

Partisan motivation and candidate traits: Cross-cultural evidence that trustworthiness matters more for out-party than in-party candidate evaluations

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Abstract

Partisans view their own candidates through rose-colored glasses and see competing candidates much more negatively. However, recent advances in political behavior research reveal that such motivated reasoning is not simply about love and hate but may also promote more nuanced shifts in preferences. Here, we build on the insight that candidates have strong incentives to benefit their own party base and put the burden of potentially costly actions on supporters of competing parties. We therefore predict that voters need to pay special attention to out-party candidates' intentions, measured by perceived trustworthiness. We show firm evidence for this prediction relying on a novel dataset encompassing nineteen elections from a diverse set of seven countries (Australia, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, UK, and USA). The results stress the importance of applying a multifaceted framework to studying candidate character, and that the role of trustworthiness, in particular, is intertwined with partisan-based reasoning about candidates.

Introduction

Citizens' ability to elect their political leaders is a core feature of democracy. It is, arguably, the primary means by which citizens can influence policy decisions (Schattschneider, 1960). However, a vast number of political science articles show that in addition to considerations about policy agreement with different candidates, voters also draw on impressions and evaluations of candidates' personalities and personal characteristics (Bean, 1993; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Funk, 1997, 1999; Hayes, 2005; Kinder, Peters, Abelson, & Fiske, 1980; Popkin, 1994; Stewart & Clarke, 1992). In fact, perceived character traits may have an influence beyond elections in shaping perceptions of legitimacy as well (Hibbing & Alford, 2004; Smith, Larimer, Littvay, & Hibbing, 2007). This raises questions like "what traits do voters care about when they elect and evaluate political candidates" and "what underlying psychological processes guide candidate preferences?"

In this article we offer a novel take on these questions as we investigate candidate evaluations through the lens of coalitional psychological reasoning and partisan bias (Bartels, 2002b; Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Pietraszewski, Curry, Petersen, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2015). Drawing on the classic distinction between in-group and out-group, we argue that voters should adjust the importance of specific candidate traits depending on whether they are on the same or the opposing side of partisan divisions as the candidate. Specifically, we argue that this logic applies most directly to trustworthiness, which taps into candidates' perceived intentions towards the voter. Because ill-intended and untrustworthy behavior by a candidate vis-à-vis a voter is likely to affect out-partisan voters more than in-partisan voters, we predict that perceptions of trustworthiness have a greater effect on global candidate evaluations among voters who do not share the

candidate's party (out-party voters) than among voters from the candidate's party (in-party voters).

Despite the prominence of the in-group/out-group distinction in public opinion and political psychology research, it has been surprisingly absent in previous work on candidate evaluations. Yet, we find overwhelming support for the prediction relying on a unique dataset constituting an original combination of twenty-three election surveys covering seven countries (Australia, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Norway, UK, and USA) with vast differences in terms of political institutions, party systems and political cultures spanning two decades: Trustworthiness is a stronger predictor of global candidate evaluations for out-party candidates than for in-party candidates. Importantly, we contrast this finding with competence and leadership—two of the most celebrated and influential traits in existing research on candidate evaluations—in Study 1 and 2, respectively. These analyses show that the predictive power of competence and leadership is not greater for out-party than for in-party candidate evaluations. In other words, not all specific traits are more strongly associated to global evaluations for out-party than for in-party candidates. Rather, voters only upregulate the importance of trustworthiness when evaluating candidates across instead of within party lines. These findings are consistent across a wide range of robustness checks.

Our results shed important new light on candidate evaluations and the underlying psychological processes. Specifically, we add the important theoretical distinction between out-party and in-party candidate evaluations and show how certain traits are weighted differently depending on whether the target candidate shares the voter's party affiliation or not. In this way, we contribute to the literature by demonstrating the often heterogeneous effects of different traits across candidates and electoral contexts (Funk, 1999; Goren, 2002, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Laustsen, 2017; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009). Our results also hold valuable insights for understanding when and how political candidates can garner legitimacy

in office and support for their policies even across party lines. Finally, we conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our findings in relation to candidate evaluations, attraction of voters and acceptance of authoritative decisions across party lines.

Partisan-motivated reasoning, political opinions and candidate evaluation

Perhaps the most established finding across more than 60 years of research in public opinion formation and political behavior is the importance of party affiliation and partisanship. Voters tend to vote for the candidate who represents the party they affiliate with, and they tend to perceive the political world through partisan lenses. These insights were already captured in *The American Voter*, which proclaimed that “few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties” (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 121), and that “[i]dentification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (p. 133).

Recent research further illuminates the depth of partisan divisions by demonstrating that attachment to the two major parties constitutes a deeper social divider in contemporary American society than race and religion (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Similar results have been found recently in Great Britain, Spain and Belgium (Westwood et al., 2018). Moreover, through psychological processes of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006), these heartfelt attachments to one party and strong oppositions towards the opposing parties lead to a series of downstream behavioral consequences: Partisans engage in selective exposure, pay more attention to sources with whom they agree (Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Stroud, 2008), and they interpret concrete pieces of news in line with their partisan beliefs (Lebo & Cassino, 2007). Likewise, partisans avoid incorporating relevant facts in their opinion formation and therefore differ in their reports and perceptions of even objective

conditions (Bartels, 2002b; Gaines et al., 2007; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Importantly, partisan bias affects evaluations of political candidates such that a candidate with whom a voter shares partisanship is more positively evaluated both globally and on any specific character trait than a candidate from the competing party (Bartels, 2002a, 2002b). In short, partisan-motivated reasoning causes a range of biased—one might even say distorted—views of the political and the social world.

Limits to partisan motivated reasoning

Although the strong influence of partisan motivation on political behavior is virtually undisputed, this does not mean that partisans only view the political world in black and white (Bisgaard, 2015; Bullock, Gerber, Hill, & Huber, 2015; Parker-Stephen, 2013). The candidate evaluation literature brings ample evidence to this argument. A series of studies illuminate the complex nature of candidate evaluations and how certain traits often exert heterogeneous effects depending on candidates' party, voters' ideology and the electoral context. Winter (2010) shows how the Democratic and Republican parties are stereotypically associated with femininity and masculinity, respectively. Hayes (2005) demonstrates that the two parties hold ownership of different character traits in candidates—Republicans of leadership and moral; Democrats of compassion and empathy—which produces interesting patterns and opportunities for strategic campaigning on character traits (see also Barker, Lawrence, & Tavits, 2006). Goren (2002, 2007) finds a negativity bias in trait evaluations such that partisans are especially likely to rate out-party candidates negatively on traits owned by their own party. Laustsen (2017) shows how liberals and conservatives—presumably because they perceive the social world as peaceful and threatening, respectively—value warmth- and power-related traits highest in candidates.

In sum, “partisan motivation does more than simply, and somewhat crudely, color character impressions in a manner that is favorable to one’s partisan orientation (Goren, 2007, p. 322). While partisan-motivated reasoning admittedly affects candidate evaluations directly—causing one’s own candidate to appear in a much more positive light than a competing party’s leader—there are other important mechanisms that also shape how partisans evaluate candidates. This article contributes to this literature by offering a more nuanced understanding of this process by theorizing and testing how partisan goals draw citizens’ attention to particular features and traits in candidates across and within party lines. Below, we unfold this argument in detail and generate our prediction.

The importance of candidate trustworthiness across and within party lines

As highlighted above, partisanship is one of the most salient coalitional markers in modern politics, causing a range of distinctions between us (in-partisans) and them (out-partisans). Our argument is based on the insight that people should expect better treatment from individuals belonging to their own group than from individuals from rival groups.

The psychological sciences provide compelling evidence that the foundation of the tendency to treat others based on shared versus different group affiliation is a central characteristic in human psychology. Studies show that the human mind is psychologically designed to pick up on any relevant markers of coalitional affiliations among unknown individuals and categorize the individuals accordingly (Pietraszewski et al., 2015). This fundamental tendency leads to preferential or discriminatory behaviors directed at individuals with shared and unshared group affiliation, respectively (e.g. Huddy, 2001; Tajfel, 1982). Shared coalitional membership thus constitutes an important predictor of positive reciprocal relationships (Efferson, Lalive, & Fehr, 2008; Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, & Weinstein, 2007).

Earlier studies have demonstrated that trustworthiness evaluations—defined as the perceived intentions of an agent or a group—tap into this differential likelihood of reciprocal relationships (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).¹ There is ample evidence that trustworthiness evaluations play a crucial role in social perception in general (e.g. Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fiske et al., 2007). Likewise, perceptions of political candidates’ trustworthiness (and related traits such as empathy, warmth, reliability, integrity etc.) form one for the two major dimensions of candidate evaluations (Bittner, 2011; Kinder et al., 1980; Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996) and play an important role in relation to judgments and decision making in the domain of politics and electoral behavior (Bøggild & Laustsen, 2016; Funk, 1999; Kinder et al., 1980; Laustsen & Bor, 2017).

Most of these studies, however, either look at differences in the perceived levels of trustworthiness across groups or at the (homogeneous) effect of trustworthiness on candidate evaluations. In other words, they overlook the possible heterogeneity in the importance of trustworthiness across groups (although see Bøggild & Laustsen, 2016). Indeed, the question of how partisan motivation moderates the importance of various traits has received remarkably little attention in the candidate evaluation literature. We propose here that trustworthiness is weighted differently in global candidate evaluations across and within party boundaries because a candidate’s unpredictable and untrustworthy behavior is likely to affect some voters more than others.

Due to the nature of politics, politicians have strong incentives to benefit their own supporters (Dahl, 1971; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017; Hibbs, 1977). They may rely on distributive policies concerning taxation or welfare, they may resort to pork barrel politics or deliver more symbolical benefits changing immigration policies, helping or harassing various

¹ The trait tapping into perceived intentions is sometimes also labelled “warmth” (Fiske et al., 2007) or “character” (Bittner, 2011). To avoid confusion, we use trustworthiness consistently.

minorities(e.g. Ames, 1995; Bowler, 2017). The possibilities are endless. Whenever a politician decides to disturb the status quo by channeling scarce resources to their party base, supporters of competing parties are likely to bear its financial or ideological costs. Indeed, this is such a fundamental feature of politics that it is reasonable to assume that citizens have a good understanding of their vulnerability in opposition.² Following this logic, voters should be particularly attentive to the intentions of leaders of competing parties and should hold particularly strong preferences for those whom they deem trustworthy. Consequently, we arrive at the following prediction: *Voters value trustworthiness more as a character trait in political candidates for out-party candidates than for in-party candidates.*

Crucially, this prediction also implies that this conditional relationship is not universal to all character traits in candidates. We contrast our prediction about trustworthiness with competence and (strong) leadership, which tap into the other large and conceptually distinct dimension of candidate evaluations (Bittner, 2011; McAllister, 2016; McGraw, 2011).³

² Evolutionary psychological studies on followership and leadership theorize that humans generally evolved to shield themselves from being exploited by untrustworthy and self-interested individuals within their groups (Bøggild, 2016; Hibbing & Alford, 2004). Followers are also more attentive to a leader's potential exploitation (i.e. negative intentions) *within* a group when the leader represents another intragroup coalition than the follower's (Bøggild & Laustsen, 2016).

³ While we subscribe to the two-dimensional framework of candidate evaluations, it is worth noting that an alternative, four-dimensional framework also enjoys considerable popularity in the literature. The latter framework splits the trustworthiness dimension into empathy and integrity, and the competence dimension into leadership and competence. We find the two-dimensional framework more applicable to our study for both theoretical and practical reasons. First, our main insight that the ill intentions of a leader may be particularly costly for out-party voters applies equally both to (a lack of) empathy and (low) integrity. Second, few election studies in other countries than the US have

Importantly, both competence and leadership refer to a candidate's skills and abilities and *not* to whether she is likely to have intentions from which the follower is likely to benefit (Bor, 2017; Laustsen, 2017).

There is no good reason to believe that the skills and abilities of a political leader affect out-partisans more than in-partisans. If anything, the opposite could be true, i.e. that the skills of a leader benefit in-partisans most. Nonetheless, our prediction is less conservative and states that voters do *not* value the competence and leadership of an out-partisan candidate more than for an in-partisan candidate.

Research Design and Methods

We test our prediction in two studies by relying on twenty-three election surveys that all include voters' perceptions of main candidates' trustworthiness. Our results are founded on more than 300,000 evaluations of major prime minister and presidential candidates spanning seven countries and twenty years. Thus, whereas most previous studies of candidate evaluations concentrate on candidates from a single country (Bittner, 2011; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013)—often bipartisan US presidential races—our analysis exploits the benefits of comparative data following a most different systems logic in at least two ways. First, in Study 1, we rely on eighteen different election studies including voter perceptions of candidates' trustworthiness and competence. Covering six countries, this cross-national and pooled set of election surveys constitutes a solid point of departure for our analyses as it covers a diverse set of countries in terms of institutional settings (e.g. unicameralism vs. bicameralism, majoritarian vs. proportional vs. mixed electoral systems etc.), party systems (e.g. two-party systems vs. multiparty systems), and political culture (e.g. traditions for majority vs. minority

systematic data for all four dimensions (Bittner, 2011). Our comparative ambition thus also propels us to employ the two-dimensional framework.

governments, the degree of party loyalty among elected politicians, and broader differences between individualistic versus collectivistic cultures).

Second, Study 2 tests the prediction using five waves of panel data from the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) polling US citizens before the presidential election. In this way the scope conditions for our prediction are tested further as the American case is fundamentally different from the countries in Study 1 in terms of electoral institution (e.g. direct versus indirect voting for main candidates) and the number of candidates evaluated per party (Study 1 includes one candidate per party, while Study 2 includes multiple candidates for both the Republican and the Democratic parties). Moreover, the panel design of the CCAP data provides leverage to control for time-invariant omitted variables by applying fixed effects estimation. Finally, the two studies allow us to contrast the predicted difference for trustworthiness in candidate evaluations within and across party lines with two different character traits: competence (Study 1) and strong leadership (Study 2). In total, the data sources cover twenty-three rounds of election surveys and a wealth of institutional, political and cultural differences—as well as empirical and methodological differences. This allows for a strong test of our prediction that trustworthiness impressions are more influential in shaping global candidate evaluations across than within party lines.

Study 1: International pooled dataset

Data⁴

To test our predictions, we rely on a unique dataset of eighteen election studies from six countries (Australia, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and United Kingdom), merging all publicly available election studies with relevant trait evaluations of main candidates

⁴ Materials ensuring full reproducibility of our analysis are deposited on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/j62qd/?view_only=691b357be01e4762b95faa0d574f1272.

running for a top executive position, i.e. prime minister. The resulting unique dataset provides insights from nationally representative samples that are geographically, culturally and historically diverse (1993-2013). The data includes evaluations from 39,797 respondents and 39 political candidates, with 2.42 candidates evaluated per respondent on average. This yields a sample of 96,319 observations.

Comparative datasets are still rare in the candidate evaluations literature (CF Bittner, 2011), despite their considerable benefits. All candidates and elections are unique, thus any analysis relying on a limited pool of cases is subject to concerns about external validity. By contrast, our inquiry increases our confidence that our results are not unique to a candidate, election or country. It averages out idiosyncrasies providing estimates closer to population means and offers a more realistic view of the variance.

The downside of pooling independent surveys is that they sometimes use different scales and operationalization. In the following, we review the variables and the transformations employed for merging the different datasets. Throughout the analyses, our dependent variable is measured by respondents' evaluations of the main candidates in their country on general feeling thermometers. Specifically, all respondents were asked to rate a candidate on an 11-point scale of liking or disliking.⁵ In the analyses, we rescale this variable to 0-100 to help interpretation of our coefficient estimates as percentage changes.

The main independent variable, perceived trustworthiness, is measured straightforwardly prompting an evaluation of trustworthiness in half of the surveys. We operationalize perceived trustworthiness with evaluations of reliability in the other half of our data. Reliability and trustworthiness are semantically close, and they have been shown to tap

⁵ The only exception is Australia 1993, which used the terms favorable/unfavorable on the same 11-point-scale instead.

into the trustworthiness trait dimension by previous research in political science (Bittner, 2011) and social psychology (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014).

Across the different datasets, perceptions of candidates' competence is measured in multiple ways. In Australia, we average over the variables knowledgeable and intelligent. In the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway), we rely on knowledgeable evaluations. In the German data, respondents are asked to what extent they believe the candidates have "sensible ideas" about the economy⁶. Finally, the British Election Studies explicitly address competence. There is considerable evidence that all these traits are closely related and reliable measures of competence in candidates and in other individuals in general (Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Fiske et al., 2007; Kinder et al., 1980; Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996). Table S1 in the supplementary materials gives an overview of our data including descriptive statistics and sample sizes. The measurement of traits ranges from 4- to 11-point scales. We center and standardize all independent variables by subtracting the group (country-year) mean and dividing by two standard deviations. This yields unbiased estimates in models with varying slopes, which can be interpreted as the predicted percentage change in the feeling thermometer ratings when moving from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean (Gelman, 2008).

⁶ Competence as economic manager is an important facet of candidate competence, which received considerable attention from scholars working in the rational choice tradition (Duch & Stevenson, 2008). There is a good reason to assume that it was a particularly relevant attribute in the years following the Great Recession (note the two German surveys are from 2009 and 2013). Because the trustworthiness trait aligns very well with the other countries in the data and the competence dimension is only meant to provide a contrast to it, we deem it suitable to keep Germany in the data. That said, all results remain virtually identical if Germany is omitted from the analysis.

All election studies have straightforward questions tapping into partisan identification. We operationalize shared coalitional affiliation as identification with the party nominating the candidate. Our in-party variable is coded “1” whenever respondent and candidate belong to the same political party; otherwise “0”. In other words, we lump together coalition partners, opposition partisans and independents. This leads to a conservative test of our hypothesis because we code candidates nominated by a different party than the respondent’s as an out-party candidate even though the candidate’s and the respondent’s parties may belong to the same party group or alliance. We conduct robustness checks in the supplementary materials to justify our decision to include independents. Finally, we include three socio-economic control variables—age, gender and education (the latter recoded as a categorical variable with three categories)—in the analysis. This is admittedly a limited set of controls. However, the differences between the countries and the surveys in our dataset make it difficult to broaden our selection of controls. Descriptive statistics and distributions for the variables in the models are shared in the supplementary materials (Table S2 & Figures S1-S3).

Estimation and modelling procedures

Our key prediction is that the relationship between perceived trustworthiness and global feeling thermometer evaluations of a candidate is conditional on the coalitional affiliation between the candidate and the respondent. Accordingly, we are investigating the interaction between trustworthiness evaluation and partisan alignment (shared versus un-shared partisanship between the respondent and the candidate). We expect that the interaction between trustworthiness perceptions and partisan alignment will be negative for trustworthiness (because our partisanship variable reflects shared partisanship (in-party) when coded “1”). Importantly, we predict that this interactive relationship will not exist for

perceptions of competence in candidates, and the interaction between competence perceptions and partisan alignment is therefore expected to be insignificant.

The fact that our data consists of multiple evaluations per respondent, multiple respondents per survey and per country gives rise to an important methodological challenge. Responses given by the same respondent or by citizens of the same country are likely to be (more) similar to each other. Such clustering in the data may cause violation of the assumption of independent error terms in regression modelling, which may lead to downward bias in standard errors and thus increase the false positive error rate (Gelman & Hill, 2007). We seek to avoid this bias by accounting for clustering with linear multilevel modelling.

Our model has three levels.⁷ On level 1 (L1 – evaluations), global feeling thermometer evaluations of the candidates are regressed on perceptions of candidate trustworthiness and competence, and both traits are interacted with the in-party dummy. In addition we control for age, gender and education. On level 2 (L2 – individual respondents), we allow for varying intercepts. On level 3 (L3 – elections), we allow for varying intercepts and varying slopes for trustworthiness, competence and their interaction with the in-party dummy.

Results

Our model (reported in Table 1) conducts the crucial test of our key prediction that the weight assigned to trustworthiness is larger in out-party than in in-party candidate evaluations. The negative coefficient for the interaction between trustworthiness and the in-party dummy provides support for this hypothesis ($\beta = -6.6, p < 0.001$). In line with our prediction, trustworthiness has a larger effect on the evaluations of out-party candidates (31 percent

⁷ We built our model in five steps, which are outlined in the supplementary materials along with Table S3. Below we focus on Model 5, which provides the best representation of our data and allows testing of our hypotheses.

predicted change) than on evaluations of in-party candidates (24 percent predicted change). Importantly, this partisan bias seems to be unique for trustworthiness and not a general pattern for all trait evaluations. This is demonstrated by the insignificant interaction between competence and the in-party dummy ($\beta = -0.7$, n.s.). The effect of perceived competence on feeling thermometer ratings for a two standard deviation change is constantly around 12 percent and is not conditional on partisan alignment between respondent and candidate.

Table 1. Multilevel model regressing trait evaluations on feeling thermometers

	<i>Dependent variable: Feeling thermometer</i>
Trustworthy	30.561*** (1.546)
Trustworthy x Own party	-6.587*** (1.298)
Competent	11.907*** (1.049)
Competent x Own party	-0.721 (0.683)
Own party	17.331*** (1.623)
Constant	48.324*** (1.557)
Observations	96,319
Log Likelihood	-415,051.100
Akaike Inf. Crit.	830,168.100

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are omitted from the table but not the model.

To put these effects in perspective, the coefficient for the in-party dummy in our model suggests that for a candidate rated average on both trustworthiness and competence, the partisan gap in global evaluations is 17.3 percentage points. However, the difference between in- and out-partisans' global evaluations is reduced by a marked 38 percent ($17.3 - 6.6 = 10.7$) for a candidate two standard deviations above average on trustworthiness.

Figure 1 illustrates the results from the model. It depicts coefficient estimates on the x-axis. The overall trends are illustrated by the vertical lines, which show the mean regression coefficients (fixed effects) and their confidence intervals for both the in-party group (in black) and the out-party group (in grey). The relationship between overall evaluations and perceived trustworthiness is moderated by partisan alignment (right panel) with different views on trustworthiness corresponding to larger differences in global evaluations for out-party than for in-party candidates. The lack of moderation for competence (left panel) shows that this tendency is specific to trustworthiness and not a product of a general partisan bias.

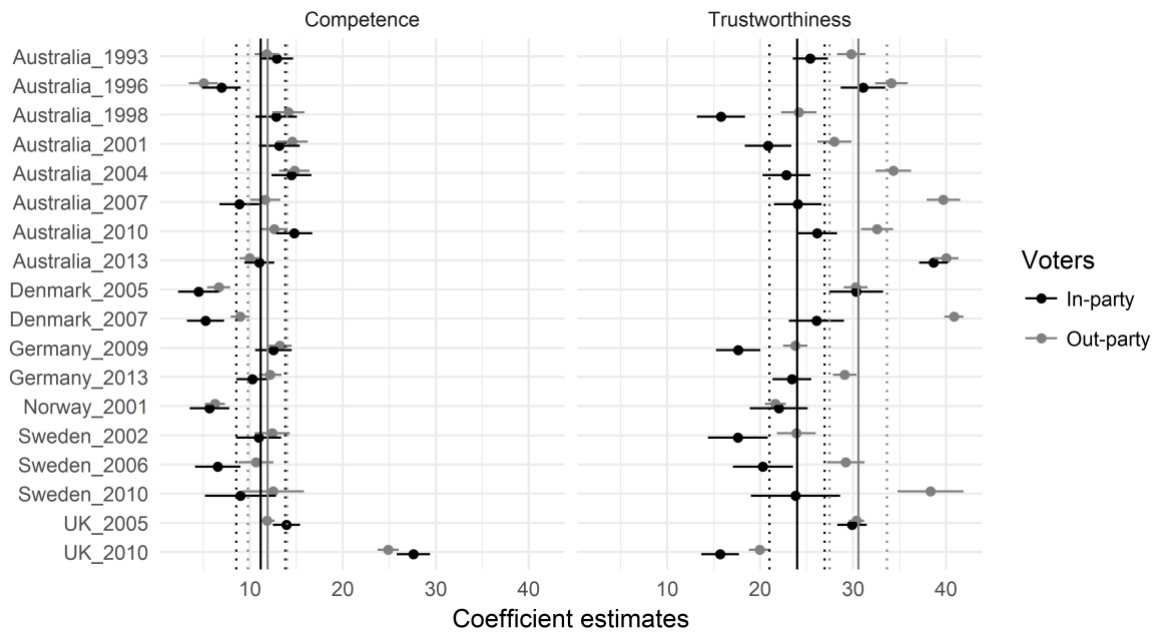


Figure 1. Trustworthiness is consistently more strongly associated with general evaluations of out-party candidates (grey) than in-party (black) candidates in Study 1, but competence is not.

Our analysis also allows a more detailed inspection of election-specific differences. The election random effects, which are plotted on the y-axis, show that the main hypothesis on the heterogeneous effect of trustworthiness is supported in the large majority of cases. Yet, four exceptions stand out from this general pattern: In Australia 2013, Denmark 2005, Norway 2001 and United Kingdom 2010 the relative importance of trustworthiness for in-party and

out-party candidate evaluations does not differ significantly. The election random effects also reveal that most elections are consistent with our predicted null effect for competence, with some deviation in both directions (significant positive interaction in UK 2005 and 2010, and negative interaction in Australia 2007 and Denmark 2005). Importantly, despite our large and diverse dataset, there are no obvious trends in the election level random effects. Divergence is more likely to be due to random differences between elections rather than some important attributes of the political regime or culture. A good example is Denmark, where there is no trustworthiness–in-party interaction in the 2005 data ($\beta_{\text{trustw.out}} = 30.3$, $\beta_{\text{trustw.in}} = 30.3$, n.s.), but there is a massive 14.8 percent difference between in-party and out-party evaluations in the following elections just two and a half years later ($\beta_{\text{trustw.out}} = 40.9$, $\beta_{\text{trustw.in}} = 26.1$, $p < 0.001$). However, the vast majority of the analyzed elections follow the aggregate result: Consistent with the prediction, and party-coalitional reasoning, the expected costs and benefits of partisan alignment with a leader cause perceptions of trustworthiness to be upregulated for in-party vis-à-vis out-party candidates.

Robustness analyses

Below we extensively test the robustness of our findings to a series of alternative substantive and modelling approaches. To ensure brevity, we report only the purpose of a specific robustness test and its main conclusion regarding the trustworthiness-in-party interaction (full models reported in tables S4-S7 in the supplementary online materials). First, to test if the pattern is driven by either left-wing or right-wing candidates, we split our sample on candidates' ideological leaning based on their parties' belonging to either a left-wing or a right-wing coalition (Table S4). Other studies have established that in the United States, parties hold ownerships of certain character traits as Republican candidates are routinely perceived as more moral (a trait closely related to trustworthiness (Goodwin et al., 2014) and

Democratic candidates perceived as more warm (Hayes, 2005). It could be that such trait ownerships cause the aggregate pattern presented above. However, the robustness analyses show that our hypothesis is supported among both left-wing and right-wing candidates, although the pattern is more pronounced and substantially stronger among right-wing candidates.

Second, we test if the point of comparison of candidates' trait ratings has an effect on our results. In the main analysis, estimated effects of perceived trustworthiness and competence on global evaluations were founded on a comparison with the *average candidate evaluation for a given election*, i.e. to what extent a candidate is considered more or less trustworthy than competing candidates. An alternative is to estimate the effects based on a comparison with the *average trait evaluations of a given candidate*, i.e. to what extent a respondent considers a candidate more or less trustworthy than other respondents. Although we believe the former comparison is substantively more important, the latter yields results that are nearly identical to our main findings. We arrive at this conclusion after employing candidates (at a given election) rather than elections as our L3 grouping variable and adjusting the centering and standardization (Enders & Tofghi, 2007) of the independent variables accordingly (see Table S4 for full model).

Third, we investigate if our results are driven by inclusion of independent voters (or voters affiliated with other parties than the main candidates') in the out-partisan category. In doing so, we simply separate the independent voters from out-partisans yielding the following three categories of voters: in-partisans, out-partisans and independents (Table S5). This demonstrates that trustworthiness ratings and global evaluations are associated similarly among independents and out-partisans. This justifies the decision to lump together independents and out-partisans in the main analysis, and it provides at least some evidence for

our theory that shared partisanship between candidate and voter constitutes the key theoretical distinction changing the role of trustworthiness for global candidate evaluations.

Finally, we test if our model is robust to a number of alternative model specifications (see Tables S6-S7). The results remain unchanged regardless of whether the three demographic control variables are kept (as in the main analyses) or dropped from the model. Results also hold when we test the interaction between perceived trustworthiness and the in-party dummy for each of the two operationalizations of trustworthiness (reliable and trustworthy). Lastly, we estimate the interactive relationships between perceived trustworthiness and competence, and the in-party dummy based on respondent fixed effects estimation—instead of linear multilevel modeling. This alternative approach essentially uses each respondent as their own control comparing the weight assigned to trustworthiness and competence in global evaluations for in-party and out-party candidates. Importantly, the fixed effects procedure provides even stronger support for our predictions.

Discussion

Altogether, Study 1 provides very strong support for our prediction. Based on a unique and large dataset comprising geographically, culturally and historically diverse countries and electoral systems, we demonstrate that in-party candidates' global evaluations are less associated with perceived trustworthiness than out-party candidates'. This pattern does not reflect "classic" partisan-biased candidate evaluations (Bartels, 2002b). Rather than reflecting generally rose-colored evaluations of in-party candidates, the results show how the relative weight assigned to a specific trait, trustworthiness, differs as a function of shared or un-shared party affiliation between the candidate and the voter. Moreover, the pattern further differs from standard notions of partisan bias as it—in line with the prediction—was only present for trustworthiness and not for competence. Additionally, previous studies have found that

ideological differences between candidates or voters also affect the importance of different character traits in global candidate evaluations (Barker et al., 2006; Hayes, 2005; Laustsen, 2017). Yet, these alternative theoretical accounts cannot explain why trustworthiness is moderated by partisan alignment either.

Although Study 1 relies on evidence from six countries and eighteen surveys, it notably lacks data from the United States. The U.S. is a particularly interesting case because presidential elections arguably constitute the most high-profile political events in the world with considerable attention to candidate personalities from citizens, pundits and the candidates themselves (Eberl, Wagner, & Boomgaarden, 2017; Funk, 1999; Laustsen, 2017; Popkin, 1994). In addition, the U.S. presidential elections constitute a qualitatively different election as citizens have the opportunity to vote directly for the candidates evaluated in the election survey (as opposed to voting for a local candidate or the party list as in the Study 1 elections). Furthermore, since much influential work on character traits and candidate evaluation is based on data about the U.S. presidential elections, it is important to test if the moderation of trustworthiness in global candidate evaluations replicates in American politics. Another drawback of Study 1 is that it includes only a limited number of candidates per elections. A broader selection of candidates could establish if our hypothesis is also supported in data with potentially less known politicians. The Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) allows us to test our prediction in the context of U.S. presidential elections and with a wider set of candidates as it covers the primaries and, thus, the nomination phase of the election.

Study 2: Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (United States)

Study 2 conducts an additional test of our prediction in a substantively interesting, highly studied political context: the U.S. presidential elections. As we lack data that includes both

trustworthiness and competence, we cannot compare the relative importance of trustworthiness and competence as in Study 1. We focus instead on trustworthiness, and to provide a contrast and test the alternative explanation focusing on “blind” partisan bias, we include strong leadership in our analysis. Strong leadership relates to character traits like decisiveness and effectiveness, which belong to the competence dimension (McAllister, 2016; Ohr & Oscarsson 2013). However, it also has an element of dominance, power and tough-mindedness, which may potentially signal (low) trustworthiness (Laustsen, 2017). This paper does not seek to establish whether strong leadership is best understood as orthogonal or negatively correlated to trustworthiness. In either case, strong leadership as a trait constitutes a good contrast to trustworthiness evaluations as we would not expect perceived strong leadership to get down-regulated for in-partisans.

Data

The CCAP collected data from a large, representative online sample of the U.S. registered voter population in six waves. The first contact occurred in December 2007, with additional waves in January, March, September, October and November. Overall 20,000 individuals were involved, and 8,062 participated in all six waves. The surveys included trustworthiness evaluations in the first five waves, whereas strong leadership evaluations were only included in the first four waves. Each survey included questions on all candidates for the presidential nomination who were still in the race at the time of the interview. Accordingly, the first wave has trait evaluations on eight candidates (Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards from the Democratic Party; Rudy Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, John McCain, Mitt Romney and Fred Thompson from the Republican Party), whereas the second wave includes trait evaluations on seven candidates, the third wave on three candidates, and the fourth wave on

two candidates. Pooling these four waves we get a dataset with 234,219 observations with 13.4 evaluations per respondent on average.

The two trait variables are measured on a four-point scale. They are centered on the wave average and divided by two standard deviations (following the Study 1 procedures). As in Study 1, we measure partisanship with an in-party dummy, which takes the value “1” whenever someone identifies with either the Democratic or the Republican Party and evaluates a candidate from that party. Independents are coded as “0”, even if they reveal that they are leaning towards one or the other party in the standard follow-up party identification question. The dependent variable—global candidate evaluation—is measured on a 5-point scale running from very unfavorable to very favorable and rescaled to 0-100 for ease of interpretation. Coefficient estimates in our models can be interpreted as the percentage difference in global evaluations corresponding to a two standard deviation shift in ratings of either trustworthiness or strong leadership. Table S8 and Figures S4-S6 in the supplementary materials show descriptive statistics and distributions for the main variables in the analysis.

Estimation and modelling procedures

As in Study 1, we rely on multi-level modelling to account for clustering in the data. The CCAP is cross-classified as there is clustering around both candidates and panel waves, with multiple candidates appearing in multiple waves. Additionally, clustering could occur due to multiple observations per individual. Our model⁸ has varying intercepts and varying slopes for trustworthiness, strong leadership, the in-party dummy and the respective interactions

⁸ As in Study 1, we proceed step-wise to a fully specified four-level multilevel model. Each new model is tested for a significant improvement in fit. Table S9 in the supplementary materials gives an overview of the steps in the model building, and Table S10 provides results for Models 1-5. Below we focus on Model 5 as it tests our hypothesis.

between perceived trustworthiness and strong leadership, respectively, with the in-party dummy for waves (Level 4 – L4), varying intercepts for candidates (L3) and varying intercepts for individuals (L2).

Results

Table 2 displays the results from Study 2, which further support our prediction. It shows that a one-unit difference in trustworthiness corresponds to a 36.7 percent difference in global evaluations for out-partisans ($p < 0.001$). However, the corresponding difference for in-partisans is 6.5 percent less ($\beta = 30.2$). The interaction effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Meanwhile, there is a significant up-regulation in the weight assigned to strong leadership perceptions for in-party candidate compared to out-party candidate evaluations ($\beta_{\text{out.party}} = 29.8$, $\beta_{\text{in.party}} = 33.3$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Study 2. Multilevel model regressing feeling thermometer on trait evaluations

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Feeling thermometer
Trustworthy	36.677*** (0.520)
Trustworthy x Own party	-6.455** (2.315)
Strong leader	29.751*** (1.875)
Strong leader x Own party	3.454** (1.248)
Own party	13.144*** (1.170)
Constant	42.817*** (2.401)
Observations	234,219
Log Likelihood	-1,033,079.000
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,066,233.000

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are omitted from table but not the model.

Again, an alternative interpretation of these findings is to compare the size of the partisan gap for candidates with average ratings of trustworthiness and strong leadership and candidates with a very high perceived trustworthiness. The coefficient for the in-party dummy ($\beta = 13.1$) reveals the former value. This “baseline partisan gap” is reduced by a substantial 50 percent for a candidate whose trustworthiness rating is two standard deviations above average ($13.1 - 6.5 = 6.6$). Meanwhile, the disagreement between the average in-party and out-party respondent’s global evaluations increases by 27 percent for a candidate who is two standard deviations above average on strong leadership ($13.1 + 3.5 = 16.6$).

Importantly, this pattern is very similar to the results obtained in Study 1 and it provides additional support for our prediction that trustworthiness taps into perceived risk of exploitation and, thus, is down-regulated for in-party candidates who are less likely to direct

exploitative tendencies against followers who share their party affiliation. In contrast, the results are not consistent with an alternative expectation that all trait ratings could receive less weight in evaluations of in-party candidates as strong leadership is up-regulated. Figure 2 depicts mean coefficient estimates (*i.e.* fixed effects in vertical lines) and wave-specific random effects (y-axis) from our model. It demonstrates that trustworthiness is down-regulated consistently in all four waves of the CCAP dataset.

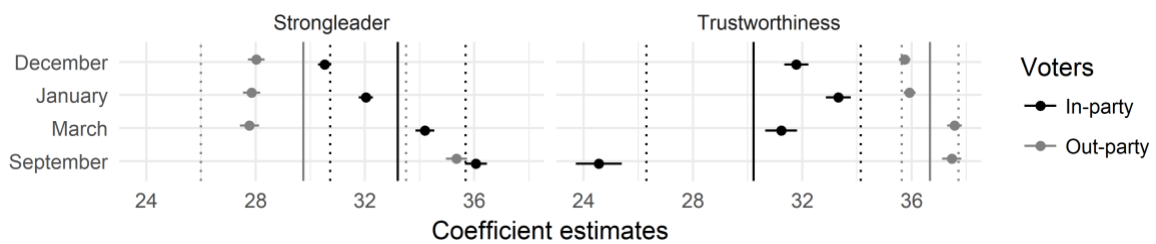


Figure 2. Trustworthiness in the CCAP data is more strongly associated with general evaluations of out-party (grey) than in-party (black) candidates, whereas strong leadership it is vice versa.

Robustness analyses

As for Study 1, we applied a series of additional models to test the robustness of the results (see Tables S11-S15 in the supplementary materials). First, following the same logic as in Study 1, we tested if the results were obtained when analyzed exclusively for one of the two parties (Table S11). Focusing on the interaction between trustworthiness and the in-party dummy, we find clear down-regulation among Democratic candidates. Interestingly, the down-regulation is statistically insignificant among Republican candidates. Our theory provides little leeway for such heterogeneity, but it is worth noting that the strongly polarized, bipartisan nature of U.S. politics contributes to significant trait ownership (Hayes, 2005). It is remarkable that our theory is still supported in the aggregate levels despite the strong evidence in the literature on trait ownership showing that Republican candidates are judged

more by their perceived morality and Democratic candidates are evaluated more by their warmth (two traits both related to trustworthiness impressions e.g. Bittner, 2011).

Second, as in Study 1, we test whether the same conclusions emerge when we shift the point of comparison from waves (at a given time how trustworthy is a candidate compared to competing candidates) to candidates (how trustworthy is a candidate compared to their own average evaluations throughout the election) through centering and varying slopes on L3. Reassuringly, the model continues to support our hypothesis. An above average trustworthiness rating (compared to the candidate's average evaluations in the campaign) is associated with a smaller bonus in global evaluations for in-party than for out-party candidates (see Table S11).

Third, we tested the results' robustness to different operationalizations of the in-party variable (Table S12). Regardless of whether leaners are lumped together with party identifiers or whether a continuous in-party variable is employed, we still find significant—yet smaller—interactions. Next, we tested if a trichotomized in-party variable consisting of in-partisans, out-partisans and independents/leaners yields similar results (Table S13). We find that in-partisans base their global evaluations significantly less on trustworthiness than out-partisans, although, interestingly, this difference is smaller than in the main models.

Fourth, we also conducted different alternative model specifications. Focusing exclusively on trustworthiness perceptions (leaving out strong leadership) allows us to include all five waves in the analyses (Table S14). This extended dataset provides even stronger evidence for our prediction with a highly significant interaction between trustworthiness and the in-party dummy. Results further replicate when we leave out the three socio-economic control variables from the analysis (Table S14).

Fifth, we also tested our hypothesis applying a respondent fixed effects estimation strategy rather than linear multilevel modeling. Respondent fixed effects allow additional

control for confounds in two ways. First, by exploiting the panel design of the CCAP data, this model controls for time-invariant omitted variables. Indeed, the results replicate well in a model using respondent (as well as candidate and wave) fixed effects (Table S15). Moreover, fixed effects models are also much more efficient than multilevel regressions and thus allow to include additional control variables. Our theory suggests that trustworthiness reflects impressions of candidates' intentions to harm or benefit a citizen. It is plausible that another well-studied determinant of party and vote choice, namely ideological proximity, provides an equally good or even better measure of these intentions (Tomz & Van Houweling, 2008). To test whether trustworthiness is just a proxy for ideological proximity or provides additional insights to leader evaluations, we test whether the observed moderation of trustworthiness by the own party dummy is still present if we control for the rival interaction between ideological proximity and the own party dummy. We utilize that the CCAP asked respondents to place themselves and each candidate on a five-point ideology scale in each wave. Our ideological proximity variable is the absolute distance between the respondent and a candidate on this scale. We include this variable into the fixed effects model as an additional interaction with the in-party dummy. Reassuringly, our results remain virtually identical suggesting that trustworthiness evaluations tap into perceived intentions above and beyond what is inferred from political agreement and ideological proximity (Table S16).

Discussion

Using data from the 2008 American presidential election, Study 2 yields further support for our prediction that trustworthiness perceptions are weighted less heavily in global evaluations of in-party candidates than in global evaluations of out-party candidates. In fact, our estimate (a 6.5 percent decrease in the effect size of trustworthiness) is essentially identical to the estimate from the cross-national dataset in Study 1. In addition, we find that high ratings of

strong leadership provide a substantially larger bonus among in-partisans, underlining that different traits are valued differently in in-party and out-party candidates. Importantly, Study 2 consists of a unique dataset with character evaluations of several candidates. Whereas Study 1 focuses on the top two or three candidates across eighteen elections, Study 2 analyzes data on eight politicians from two parties competing in the same election. The fact that the different datasets employed across the two studies give rise to such similar results suggests that the obtained pattern is widely generalizable across institutional and cultural settings rather than caused by idiosyncratic factors of campaigns in one single electoral contest.

Conclusions and General Discussion

This article builds on two insights in the political behavior literature. First, we follow the growing interest in the scope conditions and the deeper reasoning processes underlying party attachment. Second, we adhere to the call in the candidate evaluations literature to take seriously the multidimensional nature of candidate characteristics (Funk, 1999; Laustsen, 2017). In doing so, we specifically follow Goren (2007, p. 322) in investigating how partisan motivation “... also works below the surface by subtly altering the decision-making criteria citizens employ when rendering global judgements about the candidates”. More specifically, we rely on previous research suggesting that voters are sensitive to the estimated risk of being harmed by a political leader’s decisions (Hibbing & Alford, 2004) and that the costs of these decisions are least likely to be borne by the candidate’s own coalitional allies (Bøggild & Laustsen, 2016). Consequently, we hypothesize that voters should pay particularly close attention to out-party candidates’ exploitative tendencies. On this basis, we proposed that *trustworthiness* taps directly into such perceptions of exploitation risks from a leader, and accordingly, we predicted that trustworthiness is down-regulated in in-party compared to out-party candidate evaluations.

We tested this prediction in a comparative analysis utilizing a novel collection of recent election surveys from across a diverse range of western democracies characterized by different electoral institutional settings, party systems and degrees of personalization of voting behavior. Specifically, our analysis relies on two large datasets of 47 candidates from seven countries with over 300,000 observations. We leverage the considerable institutional, cultural and historical diversity across the employed election studies to test our hypothesis following a most different systems logic. The data provides firm and remarkably consistent evidence for our prediction: The relationship between trustworthiness perceptions of political candidates and general feeling thermometer evaluations was 20-25% stronger for out-party candidate evaluations than for in-party evaluations (Study 1: $\beta_{\text{out,partisan}} = 0.30$ vs. $\beta_{\text{in,partisan}} = 0.24$; Study 2: $\beta_{\text{out,partisan}} = 0.36$ vs. $\beta_{\text{in,partisan}} = 0.30$).

Our results hold important practical, methodological and theoretical implications for candidate evaluations, attraction of voters and acceptance of policy decisions across party lines. First, our findings underscore the importance of Funk's (1999) urge to think more seriously about the real content of various *specific* traits along which candidates are routinely evaluated. This article shows how conceptualizing a distinct trait—trustworthiness—in relation to specific processes of political psychological reasoning—partisan motivation—can lead to novel insights. Future research should continue this work and further expand our understanding of frequently discussed traits such as competence, (strong) leadership, morality and warmth.

Second, our findings speak to the processes through which candidates win or lose votes. In fact, focusing on the former or the latter, two sides of a coin are revealed. On the one hand, our results show that in-partisans—who voted a candidate into office—are less likely to react to signs of untrustworthy behavior from their own candidate. Meanwhile, out-party voters react stronger to such signals of untrustworthiness, but because they did not support the

candidate to begin with, their reaction is not likely to cost the candidate's (re)election efforts. From this perspective, the out-partisan vigilance towards candidate untrustworthiness may have a limited effect on democratic accountability. On the other hand, attracting voters by appearing trustworthy may also provide a silver lining. A particularly trustworthy candidate might be able to win votes among out-partisans—especially among independents. In other words, the combination of dissatisfaction with the leader of one's "old party" and an exceptionally trustworthy appearance of the leader in a "new party" might make for a powerful cocktail in attracting new voters. Future work should test if these speculations have empirical support.

Third, our results also hold interesting potential for the long intervals between elections—where the bulk of policy making takes place. Specifically, we believe our study has relevant implications for the legitimacy of political decisions. The relationship between trust and compliance is well established in the literature (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Tyler, 1990). Our results add to this line of research by hinting that political leaders may use their personal trustworthiness to boost support, in particular among out-partisan citizens.

Finally, we believe that this project highlights the important yet often overlooked benefits of employing a comparative research strategy when studying political candidates. The bulk of the candidate evaluation literature relies on single country studies, predominantly on the U.S (but see Bittner, 2011; Lobo & Curtice, 2015; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013). Merging representative surveys from multiple countries opens up avenues of new possibilities for researchers interested in the interplay of candidate evaluations and cultural, institutional or other factors. We employed a most different systems logic to demonstrate that trustworthiness is particularly strongly related to out-party candidate evaluations across diverse settings. Demonstrating the consistency of findings internationally, however, is but one strategy to employ comparative data. Future research should further explore the similarities and

differences in candidate evaluations between countries with different political institutions, party systems or media landscapes *etc.*

Despite the robustness of our results, this paper also has limitations. Most importantly, since both studies are observational, we cannot draw strong causal conclusions. This limitation raises two specific concerns. First, one might question whether the different weights assigned to trustworthiness are *truly* caused by differences in shared partisanship between voter and candidate. Within the framework of observational data analysis, we have striven to ensure that this interpretation is as sound as possible by testing for alternative explanations (e.g. candidates' subscription to a liberal or a conservative ideology), by controlling for potential unobserved factors that could cause a spurious pattern (e.g. using each respondent as "their own control" in fixed effects estimation models), and by testing the predictions across as many different countries as possible. Future research could try to replicate the pattern using experimental data. Second, like most other work on candidate evaluations, we assume *but do not test* that specific trait impressions cause global evaluations (rather than the reverse) (e.g. Goren, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Merolla, Ramos, & Zechmeister, 2007). We find it hard to come up with a plausible explanation for the contrasts between trustworthiness and competence/strong leadership that are consistent with a theory proposing causation from global evaluations to specific traits. Nonetheless, we think that the causal direction between global and specific candidate impressions constitutes an important and yet unsolved puzzle for research on candidate evaluations that deserves to be addressed.

Subject to these limitations, this paper demonstrates that trustworthiness impressions, but not competence or strong leadership impressions, of political candidates have particularly large consequences for global candidate evaluations among citizens who do not share the candidate's party affiliation. Unlike much existing work on partisanship and motivated reasoning in political and electoral behavior, this paper does not suggest that citizens simply

dislike everything from out-parties and praise everything from their own party. Instead, citizens adjust their global evaluation criteria of political candidates in accordance with whether they share a candidate's partisanship or not and this, in turn, leads citizens to skillfully anticipate and forecast potential harmful decisions to which they might themselves fall prey. We consider this as yet another sign of voters'—frequently overlooked—sophistication in navigating the political arena.

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