Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates

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This article applies theories of social cognition in an investigation of the dimensions of the assessments of candidates employed by voters in the United States. An empirical description of the public's cognitive representations of presidential candidates, derived from responses to open-ended questions in the American National Election Studies from 1952 to 1984, reveals that perceptions of candidates are generally focused on "personality" characteristics rather than on issue concerns or partisan group connections. Contrary to the implications of past research, higher education is found to be correlated with a greater likelihood of using personality categories rather than with making issue statements. While previous models have interpreted voting on the basis of candidate personality as indicative of superficial and idiosyncratic assessments, the data examined here indicate that they predominately reflect performance-relevant criteria such as competence, integrity, and reliability. In addition, both panel and aggregate time series data suggest that the categories that voters have used in the past influence how they will perceive future candidates, implying the application of schematic judgments. The reinterpretation presented here argues that these judgments reflect a rich cognitive representation of the candidates from which instrumental inferences are made.

Candidate evaluations are one of the most important but least understood facets of American voting behavior. In a classic article, Stokes (1966) argued that "personality" characteristics, rather than issues or parties, provide the best explanation for shifts in the vote from one presidential election to the next. Moreover, subsequent research has shown that candidates have been more salient to voters than political parties since the late fifties (Kagay and Caldeira, 1975; Miller, Miller, and Schneider, 1980), and that since 1956 candidate affect has been more directly related to the vote than party attachment (Kelley and Mirer, 1974; Markus and Converse, 1979; Miller and Miller, 1976).

Yet despite the unquestioned importance of candidate evaluations, systematic theoretical and empirical research has
lagged far behind that devoted to parties and issues. This may in part reflect a predominate concern among social scientists for examining rational choice theories of candidate selection. Voting on the basis of personality characteristics is often viewed in the literature as "irrational" (cf. Converse, 1964; Page, 1978). The popular cynical view of candidates is that they are attractively packaged commodities devised by image makers who manipulate the public's perceptions by emphasizing traits with special appeal to the voting audience. Voters' judgments about alternative candidates are in this view based on superficial criteria such as the candidate's style or looks.

Prior models of voting behavior have generally treated candidates as idiosyncratic, short-term forces. The model presented in *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960), for example, portrayed candidate assessments as dominated by the more enduring forces of parties and issues. The attitude consistency theory underlying this model suggested that party identification acts as a perceptual screen, and that the human need for consistency results in attitudes toward less central political objects, such as candidates, being brought into harmony with party identification. Alternatively, rational choice models have argued that citizens deal with the information available for judging candidates in a piecemeal fashion, calculating overall utilities that are then employed to select the candidate optimally satisfying their self-interest (Downs, 1957; Fiorina, 1981).

Doubts regarding the validity of these models of how individuals think about candidates have become increasingly frequent in recent years, however. With a decrease in the predictive power and stability of party identification, the model of *The American Voter* has been roundly criticized. In particular, many of the fundamental psychological underpinnings of the model have been questioned. The assumption, for example, that people have a need for consistency has been challenged (Kiesler, Collins, and Miller, 1969; Lau and Sears, 1985). Similarly, the notion of a perceptual screen is now seen as a rather static and limited view of cognitive processes. The metaphor of a screen focuses our attention on the acquisition of information, while ignoring its storage and retrieval from memory. In addition, while partisanship has always been a potent determinant of evaluative direction, it has never predicted the content (other than party) of people's thoughts about the candidates. Although later research (Rabinowitz, 1978; Rusk and Weisberg, 1972; Weisberg and Rusk, 1970) showed that substantive issue dimensions could predict the relative affective ratings of political leaders, it nonetheless left unanswered the question of what determines our actual cognitions about candidates.

Rational choice models also fail to describe or predict the content of the cognitions that citizens have about candidates. Furthermore, such models have been criticized as requiring an overly complex mental procedure for representing how people process candidate information (Fiske, 1985; Herstein, 1981). In short, rational choice models offer only a partial—and debatable—depiction of how citizens judge candidates.

Recently, a very different approach to candidate assessments has begun to appear in the literature. This emerging theory holds that candidate evaluations are not necessarily superficial, irrational, or purely short-term. Voters may focus on the personal qualities of a candidate to gain important information about characteristics relevant to assessing how the individual will perform in office (Kinder and Abelson, 1981; Popkin, Gorman, Phillips, and Smith, 1976; Shabad and Anderson, 1979). A similar perspective rooted in social psychological theory contends that criteria used in judging candi-
This new approach is largely based on the premise that individuals organize their thoughts about other people into broad preexisting categories. These category "prototypes" are then used in making judgments when only limited factual information is available (Cantor and Mischel, 1979). Kinder et al. (1980), for example, explore the features that may define an ideal president, to determine if people use this prototype to evaluate presidential candidates. They find that people can choose attributes they believe would make for an ideal president, but that these prototypic conceptions are related only to ratings of the incumbent president. In contrast, Foti, Fraser, and Lord (1982) demonstrate that preexisting cognitions about political roles are related to impressions of political leaders. Yet they only demonstrate the use of category labels such as "effective political leader" on two national figures, one of whom was president at the time of their study. These results seem to support the traditional interpretation of candidate assessments as short-term indicators of electoral change. If the presidential prototype is primarily a reflection of characteristics associated with the incumbent, then the attributes describing an ideal president must be subject to considerable variation over time. However, given the timing of the Kinder et al. study (spring 1979), it is reasonable to assume that the situational context may not have provided sufficient cues to evoke prototypical cognitions about any potential candidate other than Carter, who was then the incumbent. In short, the evidence testing the question of whether voters judge actual candidates against some prototype remains inconclusive.

It is our contention that a presidential prototype, or schema, as we shall label it, can and will be evoked during the actual campaign period when people receive the appropriate stimuli to trigger these preexisting cognitions. We will attempt to test this hypothesis with open-ended survey responses evaluating presidential candidates that have been gathered since 1952 by the National Election Studies (NES) conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies. Our analysis of people's responses to the open-ended candidate questions reveals a great deal of information about what the electorate values in political leaders, and more generally, how voters organize their cognitions about them. Before proceeding to the analysis of these data, however, we need to summarize the processes involved in schematic judgments and the hypotheses they suggest.

Theoretical Predictions of Presidential Criteria

Current theories of social cognition posit that people deal with the flood of information in their environment by employing cognitive shortcuts (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). The basic assumption is that humans are active information processors and cognitive miser (Taylor and Crocker, 1981). This theory contends that people categorize objects and simplify information as a result of general limits to human cognitive capacity. The complexity of the real world becomes simplified in our minds through a dynamic process that combines experience with real-world occurrences (and co-occurrences of objects and events) and the results of active mental processes, including the inferences we make to fill in missing information or go beyond the information directly available to us (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). These mental representations of the world, frequently called schemas, function to direct our attention and aid in the storage and retrieval of information in a manner that influences...
both our memory of previous experience and the acquisition of new information (Fiske and Linville, 1980; Taylor and Crocker, 1981).

What this theory suggests for our purposes is that voters do not evaluate each political contender de novo, or simply with respect to readily apparent attributes, but rather in terms of their own embellished perceptions. As Lippman (1922) noted, "We do not so much see this man and that sunset; rather we notice the thing is man or sunset and then see chiefly what our mind is already full of on those subjects."

Person schemas are knowledge structures about people, and schemata about political candidates are organized cognitions about them in their political role. Candidate schemas thus reduce the complexity of our impressions by enabling us to categorize and label an individual politician according to certain abstract or representative features. These categories then serve as a set of cues from which we can draw further inferences about the candidate's future behavior (Schneider, Hastorf, and Ellsworth, 1979). For example, labeling Walter Mondale as a "big spender" may cue other unstated or inferred properties among conservatives, such as being a weak leader, being overly sympathetic toward those on welfare, and, of course, being a liberal.

This process of schematic thinking about candidates is similar to overt stereotyping, in which one assigns unobservable dispositional qualities (e.g., attitudes or intentions) to another. It is usually initiated by some social or physical feature of the perceived individual, a distinctive biographical fact or observable behavior pattern, or some commonly recognized label such as "Democrat" or "liberal." Once invoked, it acts to embellish what we know about the person and provides an implicit cognitive theory regarding what we expect of the person in the future (Cantor and Mischel, 1979). Schematic images are abstracted from prior experience. Political candidates, especially those running for the presidency, would therefore appear to be prime targets for schematic thinking. Besides all the daily information about the incumbent president, people generally have observed enough presidential candidates that it seems reasonable to hypothesize that they will employ categorical criteria when evaluating them.

Another hypothesis suggested by this theoretical framework is that a few broad criteria, rather than specific information, will be used to judge candidates. Furthermore, these categories should be similar over time, despite the uniqueness of each candidate. We would also predict, for reasons spelled out below, that comments of a personal nature, rather than issues or partisan ties, should predominate in these evaluations. Contrary to the common assumption by those who view personality as irrational, schema theories suggest that more politically informed voters will be the most likely to make comments about the candidates' inner dispositions and behaviors. These types of assessment reflect inferences that go beyond the available information, and cognitive theories predict that people with "richer" schemas will make considerably more inferences, based on their larger store of experience with the object. On the other hand, those with less well-formulated schemas can be expected to limit their inferences to observable features and to make fewer and less complex inferences. In sum, the frequency with which particular attributes will be used in appraising presidential candidates should reflect the availability of informational cues, the personal relevance of these cues, and one's knowledge about politics.

**Party, Issues, or Personality?**

To examine the general framework people use in organizing their thinking about
politics, it is important to ascertain how thoughts are structured. Because open-ended questions allow respondents to establish their own frame of reference, they are particularly well suited for this purpose. By examining the distributions and interrelationships among thousands of open-ended comments about the candidates obtained in the 1952–1984 NES studies, we can gain substantial clues about the cognitive representations people have of political leaders. The frequency of mentions will denote the relative importance of particular characteristics for the public; the way these comments are organized into larger domains (as determined via factor analysis) will reveal the basic structures underlying the multitude of responses. Fortunately, the relevant open-ended questions about candidates have been asked in exactly the same way since 1952, thus eliminating any methodological concerns about changes in the wording of questions.

Figure 1. The Distribution of Personal, Issue, and Partisan Comments About Presidential Candidates, 1952–1984

Source: SRC/CPS National Election Studies.

Note: Data are the percentage of all comments in all three dimensions. Comments associating candidates with particular groups were combined with those mentioning party connections. As party differences were frequently discussed in terms of the groups they usually benefit, the two sets of comments are theoretically similar.

Schema theories offer a framework for interpreting these open-ended statements by suggesting the primary criteria for evaluating candidates and by illuminating the cognitive processes most likely involved. As gaining attention is the initial step in the categorization process, salient factors in the environment provide the primary stimulus by which schemas are invoked (Taylor and Fiske, 1978). Candidates should be very salient features of this environment, perhaps even more so than issues or parties, because they are less abstract; thus, it is easier to store and retrieve information about them from memory. In addition, media coverage of campaigns augments this focus by placing greater emphasis on the personal characteristics and background of the candidates (see Figure 1). Except for 1972 and MacKuen, 1979).

Previous research does in fact suggest that over half of the comments made about candidates are on the personal level (see Sears, 1969, for a summary). Since 1964, however, the proportion of issue-relevant comments in response to candidate like/dislike questions has increased (see Figure 1). Except for 1972 and 1984, the use of “person-related” characteristics has dominated cognitions about the candidates. Sears (1969) refers to this emphasis on personal characteristics as “the personalization of politics.” We concur, and would further argue that it reflects the result of performance or behavior inferences made about the inner dispositions of the candidates.

If, on the other hand, these comments are nonsubstantive and idiosyncratic, then we would expect a good deal of instability on the individual level—that is, that people would not offer these responses consistently from year to year. Such is not the case, however. Examining the two long-term NES panel studies, one obtains the following continuity correlations for the number of comments made by respondents in each domain:
Despite the greater similarity in the correlations for the three different components in the 1972-1976 panel, it is nevertheless still clear that the frequency of comments about candidates in terms of personal qualities is more stable across elections than is the case with either party or issue comments. This greater stability at least hints at the possibility that some more enduring or schematic thinking underlies personal assessments.

A more traditional explanation for the prevalence and stability of so-called personality comments stems from Converse's (1964) cognitive capacity model. Converse suggested that better-educated people are more likely to focus on policy concerns rather than on nonsubstantive topics such as the candidates' personal features. This prediction is based on the assumption that well-educated people seek out more political information and that their formal training enables them to absorb better the complexities of issue politics. Figure 2, however, presents data directly at odds with the cognitive capacity model. In every presidential election survey since 1952, better-educated...
respondents volunteered more personal comments about the candidates than did the less well educated, a finding that remains true even after controlling for articulateness. Nor does the difference in the number of issue comments made across education levels fit with the prediction of the cognitive capacity model. Once articulateness was controlled for, level of education was not significantly correlated with the number of issue comments a respondent made in any of the years examined.

An alternative explanation is suggested by theories of schematic information processing. People generally use situational information as a basis for making inferences about another person’s dispositions (Schneider, Hastorf, and Ellsworth, 1980). This implies that voters who regularly follow politics will have more available information about the candidates and be more likely to make dispositional inferences concerning them. Indeed, the regressions displayed in Table 1 demonstrate that political interest and media usage are significantly related to the number of personal attribute comments offered about the candidates. Yet even after controlling for these other factors, education remains a strong predictor of statements regarding the candidate as a person. Comments associating the candidates with issues, on the other hand, are predominately related to interest in politics (see Table 1).

In general, the regressions in Table 1 support the hypothesis that when asked to evaluate the candidates, people emphasize personally relevant factors. What is salient to the perceiver can also be a property of the perceiver, or as Markus (1977) argues, individual cognitive schemas about the self can direct our attention to particular aspects of the environment. For example, people who think of themselves as interested in politics seek out more political information and tend to make more issue comments, regardless of their educational background. Similarly, we find that strong partisans focus their comments on party connections, presumably because partisanship and the particular groups associated with each party are more personally meaningful to these individuals.

Surely the most important finding in Table 1 is the counter-intuitive notion that elections are more likely to be “personality contests” for college-educated voters. In order to develop a complete and meaningful interpretation of this important finding, it is clearly necessary to examine the content of the personal comments.

Cognitive Categories Underlying Personality Comments

Numerous statements have been made by survey respondents regarding the various candidates who have run for the presidency during the past quarter-century covered by the NES. The most crucial use of these data for our purposes is to determine if the comments cluster together into relatively few general categories, as schema theory would predict, and to ascertain from the content of the comments what judgmental criteria are employed. Previous researchers (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, 1954; Page, 1978; Shabad and Andersen, 1979) have organized people’s responses in a number of different fashions according to their own particular interests. The variation in the resulting categorization schemes suggests the need for a systematic, empirically based approach to these open-ended responses. Rather than imposing ad hoc typologies on people’s comments, we have chosen to investigate empirically how the respondents themselves structure their responses.

The approach employed was to apply factor analysis to the set of comments made by the respondents. In each of the years examined, the factor analysis
showed a five-dimensional solution as the best fit to the data. Although the components are not perfectly distinct for every year, they are clearly separate—the average correlation among the factors was only .10. These results confirm the prediction from schema theory that people think about presidential candidates in terms of a limited number of broad categories rather than in terms of a multitude of discrete traits. While the categories are similar in some respects to those used by previous researchers, they have the advantage of being identified through an analysis of the data themselves rather than by preconceived notions of the investigator.

The first generic category or dimension people use involves the candidate's past political experience, ability as a statesman, comprehension of political issues, and intelligence; we call this competence. Another dimension, integrity, deals with notions of trustworthiness and includes remarks such as "honest," "sincere," and "just another politician," and references to corruption in government. A third dimension, reliability, is similar to integrity but contains important distinctions. Reliability refers to a candidate as dependable, strong, hardworking, decisive, aggressive, or the opposite of any of these. That the two dimensions are separate is most evident in the evaluations of Goldwater, who received the highest integrity rating of any candidate except Eisenhower and the lowest reliability rating of any candidate in the entire series. Reliability thus serves as a bridge between integrity and competence. Perhaps the best description of it would be trust in terms of capability rather than honesty.

A fourth factor, which we label charisma, encompasses a candidate's leadership, dignity, humbleness, patriotism, and ability to get along with, communicate with, and inspire people. Finally, a fifth major category can be seen as comprising the most purely personal comments. Included here are references to a number of observable features about the candidates' appearance (e.g., age, health, smile, speech pattern) or background factors (e.g., military experience, religion, wealth, previous occupation). We refer to this as the personal dimension, but it should not be confused with the label personal attributes that has traditionally been used to designate all of the comments encompassed by the five different dimensions. (Please see the Appendix for a complete list of which codes fell onto which factors.)

In summary, the factor analysis demonstrates that people do in fact think about candidates in terms of a limited set of broad categories. These categories appear to incorporate both observable descriptive characteristics and inferred dispositions that citizens group in a coherent and consistent fashion when judging candidates. That most of the specific comments are incorporated by the five dimensions indicates rather widespread consensual cognitions of political candidates. Likewise, the similarity in the structure of the comments revealed by the factor analyses for the various years suggests that people share common expectations across time about what presidential candidates should be like. In general, the data imply schematic rather than piecemeal processing of information about presidential candidates.

The Prevalence of Specific Characteristics Over Time

Further evidence relevant to the question of whether people use relatively stable judgmental categories to evaluate candidates comes from an examination of the frequency with which the various categories have been employed over time. Despite the uniqueness of each specific candidate, we can expect that the inherent nature of schematic structures will limit
Table 2. The Relative Prevalence of Generic Categories of Candidate Characteristics, 1952–1984

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charisma</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Election Studies, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.
Note: Table entries are percentages of all comments from the five dimensions.

their accommodation to new information. The novelty of each candidate and the historical situation may influence the prevalence of different criteria, but continuity in the general dimensions used in judging presidential contenders across time would further confirm that people process information about candidates schematically.

Over the years, respondents have consistently made more comments reflecting the internal dispositions and expected behaviors represented by the dimensions of competence, integrity, and reliability (see Table 2). Remarks concerning candidate competence have consistently been the most prevalent, thereby implying that voters are quite sensitive to cues concerning the candidate’s past or potential performance in office. Such was particularly the case in 1960, when many people mentioned Nixon’s experience as vice president. The fact that Kennedy deliberately tried to counter Nixon’s advantage on this criteria by emphasizing his own knowledge and expertise no doubt also increased the frequency of these responses. Similarly, both candidates in 1980 emphasized their previous experience—Carter as president and Reagan as governor of California. The survey comments reflect these emphases, as well as a widespread questioning of Carter’s competence to solve governmental problems.

The greatest variation in the frequency of responses occurs on the dimensions of charisma and personal characteristics. Presumably the frequency of these comments evidences greater variation across time because they reflect the uniqueness of particular candidates, rather than prototypical features. Eisenhower’s military record, poor health, and advanced age in 1956, as well as Stevenson’s divorce and Kennedy’s religion were all vivid features that provoked comments in the early surveys. McGovern and Nixon, on the other hand, were not perceived as particularly unique in appearance or background, as evident from the relative lack of such remarks in 1972. Similarly, their lack of personal appeal can be seen by the equally low percentage of comments classified as charisma. In general, candidates running since 1964 have been less likely to evoke comments in terms of either charisma or personal characteristics.

The Continuity of Judgmental Criteria

The endurance of these prototypical judgmental criteria suggested by the aggregate figures is further supported by panel data. Those respondents who used the competence, integrity, or reliability dimensions for evaluating a candidate at one point in time were significantly more likely to employ the same dimension four years later, even though different candidates were now running for office (see
Table 3. Stability Across Time of Cognitive Dimensions Used in Evaluating Candidates, as Determined from Panel Data

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charisma</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Panel Studies, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.

Table 3). For example, 70% of the 1956–60 panel respondents who mentioned competence in 1956 did so again in 1960, compared to only 45% for those who had not used competence in their evaluations in 1956. Similar differences were also generally found for the integrity and reliability categories in both the 1956–60 and 1972–76 panels.

The degree of continuity in the three main judgmental categories—competence, integrity, and reliability—when assessing candidates is significantly higher than might be expected given all the measurement problems involved in coding open-ended responses. This is not to imply, however, that the use of these criteria is unaffected by historical circumstances or the events of particular campaigns. On the contrary, the percentages for integrity and reliability in Table 3 reveal a general increase in these concerns during the 1970s, when citizens began to question whether politicians could and would do what they promised. Nevertheless, respondents who had employed one of the three major personal dimensions in the 1972 campaign were significantly more likely to use the very same criterion four years later when assessing two new candidates for the presidency. A much lower level of continuity was found for the dimensions of charisma and personal characteristics (see Table 3). Such instability further demonstrates the sensitivity of these two criteria to the unique features of specific candidates.

If, as suggested earlier, people schematically draw dispositional and behavioral inferences from the candidate's appearance, then a variety of observable features will apparently cue the same inferred performance-related criteria when judging candidates. In other words, a candidate's unique personal attributes or campaign style might call attention to some characteristic from which the voters would infer that he lacked competence, while leaving unchanged the overall basic structure employed in candidate appraisals.

Explaining Candidate Assessment Dimensions

The consistent predominance of comments referring to competence, integrity, and reliability offers a considerably different interpretation regarding the meaning and political relevance of personality responses than is standard in the literature. The finding that better-educated people are more likely to offer personal comments now seems more understandable. As can be seen from Table 4, the competence, integrity, and reliability dimensions are those most frequently
Table 4. Average Number of Comments on Personal Attribute Dimensions, by Level of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Charisma</th>
<th>Personal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade School</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Election Studies, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.

Note: For the sake of parsimony the number of comments per dimension was averaged over the years 1952-1984 rather than presenting the figures for each year. Values for the individual years can be obtained by writing the authors.

mentioned by better-educated respondents. There is only a slight tendency for well-educated people to make more comments pertaining to the charisma and personal dimensions, and within education levels it is clear that these features are more salient to those voters with the least education. Therefore, a partial explanation for the decline noted earlier across time in comments referring to personal attributes may be the general rise in education that occurred during this period.

In sum, college-educated voters appear more likely to make inferences about the expected performance and internal dispositions of the candidates, whereas less-educated voters rely on more readily observable features. These observable features of the presidential contenders should cue inferences about the expected behavior of candidates according to the social cognition theory outlined above. Unique aspects of the candidates’ looks, behavioral mannerisms, and background are often quite vivid and well known, thus providing relatively cost-free information used by many voters when evaluating candidates (Herstein, 1981). Therefore, we would expect that personal characteristics should carry more weight in schematic judgments made by the least-informed voters.

The evidence presented in Table 5 does, in fact, suggest that people—especially those with a low level of education—draw inferences about the competence, integrity, reliability, and charisma of a candidate from the candidate’s personal characteristics. For example, the average correlation of the personal characteristics dimension with the other four was larger ($r = .14$) than the average correlation among the four substantive dimensions ($r = .08$). Although the multiple correlations in Table 5 are quite low for the college educated they are significant, thereby indicating that personal features play some role in their judgments about a candidate’s prospective performance. These personal cues are clearly more important for the less well educated, though, as predicted by the theory. The only exception to this pattern occurs in 1980, due primarily to the tendency of better-educated voters to connect Carter's religious beliefs with his honesty. When these comments are removed, the multiple correlations return to the pattern found for the other years. However, this does suggest that what people personally value may determine which inferences get connected with particular characteristics.

Beyond education, it is also important to investigate other factors that influence the relative use of the various prototypical candidate judgments. Previous research on schemas (Markus, 1977; Tesser, 1978) suggests that better-informed voters should have a greater store of previously gathered information upon which to base candidate inferences. By following the
media they should have a clearer perception of the political environment, thereby fostering richer inferences. Similarly, more politically interested citizens will have spent more time thinking about the candidates, and therefore be more likely to report central attitudes and themes rather than easily observable characteristics.

A test of these hypotheses was accomplished with a multivariate analysis predicting the emphasis given to each dimension of candidate appraisal. Included among the independent variables, besides education, were (1) campaign interest and strength of party identification, to measure personal involvement in politics; (2) media exposure, to indicate familiarity with campaign information; and (3) a measure of articulateness, to guard against the possibility that the results simply reflect verbosity.

The results of the analysis demonstrate that interest in politics does significantly increase the likelihood of making performance-relevant inferences about the candidates—especially with regard to competence (see Table 6). However, political interest has no significant impact on references to charisma or to personal characteristics. It is also clear that information the media provides is relevant primarily to making competence inferences, and also focuses attention on the candidates' charisma—no doubt by informing voters of the candidates' previous experience and how they are performing in the campaign. Strength of party identification...
tion, on the other hand, apparently plays no role in triggering either personal or performance-related judgments.

Of particular interest in Table 6 is the fact that education remains significantly related to one's attention to competence, integrity, and reliability, even after controlling for the effects of political interest, media usage, and articulateness. Therefore, this relationship is not simply the result of college-educated people being more politically interested and attentive to the media. A plausible alternative explanation is that these particular criteria are more relevant to the personal values of college-educated citizens. Perhaps better-educated people place greater emphasis on these characteristics in their own lives or in the schemata they apply to themselves, which they in turn use to evaluate candidates. In addition, formal education acts to socialize people into cultural norms regarding how a president ought to act. If the expectation that political leaders ought to be competent, honest, and reliable is largely determined culturally, then the relationship with education is quite understandable. Given the somewhat weak multiple correlations of Table 6, however, it is apparent that further research is needed in order to reach a definitive answer for why citizens apply particular prototypic criteria in their cognitions of political leaders.

In sum, empirical analysis reveals substantial variation in the inferential richness of candidate schemas from one individual to the next. College-educated people, for example, place more emphasis on performance criteria, which they infer from a broader information store, while the less well educated base their inferences more directly on the observable attributes of the candidates. There is also variation in the relative prevalence of particular judgmental criteria across time, thus revealing how unique features of the candidates or different campaign events influence cognitions of presidential contenders. Despite this variation, the general structure of the prototypic criteria remains in effect, guiding judgments about even relatively unknown persons who emerge as presidential candidates.

 Extensions to Affective Evaluations and the Vote

As we have been reminded lately, politics—and human interactions more generally—usually have an emotional or affective undercurrent (Zajonc, 1980). The very act of assessing candidates implies the notion of preference or affect. Thus, a brief examination of how schematic judgments are associated with affective candidate evaluations and the vote is clearly in order. For the sake of brevity, we will consider only a limited set of expectations regarding the link between cognitive and affective candidate evaluations. For example, at a minimum, we would expect that criteria that are the most frequently used in candidate assessments should also weigh most heavily in overall affective evaluations (Tesser, 1978). If, as we argue, people evaluate candidates on the basis of inferences they draw from salient cues, then abstract inferences should be more strongly related to affective ratings and the vote than to the readily observable characteristics of the candidates. In addition, it follows that performance-relevant criteria should predict candidate affect better for college-educated respondents, whereas personal characteristics will be relatively more important for the less educated.

It is widely recognized that during the period from 1952 to 1980 presidential candidates in general became less personally popular with the public (cf. Miller and Wattenberg, 1981; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus, 1984, p. 225). This rise in negative evaluations did not, however, occur equally across the five categories we have identified. A separate analysis reveals that for the population as a whole,
Table 7. Average Regression Coefficients Predicting Affective Candidate Ratings and the Presidential Vote from Schematic Judgments, by Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Grade School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicting Democratic Candidate Feeling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thermometer Ratings from:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charisma</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Predicting Republican Candidate Feeling    |              |             |         |
| Thermometer Ratings from:                 |              |             |         |
| Competence                                 | .28          | .28         | .33     |
| Integrity                                  | .16          | .21         | .22     |
| Reliability                                | .12          | .15         | .17     |
| Charisma                                   | .07          | .08         | .06     |
| Personal                                   | .13          | .12         | .05     |
| Multiple R                                 | .44          | .47         | .51     |

| Predicting Presidential Two-Party Vote from:|              |             |         |
| Competence                                 | .31          | .30         | .36     |
| Integrity                                  | .17          | .21         | .23     |
| Reliability                                | .11          | .12         | .15     |
| Charisma                                   | .08          | .09         | .07     |
| Personal                                   | .16          | .12         | .07     |
| Multiple R                                 | .52          | .54         | .55     |

Source: National Election Studies, University of Michigan Center for Political Studies.

Note: All coefficients are averages for all the years available. The feeling thermometers range from 1968 to 1984, whereas the vote is available for all years. The independent variables employed in this analysis were computed by using the comments in each domain to derive the net balance between positive and negative responses for each candidate.

the increase in negative assessments is most evident in the areas of competence and reliability. As hypothesized, the rise in negative comments varies in terms of content across education levels. Among the better educated, negative comments on competence and reliability increased markedly, whereas comments regarding integrity, charisma, and personal characteristics revealed little systematic rise in negative judgments. The less well educated exhibited a relatively smaller increase in the percentage assessing candidate competence and reliability negatively, with the key difference being that respondents with a grade school education also became increasingly negative in their statements about the personal characteristics of the candidates (e.g., Reagan's age or Carter's southern roots in 1980).

These differences also appear to influence affect toward candidates and the vote choice in the manner suggested by Tesser (1978). As can be seen in Table 7, the regressions predicting candidate thermometer ratings and the vote reveal a substantially greater impact for the performance-relevant criteria than for the more superficial and apparent candidate characteristics. Moreover, competence, integrity, and reliability judgments gener-
ally increase in importance as education rises, while the impact of personal characteristics declines. The major exception to this pattern occurs for the impact of competence on the ratings of Democratic candidates. The somewhat higher average coefficient for competence among those with a grade school education occurs because their ratings of Carter were strongly associated with their belief in 1980 that he had gained valuable experience during his term in office. For the remaining three election studies, the competence coefficients fit the predicted pattern.

In general, the personal attributes of candidates play a more central role in the political cognitions of less well-educated citizens. Yet, even among these respondents, inferences about whether a candidate will perform competently, reliably, and honestly far outweigh considerations of the candidate's appearance. While voters might base their inferences about the candidate's future behavior on observable characteristics, actions, and other readily accessible political cues, it is the performance or instrumental inferences, rather than the observable features, that become linked with the vote decision. The variation in the magnitude of the coefficients across the different dimensions and education groups also fits with Tesser's (1978) suggestion that evaluations vary depending upon individual differences in cognitive schema.

Conclusion

The evidence presented above provides consistent support for the theory that Americans evaluate presidential candidates on the basis of a limited set of general and enduring criteria. In other words, people have a preexisting knowledge structure, or schema, concerning what a president should be like, and judge real candidates according to how well they match the elements of these schemas. While these criteria have remained quite stable over time, the relative importance of particular categories has varied with changes in historical circumstances. The primary dimension used by citizens throughout the 1952–1984 period has been competence, clearly a performance-related criteria. Integrity and reliability have become more prevalent in judgments of candidates since 1964. These broad expectations that citizens hold about presidential performance appear to reflect in part the actions of past presidents and in part the agenda as set by the media or by current candidates.

The cognitive process underlying the evaluation of candidates, which we have described above, is clearly a dynamic one involving an interaction between the individual and the political environment. Voters abstract from their experience of past presidents those features and behaviors they associate with political success, and then evaluate other candidates with respect to these same characteristics. During the campaign the candidates no doubt emphasize certain characteristics in ways that reflect on or cue judgments of their competence, integrity, and reliability, because they believe these are relevant to the conduct of the office. Voters in turn respond to these campaign messages not only because they are relevant to their schema for presidential candidates, but also because these are the terms in which the political dialogue is conducted. Particular events of the campaign and the unique strengths and weaknesses of the specific candidates, as well as cognitive and personal variation across individual voters, focus attention on certain of these criteria, giving more emphasis to some and less to others. Nevertheless, despite some variation in the specific content of political cognitions across time, the general structure of the abstracted inferences and judgments derived from the historical particulars remains fairly stable over the years.
Unfortunately, the micro-level cognitive processes involved in evaluating candidates remain less clearly specified than the content and structure of candidate schemas. A number of alternative models describing the evaluation process could be examined. For example, voters might evaluate candidates by comparing each one individually with some abstract ideal or exemplary president. According to this model, a voter for Reagan would prefer him because he is as competent as their ideal president was or should be, independent of what they think about Mondale. An alternative model would have the voter explicitly comparing the two candidates with respect to the various prototypic categories (e.g., is Reagan more competent than Mondale?).

Differentiating between alternative cognitive process models at the individual level can be important to predicting overall candidate preferences. The open-ended questions from the National Election Studies are not, however, ideally designed for specifying these models. Further analysis with different forms of data in addition to the open-ended items is necessary before they can be fully tested.

Much work clearly remains to be done. Nevertheless, the relevance of the research presented here is that it offers a theoretical framework differing from previous approaches, and within which future work can be done. Earlier treatments of the candidate factor, especially the rational choice theories or those employed in The American Voter, de-emphasized the cognitions and processes discussed here by treating them as idiosyncratic, irrational, and piecemeal rather than systematic and instrumental.

The enduring quality of the judgmental criteria over time challenges the conception of candidates as short-term forces presented in The American Voter. While the affective response to particular candidates has shown considerable volatility over the years, recent evidence reveals greater stability in the affective ratings of some political leaders than in feelings toward the Democrats or Republicans (see Wattenberg, 1984, ch. 2). Many politicians remain in office for so long and become salient enough to the general public to be considered long-term forces. Moreover, despite the fact that each candidate brings a unique set of personal characteristics to the public's attention, inferences based on these features do reflect more stable and enduring evaluative categories.

Evaluating candidates on the basis of personal qualities has for years been regarded as emotional, irrational, and lacking in political relevance. This interpretation arose in part because candidate evaluations were considered to be uninform ed idiosyncratic responses based on superficial criteria. The evidence now suggests that a reinterpretation is clearly needed. Rather than represent a concern with appearance, candidate assessments actually concentrate on instrumental concerns about the manner in which a candidate would conduct governmental affairs. In general, they represent a schematic conception of the president as someone who can be relied upon to deal competently with the nation's problems in an honest and even-handed manner.

Appendix

The following is a list of the codes from the National Election Studies (NES) which form each of the five personal dimensions for our baseline year of 1972. In earlier years some of the codes on different dimensions were combined, necessitating the reading of the actual protocols for these cases to sort out the various codes and maintain consistency from year to year.

Integrity

313. A politician/political person; (too) much in politics; a good politician
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314. Not a politician; not in politics; above politics; a bad politician
401. Honest/sincere; keeps promises; man of integrity; means what he says; not tricky
402. Dishonest/insincere; breaks promises; no integrity; doesn't mean what he says; tricky
403. Man of high principles/ideals; high moral purpose; idealistic
404. Lacks principles/ideals; not idealistic
603. Honest government; not corrupt; no "mess in Washington"
604. Dishonest/corrupt government; "mess in Washington"

Reliability
213. Dependable/reliable; a man you can trust with the responsibilities of government ("trust" in the capability sense, rather than the honesty sense)
214. Undependable/unreliable; a man you can't trust with the responsibilities of government
319. (too) careful/cautious
320. (too) impulsive/careless
407. Public servant; man of duty; conscientious; hard-working; would be a full time President
408. Does not take public service seriously; lazy; would be a part-time President
431. Unsafe/unstable; dictatorial; craves power
432. Safe/stable
709. Good for country; has country's best interests at heart
710. Bad for country; doesn't have country's best interests at heart

Competence
201. General reference to him as "a good/bad man"; R has heard good/bad things about him; qualifications; general ability (low priority code)
211. Experienced
212. Inexperienced
217. His record in public service; how well he's performed in previous offices
218. Has government experience/political experience
219. Lacks government experience/political experience
220. A statesman; has diplomatic experience
221. Not a statesman; lacks diplomatic experience
315. Independent; no one runs him; his own boss
316. Not independent; run by others; not his own man/boss
413. Understands the nation's problems; well-informed
414. Doesn't understand the nation's problems; poorly informed
415. Idealistic/pragmatic/practical; down-to-earth; not too idealistic
416. Too idealistic
417. Uses common sense; makes a lot of sense
418. Not sensible; impractical
419. (too) well educated; scholarly
420. Poorly educated; unschooled
421. Intelligent/smart
422. Unintelligent/stupid/dumb
601. Good/efficient/businesslike administration
602. Bad/inefficient/unbusinesslike administration
609. General assessment of job he would do; he'd be a good/bad President, provide good/bad administration (low priority code)
707. Candidate as good protector; will know what to do
708. Candidate as bad protector; won't know what to do

Charisma
301. Dignified/has dignity
302. Undignified/lacks dignity
305. Inspiring; a man you can follow; "a leader"
306. Uninspiring; not a man you can follow; not a leader
307. People have confidence in him
308. People don't have confidence in him
309. Good at communicating with blacks, young people, other "problem" groups
310. Bad at communicating with blacks, young people, other "problem" groups
311. Knows how to handle people (at personal level)
312. Doesn't know how to handle people (at personal level)
317. Humble; knows his limitations; doesn't pretend to know all the answers
318. Not humble enough; too cocky/self-confident
411. Patriotic
412. Unpatriotic
433. Sense of humor; jokes a lot/(too much)
434. No sense of humor/humorless/(too) serious
435. Kind/warm/gentle
436. Cold/alooof
437. Likeable/gets along with people
438. Unlikeable/can't get along with people
439. Democratic (in nonpartisan sense)
440. Undemocratic (in nonpartisan sense)
441. High-fallutin/high-brow; talks in circles; can't talk to common man; can't communicate ideas well
442. Not high-fallutin/low-brow; talks straight; can talk to common man
703. Will save America; America needs him
704. Will ruin America; last thing America needs
705. Will unite Americans/bring people together
706. Will divide Americans/drive people apart

Personal
215. A military man; a good military/war record
216. Not a military man; bad military/war record; no military/war record
423. Religious; "moral" (in religious sense); God-fearing
were then compared to determine their degree of similarity. Using the 1972, and 1976 surveys, and subjected to factor analysis using both orthogonal and oblique rotations. Selecting only those factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 produced a five-dimensional solution that accounted for 68%, 65%, and 71% of the total item variance in 1956, 1972, and 1976, respectively.

The final solutions for each of the factor analyses were then repeated with regard to the Republican party. Thus, one possible reason for the prevalence of personal responses is that the items focus the respondent’s attention on the candidate rather than on the issues or parties.

5. A multivariate analysis with panel data confirms the results of Table 3. Mention of a dimension in 1972 was used to predict the use of the same dimension in 1976 after controlling for education, strength of party identification, and media usage. The results demonstrate that the prior use of the competence, integrity, and reliability dimensions significantly predicted (better than .001 level) the subsequent use of these dimensions, whereas no significant impact across time was found for the charisma or personal dimensions.

6. Recent research has suggested that a new “compassion” or “empathy” dimension of candidate evaluations may be emerging since 1980 (Kinder, 1985). A closer examination of the open-ended NES responses relevant to this theme, however, reveals little support for this contention. The percentage of comments that referred to codes encompassing compassion (codes 435, 436, 807, 808, 831, and 832) was only 3.3% in 1984, compared to 3% in 1980. Our analysis shows that closed-ended items that initially may be thought of as compassion, such as “in touch with ordinary people” or “really cares about people like me,” are largely incorporated by the group benefits dimension in the open-ended responses.

References


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