traits are also present on other dimensions; this is referred to as a halo effect. In order to reduce halo effects in these studies, each politician was described as either high in warmth qualities but low in competence or high in

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[1]Note that the ideological implications of this contextual information was carefully pilot tested and found to be relatively neutral. No partisan affiliation for the politician was provided, thus allowing partisan and ideological biases to operate in the same way for each subject and Congressman.

competence qualities but low in warmth. By specifying negative traits in another dimension, the stimulus materials better isolated the traits of interest.

Each of these experiments has used undergraduate students as subjects on the grounds that college students follow the same fundamental processes in candidate evaluations as do other US citizens. The procedure of the experiment was designed to mimic the dynamic process of impression formation. The trait descriptions provide a basis for initial impressions about a Congressman. In order to crystallize these impressions, subjects are asked to list several things which come to mind when thinking about the Congressman. Next, they read either the negative integrity or neutral integrity information and then give their ratings of the Congressman on a number of trait and overall evaluation scales.

The Relative Importance of Competence vs. Warmth. In both experiments, there is evidence that competence is valued more than warmth in political officeholders. Congressmen who were highly warm but not very competent were evaluated less favorably than those highly competent but not very warm. Warmth is separable from competence; subjects respond differently to politicians depending on their warmth or competence-related qualities.

Warmth can be equally important as competence but possibly only for those with less political knowledge. Those with more political knowledge evaluated competent politicians more favorably than warm ones in both studies. Those with less knowledge did not privilege competence over warmth in their overall evaluations.

The reasons underlying these different reactions by those with more and less political knowledge are still somewhat unclear. Political knowledge is thought to reflect a more general expertise in the political domain which allows for more complex processing of political information. It may be that those with more political knowledge make more complex judgments about political figures allowing them to distinguish between the competent and warmth-related information in their reactions. A simpler interpretation suggests that those with more political information weight candidate trait dimensions differently perhaps because the more knowledgeable have better learned or are more interested in following civic norms than the less knowledgeable.

However, previous studies have not found the predictors of candidate evaluations to differ by education levels or other concepts related to political information. Past literature suggests stronger theoretical grounds for a view of the more informed as able to make more complex political judgments. This cognitive complexity could result from a greater motivation or a greater ability to make finer-grained distinctions when processing political information.

The more knowledgeable differentiated between the content as well as the positive or negative evaluative implications of the information in these experimental studies. Those with more knowledge reacted more favorably to the competent than the warm politicians. These differences could not be explained away by other hypothesized relationships such as cynicism or moral traditionalism in reaction to politicians. Survey reports have sometimes suggested that the better educated are more likely to endorse competence in presidential candidates; the present findings suggest that the more knowledgeable actually respond more favorably to competent politicians than do others. This suggests that self-presentation concerns alone are not responsible for prior findings of differences between correlates of political knowledge and candidate evaluations.

A Causal Role of Trait Inferences. The experimental studies described here offer more direct support of a causal role of trait inferences in global candidate evaluations. These experiments demonstrate that candidate traits on warmth and competence dimensions lead to differential global evaluations. The best predictors of global evaluation in both of these experimental studies were ratings of candidate trustworthiness and competence, consistent with survey reports on actual politicians. Candidate warmth was sometimes important as well but appears to be less consistently important than competence traits, especially among those with greater political expertise.

Measuring Trait Dimensions

These experimental studies provide greater confidence that the trait measures currently in use by NES are important for understanding candidate evaluations. The question of which traits are important in candidate evaluations is still partially open to debate. As a further consideration of the utility of separating trait ratings into the 4 dimensions originally suggested by Kinder or into some

other grouping I consider, below, the convergent and divergent validity of the NES trait ratings from 1988 and 1992. The results in Table 7 provide a first look at the extent to which the NES trait ratings measure different trait dimensions. These results are averages of simple Pearson correlations between items.

Insert Tables 7 about here.

Summarizing across candidates and years, the average correlations shown in the off diagonal are smaller than those on the diagonal. This provides some evidence that each trait index measures something different from the other trait indices. The evidence for divergent validity is strongest for the competence index. Across all candidates and years, the average correlation between the items measuring competence and those measuring some other trait dimension is lower than that between the 2 items in the competence index.

The divergent validity of integrity and empathy measures is somewhat weaker. It may be that the strong interrelationship between empathy and integrity measures is a reflection of real covariation in the trait qualities or perceived qualities of presidential candidates. These interrelationships do vary across candidates. The strongest case for separation of empathy and integrity emerged from the case of Clinton-- where presumably the greatest differentiation might reasonably have occurred. A second possibility is that the dimension of empathy is separable from that of integrity but is not measured, here, in a way which sufficiently distinguishes it from integrity (or leadership). The experimental studies, described above, provide additional leverage on both of these possibilities.

The experimental studies, described above, created politicians which showed considerable variation in trait qualities and then measured perceived trait qualities using 9-point bipolar trait ratings related to competence, trustworthiness (or integrity) and warmth. Each trait dimension was measured by 4 items. Competence was measured by ratings as doing a good job, well informed, qualified, and competent. Trustworthiness was tapped by ratings as reliable, trustworthy, moral, and means what he says. Warmth was measured by ratings as warm, has charisma, personable,

and sociable. Note that these measures of warmth are quite different from the empathy measures (cares about people like you and compassionate) used in the NES. In addition, the experiment included a rating of cares about people like me in order to test the relationship of this common measure of empathy to the present consideration of warmth.

Table 8 shows the average inter-item correlations found in the experimental study of candidate evaluation for the three dimensions of competence, trust, and warmth. The separation of warmth ratings from those of competence and trust is dramatically different than was found for the NES ratings. Warmth ratings are clearly distinct from those of competence or trust, regardless of differences in the trait qualities of the hypothetical candidates.

The relationship of the cares about people item, however, proved to be more closely related to measures of trust than to warmth. Of the four trust items, moral was the least strongly correlated with the cares about people item. Interestingly, the cares item was about equally correlated with the competence measures as it was with the warmth ones, regardless of the experimental condition.

Insert Tables 8 about here.

These results may indicate that the divergent validity of the empathy and integrity items in the NES could be improved with different measures of empathy, perhaps with a more broadly conceived warmth dimension. Ratings of these experimentally constructed candidates also serve to illustrate what may be the lower bound for differentiation among the trait dimensions. Actual politicians surely aim to be and are often perceived to be less distinctive in their trait qualities than these hypothetical politicians. The relationships between trait indices for these experimentally created politicians provide a useful illustration of the potential of these measures to tap distinct trait dimensions in candidate images.

Conclusions

Traits judgments are a core part of candidate images. Impressions of candidate trait qualities have proven to be important in overall evaluations of candidates and in vote choice. Traits qualities are frequently mentioned in response to questions about candidates on public opinion surveys.

Trait judgments are significant predictors of global evaluations and vote choice even after controlling for other factors. And, trait judgments have been shown to directly impact global evaluations in experimental research.

Research on candidate traits has repeatedly suggested that a handful of dimensions underlie the trait judgments of political figures. Researchers have defined these underlying dimensions in different ways and used different labels to represent them. Part of the difficulty in identifying the content dimensions of trait judgments appears to stem from interrelationships among them. There are three overlapping dimensions of trait judgments which are common to much of the research on political figures: competence, trustworthiness, and warmth. Competence and trustworthiness appear to have greater relative importance in candidate evaluations than does warmth, however. Warmth has been found to significantly predict global candidate evaluations in correlational studies but was not as strong a predictor as other trait dimensions. Experimental findings confirm that candidate warmth is less important in global evaluations than is competence, at least among those with more political knowledge or expertise. A warmth dimension, while separable from other aspects of trait impressions, appears to be less consistently important in global candidate evaluations.

These trait dimensions have repeatedly been found to underlie candidate evaluations for different kinds of officeholders and in different democratic systems including the US, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Stewart and Clarke (1992) hypothesize that formal and informal "representational processes" in contemporary democracies, such as common cultural norms, institutional processes, and elite behaviors, encourage the development of common underlying dimensions of leader images. The reasons underlying the similarity in dimensions of candidate trait judgments across different political systems is beyond the scope of this paper but remains an intriguing question for future research.

While considerable attention has been given, here, to which traits matter for candidate evaluations, relatively little has been said about why traits are so important in candidate images. Trait inferences are a common and spontaneous response to (direct or indirect) contact with

political figures. The reason traits are so important in judgments of politicians may be related to their function as mental short-cuts or summaries for a whole host of other information about politicians. Similarity with a candidate on key issue positions as well as assessments of performance in office can serve as bases for both trustworthiness and competence impressions, for example.

Other aspects of candidate images could serve a similar function as well. Affective reactions to candidates, for example, are considered important on nearly the same grounds as that for traits. Affective reactions are common, spontaneous, and have been found to be important independent predictors of global candidate evaluations (Abelson, et al. 1982). As with candidate traits, affective reactions may serve a cognitive short-cut function. Issue similarity and performance assessments may serve as important bases for affective reactions to the candidate as well. Little is known about the relationship between trait judgments and affective reactions. Future research on candidate traits will need to pay more attention to the interrelationships among the different aspects of candidate images in order to address more fully how candidate images are formed and how they translate into global judgments and vote preferences.

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Table 1
Pearson Correlations Between Latent Trait Factors*

	Reagan 1984 Pre	Reagan 1984 Post	Reagan 1986	Reagan 1988 Post	Mondale 1984 Pre	Mondale 1984 Post
Empathy and Integrity	.852	.860	.861	.882	.929	.879
Empathy and Leadership	.885	.859	.885	.846	.734	.708
Empathy and Competence	.680	.662	.760	.798	.724	.731
Integrity and Leadership	.828	.759	.807	.752	.612	.506
Integrity and Competence	.693	.626	.729	.727	.772	.689
Leadership and Competence	.754	.719	.788	.795	.745	.701

	Dukakis 1988 Pre	Jackson 1988 Pre	Bush 1988 Pre	Bush 1992 Pre	Clinton 1992 Pre	Average	Range
Empathy and Integrity	.864	.951	.910	.912	.856	.89	.85-.95
Empathy and Leadership	.817	.902	.839	.860	.894	.84	.71-.90
Empathy and Competence	.693	.813	.748	.711	.731	.73	.66-.81
Integrity and Leadership	.683	.792	.714	.771	.855	.73	.51-.86
Integrity and Competence	.754	.767	.769	.784	.639	.72	.63-.78
Leadership and Competence	.765	.823	.801	.775	.800	.72	.70-.82

* Data from NES Surveys 1984 to 1992. These correlations, derived from confirmatory factor analyses in EQS, are corrected for measurement error. Each trait rating was assumed to be due to one and only one latent factor. Each latent factor was measured by two trait ratings in 1984. In 1988 the integrity factor was measured by 3 items (moral, decent, and honest). In 1992, integrity was measured by 2 items (moral and honest) while leadership was measured by 3 items (provides strong leadership, inspiring, and gets things done). All measures and factor structure are the same across candidates for each year. The factors were allowed to freely covary; the covariance between error terms was assumed to be zero with no exceptions.

Table 2

Comparison of Model Fit for Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Traits for Candidate Clinton 1992

	4 Factors Competence, Leadership Integrity, Empathy	**2 Factors** Competence, Integrity	**1 Factor**
Chi-square	238.4	572.1	720.5
df	21	26	27
p-value	.001	.001	.001
Bentler-Bonnett NNFI	.957	.912	.893
Comparative Fit Index	.975	.937	.920

Table 3

Comparison of Model Fit for Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Traits for Candidate Bush 1992

	4 Factors Competence, Leadership Integrity, Empathy	**2 Factors** Competence, Integrity	**1 Factor**
Chi-square	261.8	614.1	932.2
df	21	26	27
p-value	.001	.001	.001
Bentler-Bonnett NNFI	.959	.918	.879
Comparative Fit Index	.976	.941	.909

Table 4
Comparison of Model Fit for Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Traits for Candidate Bush 1988

	4 Factors Competence, Leadership Integrity, Empathy	**2 Factors** Competence, Integrity	**1 Factor**
Chi-square	173.7	434.8	738.3
df	21	26	27
p-value	.001	.001	.001
Bentler-Bonnett NNFI	.964	.923	.871
Comparative Fit Index	.979	.944	.903

Table 5
Comparison of Model Fit for Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Traits for Candidate Dukakis 1988

	4 Factors Competence, Leadership Integrity, Empathy	**2 Factors** Competence, Integrity	**1 Factor**
Chi-square	108.2	409.2	677.6
df	21	26	27
p-value	.001	.001	.001
Bentler-Bonnett NNFI	.976	.915	.861
Comparative Fit Index	.986	.939	.896

Table 6

Comparison of Model Fit for Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Traits for Candidate Jackson 1988

	4 Factors Competence, Leadership Integrity, Empathy	**2 Factors** Competence, Integrity	**1 Factor**
Chi-square	157.8	474.3	870.3
df	21	26	27
p-value	.001	.001	.001
Bentler-Bonnett NNFI	.977	.939	.890
Comparative Fit Index	.987	.956	.918

Table 7
Convergent and Divergent Validity of Trait Indices
Average Inter-item Correlations Within and Between Indices

Candidate Clinton, NES 1992

	COMPETENCE	LEADERSHIP	INTEGRITY	EMPATHY
with Competence Items	**.58**			
with Leadership Items	.48	**.66**		
with Integrity Items	.36	.54	**.62**	
with Empathy Items	.43	.56	.52	**.60**

Candidate Bush, NES 1992

	COMPETENCE	LEADERSHIP	INTEGRITY	EMPATHY
with Competence Items	**.56**			
with Leadership Items	.44	**.59**		
with Integrity Items	.45	.45	**.58**	
with Empathy Items	.44	.54	.56	**.65**

Candidate Bush, NES 1988

	COMPETENCE	LEADERSHIP	INTEGRITY	EMPATHY
with Competence Items	**.60**			
with Leadership Items	.47	**.63**		
with Integrity Items	.46	.43	**.62**	
with Empathy Items	.45	.52	.57	**.63**

Table 7 Continued
Convergent and Divergent Validity of Trait Indices
Average Inter-item Correlations Within and Between Indices

Candidate Jackson, NES 1988

	COMPETENCE	LEADERSHIP	INTEGRITY	EMPATHY
with Competence Items	**.67**			
with Leadership Items	.55	**.67**		
with Integrity Items	.54	.55	**.73**	
with Empathy Items	.53	.59	.66	**.66**

Candidate Dukakis, NES 1988

	COMPETENCE	LEADERSHIP	INTEGRITY	EMPATHY
with Competence Items	**.52**			
with Leadership Items	.43	**.63**		
with Integrity Items	.42	.42	**.62**	
with Empathy Items	.39	.49	.52	**.57**

Table 8
Convergent and Divergent Validity of Trait Indices for Hypothetical Congressmen[*]
Average Inter-item Correlations Within and Between Indices

For Congressman High in Competence, High in Trustworthiness, and Low in Warmth

	COMPETENCE	TRUST	WARMTH
with Competence Items	.54		
with Trust Items	.48	.65	
with Warmth Items	.11	.15	.63
with Cares Item	.33	.48	.38

For Congressman High in Competence, Low in Trustworthiness, and Low in Warmth

	COMPETENCE	TRUST	WARMTH
with Competence Items	.57		
with Trust Items	.43	.59	
with Warmth Items	.18	.25	.60
with Cares Item	.41	.49	.30

For Congressman Low in Competence, High in Trustworthiness, and High in Warmth

	COMPETENCE	TRUST	WARMTH
with Competence Items	.71		
with Trust Items	.53	.69	
with Warmth Items	.26	.40	.57
with Cares Item	.42	.64	.37

For Congressman Low in Competence, Low in Trustworthiness, and High in Warmth

	COMPETENCE	TRUST	WARMTH
with Competence Items	.68		
with Trust Items	.42	.60	
with Warmth Items	.19	.27	.54
with Cares Item	.49	.51	.40

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[*] Source: Funk, 1994. n=194. All items were measured by 9-point bipolar scales with a high score indicating possession of the trait. The competence items included doing a good job, well informed, qualified, and competent. The trust items included reliable, trustworthy, moral, and means what he says. The warmth items included warm, has charisma, personable, and sociable. Cares item indicates rating of "cares about people like me."