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Introduction: Personality, Party Leaders, and Election Campaigns

From the moment Donald Trump declared his candidacy in the run up to the 2016 American election, his personality was front and centre. Voters were prompted from the get-go to consider “trusting” his “strong leadership,” his “honesty,” and his business acumen. Unlike many presidential candidates who are career politicians, including governors, senators, or members of congress, Trump has none of this experience but does have a level of personal infamy that rivals some of the most notorious personalities—political or otherwise—in global history. Indeed, much of the content of his campaign was, strictly speaking, devoid of “real” policy discussion, and he chose instead to prey upon the emotions of voters while insulting the personalities of his opponents. His opponent, Hillary Clinton, magnified this by, in her advertising, focusing on Trump’s character to the exclusion of issue appeals.

Researchers will spend the years to come seeking to understand the election result from a number of angles, including the role of political scandals, the gendered dynamics of campaigns, the impact of income inequality and growing dissatisfaction with the American dream and standards of living. We suggest that in order to fully understand this election result (and indeed, all elections), we need a better understanding of the role of candidates and party leaders in the minds of voters. This special issue of *Electoral Studies* brings together a number of papers that seek to address many of these issues, and they do so using multiple methods, multiple data sources, and basing their analyses on elections from multiple countries, including the United States, Denmark, the Netherlands, Britain, and Canada.

While political scientists have spent significant effort assessing the role of leaders in elections, much of the scholarship remains inconclusive. Studies have focused on everything from the impact of leaders’ appearance (Rosenberg et al. 1986; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, and Hall 2005) to the effect of television in influencing how much voters focus on leaders during election campaigns (Hayes 2009; Mendelsohn 1993), but the various strands of this literature are substantially disconnected. There do, however, appear to be a few clear categories of study that emerge. These are distinguished by their respective focus on: (i) leadership traits and trait dimensionality; (ii) information sources and the factors influencing candidate evaluation; and (iii) the impact of leaders on voter choice and electoral outcomes. These categories relate directly to the process of evaluation, and in particular, to the interaction between leaders and voters. While there appears to be growing academic consensus that leaders play an important role in the minds of voters (e.g. Bittner 2011), there is still much to be done to tease out evaluation processes and to understand the psychology behind candidate evaluation, the role of the media in shaping the place of leaders in electoral outcomes, and the link between candidate evaluation and elections (both in the US and around the world).

Traits and Trait Dimensionality

On the topic of leaders’ traits we find a rich but inconclusive assessment of the individual traits that voters take note of, as well as uncertain conclusions regarding the underlying “structure” or “dimensionality” of personality traits and how voters perceive, process, and assess traits (Bartels 2002b; Bean and Mughan 1989; Bittner 2010, 2011; Brown et al. 1988; Holian and Prysby 2015; Hudson 1984; Johnston 2002; Kinder 1983, 1986; Kinder et al. 1979, 1980; Peterson 2006, 2009, 2015; Rosenberg et al. 1986). Scholars have hypothesized that party leaders serve as a sort of information shortcut, a way of helping voters with less information about policies and issues to make decisions. To explain such shortcuts, scholars sought to compare the decision-making processes between the least and the most politically informed segments of the population (Cutler 2002; Glass 1985; Miller et al. 1986; Rahn et al 1990).

Generally, they expected less informed voters to depend more heavily on impressions of leaders, while the more informed would focus more heavily on policy platforms and issues when deciding how to vote. However, in reality, the more informed were as likely or even more likely to consider leaders in their decisions when compared with their less informed counterparts (Glasgow and Alvarez 2000; Bittner 2011; Cutler 2002; Glass 1985; Miller et al. 1986). The finding echoes observations on citizen competence, where the more informed were found to consider a greater number of factors than the less informed overall, including factors which had been thought to serve as a “shortcut” for the least informed (Sniderman et al. 1991).

The question then arises: why are people evaluating leaders in the first place? Is it simply a shortcut to compensate for a lack of information? If so, how do we explain that the more informed also use this shortcut? Or is it that leaders provide voters with a more complex type of information that the most informed are able to tap into (Glass 1985)? Is this a conscious process? Subconscious? Is it a combination of both, or something else entirely? Papers in this issue by Clifford, Ditonto, Kelly et al., and Vitriol et al. contribute to and push the existing literature in this area, by assessing voters’ decision-making processes, largely through experimental research designs. These papers build on existing understandings of person perception and trait evaluation, and develop sophisticated models of voters’ impression formation.

Information Sources and the Factors Influencing Voters’ Evaluations of Leaders

Related to leaders’ traits is the issue of where evaluations come from in the first place — the types of factors that affect trait assessment and perception. Scholarship in this area often points in diverging directions; some suggest that voter demographics matter (Cutler, 2002), others point to the importance of partisanship and ideological attachments of both voters and leaders (Bartels 2002a; Graetz and McAllister 1987), while still others suggest that policy or issue factors are key (Bartels 2002a; Graetz and McAllister 1987; Peterson 2005; Rusk and Weisberg 1972; Weisberg and Rusk 1970). Some note the importance of all of the above in different circumstances (Conover and Feldman 1989). As the above discussion illustrates, it is likely that there is substantial heterogeneity in what information voters use to form their evaluations of party leaders (in addition to the heterogeneity in how the attitudes are used).

The bulk of the literature on “information sources” focuses on characteristics intrinsic to the voter as factors explaining perceptions of leaders and candidates (things like partisanship, ideological self-placement, and so on). Very few studies have been conducted to date on the role of the media in shaping voters’ impressions of candidates. Papers in this issue by Aaldering, Banducci et al., and Peterson all assess the role of the media, using data from different countries and novel approaches to measuring the effects of the media. Much attention has been paid to perceptions of leaders, less attention to date has centred on the media as a shaper of those perceptions, and these papers further our understanding of the relationship between “information” and “perceptions” of leaders and candidates.

The Impact of Leaders in Elections

In addition to why voters might consider party leaders’ personalities, we have the issue of impact: to what extent does personality actually affect election outcomes? While this might seem like an obvious effect, there is substantial skepticism in the literature. A leading example is Anthony King who, in his introduction to an edited volume on the effects of party leaders, states that “if the party with the less-well esteemed leader wins, then the outcome of that election cannot have turned on voters’ judgments of the respective qualities of the various parties’ leaders or candidates” (2002a: 43, original emphasis). In his now decade-old response to

the ongoing debate about the role of leaders in voter choice, Anthony Mughan notes that “at one extreme, they may have no independent effects in, say, a highly polarized election where the partisan lines are clearly and uncompromisingly drawn. At the other extreme, however, leaders may be the difference between victory and defeat for their party when an election is closely fought” (2005: 1). That is, leaders matter in election contests, despite the skeptics who tend to rest their case on leaders who fail to alter the outcome of a given election. Mughan argues that this view constitutes “an extreme and unrealistic criterion of substantive electoral relevance” (2005: 2-3).

The skeptical view of the role of candidates and leaders has many of its intellectual roots in Gelman and King’s (1993) critique of campaign effects and campaign coverage. Recent coverage of election campaigns in America has, potentially learned these lessons too well. It is the dominant view portrayed in political scientist blogs (Dickson 2014; Ladd 2014), reporting by political science friendly journalists (Silver 2012), and the opinion pages of newspapers like the New York Times (Fiorina 2012). The increased journalistic emphasis on “the fundamentals” of elections, and the downplaying of the candidates’ image, has become one of the areas that political science points to as evidence of our relevance and engagement. Unfortunately, this effect on media coverage has occurred despite the conflicting evidence that personality plays an important role in shaping election outcomes. If leaders are important to ballot box outcomes, then we need to better understand people’s evaluations of leaders, and the impact of those evaluations. In this special issue, papers by Bittner and Tien & Lewis-Beck assess the role of personality traits in electoral contexts, both in the United States and in the multi-party system of Canada. The value of the cross-national lens is such that it illustrates that it is not only Americans who are paying attention to personality, and that traditional understandings of voter behavior in non-presidential systems need to be expanded in order to account for the “real” decision-making processes of voters.

Moving Forward

There is a good amount of overlap between the articles published as part of this special issue and, collectively, their contribution moves forward the study of leaders, candidates, and personality. However, there are several lingering issues in the field that come to light through this collection of essays. In reading these papers together, there are three themes that we think clearly deserve more attention in the literature.

First, there is essentially no agreement on the dimensionality of the assessments of leader personalities. This is true of both how they are presented to voters and in how voters form these assessments. The majority of the articles seem to, either implicitly or explicitly, follow the lead first taken by Kinder and colleagues (Abelson et al 1982; Kinder et al 1980; Kinder 1986). Their approach started as largely inductive: they examined the ANES open-ended responses to questions about the candidates to see what people seemed to say. These scholars then codified this with several direct questions about particular traits. Given the status of the ANES in the field of political behavior, using these questions became the dominant approach, even on a cross-national basis. Clifford and, to a lesser extent, Peterson, draw on different traditions, situating their work in moral foundations theory and the Big 5, respectively. There has been a history of trying to assess the dimensionality of these traits assessments (for instance, Funk 1999), but there hasn’t been much exploration of this recently. With new perspectives, it is time for a more in detail depiction of the structure of these assessments in the minds of the voters.

Second, as the Ditonto and Kelly et al. articles demonstrate, there are important differences in how leaders' personalities are perceived based on candidates' race and gender. Given the role American presidential elections have played in the development of this literature, there has not been a lot of variation in either the race or gender of the candidates until recently. It is clear, however, that any study of leader personalities now needs to make gender and race a central element of their design. As women and non-white leaders become increasingly common, understanding how the biases and stereotypes of voters shape perceptions of these candidates becomes even more important. The 2017 candidacy of Le Pen in France was compared in the media to the 2016 Clinton campaign in the U.S. With the increasing prevalence of more "diverse" candidates around the world, our Presidential Prototypes (Kinder et al. 1980) may be changing, and knowing how this variation shapes voters' impressions will help develop more theoretical insight into both voter decision-making as well as the campaigns of these leaders.

Third, while there is some variation in the countries analyzed in these works, they are entirely single nation studies. There is a lot to learn from these deep studies situated in a single context, but it would also be valuable to learn more about the institutional and national sources of variation shaping the role of leader personality in elections. As this literature moves forward, developing an agenda that is truly comparative and captures the differences and similarities across countries is vital. A cross-national focus would also augment the study of the dimensionality of leader personality and the roles of gender and race. The Ditonto and Kelly et al. articles in this collection are both strictly about American politics, but the ideas that they develop may extend beyond the U.S. Whether or not they are applicable in other contexts will help us understand the role of race and gender more generally and in the particular countries studied.

We know quite a bit about the role of leaders' personalities in elections, but there is still a lot missing from our understanding of the complex factors that shape voter decisions. This collection moves us a step forward, and highlights some of the issues we still need to assess.

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