

(In)Consistency and its Effects on Voter Perceptions

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I. Introduction

Beginning in July 2019, accounts called “Bernie: Then and Now” began to appear across the internet, most prominently on Twitter and YouTube. These accounts began posting several videos of Sen. Bernie Sanders from the past three decades, in an effort to show his commitment to the ideas and principles he famously preaches. While their presence on YouTube and Twitter is relatively minimal with only about seventy-five thousand views and 7,400 followers (as of 4/27/20) respectively, they drew attention to the question of political consistency in the crowded Democratic primary race (YouTube, 2020; Twitter; 2020). However, as the race came down to Sen. Sanders and the former Vice President Joe Biden, the accounts’ focus shifted to Biden’s inconsistent record on budgetary issues and social programs like social security and Medicare (Twitter, 2020). I first came across these videos on my Twitter timeline in late 2019 but when I saw their posts about Biden’s inconsistency, it made me think about the role of explicit displays of political inconsistency in an individual’s vote choice. Can information about a candidate’s consistency, or lack thereof, influence an individual’s propensity to vote for said candidate? This research seeks to build on existing research regarding public opinion formation, voter decision-making, and the concept of ‘consistency’ in the political arena.

II. Literature Review

In his 1972 paper “The Politician’s Dilemma,” Thomas R. Ireland concludes that “the politician, as a politician, is primarily interested in election, no objective social analysis, and his judgment can become quite biased by his political interest.” Political officials, in a ruthless pursuit of office, have said or done just about everything in hopes of gaining voters’ support. But how do individual voters respond to this pursuit, especially if the candidate’s political

record, as well as reputation, becomes inconsistent as a result? Past scholarship regarding ‘consistency’ has focused on the consistency of public opinion toward political issues (Bowles and Richardson, 1969; Beck and Parker, 1985; Garner and Palmer, 2011), as well as the level of “consistency” between party platforms and individuals’ general principles. There is, however, a subfield of political psychology that has focused on how individuals would respond to explicit displays of consistent or inconsistent behavior or attitudes (McCaul et al, 1995). Allgeier et al (1979) found that individuals perceived strangers that changed their positions as being less decisive and less reliable. The negative evaluation of attitude change that they record is referred to as the “waffle phenomenon.” The name comes from a statement made by former President Gerald Ford in a statement regarding his opponent in the 1976 presidential election: “He wanders, he wavers, he waffles and he wiggles...Jimmy Carter will say anything to be president.” Extending Allgeier et al (1979)’s findings to political candidates, Hoffman and Carver (1984) found that students were more likely to support candidates that they agreed with and were consistent over a period. Scholars have also investigated how political party affiliation could affect the consistency effects that Allgeier et al (1979) had reported. Carlson and Dolan (1985), in their research regarding this topic, predicted that similarities in party affiliation would diminish the voters’ consideration of a politician’s consistency. While they were unsuccessful in supporting this prediction, their data did reaffirm previous work showing that respondents rated a consistent politician more favorably than an inconsistent one. In my pursuit of finding comparative literature for this research, there were very few scholarly papers that focused on the effects of candidate consistency on vote choice in the 21st century (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2010; Croco and Gartner, 2014; Doherty et al, 2016). This research will build on existing scholarship by bringing the discussion into the contemporary media landscape. By using a fictional online news article as the vehicle for spreading political information, this research will

hope to explore how displays of consistency influence vote choice in this new media environment.

III. Experimental Design

The survey experiment considers whether being exposed to information about a politician's consistency would lead to increased support for said politician. The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics and was disseminated online using Facebook, Instagram, and Groupme over a two-week period. The experiment was sent to students from across the country, as well as family members and friends of family. In hopes of getting an even distribution of respondents' age, gender, political affiliations, the experiment was not only sent to students at GW. To get older, as well as more conservative respondents, I used my mother, father, and grandmother as bridges in a larger online network to contact potential respondents.

In this experiment, the independent variable is the exposure to information about consistency or inconsistency while the dependent variables are the feeling thermometer (FT) of a fictional political candidate (John Smith of Point Valley) and a Likert scale of the respondent's likelihood of voting for Smith in an upcoming city election. Other variables collected include age, gender, highest level of education completed, and political party affiliation.

Hypotheses

These hypotheses are largely rooted in the findings of Allgeier (1979), Hoffman and Carver (1984), Carlson and Dover (1985), and McCaul et al (1996), as well as my personal experiences on Twitter and YouTube. Past scholarship has portrayed the causal relationship between a politician's consistency and voters' feelings of positivity. While this previous

research has also focused on whether political agreement, partisan affiliation, or specific policy influences these consistency effects, the hypotheses below bring attention to the direct relationship between explicit portrayals of political consistency and voter support.

General hypothesis is as follows:

A candidate's political consistency, as communicated through a newspaper article, will cause voters to respond favorably to said candidate.

Null hypothesis: A candidate's political consistency, as communicated through a newspaper article, will not cause voters to respond favorably to said candidate.

Individual hypotheses, for each treatment group and outcome of interest:

H1: I think that exposure to information about a **candidate's consistency** will inspire respondents to be **more willing to vote** for said candidate, than if they did not receive this information.

Null hypothesis: Exposure to information about a candidate's consistency will not inspire respondents to be more willing to vote for said candidate.

H2: I think that exposure to information about a **candidate's inconsistency** will inspire respondents to be **less willing to vote** for said candidate, than if they did not receive this information.

Null hypothesis: Exposure to information about a candidate's inconsistency will not inspire respondents to be less willing to vote for said candidate.

H3: I think that exposure to information about a **candidate's consistency** will inspire respondents to **think more positively** about said candidate, than if they did not receive this information.

Null hypothesis: Exposure to information about a candidate's consistency will not inspire respondents to think more positively about said candidate.

H4: I think that exposure to information about a **candidate's inconsistency** will inspire respondents to **think more negatively** about said candidate, than if they did not receive this information.

Null hypothesis: Exposure to information about a candidate's inconsistency will not inspire respondents to think more negatively about said candidate.

Survey Design

Every survey respondent was asked to answer each of the demographic questions. After each was answered, they were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions:

1. Receives information about a candidate's history of consistency
2. Receives information about a candidate's history of inconsistency
3. Receives information about the community center where the candidate announced their fictional campaign (placebo)

For this experiment, the condition groups were given one of three versions of a passage from a fictional news article about the politician launching his candidacy (Figure 1). In an attempt to eliminate any potential biases, I used a generic name for the candidate, John Smith, and a randomly generated city name, Point Valley. I also made sure to make both the election, as well as the candidate, nonpartisan, in order to avoid any bias among respondents. Each passage began with the same paragraph explaining who the candidate is, what election they were running for, and where they had announced their candidacy. The passage given to the consistency condition included information about Smith's reputation of being a principled voice in local politics that has stayed consistent over several years and election cycles. The passage assigned to the inconsistency treatment details Smith's reputation of being a rather inconsistent voice in local politics, including how he had been running on issues he had previously opposed. The placebo condition received a passage about the history of the city community center, as well

as information about the weather the day Smith announced his candidacy. All the passages assigned to respondents were seven sentences long and were stylized to look like an online news article.

After they were exposed to one of the three conditions, they were then asked to answer questions about how they feel about the candidate (on a FT of 0-100) and if they would vote for the candidate if they took part in the city election later that year (on a Likert scale of 1-5; Definitely will to Definitely will not).

IV. Methodology

After collecting the data in Qualtrics, basic linear regression models were created in order to study the causal relationship between the variables. Bivariate and multivariate regressions were used to examine the relationship between the conditions and outcome variables, while also accounting for other variables such as age, partisan affiliation, and education. When the survey was initially created, not all questions had been marked with “Force Response,” the tool Qualtrics uses to ensure respondents answer every question. As a result, one respondent left both outcome variable questions blank and three left just the feeling thermometer question unanswered. To ensure that this did not skew the results in any way, these values were re-coded as the average for each respective variable (41.51807 for FT_1 and 3.151163 for VoteChance). The regressions employed can be viewed in Figures 3-10 in the Appendix.

V. Findings/Results

The experimental survey data (n=87) shows that I can reject the null hypotheses for H2 ($p < .001$; Figure 3) and H4 ($p < .05$; Figure 4). While both treatment conditions caused respondents

to say that they were less willing to support the candidate, the inconsistency treatment group had a much larger coefficient (.633 on a 5-point scale) than the consistency condition (.046; Figure 3). The data shows that a person's negative "feelings" toward a candidate, as well as their unwillingness to vote for the candidate, can be caused by an exposure to information about a politician's lack of consistency. On the other hand, while exposure to the consistency treatment was able to increase the positivity of a respondent's feelings toward the candidate, the coefficient was not statistically significant (Figure 4). Lastly, while the effects of the consistency treatment were stronger for those who were older than 35, the effects of the inconsistency treatment were much greater for respondents who were younger than 35 ($p < .05$; Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8), as well as those who identified as (lean or strong) Republican ($p > 0.05$; Figures 9 and 10).

VI. Discussion

The data shows that media frames of a politician's history of consistency, or lack thereof, could have a serious impact on voters' feelings toward the candidate, as well as their propensity to vote for them. Reaffirming the findings of previous research into the perceptions of politicians' consistency, the data displays the causal relationship between information about a politician's inconsistency and negative feelings regarding their candidacy/campaign. However, the consistency treatment's inability to significantly push voters to become supportive of Smith is also telling. Hearing about a candidate's history of consistency was not enough to secure voters' support. This leads me to believe that voters, especially younger ones (less than 35) expect a politician to be consistent in their rhetoric, or ideology, and therefore punish those who 'flip-flop' or adopt policy they once criticized, by withholding their support. In the context of the 2020 Democratic Primaries, this development would make sense. The politician who had gained a reputation for sticking to the same message over and over again was the same candidate

that secured the votes of young Democrats in the first few 2020 primary contests (Keith, 2015; Keisa et al, 2020; Bronner and Bacon, 2020). This research builds on existing findings regarding perceptions of political consistency and contributes to the ongoing discussion surrounding how consistency, or a lack thereof, can influence an individual's vote choice.

This 2020 primary contest between a politician who has been consistent in-principle over the last few decades, and a politician who has largely adapted their policies to the progression of the American Overton window, alongside this survey data, displays a larger paradigm shift in American politics. Although Sanders was unsuccessful in the primary race, his rhetorical consistency has helped thousands of Americans come to terms with the long history of imperfection within the American government. His unrivaled support among young voters is a sign that young Americans are interested in a consistent, values-based approach to politics that seeks to accomplish sweeping change to a severely flawed system. This theory of politics stands in opposition to the standard of the Democratic Party in recent years, in which it has largely served as a big-tent opposition party to Trump and the Republican Party. The youth's attention political sentiment that is (1) more than just standing in opposition to the President, and (2) acknowledges issues like universal healthcare, a Green New Deal, and tuition-free public college, shows that in the coming years, there might be a significant change in how political issues are discussed within the Democratic Party.

Potential Limitations

There are a few limitations to using fictional news articles as vehicles for political information in research. First, there are usually several other factors that contribute to a voter's decision-making process, in addition to whether they are exposed to information about a

candidate being politically consistent or not. Also, because the fictional election and candidate were nonpartisan, this research cannot contribute anything to the existing research surrounding the role of political parties in perceptions of political consistency. Another limitation is that this research cannot speak to the transmission of information through other media channels.

Information about a politician's consistency or inconsistency is not always spread through online news articles. Interpersonal communication, television news, as well as social media, all play large roles in a voter's exposure to political information, especially during a local election.

In addition to this, there are also limitations with the actual information that was included in the fictional article passages. First, using information about an individual building a reputation within the locality could have had an influence on the survey responses. Another limitation is the difference in the language used between the treatments used for the consistency and inconsistency conditions. While the consistency treatment mentions that Smith will continue fighting for his platform if he is elected office, it would be odd for a newspaper to write that he *would not* pursue the policies he's running on, in the context of the inconsistency treatment. Despite the neutrality of the language used in the survey, there is still some room for priors to affect survey responses. Information about a city community center and public green could have primed respondents with thoughts about public investments, causing them to believe that Point Valley is already a well-functioning city. Although the layout of the treatment articles was supposed to resemble the style of online news articles, there were also some significant details that could have been improved. For example, there was no branding or advertising on the treatment passage. In addition to this, there was no mention of an author of the article. This detail, if corrected, could have added to the authenticity of the treatment article.

Another limitation of this research would be the inability to apply the findings to a full range of ages of voters. The survey, although it was sent to individuals of all ages, was largely answered by a younger, more liberal sample of the general population. As demonstrated in Figure 13, a wide majority of the respondents were in the 18 to 24 years old age range. Most respondents identified as being either 'Strong Democrat,' 'Lean Democrat,' or 'Neither Democrat nor Republican' (Figure 14). Although there were a similar number of respondents that considered themselves to lean Republican as there were independents, there were very few respondents that identified themselves as 'Strong Republican.'

VII. Conclusion

The survey experiment data two conclusions. First, exposure to information about a politician's consistency can have a significant effect on voters' feelings toward a politician. Second, exposure to information about the lack of consistency in a candidate's political career has the potential to influence a voter's chances of supporting said candidate in an upcoming election. The survey results speak to how voters, especially younger ones, perceive and respond to explicit displays of political consistency communicated through an online news article. While this research had only studied immediate consistency effects without any mention of specific policy or political affiliation, future research into this subject will have to focus on the duration of effects over time, as well as the role of partisanship, governmental policy, and other potential sources of political information in vote choice.

VIII. References

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IX. Appendix

(**Figure 1**) Text scheme for experimental treatments. Italicized text indicates passages that correspond with one of three randomized conditions: consistency, inconsistency, or a placebo about a city community center. The corresponding condition is stated in brackets.

Point Valley Resident John Smith Announces Candidacy for Council Seat

There is a new candidate running in the Point Valley city elections this fall. John Smith is running for a seat on the city's nonpartisan council. Smith, 47, announced his candidacy at the Point Valley Community Center yesterday. 38

[Consistency] *Over the past decade, John Smith has built the reputation of being a consistent voice in Point Valley politics. He has stated time after time again, that he is an unwavering defender of his principles and values. Smith has been a proponent of many of the ideas on his platform for several years now, and has said that he will continue fighting for them if he is elected in November.*

Smith, in his announcement speech, said that he would be running on many of the same policies that he had run on in his 2012 and 2016 campaigns for city council.

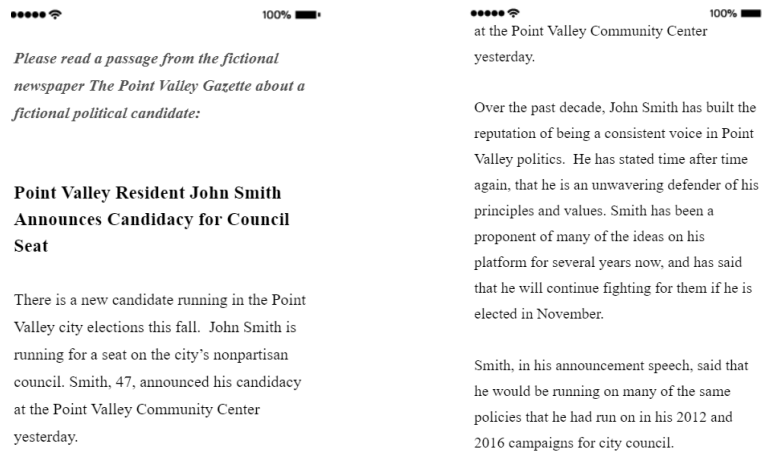
[Inconsistency] *Over the past decade, John Smith has built the reputation of being a rather inconsistent voice in Point Valley politics. He has recently come under criticism from members of the community for changing positions on issues. Smith has recently adopted new policies to his platform that he has previously deemed politically irresponsible and irrelevant.*

Smith, in his announcement speech, said that he would be running on many issues that he had opposed in his 2012 and 2016 campaigns for city council.

[Placebo] *Built in 1926, the Point Valley Community Center sits at the intersection of Park and Main St. The community center was designed by Anthony Johnson and Timothy Taylor and took nearly two years to build. John Smith spoke just outside the community center, next to the Point Valley Green.*

It was 68 degrees and partly cloudy yesterday when Smith announced his candidacy for city council.

(Figure 2) The mobile version of the treatment given to those assigned to the consistency condition.



(Figure 3) Results for regression:

```
model.5 <- lm(VoteChance ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Age + Education + PartyID,
data=finaldata)
summary(model.5)
```

```
Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  2.728823   0.246964  11.049  < 2e-16 ***
Consistency   0.045958   0.164114   0.280  0.780174
Inconsistency 0.633246   0.167018   3.791  0.000289 ***
Age           0.015121   0.053423   0.283  0.777869
Education     0.031697   0.058840   0.539  0.591591
PartyID       0.007444   0.060963   0.122  0.903114
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

(Figure 4) Results for regression:

```
model.10 <- lm(FT_1 ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Age + Education + PartyID,
data=finaldata)
summary(model.10)
```

```
Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  61.054    6.941    8.796 2.02e-13 ***
Consistency   2.148     4.599    0.467  0.6416
Inconsistency -10.429    4.719   -2.210  0.0299 *
Age           -3.258     1.509   -2.160  0.0338 *
Education     -1.078     1.660   -0.650  0.5177
PartyID        1.376     1.711    0.805  0.4234
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

(Figure 5) Results for regression of ages younger than 35 (FT):

```
ageconsistency1 <- lm(FT_1 ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Education + PartyID,
data=subset(finaldata, Age < 4))
summary(ageconsistency1)
```

```
Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   51.9521     8.6149   6.031 2.1e-07 ***
Consistency     0.7557     5.3152   0.142  0.8875
Inconsistency -11.7350     5.7766  -2.031  0.0476 *
Education      -2.3534     2.1474  -1.096  0.2785
PartyID         4.9538     2.1627   2.291  0.0263 *
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

(Figure 6) Results for regression of ages older than 35 (FT):

```
ageconsistency2 <- lm(FT_1 ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Education + PartyID,
data=subset(finaldata, Age > 4))
summary(ageconsistency2)
```

```
Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   61.5587    23.1136   2.663  0.0139 *
Consistency     6.7556    10.1957   0.663  0.5142
Inconsistency  -7.3037    10.0105  -0.730  0.4730
Education      -0.4398     3.5364  -0.124  0.9021
PartyID        -4.8388     3.6450  -1.328  0.1974
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

(Figure 7) Results for regression for ages younger than 35 (1-5 scale)

```
ageconsistency3 <- lm(VoteChance ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Education + PartyID,
data=subset(finaldata, Age < 4))
summary(ageconsistency3)
```

```
Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   3.195079   0.331401   9.641 6.68e-13 ***
Consistency     0.042672   0.204468   0.209  0.8356
Inconsistency   0.447354   0.222218   2.013  0.0496 *
Education      -0.071124   0.082609  -0.861  0.3934
PartyID        -0.007947   0.083196  -0.096  0.9243
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```


(Figure 8) Results for regression for ages younger than 35 (1-5 scale)

```
ageconsistency4 <- lm(VoteChance ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Education + PartyID,
data=subset(finaldata, Age > 4))
summary(ageconsistency4)
```

```
Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   1.73828    0.61982   2.805  0.01007 *
Consistency    0.12507    0.27341   0.457  0.65165
Inconsistency  0.89741    0.26844   3.343  0.00282 **
Education     0.14345    0.09483   1.513  0.14399
PartyID        0.11292    0.09774   1.155  0.25985
---
Signif. codes:
0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

(Figure 9) Results for regression for identified lean or strong Democrat (1-5 scale)

```
partyconsistency3 <- lm(VoteChance ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Education + Age,
data=subset(finaldata, PartyID < 3))
summary(partyconsistency3)
```

```
Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   3.00129    0.37901   7.919 1.02e-09 ***
Consistency   -0.03081    0.24837  -0.124  0.9019
Inconsistency  0.64344    0.26168   2.459  0.0184 *
Education     0.02454    0.09989   0.246  0.8072
Age           -0.07241    0.11093  -0.653  0.5176
---
Signif. codes:
0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

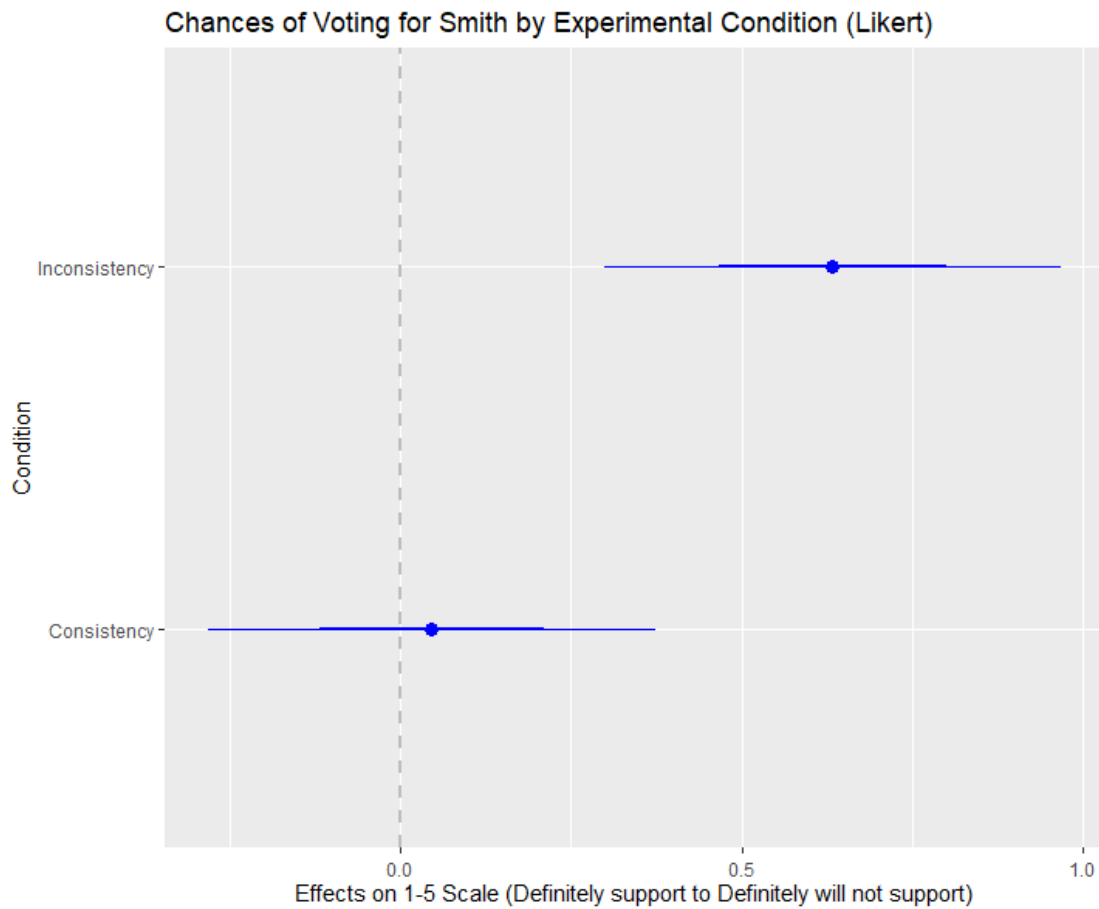
(Figure 10) Results for regression for identified lean or strong Republican (1-5 scale)

```
partyconsistency4 <- lm(VoteChance ~ Consistency + Inconsistency + Education + Age,
data=subset(finaldata, PartyID > 3))
summary(partyconsistency4)
```

```
Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   3.00129    0.37901   7.919 1.02e-09 ***
Consistency   -0.03081    0.24837  -0.124  0.9019
Inconsistency  0.64344    0.26168   2.459  0.0184 *
Education     0.02454    0.09989   0.246  0.8072
Age           -0.07241    0.11093  -0.653  0.5176
---
Signif. codes:
0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1
```

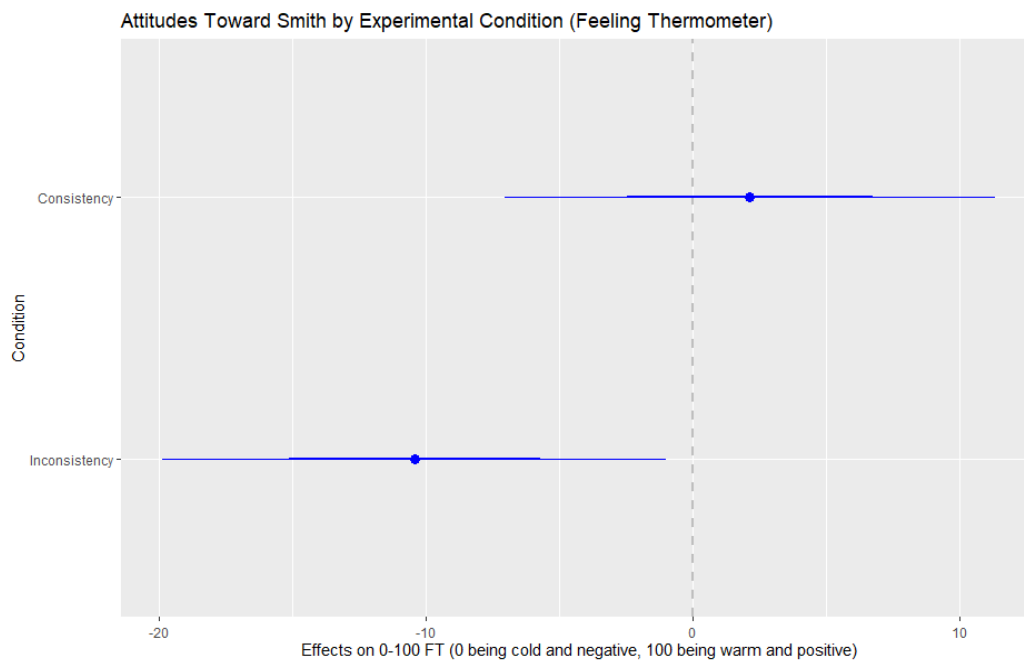
(Figure 11) Coefplot visualization of regression model.5

```
coefplot(model.5, title="Chances of Voting for Smith by Experimental Condition",  
intercept=FALSE, ylab="Condition", xlab="Effects on 1-5 Scale (Definitely support to  
Definitely will not support)", sort="magnitude", predictors=c("Consistency", "Inconsistency"))
```



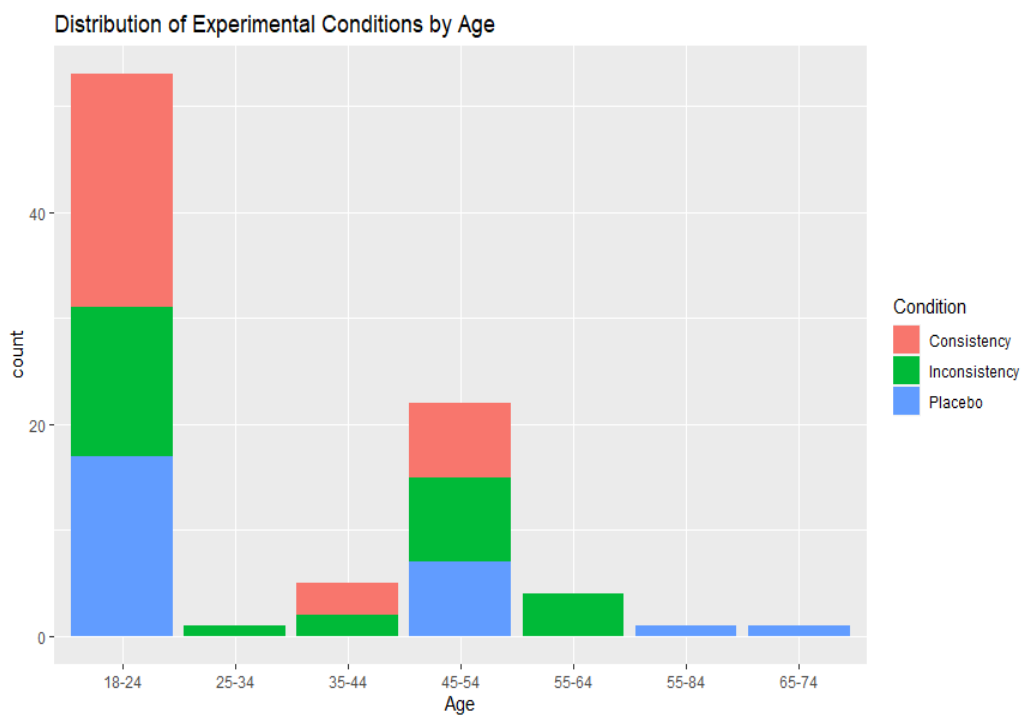
(Figure 12) Coefplot visualization of regression model.5

```
coefplot(model.10, title="Feelings Toward Smith by Experimental Condition (Feeling  
Thermometer)", intercept=FALSE, ylab="Condition", xlab="Effects on 0-100 FT (0 being cold  
and negative, 100 being warm and positive)", sort="magnitude", predictors=c("Consistency",  
"Inconsistency"))
```



(Figure 13) Distribution of experimental conditions by age group.

```
finaldata$Condition[finaldata$Condition == 1] <- "Consistency"  
finaldata$Condition[finaldata$Condition == 2] <- "Inconsistency"  
finaldata$Condition[finaldata$Condition == 3] <- "Placebo"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 1] <- "Less than 18"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 2] <- "18-24"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 3] <- "25-34"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 4] <- "35-44"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 5] <- "45-54"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 6] <- "55-64"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 7] <- "65-74"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 8] <- "55-84"  
finaldata$Age[finaldata$Age == 9] <- "85 or older"  
agecondition <- ggplot(data = finaldata, mapping = aes(x = Age, fill = Condition))  
agecondition + geom_bar() + labs(title="Distribution of Experimental Conditions by Age")
```



(Figure 14) Distribution of Experimental Conditions by Party Affiliation

```
partyidcondition <- ggplot(data = finaldata, mapping = aes(x = PartyID, color = Condition))  
partyidcondition + geom_bar() + labs(title="Distribution of Experimental Conditions by Party  
Affiliation", x =" Party Affiliation (Strong Democrat to Strong Republican, 3 = Neither)")
```

