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*American Politics Research* 2010 38: 1102 originally published online 19 July 2010

DOI: 10.1177/1532673X10371298

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American Politics Research

38(6) 1102–1129

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DOI: 10.1177/1532673X10371298

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**Danny Hayes<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

Assessments of candidates' personal attributes are known to affect vote choice in presidential elections, but little work has explored trait perceptions and trait voting in congressional contests. In this article, I examine the role of candidate traits in U.S. Senate campaigns, drawing on unique survey data from the 2006 midterms. I find that voters' evaluations of candidate qualities are less influenced by party stereotypes than in presidential elections and are strongly related to whether a candidate is an incumbent. And just as in campaigns for the White House, trait perceptions affect vote choice. But sitting Senators hold trait advantages that incumbent presidents do not necessarily receive, which makes leadership a particularly influential attribute in Senate races. In addition, trait voting is not contingent on campaign intensity and is strongest among the least politically aware citizens. In general, the results provide evidence for the applicability of presidential trait theories to congressional elections but show that incumbency and political awareness condition their effects in Senate contests.

## Keywords

U.S. Senate elections, political campaigns, voting, candidate evaluations, trait perceptions, candidate qualities, political information

What role do U.S. voters' assessments of candidates' personal traits play in shaping their choices at the ballot box? In the past four decades, much work has shown that perceptions of presidential candidates' attributes—leadership,

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empathy, trustworthiness, and the like—can influence voting behavior.<sup>1</sup> Although reasonable skepticism persists about the magnitude of the effects of candidate personality (Bartels, 2002b; Kilburn, 2005), the consensus is that it plays a role.

But in congressional elections, there is surprisingly sparse evidence for the same dynamic and some reason to suspect that the influence of candidate traits is different from that in presidential campaigns. The magnitude and nature of personality effects in presidential contests is at least partially the product of a highly saturated information environment and nonstop television exposure to candidates. These conditions do not characterize many congressional campaigns, and the power of incumbency in House and Senate elections could amplify or attenuate the influence of traits on vote choice.

Few studies have sought to explore how these differences in the context of legislative campaigns may alter the role played by candidate traits. And even fewer national surveys of congressional voters have included appropriate measures of trait perceptions; many of the studies often cited as providing evidence for trait effects in legislative contests are based on experiments or survey measures whose validity has been challenged in the voting literature. As a result, there is a need for an investigation of trait effects in congressional contests that explores these contextual differences with better data.

In this article, I examine trait voting in U.S. Senate contests, focusing on (a) the role of partisan stereotypes and incumbency in shaping assessments of candidate attributes, (b) the importance of campaign intensity in conditioning the influence of traits on vote choice, (c) the mediating role played by a voter's level of political awareness, and (d) the specific traits that voters care about. All are areas in which the existing literature posits that trait effects may play out differently than in presidential contests. To do so, I analyze data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) in 30 U.S. Senate races during the 2006 midterm elections, drawing on measures of trait perceptions that overcome the limitations of previous data.

The results show some evidence that partisan stereotypes influence voters' assessments of candidate attributes but that incumbency plays a stronger role in shaping those assessments than in presidential elections. And just as in campaigns for the White House, trait perceptions affect vote choice. But sitting Senators hold trait advantages that incumbent presidents do not necessarily receive, which makes leadership particularly important in Senate races. In addition, trait voting is not contingent on campaign intensity and is strongest among the least politically aware citizens. In general, the findings provide evidence for the applicability of presidential trait theories to congressional elections but show that incumbency and political awareness are important in conditioning their effects in Senate contests.

## The Origins of Trait Perceptions in U.S. Senate Elections

When it comes to politics, citizens are, if anything, efficient. Because most people are willing to devote only minimal time and energy to thinking about political matters, political judgments are often the product of a few easily accessible cues, not an exhaustive survey of all the available information (e.g., Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia, 1994). In many cases, those judgments stem from simple stereotypes that help voters “go beyond the data” at hand (Popkin, 1994). Just as people rely on social stereotypes to make judgments about the character, motives, and identities of people they meet in their daily lives (e.g., Aronson, 2004), voters often judge politicians based on simple “schemas” or cues (Feldman & Conover, 1983; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Otatti, 1990; Rahn, 1993; Riggle, Otatti, Wyer, Kuklinski, & Schwartz, 1992).

The same process applies to the evaluation of candidate traits (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Rapoport, Metcalf, & Hartman, 1989). At the presidential level, stereotypes associated with candidates’ party label appear to influence perceptions of their personal qualities. Building on Petrocik’s (1996) theory of “issue ownership” and psychological studies of trait perception (Cantor & Mischel, 1979), Hayes (2005) posits that political parties come to “own” personality traits associated with particular issues. Because Republican candidates typically emphasize themes of national security, law and order, and traditional values, voters associate Grand Old Party (GOP) politicians with the traits of leadership and morality. At the same time, because Democratic candidates focus their attention on promoting the interests of the less fortunate, voters tend to view them as compassionate and empathetic (see also Prysby, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Over time, the parties have developed “trait ownership,” a phenomenon that may also stem from differences in the traits prioritized by Democratic and Republican primary voters (Barker, Lawrence, & Tavits, 2006).

On one hand, we should expect to find trait ownership in Senate elections. Voters routinely make inferences about candidates’ attributes, ideology, and issue positions based on their party affiliation (Feldman & Conover, 1983; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Rahn, 1993), and the relatively low-information contexts of many Senate campaigns may make partisan heuristics even more influential (Huckfeldt, Levine, Morgan, & Sprague, 1999; Taylor & Fiske, 1978). And in an era of increasing elite partisan polarization and the reinvigoration of mass partisanship, candidates likely have a difficult time distancing themselves from the national party image (Bartels, 2000; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Stonecash, Brewer, & Mariani, 2002).

But incumbency may serve as another stereotype or shortcut that could attenuate the effect of party stereotyping (Jacobson, 2004). Members of Congress see their personal image as central to their reelection prospects, and go to great lengths to keep it burnished (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1987; Fenno, 1978, 2007). And voters may stereotype incumbents—in contrast to challengers and open seat candidates—as possessing traits, such as leadership ability, that are typically associated with experience in office (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Fridkin & Kenney, 2007). As a result, incumbents may hold trait advantages over nonincumbents that override the effects of party stereotyping, a pattern not evident in presidential campaigns. If incumbency dilutes the power of partisan stereotypes, then trait ownership may be less applicable in Senate elections.

## Trait Effects in U.S. Senate Elections

Regardless of their origins, we would expect trait perceptions to affect voting behavior in congressional contests. Trait inferences are an inherent part of person perception, and people are quite willing to make judgments about candidates' attributes (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Fridkin & Kenney, 2007; McGraw, 2003). Voters may have a hard time discerning the fiscal wisdom of a candidate's tax proposal, but they are probably quite comfortable judging whether he cares about people or has leadership skills, evaluations that can affect whether they believe a candidate is fit for public office (e.g., Funk, 1997).

Moreover, legislative representation in the United States is actively "personalized" by incumbents who attempt to develop strong personal ties with their constituents. (Cain et al., 1987). Fenno (1978) argues based on his observation of members of Congress that "presentation of self" to their constituents is critical. Incumbents' interactions with voters are not issueless—that is, devoid of policy content—but much of their engagement both between and during campaigns, is designed to develop a personal connection. The hope is that on election day, these positive feelings translate into a vote for reelection: "The expression [a member of Congress] tries to give off in all his person-to-person dealings," Fenno (1978, p. 65) writes, "is that he knows them, that they know him as a person, that they are all part of the same community, and that his constituents, therefore, have every reason to make favorable inferences about him." Jacobson (2004) notes that members of Congress often gain and maintain office by "eliciting trust and regard as individuals" (p. 94), underscoring the point made by Fenno's (1978) campaign trail observations. The little research that has directly examined trait voting in U.S. Senate and House

elections has found significant effects (Druckman, 2004; Jacobson & Wolfinger, 1989; Miller, 1990).

But Senate elections differ from presidential contests in ways that might make trait effects conditional on campaign context (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Westlye, 1991). Senate races vary dramatically in “intensity” (Sulkin, 2001; Westlye, 1991)—the amount of attention given them by the news media and in advertising campaigns. Many campaigns—especially those where incumbents face only feeble opposition—receive little public attention. In those races, voters are unlikely to learn about the candidates’ personalities, or much else. In addition, if the influence of candidate personality is amplified by televised exposure to candidates (Druckman, 2003; Hart, 1999; Keeter, 1987; see Hayes, 2009, for a review), then the lower levels of television coverage in low-key Senate campaigns may make candidate traits less influential in these contests. This is the argument that Westlye (1991) uses to explain why issue voting should be more prominent in intense campaigns.

But because trait assessments require less specific information about the candidates than issue voting, there is a competing hypothesis: Trait voting will not be mediated by campaign intensity. Trait inferences about people, including aspirants for political office, are “relatively automatic” (McGraw, 2003, p. 398). Thus, even minimal exposure to candidates—in a handful of news stories or even through conversations with acquaintances—may give citizens the ability to make these judgments, regardless of their accuracy. Unlike issue positions, voters simply do not need much information to cast a ballot based on traits, because they can make those assessments fairly easily. As a result, it is possible that the intensity of campaigns does not mediate trait effects.

Individual-level characteristics—and in particular, political awareness—could also play a role in determining when trait voting will occur. The literature at the presidential level has concluded that traits matter more for well-informed than for poorly informed voters (Glasgow & Alvarez, 2000; Miller et al., 1986) or equally for the two groups (Glass, 1985; Hayes, 2009; Pierce, 1993; Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, & Sullivan, 1990).<sup>3</sup> In Senate campaigns, however, we would anticipate traits to matter more for less aware voters. Information about candidates’ stands on issues in congressional campaigns is harder to come by for less attentive citizens, because there tends to be less attention to substantive policy debates (Kahn & Kenney, 1999). Thus, the individuals most likely to vote on the basis of issues would be the more politically aware, and those policy considerations should dilute the influence of trait perceptions. By contrast, poorly informed voters are less likely to know much more than basic information about the candidates, which likely includes some assessments of their personal attributes. As a result, we would

expect poorly informed voters, vis-à-vis the politically aware, to rely more on impressions of the candidates' personal characteristics in making a candidate choice.

Finally, the literature also suggests voters may care about different traits in congressional contests than in presidential elections. Because members of legislative bodies are not unitary actors, voters may be less concerned with their leadership abilities than in the case of a president or mayor, whose office requires a good deal of symbolic and political strength. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) find in a laboratory experiment that perceptions of a candidate's leadership abilities were a stronger predictor of vote choice in executive than legislative contests, but that conclusion has not been subjected to a test in an actual campaign. Studies of presidential campaigns find leadership to be a central component of candidate evaluation, but it bears exploration whether the same is true for Senate contests.

Although a fair amount of literature has explored the role of candidate attributes in congressional contests, much of it fails to satisfactorily answer the central questions of how voters form trait impressions and how those perceptions influence voting in actual campaigns. Research has shown that trait information is available to voters in many congressional campaigns (Kahn & Gordon, 1997; Kahn & Kenney, 1999), but little of that work has been paired with analysis of survey data in these campaigns. Experimental work has valuably identified the cognitive processes that illuminate voter decision making (Funk, 1997; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a; Iyengar, Valentino, Ansolabehere, & Simon, 1997; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005), but these studies cannot provide evidence of the influence of candidate traits amid the cacophony of a real-world campaign.<sup>4</sup>

The studies that have used surveys to examine the effect of trait perceptions on candidate evaluation and voting are limited in important ways. Based on analyses of citizens' responses to open-ended questions asking what they like and dislike about the candidates, Miller (1990) and Jacobson and Wolfinger (1989) find that trait perceptions influenced voting in House and Senate contests. Those results are subject to criticism, however, given the questions that have been raised about how accurately people can articulate why they voted for or against a candidate (Rahn, Krosnick, & Breuning, 1994; Smith, 1989).<sup>5</sup> Druckman's (2004; Druckman & Parkin, 2005) work on the 2000 Minnesota Senate campaign employs better trait measures, but its conclusions, based on a study of a single race, are necessarily limited.<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, Fridkin and Kenney (2007) is the only study similar to this one, though their focus is more squarely on comparing incumbent and challenger trait perceptions and voting, and the analysis does not include open seat races.

The following analyses examine trait perceptions and trait effects using data from a nationally representative survey of voters in 30 U.S. Senate campaigns during the 2006 campaign. The study overcomes the limitations of earlier studies by using closed-ended measures of trait perceptions—identical to those used to tap voters' assessments of presidential candidate traits in the American National Elections Studies (ANES)—rather than likes/dislikes batteries; collecting data from multiple races; and directly testing the effects of trait evaluations in actual elections, while controlling for other factors known to shape vote choice.

To be sure, this approach has drawbacks of its own. The 2006 election was unquestionably bad for Republicans, which raises legitimate questions about the generalizability of any patterns that emerge from the analysis. Given the prevailing mood during the midterms—61% of registered voters in mid-October thought the country was on the “wrong track”<sup>7</sup>—it would not be surprising if ratings of GOP candidates' traits suffered in unrepresentative ways. Overall displeasure with the Republican Congress, George W. Bush, and the war in Iraq may have permeated citizens' judgments about all aspects of the party's candidates, including their personality traits (Jacobson, 2007). These circumstances would seem to make for hard tests of the trait ownership and trait effects hypotheses. The electoral landscape may have been tilted so steeply in favor of Democrats that survey data may show massive Republican disadvantages across the board. At the same time, the effects of candidate personality on vote choice may evaporate in an environment in which voters are acutely concerned with weightier matters like an unpopular war. Thus, the results should be interpreted with these contextual limitations in mind.

## **Data**

The data for this article come from the CCES, a collaborative enterprise of more than three dozen academic institutions that organized a survey of Americans during the 2006 midterm elections. The survey was conducted by Polimetrix, Inc. Each university was given the opportunity to design a questionnaire administered to a representative sample of 1,000 Americans, who also filled out a longer survey of “common content” questions. The key measures in this article were included in the University of Texas module in the CCES.<sup>8</sup> The survey included a host of measures typical in congressional election studies: demographic questions, party identification, ideology, candidate evaluation, and vote choice. The University of Texas module also included questions about the personality traits of the Republican and Democratic Senate candidates in the respondent's state.



Because of survey time constraints, roughly half the sample was asked the trait battery. In all, the trait measures were asked of about 500 respondents from 30 states with Senate elections in 2006.<sup>9</sup> Though the sample does not constitute a random draw within each state, the large number of elections allow for an examination of trait perceptions and their effects across a range of races with differing characteristics. Aggregating survey respondents from multiple states is a common approach in U.S. Senate election research (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Lau & Pomper, 2001). Table A.1 displays the candidates, their incumbency status, and the states included in the analysis.

Respondents were asked to assess the candidates on four traits: “provides strong leadership,” “moral,” “compassionate,” and “really cares about people like me.”<sup>10</sup> Following the standard wording of the ANES trait batteries, respondents were asked a question in this format: “Think about Rick Santorum, the Republican candidate for U.S. Senator. In your opinion, does the phrase ‘provides strong leadership’ describe Rick Santorum extremely well, quite well, not too well, or not well at all?” Respondents were asked to rate both Republican and Democratic candidates on each trait. The responses were initially coded so that *extremely well* received a score of 3, *quite well* a score of 2, *not too well* a score of 1, and *not well at all* a score of 0. Following Bartels (2002b), I transformed these values into a 0 to 100 rating to ease the interpretation of the descriptive data.<sup>11</sup>

## **Party Stereotyping and Incumbency: How Do Voters See Senate Candidate Traits?**

The responses to these measures allow for a test of the trait ownership hypothesis and the incumbency hypothesis. If partisan stereotyping affects perceptions of Senate candidates, then Republican candidates should be perceived more favorably than Democrats on the leadership and morality measures, whereas Democrats should hold an advantage on compassion and really cares about people like me (which, following convention, I refer to as “empathy” in the remainder of the article). The incumbency hypothesis predicts that incumbents will be perceived more favorably than challengers or open seat candidates, regardless of party affiliation.

In the first two columns of Table 1 (“All Democrats” and “All Republicans”), the trait ownership hypothesis finds mixed support. The comparisons for leadership and morality show little evidence of Republican ownership. Although GOP candidates received slightly higher morality ratings than Democrats—52.4 to 51.7—the difference is not statistically significant ( $p = .79$ ). Moreover, Democrats received higher leadership ratings than

**Table 1.** Mean Trait Ratings for U.S. Senate Candidates, by Party and by Incumbency, 2006 CCES

	Democrats			Republicans		
	All Democrats	All Republicans	Incumbents	Nonincumbents	Incumbents	Nonincumbents
Strong leader	50.8 (31.8) n = 466	48.9 (32.3) n = 466	55.5 (32.7) n = 235	46.0 <sup>^</sup> (30.2) n = 231	54.8 (33.3) n = 196	44.6 <sup>†</sup> (30.9) n = 270
Moral	51.7 (32.4) n = 464	52.4 (33.0) n = 464	53.7 (34.0) n = 234	49.7 <sup>^</sup> (30.6) n = 230	57.4 (33.8) n = 195	48.7 <sup>†</sup> (32.0) n = 269
Empathetic	45.9 (34.1) n = 463	38.2 <sup>*</sup> (34.5) n = 463	47.4 (35.2) n = 233	44.4 (33.0) n = 230	38.4 (35.5) n = 196	38.1 (33.8) n = 267
Compassionate	55.4 (31.4) n = 464	44.8 <sup>*</sup> (32.8) n = 464	56.7 (32.9) n = 234	54.1 (29.9) n = 230	48.1 (34.6) n = 196	42.4 <sup>†</sup> (31.2) n = 268

Note. CCES = Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Cell entries are means, with standard deviations in parentheses. Responses to the trait questions are recorded on a 0 to 100 scale. Table includes only respondents who rated both candidates in their state on the particular trait. Data are from the 2006 CCES.

<sup>\*</sup>Difference between Democratic and Republican candidates is significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>^</sup>Difference between Democratic incumbent and nonincumbent candidates is significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>†</sup>Difference between Republican incumbent and nonincumbent candidates is significant at  $p < .05$ .

Republicans, at 50.8 to 48.9, a difference that also falls short of statistical significance ( $p = .42$ ).

On the other hand, as predicted by the trait ownership hypothesis, Democrats held large advantages on their party's traits. Democratic candidates on average received a rating of 55.4 on compassion, compared with 44.8 for Republicans, a statistically significant difference of more than 10 points ( $p < .05$ ). Likewise, survey respondents saw Democratic candidates as significantly more empathetic than Republicans, giving them a nearly 8-point advantage on empathy, 45.9 to 38.2 ( $p < .05$ ).<sup>12</sup> Just as in presidential campaigns, congressional voters view Democrats as more caring than their GOP counterparts (Hayes, 2005).

Given the very low baseline of Republican support in 2006, the fact that the GOP did not "lose" the leadership and morality comparisons to the Democrats, even in the face of such public discontent, suggests the importance of party reputations. One interpretation is that the default stereotype of Republicans allowed them to at least "tie" the Democrats on these traits—even scoring slightly higher morality ratings, despite the scandals involving lobbyist Jack Abramoff and Florida Republican Congressman Mark Foley's communications with congressional pages. Whether this is evidence for "ownership" of GOP traits is debatable, but it seems to point to the relevance of partisan stereotyping in the process of trait attribution. Critically, the relative advantages of Democrats are much larger—and statistically significant—on the Democratic traits. This, of course, remains speculative, given that these comparisons are based on a single election year.

The incumbency hypothesis fares somewhat better. The final four columns of Table 1 present comparisons between each party's incumbents and challengers/open seat candidates.<sup>13</sup> Looking first at the Democratic candidates, incumbents were seen as substantially stronger leaders than nonincumbents (55.5 to 46.0;  $p < .05$ ) and slightly more moral (53.7 to 49.7;  $p < .05$ ). Although the differences on compassionate and empathetic are not statistically significant, Democratic nonincumbents held no trait advantages over incumbents. Likewise, Republican incumbents had large advantages over GOP challengers and open seat candidates on the questions of strong leadership and morality, as well as compassionate.

In summary, perceptions of Senate candidate traits appear more heavily influenced by incumbency than party affiliation, in contrast to presidential contests. Party stereotypes appeared to provide Democrats with the expected advantages on compassion and empathy, but Republicans did not benefit from their party's reputation on the remaining traits. Trait ownership, at least in the 2006 Senate contests, is limited. Incumbency appears to be a more

powerful source of trait perceptions, especially when it comes to assessing Senate candidates' leadership abilities and moral fortitude. Because leadership has in presidential elections been strongly related to vote choice, this advantage could be especially beneficial for incumbents in Senate contests.

It is one thing to learn that voters' assessments of candidate traits are influenced by their party affiliation and incumbency status. But does this matter? Do voters take these attributes into account on Election Day? And if so, does the prevalence of trait voting vary according to campaign intensity and individual-level political awareness? I turn now to those questions.

## **Do Trait Perceptions Affect Vote Choice in U.S. Senate Elections?**

The central hypothesis is that, controlling for other factors known to shape candidate evaluation, individuals' perceptions of their Senate candidates' traits will influence their vote choice. Testing this hypothesis requires a model explaining a respondent's vote. The dependent variable is the respondent's self-reported vote choice from the CCES postelection survey. The variable is coded 1 for a vote for the GOP candidate, 0 for the Democrat.

The key independent variable is a comparative trait index.<sup>14</sup> I created the variable by first summing a respondent's rating of the Republican candidate on each trait, which ranged from 0 (*not well at all*) to 3 (*extremely well*). Thus, the Republican candidate could receive a rating from 0 (*not well at all* on all four traits) to +12 (*extremely well* on all four traits). I then did the same for the Democratic candidate and subtracted the Democratic rating from the Republican rating to create the comparative measure. The trait index thus ranges from -12 (the most pro-Democratic rating) to +12 (the most pro-Republican rating). I use this comparative trait measure instead of separate variables for each candidate in light of the evidence that voters do not evaluate candidates separately but, rather, in reference to the alternative (Rahn et al., 1990). If trait perceptions affect vote choice, the coefficient for the variable will be positive and significant—increases in the Republican trait advantage will increase the probability of a Republican vote. A host of controls account for individual-level and contextual factors known to influence vote choice.<sup>15</sup>

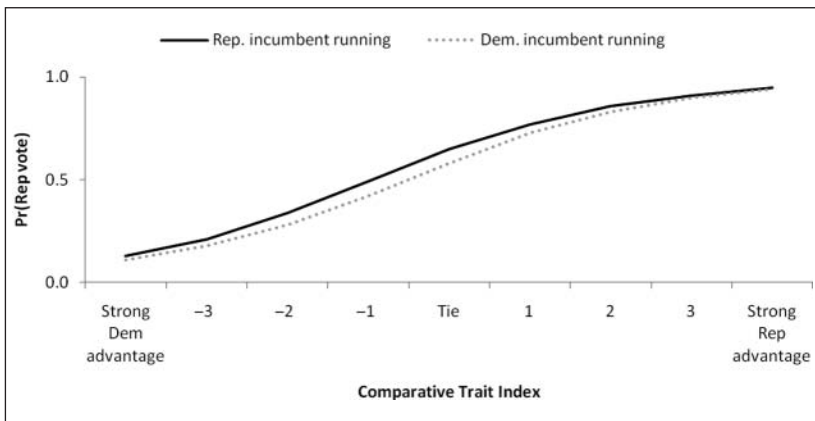
The results of the logit model are presented in the "Trait Index Model" column of Table 2. Trait perceptions clearly influence voting behavior in Senate contests. Even controlling for party identification, ideology, views of the Iraq War, and a variety of other variables (whose coefficients are not shown in the table), evaluations of the candidates' personal attributes help explain vote choice.<sup>16</sup> Figure 1 displays the effect of shifting trait perceptions

**Table 2.** Models of the Effect of Trait Evaluations on Vote Choice, 2006 U.S. Senate Elections

	Trait Index Model	Intensity Model	Specific Trait Model	Awareness Model	Awareness + Specific Trait Model
Trait index	0.67* (0.15)	0.75* (0.19)	—	1.55* (0.31)	—
News coverage	—	0.11 (0.10)	—	—	—
Trait index × news coverage	—	-0.01 (0.02)	—	—	—
High awareness Trait index	—	—	—	1.19* (0.59)	0.51 (0.71)
× High awareness	—	—	—	-0.93* (0.27)	—
Strong leader	—	—	1.37* (0.45)	—	2.23 (1.30)
Moral	—	—	0.47 (0.36)	—	1.03 (1.26)
Compassionate	—	—	0.12 (0.34)	—	0.51 (0.86)
Empathetic	—	—	0.87** (0.50)	—	2.19 (1.62)
Strong leader × high awareness	—	—	—	—	-1.11 (1.16)
Moral × high awareness	—	—	—	—	-0.57 (1.12)
Compassionate × high awareness	—	—	—	—	-1.20 (1.74)
Empathetic × high awareness	—	—	—	—	-0.48 (0.92)
Control variables not presented (see Appendix A)					
Constant	0.11 (1.39)	-1.69 (1.75)	-0.38 (1.49)	-2.13 (2.41)	-1.83 (3.23)
N	375	375	375	312	312
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.82	0.83	0.83	0.87	0.88
Log likelihood	-259.86	-259.86	-259.86	-215.95	-215.95
χ <sup>2</sup>	90.95	130.46	71.24	111.86	6454.76

Note: Dependent variable is vote choice (1 = Republican, 0 = Democrat). Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Models include controls for party identification, ideology, view of whether the Iraq War was a mistake, sex, race, education, Republican spending advantage, quality candidates, and incumbents. Data are from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .10.

on the probability of voting for the Republican candidate in races with a GOP or Democratic incumbent.<sup>17</sup> On the far left, the figure shows that when a voter views the Democratic candidate as holding a large trait advantage (-4 on the comparative trait index), the likelihood of a GOP vote is very low. But as the trait gap narrows and eventually becomes an advantage for the Republican, the probability increases significantly. For example, a voter in a state



**Figure 1.** The effects of trait evaluations on vote choice, 2006 U.S. Senate elections  
 Note. Predicted probabilities are based on a moderate, independent, White, female voter with a mean level of education and who was unsure whether the Iraq war was a mistake. The Republican spending advantage was set at its sample mean value. The simulations are based on the model in the “Trait Index” column of Table 2. Data are from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

with a GOP incumbent who gave the Democratic candidate a one-unit advantage (i.e.,  $-1$  on the trait index) has a .49 probability of voting for the Republican. But if the same voter viewed the Republican candidate with a slight trait advantage ( $+1$  on the trait index), the probability of a GOP vote becomes .77. The magnitude of the effect is similar in both Republican and Democratic incumbent contests.

The “Intensity Model” column of Table 2 explores whether trait effects are contingent on the intensity of a Senate campaign (Westlye, 1991). To measure intensity, a research assistant conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage of each of the 30 U.S. Senate campaigns in the analysis. Following Kahn and Kenney (1999), the key variable is the number of paragraphs about each race published in the state’s largest newspaper in the month before Election Day. This serves as a reasonable proxy for the relative amount of information voters in each state would have had at their disposal during the campaign.<sup>18</sup> The variable ranged from 36 paragraphs (Massachusetts) to 2,108 (Maryland), with a mean of 663. I include in the model the news coverage variable and its interaction with the trait index. If traits matter more as a campaign receives more attention, then the interaction term should be positive and significant.<sup>19</sup>

But the interaction is not statistically significant. Trait voting is not conditional on the amount of attention devoted to a Senate campaign. In contrast to the literature on issue voting in congressional campaigns (e.g., Kahn & Kenney, 1999, chap. 9), voters evidently do not need that much information to incorporate trait assessments into their vote choice. Traits appear salient regardless of the level of information available to voters in a campaign, likely owing to the ease with which citizens can incorporate these judgments into their evaluations of candidates.

A third question about the context of Senate campaigns is whether different traits matter more than others. To answer this question, I ran a second regression similar to the first. But instead of the trait index, the key covariates are the comparative ratings on each personality trait. For each characteristic, the rating could range from  $-3$  to  $+3$ , with the higher values indicating a Republican advantage.

The results of the model are presented in the “Specific Traits Model” column of Table 1. Similar to presidential elections, leadership and empathy are at the top of voters’ priority lists in Senate elections. The coefficients for moral and compassionate, however, are not significant, indicating that those attributes play a comparatively smaller role in legislative contests. Postestimation Wald tests show that the leadership coefficient is significantly larger than the morality and compassion measures ( $p < .05$ ). The empathy measure is not significantly larger than compassion and morality at conventional levels ( $p = .21$  and  $p = .35$ ), though that is certainly in part a product of the small sample size.

The strength of the leadership effect is at odds with Huddy and Terkildsen’s (1993b) finding that traits associated with leadership and competence are less important in legislative than executive races. In most studies of presidential trait effects, leadership typically matters as much as, if not more than, candidate empathy ratings (e.g., Hayes, 2005). It appears that voters want the people who they put into higher office—whether for president or Senator—to possess leadership skills. They do not deprioritize leadership qualities because legislative representatives have less autonomy than executive officeholders. At the same time, voters also want their legislators to be caring, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s (2002) argument that the public is concerned that government officials be empathetic finds support in these results. But, given the advantages possessed by incumbents on leadership, this finding suggests an additional reason for the success of incumbents: Voters care most about an attribute on which incumbents hold a large advantage, which boosts their reelection prospects further.

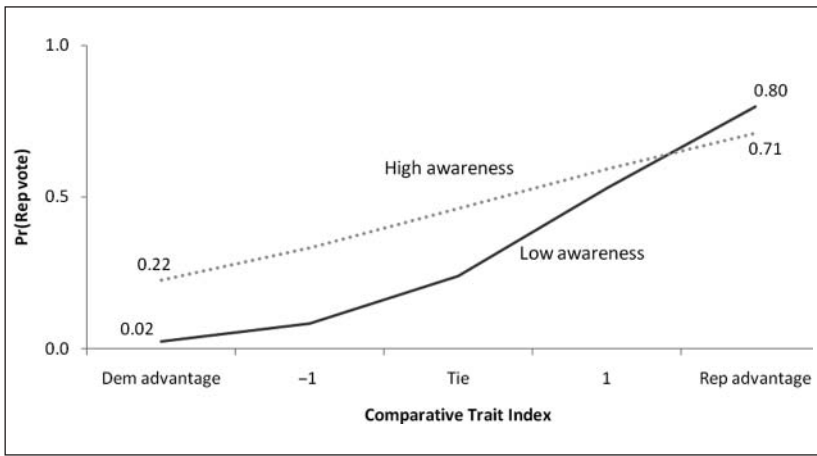
Finally, I examine whether the information level of voters makes a difference. Even though the presidential literature has found traits to play a similar or more important role in shaping the voting of the more politically aware, there are reasons to suspect traits matter more for poorly informed voters in Senate contests. I built a measure of political awareness based on a handful of appropriate questions included in the CCES: a respondents' ability to identify both the U.S. House candidates in his district and the identification of the Republican Party as more conservative than the Democratic Party. This measure is not ideal; a larger number and variety of factual knowledge questions would produce a more reliable measure of political awareness (Delli Karpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1992).<sup>20</sup> But the variable should tap familiarity with, and attention to, politics, the core components of political awareness.<sup>21</sup>

I split the sample into high- and low-awareness voters, with the highly aware representing the roughly half the sample that answered all three questions correctly. In the model, I include the high-awareness dummy and its interaction with the trait index. I expect the coefficient to be negative, indicating that trait perceptions exert less of an influence on vote choice for highly aware individuals compared with their less aware counterparts.

The "Awareness Model" column of Table 2 shows the expected result: the interaction is negative and significant. Figure 2 displays the effect graphically. Consider first the dotted line, which represents highly aware voters. The probability that a highly aware voter would cast a ballot for the Republican candidate when he saw the Democrat as holding, for instance, a moderate trait advantage (i.e.,  $-2$ ) is .22. An identical voter who gave the Republican candidate a two-unit advantage on the trait index, however, would have a .71 probability of casting a GOP vote, for a difference of .49. But that increase is even more dramatic for a poorly informed voter, whose probability of voting for the Republican moves from .02—almost zero—to .80 with an identical four-unit shift on the trait index. This increase of .78 is significantly greater than the increase for highly aware voters ( $p < .05$ ).

Notably, the effect of shifting trait perceptions is roughly the same for low- and high-awareness voters when the Democratic candidate holds a trait advantage. But the steeper slope of the low awareness line on the GOP advantage side indicates that poorly informed voters significantly reward Republican candidates when they demonstrate positive personal qualities. Part of this asymmetry is because of the substantially lower baseline of GOP support among low-awareness voters and suggests that Republican candidates may succeed in winning over the poorly informed by making personal, rather than policy or ideological, appeals.





**Figure 2.** The effects of trait evaluations on vote choice, by political awareness, 2006 U.S. Senate elections

*Note.* Predicted probabilities are based on an open seat race and a moderate, independent, White, female voter with a mean level of education and who was unsure whether the Iraq war was a mistake. The Republican spending advantage was set at its sample mean value. The simulations are based on the “Awareness” model in Table 2. Data are from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

The final column of the table explores whether citizens of different levels of expertise rely more heavily on different traits (Funk, 1997). That does not appear to be the case. The interactions between the awareness variable and the specific trait measures are all statistically insignificant. Thus, less knowledgeable citizens are more reliant on traits, but this difference is not restricted to one or two attributes.

In summary, the analysis reveals several findings. Candidate trait assessments are influenced by incumbency and party affiliation, but more heavily by the former. The resulting trait perceptions influence vote choice, an effect that is not conditional on the intensity of the Senate race. Leadership and empathy are the attributes that appear to matter the most, and traits are the most influential for poorly informed voters.

## Conclusion

In the typical American political campaign, strategists tirelessly attempt to bur-nish their candidate’s image, using sophisticated television advertising and closely managed public appearances to create a picture in voters’ minds of their candidate as a man or woman of superb character. In presidential elections, the

scholarly consensus is that these strategies pay dividends from time to time, as voters' evaluations of candidate traits are related to political decision making. But because of important differences between the information environment and political context of presidential and congressional campaigns, the role of candidate personality in subpresidential contests has been less than clear. This study has helped shed light on how voters assess candidate traits and how those judgments influence voting behavior in U.S. Senate contests.

Not surprisingly, incumbency plays a more powerful role in shaping voters' perceptions of candidate traits in Senate contests than in presidential election. Although party ownership of traits appears well established at the presidential level, those patterns were evident in the 2006 midterms only on the Democratic attributes of empathetic and compassionate. Voters' assessments of candidate traits appear more strongly related to their status as incumbents, as sitting Senators in both parties held significant advantages over nonincumbents on the traits of leadership and morality.

These trait assessments affect citizens' choices on Election Day, with judgments about whether a Senate candidate is a strong leader carrying the most weight. This is likely another source of the incumbency advantage: Voters care most about the trait dimension on which incumbents hold the largest edge. This is not, of course, a coincidence; incumbents often emphasize experience and leadership capabilities in their campaign communications. Presumably, the extent to which leadership is prioritized by voters will vary with the campaign context, as incumbents should reap the largest benefits of their trait advantage when questions of leadership are central to campaign discourse.

The findings also reveal that informational inequalities among voters are more consequential in shaping trait voting in Senate campaigns than in presidential contests. Although voters of varying levels of awareness have been shown to rely similarly on traits in presidential campaigns, I found that trait voting was more pronounced among the less politically informed. This difference is likely related to the difficulty that relatively inattentive voters have in extracting issue information from the political environment in Senate campaigns. This leaves them to lean more heavily on trait impressions in making their choices. The context of congressional campaigns appears to alter the way individual-level characteristics influence voting behavior.

More broadly, one contribution of this article is to demonstrate that although Senate contests often appear to be less overtly "personal" than presidential campaigns, the electorate is interested in the character traits of their congressional hopefuls. There is no doubt that partisanship, ideology, and incumbency occupy the most central role in congressional voting. But in explaining election outcomes, scholars must also account for the part played by the public's views of the candidates' traits. It is certainly too sweeping to

assert, as journalists sometimes do (e.g., Zengerle, 2002), that personality is the most important component of congressional elections. But we now have evidence—with better data that previous studies have relied on—that it matters substantially.

## Appendix A

### *Coding of Control Variables in Regression Models (Table 2)*

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*Party ID:* 7-point partisanship scale, ranging from strong Democrat (low) to strong Republican (high).

*Ideology:* 5-point ideology scale, ranging from very liberal (low) to very conservative (high). (A variable that measures the ideological distance between the respondent and the candidate reveals substantively identical results. But because about 70 respondents failed to place both candidates on the ideological scale, in the models I use self-reported ideology.)

*Iraq mistake:* Respondent's view of whether the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a mistake. An answer of *no* was coded as 1, *yes* coded -1, and *not sure* coded as 0. (The results of the models are the same if the "not sure" responses are omitted. But because I lose about 90 cases, the trichotomized measure is preferable.)

*Female:* Coded 1 for female respondents, 0 for males.

*White:* Coded 1 for White respondents, 0 for all others.

*Education:* Six-category scale, ranging from no high school degree (low) to postgraduate degree (high).

*Republican spending advantage:* Difference in campaign spending between the two candidates, scaled so that a Republican spending advantage takes on positive values. The measure is scaled by \$10,000. Spending data were collected from the *New York Times* 2006 Election Guide.

*Republican and Democratic incumbent:* Dummies for races with Republican and Democratic candidates running. Incumbents are designated by an asterisk in Table A.1.

*Quality Republican and Quality Democrat:* Dummies for races with quality Republican and Democratic challengers or open seat candidates. Following Jacobson (2004), a quality candidate is one who has previously held elective office. A list of quality candidates is available from the author.

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(continued)

## Appendix A (continued)

**Table A.1.** Summary U.S. Senate Candidates, 2006 CCES

State	Republican Candidate	Democratic Candidate
Arizona	Jon Kyl*	Jim Pederson
California	Richard Mountjoy	Dianne Feinstein*
Delaware	Jan Ting	Thomas Carper*
Florida	Katherine Harris	Bill Nelson*
Hawaii	Jerry Coffee	Daniel Akaka*
Massachusetts	Ken Chase	Edward Kennedy*
Maryland	Michael Steele	Ben Cardin
Maine	Olympia J. Snowe*	Jean Hay Bright
Michigan	Mike Bouchard	Debbie Stabenow*
Minnesota	Mark Kennedy	Amy Klobuchar
Missouri	James Talent*	Claire McCaskill
Mississippi	Trent Lott*	Erik R. Fleming
Montana	Conrad Burns*	Jon Tester
North Dakota	Dwight Grotberg	Kent Conrad*
Nebraska	J. Peter Ricketts	Benjamin Nelson*
New Jersey	Thomas Kean Jr.	Robert Menendez*
New Mexico	Allen W. McCulloch	Jeff Bingaman*
Nevada	John Ensign*	Jack Carter
New York	John Spencer	Hillary Clinton*
Ohio	Mike Dewine*	Sherrod Brown
Pennsylvania	Rick Santorum*	Robert Casey
Rhode Island	Lincoln Chafee*	Sheldon Whitehouse
Tennessee	Bob Corker	Harold Ford
Texas	Kay Bailey Hutchison*	Barbara Ann Radnofsky
Utah	Orrin Hatch*	Pete Ashdown
Virginia	George Allen*	James Webb
Washington	Mike McGavik	Maria Cantwell*
Wisconsin	Robert Gerald Lorge	Herb Kohl*
West Virginia	John Raese	Robert C. Byrd*
Wyoming	Craig Thomas*	Dale Grountage

Note. CCES = Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Asterisks signify incumbent candidates.

### Acknowledgments

I thank Daron Shaw and Brian Arbour for help acquiring the survey data and Rebekah Liscio for research assistance and comments. Thanks also to Kim Fridkin, Andy Karch, Scott McClurg, John Sides, and several anonymous reviewers for valuable feedback.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The data collection for this article received financial support from the Department of Government and the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation at the University of Texas at Austin.

## Notes

1. Among the many relevant studies are Bishin, Stevens, and Wilson (2006); Funk (1999); Goren (2002, 2007); Hayes (2005); Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004); Kinder, Peters, Abelson, and Fiske (1980); Markus (1982); Miller, Wattemberg, and Malanchuk (1986); Stokes (1966); and Sullivan, Aldrich, Borgida, and Rahn (1990).
2. This statement is, of course, focused on overall patterns of opinion, because any individual voter's candidate trait ratings will also be affected by their existing predispositions (Bartels, 2002a).
3. In an experimental study, Funk (1997) finds that politically sophisticated individuals were more likely to evaluate members of Congress on competence, whereas less aware participants were more likely to rely on perceptions of candidate warmth. In the multivariate models below, I test whether different traits are prioritized by individuals with different levels of knowledge.
4. Similar findings have emerged in experimental work on legislative elections outside of the United States (e.g., Johns & Shephard, 2007).
5. Scholars have argued that the questions do not measure the actual criteria by which voters choose; instead they reflect "top of the head" considerations that are merely rationalizations of a preexisting choice.
6. Grose and Globetti (2007) find that traits influenced vote choice in the 2006 mid-term Senate contests, but some of the respondents in their study were purposely exposed to candidate ads that "primed" trait considerations. McCurley and Mondak (1995) find that candidates' integrity and competence are closely related to their electoral success. But these traits are assigned by the authors based on candidate background and biographies, not voter perception.
7. NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll taken October 13 to 16, 2006. Results retrieved from [www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com).
8. The CCES is an opt-in web survey and, as such, does not use a traditional probability sample procedure. Instead, respondents are selected from the Polimetrix PollingPoint database based on "matching" respondents from the panel to

respondents in the 2004 American Community Study, a nationally representative Census Bureau study of more than one million respondents. This produces a sample that is broadly representative of the larger U.S. population in terms of demographic and political characteristics. Poststratification weights are applied in the CCES to ensure representativeness. For more information on the Polimetrix sample matching and weighting procedures, see Rivers (2006). Although the CCES panel tends to be slightly better informed, slightly younger, and slightly more educated than respondents in the 2004 National Election Studies, one postsurvey analysis (Hill, Lo, Vavreck, & Zaller, 2007) shows that these differences are not large. Moreover, comparisons of actual 2006 election outcomes with data from the CCES suggest that the survey was accurate in measuring vote choice. Additional information on the survey methodology is available at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html>.

9. This article does not include data from three states with unusual circumstances in their 2006 Senate races. In Indiana, Republican Richard Lugar faced no Democratic opposition. In Connecticut, Democrat Joe Lieberman won reelection as an independent, beating out a Republican and Democratic opponent. And in Vermont, independent Bernie Sanders won election in a contest without an official Democratic candidate.
10. It would be ideal to have a larger battery of trait questions. But because of limitations on the number of questions that could be included in the survey, the measures were restricted to characteristics central to previous work. Even though the battery is smaller than the group of traits included on, for example, the ANES, it does account for three of the four key dimensions of personal attribute evaluation. Previous work has identified leadership, integrity, empathy, and competence as critical trait dimensions (Funk, 1997; Kinder, 1986). Leadership is tapped by the “provides strong leadership” measure. Empathy is tapped by the “really cares . . .” and “compassionate” questions. Integrity is tapped by the “moral” measure. The most important weakness of the battery is the absence of the competence measures. Although this is a shortcoming, the omission of a single trait dimension is unlikely to produce substantively different results than if it was included. Ultimately, the traits used here represent a salient range of qualities that tap key components of candidate evaluation.
11. Specifically, a score of 0 remained 0, 1 was converted to 33.3, 2 was converted to 66.7, and 3 was converted to 100. The results are substantively no different if the original coding is employed.
12. Table 1 excludes respondents who did not rate one of the candidates on the particular trait. In other words, the comparisons reflect only the responses of individuals who were willing to rate both the Republican and Democratic candidates on the specific trait. Depending on the trait, this eliminates roughly 90 of the 558

- respondents, but the results are not substantively different when the responses of these individuals are included. In those analyses, there are no significant differences on leadership and morality and significant Democratic advantages on “compassion” and “really cares about people like me.”
13. The results in Table 1 are no different if open seat candidates are eliminated, restricting the comparisons to incumbents and challengers.
  14. A prominent concern in the literature on candidate traits is that assessments of personal characteristics may stem from projection. When voters engage in projection, they “reason backwards,” assigning positive attributes to the candidate they already prefer, instead of first evaluating the candidates’ attributes and then using those evaluations to form a candidate preference. If trait assessments represent mere projection, they can tell us little about voting behavior. But though there is evidence that this sort of motivated reasoning does occur, it is not clear empirically that trait assessments represent nothing more than projection. In the CCES sample, for example, 37% of respondents rated their Senate candidates equally on one of four traits, which should not occur if trait perceptions are simply reflections of a preexisting candidate preference. Another 16% of voters rated the candidate they did not vote for more favorably on at least one trait dimensions. That number is not trivial, and it is even higher in presidential contests. Thus, although some amount of projection no doubt occurs, other elements of the campaign, or the candidates themselves, are contributing to voters’ attitudes. For discussions of projection and motivated reasoning, see Bartels (2002a) and Taber and Lodge (2006). For evidence that trait perceptions may originate from other sources, see Hayes (2005) and Johnston et al. (2004).
  15. The control variables for all the models in Table 2 are a 7-point party identification scale, the respondent’s self-placement on a 5-point ideology scale, whether the respondent viewed the Iraq War as a mistake (a variable that is necessary because of the centrality of the issue to the 2006 midterms), gender, race, education, the difference in campaign spending between the candidates, dummies for races with Republican and Democratic incumbents (with open seats as the omitted category), and dummies for the presence of quality challengers/open seat candidates. Coding is described in Appendix A. I have also run models that include an index of issue positions. But because many respondents fail to identify their preferences on one or more issues, the models lose more than 100 cases. The results, however, are substantively identical to the ones presented in Table 2. Because of the loss of cases, I choose to omit that variable from the model, relying only on the ideology variable to measure policy preferences. One final note about the models: Because they include measures at different levels of aggregation—the individual level and state level—they are estimated using robust (Huber–White) standard errors to account for the clustering of observations by state (Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2009).

16. One concern in using a trait index is that a single trait could be driving what appears to be a more general effect. To determine whether this is true, I calculated four separate trait indices, by dropping one single trait from the measure. For example, the first trait index included evaluations only of moral, compassionate, and empathetic (but not leadership). The second was composed of leadership, compassionate, and empathetic (but not moral). And so on. I then reran the models, substituting the four new trait indices one at a time. The effects of the trait index in each model were nearly identical to the full trait index in Table 2. The coefficient for the indices without leadership, morality, compassionate, and really cares were, respectively, .72, .88, .89, and .76. All coefficients were significant at  $p < .05$ . Thus, no single trait is driving the effects of the comparative trait index variable in Table 2.
17. Open seat contests are not shown, given the small number of respondents from states with open seats in the data set. Also, I do not present the predicted probabilities across the entire range of the trait index (-12 to +12), because the vast majority of respondents had scores on the variable between -4 and +4. All simulations in this article are produced using CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, & King, 2001). The effects are based on a moderate, independent, White, female voter with an average level of education and who was unsure about whether the Iraq war was a mistake. The Republican spending advantage was set at its sample mean value.
18. A list of the newspapers is available from the author on request.
19. In two separate analyses, I also explored whether operationalizing intensity differently produced different results. First, I examined various cut points to determine whether traits became more or less influential at different levels of news coverage. To do this, I ran separate regressions for all races with at least 100 stories, then for all races with at least 200 stories, 300 stories, and so forth. This allowed me to examine whether trait voting became more important at some threshold of news attention. There were, however, no differences until I reached a point where there were too few respondents to draw valid statistical inferences. Thus, the null finding for intensity does not seem to rest on my operationalization of the concept. Second, I examined whether intensity differentially mediated the influence of traits on the evaluations of incumbents versus challengers. I ran regressions predicting candidate evaluation for all Republican candidates, interacted the intensity variable with a variable for whether a candidate was an incumbent or challenger, and ran the same models for Democrats. I found no evidence that intensity influenced the effect of trait perceptions differentially for challengers or incumbents.
20. In addition, because a number of respondents were not asked at least one of the knowledge questions, the resulting models include 63 fewer cases than the previous regressions.



21. I have also experimented with a scale that includes a measure of self-reported political interest. The use of that variable yields the same results as the three-item awareness measure, but because only about 300 respondents answered the interest question, it forced me to drop about 150 cases from the analysis. Because the two variables perform identically, I choose to use the measure based only on the knowledge questions to avoid losing a substantial number of observations.

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## Bio

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