

PROJECTING LEADERSHIP: THE INTERPLAY OF PERSONALITY AND POLICY
IN U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate nexus between personality traits in politics and their influence on electoral outcomes, specifically within the context of U.S. presidential elections from 2000 to 2020. The research utilizes a three-pronged approach: a content analysis of presidential debates to discern strategic trait-mentions, an examination of American National Election Study (ANES) data to capture voter evaluations of candidates based on specific traits, and an exploration of candidates' foreign policy emphasis, reflecting their projection of leadership. Key findings suggest Republicans consistently emphasize traits more than Democrats in debates, and there is noticeable variability in trait preference across partisan lines, particularly among Independents. A shift from domestic to foreign policy considerations was also observed over the years, indicating an electorate more cognizant of international influences on domestic policy. This change allows candidates to demonstrate their leadership skills through their stance on international matters. The culmination of these insights presents a comprehensive view, underscoring the dynamic interplay of candidate personality portrayals, voter preferences, and policy considerations in shaping electoral dynamics. The research emphasizes the imperative for political transparency and robust representation, aiming to demystify leadership roles and promote informed electoral choices for the greater societal benefit.

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Introduction

In politics, where personalities collide with power, the study of candidate personality traits and their impact on voter perception and decision-making remains a captivating and consequential area of research. The political scientist Fred I. Greenstein described politics as "...a function of both the environmental situations in which actors find themselves and the psychological predispositions they bring to those situations".¹ Political events and electoral outcomes are influenced by factors attributed by political scientists to the personality and behaviors of individuals.²³⁴⁵ Political activity and behavior extend beyond the support of routine government functions.⁶⁷ This endeavor would greatly enhance our understanding of voter behavior and provide clarity on the types of personas which align with desired leadership styles. Moreover, the examination of personality's impact on electoral success is an area of study which could benefit from further exploration. Researchers have increasingly recognized the significant influence of leaders' personalities on political performance and voter behavior. Voters, in turn, stand to gain greater utility into the behavior of potential candidates, as it remains an important factor in determining overall political performance.

¹ Greenstein, Fred I. *Personality and Politics: Problems of Evidence, and Conceptualization*. New York: Markham Publishing Company, 1975, 7.

² Bittner, Amanda. 2011. *Platform or Personality?: The Role of Party Leaders in Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 95.

³ Mondak, James H., and Karen L. Halperin, "A Framework for the Study of Personality and Political Behaviour," *British Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2008): 340

⁴ Caprara, Gian Vittorio, and John Silvester, "The Personality Attributes of Political Elites," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites*, edited by Heinrich Best and John Higley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 507.

⁵ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 237.

⁶ Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, 7.

⁷ Lasswell, Harold D. 1930. *Psychopathology and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 42.

The prevalence of personality in politics has long fascinated political scientists. Since the 1930s, researchers, exemplified by Harold Laswell in his seminal work "Psychopathology and Politics", have systematically investigated the role of political candidates' personality in shaping American elections. Laswell argued for the broadened scope of political behavior to encompass both the abstract and routine operations of government institutions.⁸⁹ Similarly, Greenstein's work explored the space where actors exert the most influence on events and examined the concept of actor dispensability/suitability.¹⁰ The work attempted to bridge the known psychological frameworks of personality with the complexities of political environments.¹¹ It explored the development of typologies for political actors, drawing parallels to influential studies like "The Authoritarian Personality" by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, and Levinson, published in 1950.¹² This landmark work explored the relationship between personality traits and prejudicial behavior, providing insights which inform our understanding of the complexities between individual psychology and political dynamics.¹³

Additionally, in the context of country-level comparative research, scholars have explored the impact of a leader's personality on voter decision-making. For instance, Bittner's research on the impact of Canadian party leaders during elections revealed the positive influence of a leader's character traits on voter preference.¹⁴ Bartle and Crewe

⁸ Laswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, 42

⁹ Garzia, Diego. 2011. "The Personalization of Politics in Western Democracies: Causes and Consequences on Leader-Follower Relationships." *The Leadership Quarterly* 22, no. 4: 697.

¹⁰ Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, 41.

¹¹ Greenstein, Fred I., "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?" *Political Psychology* 13, no. 1 (1992): 106.

¹² Adorno, Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund. 1950. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York, NY: Harper and Brothers.

¹³ Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, 96.

¹⁴ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 6.

found a weak-influence of leadership traits during the 1997 British general election, specifically focusing on the positive and negative trait evaluations of John Major and Tony Blair as viewed by the public.¹⁵ Furthermore, Johnston's study of Canadian federal elections between 1988 and 1997 provides data on the evaluation of candidates over time and effective leadership typologies. Johnston's research on the impact of personality in politics has served as a catalyst for subsequent studies seeking to explore the correlations between personality traits and electoral outcomes.¹⁶¹⁷ Conversely, Blais' findings align with the theoretical framework established in works like "The New American Voter" by Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks.¹⁸ These studies emphasize the significance of socio-demographic variables, values, beliefs, and economic perceptions in shaping voter behavior and decision-making.¹⁹ By expanding the analysis beyond individual leaders and considering broader contextual factors, researchers gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in electoral outcomes. These studies, conducted across multiple countries and over time, reflect the extensive breadth of data and the ongoing pursuit of knowledge in understanding the subject of leaders' influences on voter behavior and electoral dynamics.

However, it is important to note these endeavors are not solely focused on psychological issues; more importantly, they also seek to understand the influence of

¹⁵ Bartle, John, and Ivor Crewe. 2002. "The Impact of Party Leaders in Britain: Strong Assumptions, Weak Evidence." In *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*, edited by Anthony King. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Online edition, 2003, Oxford Academic.

¹⁶ Bittner, In Platform or Personality?, 2.

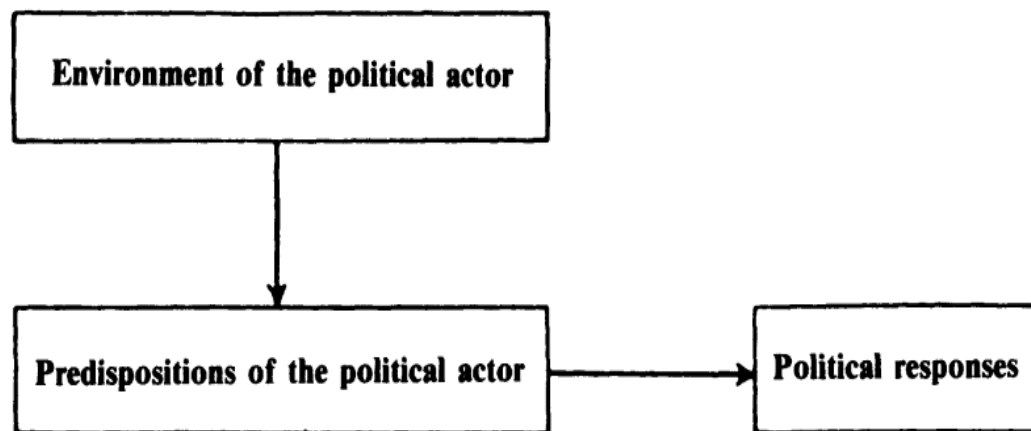
¹⁷ Johnston, Richard. 1992. *Letting the People Decide: The Dynamics of Canadian Elections*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

¹⁸ Miller, Warren E., and J. Merrill Shanks. 1996. *The New American Voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁹Blais, André. 2005. "Accounting for the Electoral Success of the Liberal Party in Canada: Presidential Address to the Canadian Political Science Association, London, Ontario, June 3, 2005." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 4: 821.

participants in the political process.²⁰ By studying the relationship between personality and decision-making, political scientists strive to gain insights into how individual traits can shape the behavior and choices of political actors, ultimately influencing the course of political events.²¹

FIGURE 1 BASIC ANTECEDENTS OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOR (E-P-R)



Throughout the paper, it is crucial to recognize political actors operate within specific environments and bring their own predispositions which elicit political responses (Figure 1).²² In certain environmental contexts, personality traits are more likely to be expressed, while the presence of ego defenses is heightened in specific circumstances.²³²⁴ These circumstances typically involve stimuli which evoke powerful emotional impulses individuals are socialized to repress, but which continue to exert a significant impact beneath the surface.²⁵ This tradition of studying personality in politics can be traced back to the 1930s, when notable works like Harold Laswell's research first emerged. Laswell

²⁰ Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, 43.

²¹ Bittner, *In Platform or Personality?*, 117.

²² Greenstein, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?", 109.

²³ Mondak, "A Framework for the Study of Personality and Political Behaviour", 339.

²⁴ Greenstein, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?" 113.

²⁵ Greenstein, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?" 113.

introduced the concept of the "Political Man," which emphasized the phenomenon of displacing private needs onto public objects and the necessity of rationalizing these needs as serving the public interest.²⁶

This approach is fundamental in understanding how individual behavior can impact political processes. It emphasizes the need to bridge the gap in current research, which lacks comprehension on the influence of individual behavior on political dynamics.²⁷ This early research laid the foundation for lines of inquiry extending beyond the United States to encompass similar analyses in other countries, including Britain, France, Germany, and Russia.²⁸ By examining these factors, researchers aim to better define the impact of personality traits and political outcomes.

Whether it is a police officer patrolling a neighborhood and interacting with residents or an elected official addressing the concerns of constituents at a town hall, individuals in various government positions operating in an official capacity engage in political behaviors which are shaped by their personality traits. In both cases, the exercise of power is supported by the government.²⁹ Ongoing research seeks to determine the extent to which the personality of a police officer or elected official influences the dynamics of power.³⁰ As researchers continue to explore the impact of personality on the dynamics of power in government, attention has historically been centered on the role of personality in a key entity of the American political system: the President.

²⁶ Laswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, 42

²⁷ Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, 149.

²⁸ King, Anthony, ed. 2002. "Do Leaders' Personalities Really Matter?" In *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Online edition, 2003, Oxford Academic, 5.

²⁹ Laswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, 8.

³⁰ Greenstein, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?" 117.

Political Science and Personality

Research methodology in the field of personality and politics has evolved over time, encompassing various approaches which provide insights into the crucial role of personal characteristics in shaping political events and elections. Among these approaches, single-case studies, aggregate analysis, and typological grouping have been particularly influential.

Single-case study analysis holds significant appeal for political scientists interested in understanding the intersection of personality and politics. This methodology allows for a focused examination of the performance and psychological disposition of specific leaders in relation to events or circumstances.³¹ For example, a noteworthy case study in the field of personality and politics is the analysis conducted by George and George in 1964, which focused on the influence of Colonel Edward House on Woodrow Wilson.³² This particular case study examined the dynamics between House, a key advisor to President Wilson, and Wilson himself, shedding light on the significant impact of House's personality and political influence on the decision-making process of the Wilson administration, particularly during the challenging period of the League of Nations' failure and the aftermath of World War I.³³

Furthermore, accounts such as “Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective” by Richard E. Neustadt reveals the decision-making processes and leadership styles of another United States President during a decisive moment in foreign relations. In this

³¹ Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, 16.

³² Greenstein praises this example specifically for its ability to associate a body of theory and empirical evidence in a way which enables the deduction of predictions about biographical subjects and the observation of behavioral patterns. Greenstein, “Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?”, 119.

³³ George, Alexander L., and Juliette L. George. *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study*. New York: J. Day Co., 1956.

work, Neustadt examines the Skybolt crisis during John F. Kennedy's presidency, offering a perspective on how Kennedy's personality and leadership qualities influenced his response to the political and military dispute between the United States and the United Kingdom in the early 1960s.³⁴ Biographical accounts like these offer a rich source of evidence for understanding the connections between personality, leadership, and political decision-making.

While single case study analysis often provides captivating discoveries, it is essential to recognize its limitations, such as potential subjectivity, limited depth due to psychological knowledge constraints, and a lack of standards for replicability.³⁵ Early attempts to investigate the influence of personality in politics using a single-case study approach faced challenges in defining and measuring the construct of "personality" consistently.^{36,37} In general, studies on personality were not widely regarded as relevant to political behavior.

Personality is no longer an abstract concept political scientists struggle to incorporate into general political theory. It has been studied from two perspectives: as the individual's internal reference and as an observable framework of psychological characteristics which differentiate individuals from one another. The first perspective can be observed in a candidate's own recognition or self-reflection on how voters perceive their leadership abilities.³⁸ In the second perspective, most studies aim to identify a

³⁴ Neustadt, Richard E. Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

³⁵ Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, 18.

³⁶ Bittner, *In Platform or Personality?*, 11.

³⁷ Winter, David G. "Personality Profiles of Political Elites." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, edited by Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, 426. Oxford University Press, 2013.

³⁸ Caprara, "Personality Approaches to Political Behavior," 24.

common set of variables to examine. Political scientists construct an "observable architecture" for analysis based on the character traits preferred by the public.³⁹⁴⁰ By focusing on specific traits rather than broader and more general evaluations, it becomes possible to gain a deeper understanding of how voters appraise leaders.⁴¹ This includes examining how leaders are perceived, identifying the factors which influence voters' perceptions, and explaining the impact of these perceptions on vote choice and electoral outcomes.⁴²

Defining Personality in a Political Context

The American National Election Study (ANES) provides further validation through its inclusion of twelve traits, categorized within the four-category personality typology, in its election studies. Many studies investigating American political behaviors and outcomes have utilized the ANES as a foundational resource, contributing to the standardization of the field.⁴³ The development of surveys dedicated to identifying personality traits in political candidates demonstrates a concerted effort to address claims suggesting there is a diminished or negligible importance of personality in the study of politics.

Conceptualizing and understanding the role of personality in politics benefits from insights gained from other disciplines. In multidisciplinary studies, the Five-Factor Model of Personality (FFM) has emerged as a widely accepted framework to capture

³⁹ Kinder, "Presidential Prototypes", 315.

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 17.

⁴¹ Bartels, "The Impact of Candidate Traits in American Presidential Elections.", 48.

⁴² Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 12.

⁴³ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 18.

major individual differences in behavioral tendencies.⁴⁴ The FFM encompasses five recognized traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Many other personality traits can also be considered within the framework of the FFM.⁴⁵⁴⁶ While there is no rigid rule for categorizing the multitude of dimensions of personality traits, current research increasingly relies on a two-dimensional or four-dimensional typology within a political context. The two-category typology focuses on leadership and competency, while the four-category typology encompasses competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy.⁴⁷⁴⁸ These typologies provide a framework for analyzing and understanding the role of personality traits in political contexts.

The differences between the two sets of typologies stem from variations in the datasets available for study. British, Australian, and Canadian Election Study surveys have sought to identify similar traits across the three countries, such as valuing effectiveness, being receptive to reasoned arguments, demonstrating care, and adhering to principles.⁴⁹ Making direct comparisons between countries is limited by variations in question interpretation, coding of answers, and the general analysis of responses. To address these challenges, political scientists have adapted their survey designs to incorporate the leadership and competency typology. Nowadays, most annual polls

⁴⁴ King, *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*, 43.

⁴⁵ Rolland, J.-P. "The Cross-Cultural Generalizability of the Five-Factor Model of Personality." In *The Five-Factor Model of Personality Across Cultures*, edited by R. R. McCrae and J. Allik, 7. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002.

⁴⁶ Caprara, "Personality Approaches to Political Behavior," 31.

⁴⁷ Kinder, "Presidential Prototypes", 319.

⁴⁸ Bittner, *Platform or Personality*, 18.

⁴⁹ Bittner, *Platform or Personality*, 18.

include questions specifically focused on assessing the leadership traits of political candidates.

Currently, the measurement of political attitudes and voter behavior heavily relies on opinion surveys, approval ratings, and electoral success. While these measurements provide insights into a candidate's overall competency, they often fail to highlight the specific and unique characteristics voters find favorable in political leadership.⁵⁰ Therefore, an ongoing focus in the study of personality and politics is to identify the distinctive characteristics voters prefer and determine the most effective methods of measuring those values. One challenge is determining the most effective methods and timing for appealing to voters. It remains unclear which traits are most influential, under what circumstances or political environments, and when candidates should emphasize them to maximize their impact.⁵¹⁵²

Scholars have observed a lack of a consolidated approach to understanding the role of leaders in political processes.⁵³ Aggregate analysis offers the advantage of conducting replicable comparisons across multiple cases, allowing researchers to identify broader patterns, trends, and relationships. Aggregate analysis in the study of personality and politics employs various techniques, including open-ended or free-choice questions, rating scales, and rankings. These methods involve coding responses from interviews, rating the importance to which a candidate possesses specific attributes, and using tools

⁵⁰ Greenstein, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?", 105.

⁵¹ Cohen, Jeffrey, and J. A. Hamman. "The Polls: Can Presidential Rhetoric Affect the Public's Economic Perceptions?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33 (2003): 408.

⁵² Cohen, Jeffrey, "The Many Meanings of Presidential Leadership." In *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion: Causes and Consequences*, 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁵³ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 10

such as feeling thermometers to measure attitudes.⁵⁴ Additionally, ranking exercises are conducted to determine the relative importance of different attributes in the evaluation of political candidates.

The University of Michigan's Survey Research Center played a pioneering role in the formalized research of candidate trait assessments and candidate image perceptions.⁵⁶ Since 1952, the Center has conducted research on presidential campaigns, aiming to understand respondents' preferences and opinions towards presidential candidates.⁵⁷ Similarly, in the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon commissioned the Opinion Research Corporation (ORC) to conduct polling research on desirable characteristics for presidents. This research involved presenting respondents with word pairs and asking them to rate them on a 7-point scale, capturing their perceptions and evaluations of different traits. Respondents were then asked to indicate where they would place their "ideal president" on the same scale.⁵⁸ The survey participants expressed a preference for a president who is predictable rather than unpredictable, a unifier rather than a divider, sensitive instead of insensitive, and a decisive and strong leader. They also preferred a president who is self-confident and exhibits leadership qualities over one who follows others.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the candidate's political affiliation emerged as one of the strongest negative traits recorded in the survey. This initial research laid the foundation for future studies that would continue to explore the idealized traits sought in presidential

⁵⁴ Bittner, *Platform or Personality*, 10.

⁵⁵ Nimmo, Dan, and David Savage. *Candidates and Their Images*. New York: Macmillan, 1976, 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Frantilla, Anne. "Social Science in the Public Interest: A Fiftieth-Year History of the Institute for Social Research." University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1998.

⁵⁸ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 29.

⁵⁹ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 29.

candidates.⁶⁰ Moreover, these approaches allowed for systematic analysis and measurement of public opinion on candidate attributes.

In a 1978 study conducted at Carnegie-Mellon University, students were asked to generate lists of qualities and behaviors associated with an ideal president or an anti-ideal president. The survey collected responses on 16 positive traits, 16 negative traits, 16 positive behaviors, and 16 negative behaviors.⁶¹ The initial iteration of the survey was carried out in New Haven, Connecticut, with a sample size of 135 undergraduate students. Unfortunately, the demographic information of the students was not provided. The survey results revealed a clear preference for an ideal president who is honest (91.4%), knowledgeable (87.5%), open-minded (79.3%), and courageous (48.2%).⁶² Conversely, negative traits associated with an anti-ideal president included being power-hungry (76.3%), unstable (65.9%), weak (50.5%), and prejudiced (48.7%). Furthermore, the ideal president was expected to exhibit strong leadership qualities (75.2%), appoint competent advisors (64.4%), address economic problems (62.6%), while avoiding unnecessary wars (73.6%), personal gain (62.1%), and hiding information from the public (55.4%).⁶³ The noteworthy aspect of these initial surveys is the emphasis placed on honesty and strong leadership as defining characteristics of an ideal president.

In a follow-up study conducted 29 years later, Jeffery E. Cohen continued the investigation initiated by Donald R. Kinder in 1978 and found that honesty and strong leadership were enduring qualities in the public's perception of an ideal president. Public

⁶⁰ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 29.

⁶¹ Kinder, "Presidential Prototypes", 319.

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

perceptions of presidential strength were bolstered by party success in Congress.⁶⁴ Cohen utilized a Greenberg Quinlan Rosner poll conducted in August 2008, where respondents were asked to identify the two most important attributes in a presidential candidate.⁶⁵ The results closely mirrored those of the 1978 Kinder study. Half of the participants (47%) emphasized the importance of honesty and trustworthiness, while other positive traits included strong leadership (31%), the ability to bring the right kind of change (26%), and shared values (22%). Honesty and leadership have consistently emerged as the preferred character traits in interpreting candidate personality and performance for the public.⁶⁶ Moving forward in the paper, recent polling data will be compared to past surveys, offering insights into the stability of desired and undesired personality traits in presidential candidates.

The Study of Presidential Personality and Politics

The President's role in the American political system has historically been the focal point of personality studies in politics.⁶⁷⁶⁸⁶⁹ This is because no other political office in America holds the same potential for monumental change. Presidents are expected to play a key role in political and government functions. They possess comprehensive authority over the Executive Branch, serve as the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, yield veto powers and legislative influence, nominate judges within the Judiciary Branch, and hold prominent positions in political party leadership. Given the direct

⁶⁴ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 85.

⁶⁵ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 31.

⁶⁶ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 29.

⁶⁷ Cohen, "The Many Meanings of Presidential Leadership", 1.

⁶⁸ Glass, David P. "Evaluating Presidential Candidates: Who Focuses on Their Personal Attributes?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (1985): 517.

⁶⁹ Kinder, "Presidential Prototypes.", 315.

voting structure of the American presidency, presidential politics inherently places a greater emphasis on personality.⁷⁰ In contrast, voting structures designed to achieve proportional representation or indirect voter support for executive leadership place less emphasis on the personality of individual actors.⁷¹ The concept of the "presidentialization" of parliamentary politics, where leaders are becoming more central to voter behavior, is still a subject of ongoing examination and debate among scholars, with varying perspectives and opinions.⁷²⁷³

The President of the United States holds a prominent position in national and global political news coverage, making the examination of personality in presidential politics particularly relevant. The persuasive power of news media in shaping public opinion, especially regarding candidate performance and leadership evaluations, reinforces the significance of studying personality in this context.⁷⁴ Media framing has the potential to influence public perception, which, in turn, impacts voter preferences within the two-dimensional political typology of leadership and competency.⁷⁵⁷⁶ Additionally, citizens are highly concerned with presidential behavior as they form opinions about political individuals, groups, and issues.⁷⁷ Citizen's pursuit of political information from alternative sources, such as through social media, to gain a more

⁷⁰ Garzia, "The Personalization of Politics in Western Democracies," 703.

⁷¹ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 91.

⁷² Poguntke, T., & Webb, P., eds, *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁷³ Garzia, "The Personalization of Politics in Western Democracies," 697.

⁷⁴ Nimmo, *Candidates and Their Images*, 36.

⁷⁵ Kinder, "Presidential Prototypes," 319.

⁷⁶ Caprara, "Personality Approaches to Political Behavior," 31.

⁷⁷ Meyer, A. "The Role of Leader Evaluations in Democratic Elections" in *Personality Politics?*, edited by Marina Costa Lobo and John Curtis, 128. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

comprehensive understanding of candidate policies and profiles is a developing field of research.

Studying how perceptions of presidential candidates' personality traits evolve, even within the span of an election, can provide further evidence of the dynamic nature of voter preference.⁷⁸ When making voting decisions, voters take into account various factors such as party membership, candidate traits, policy positions, and the relevance of salient issues to their vote.⁷⁹⁸⁰ The frequency with which competing candidates discuss personality traits during presidential campaigns provides researchers with systematic evidence to study.⁸¹ By comparing presidential elections, researchers can examine the diverse range of personalities and political outcomes. Throughout this paper, we will delve further into this examination.

Presidents invest considerable resources in crafting and delivering messages aimed directly at the public. However, the effects of these appeals on perceptions of the president have not been thoroughly examined.⁸²⁸³⁸⁴ A study focusing on Americans' exposure to President Trump's Inaugural Address over a three-year period (2017-2019) revealed noteworthy findings.⁸⁵ The results indicated a noticeable increase in positive perceptions of the President, with participants perceiving him as more representative of democratic values, more likely to command the respect of others, and more deserving of

⁷⁸ Nimmo, *Candidates and Their Images*, 16.

⁷⁹ Miller and Shanks, *The New American Voter*.

⁸⁰ Lewis-Beck, Michael S., William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. *The American Voter Revisited*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008, 31.

⁸¹ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 2.

⁸² King, *Do Leaders' Personalities Really Matter?*, 2.

⁸³ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 10.

⁸⁴ Howell, William G., Ethan Porter, and Thomas J. Wood. "Rethinking Public Appeals: Experimental Evidence on Presidential Performances." *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*, 2020, 155.

⁸⁵ Howell, "Rethinking Public Appeals: Experimental Evidence on Presidential Performances", 155.

confidence. Presidential speeches have the potential to significantly influence public perceptions of a president's leadership qualities and overall presidential image.⁸⁶

Related scholarship has featured the work of John G. Geer, which focuses on the frequency of leadership discussions by competing candidates in presidential election campaigns.⁸⁷ Geer's study analyzed 757 TV ads from presidential contests between 1960 and 1996, specifically examining how often candidates criticized their opponents' character traits.⁸⁸ Of these ads, 45% (332) mentioned leadership characteristics in criticism of political opponents, while only 17% mentioned the candidates own positive leadership traits. To determine these figures, Cohen utilized a coding criterion.⁸⁹ Positive leadership traits were coded as "leadership" (code 29), "strong/forceful" (code 35), and "strong/good leader" (code 36). Negative leadership traits included "old/bad/weak leadership" (code 129), "weak leader" (code 135), and "weak, not tough" (code 136). Overall, the coding system consisted of 99 positive trait codes and 99 negative ones.

This research paper aims to go beyond the analysis of campaign ads and instead directly examine the speeches and statements made by the candidates themselves. By focusing on the presidential debates, we seek to highlight the candidates' own articulation of the importance of character traits. This approach allows us to capture the candidates' direct engagement with issues of leadership and character, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how they convey their views on these central qualities to the voters. Additionally, this research provides an opportunity to gain insight into the

⁸⁶ Cohen, "The Polls: Can Presidential Rhetoric Affect the Public's Economic Perceptions?," 408.

⁸⁷ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 1

⁸⁸ Geer, J. G. *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

⁸⁹ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 23.

internal psychological characteristics of candidates through the examination of their carefully crafted speech, enabling us to distinguish them from other contenders.

The Ideal President

Having explored various evaluations and early studies on determining the ideal president, we now turn our attention to survey results which provide data on the characteristics and traits desired in an idealized presidential candidate. Over the years, research has delved into understanding the public's perception of the ideal president, revealing consistent patterns and evolving preferences.

In the 1970s, survey participants expressed a preference for a president who is predictable, a unifier, sensitive, decisive, and a strong leader. Self-confidence and leadership qualities were valued over a follower mentality.⁹⁰ In 1978, honesty, knowledgeable, open-mindedness, and courage emerged as key traits associated with the ideal president. Negative traits such as being power-hungry, unstable, weak, and prejudiced were viewed unfavorably.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid*

TABLE 1 ATTRIBUTES VALUED MOST IN A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

Trait	% Valued Most Important
Integrity	51
Level-headedness	33
Authenticity	26
Willingness to compromise	21
Ability to relate to me	21
Political experience	18
Business experience	11
An outsider's perspective	10
Decline to answer	4

Source: Harvard Institute of Politics, Harvard Institute of Politics Poll: October 2015, Question 37, GfK Knowledge Networks, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion. Question: Which of the following attributes do you value most in a presidential candidate. Please select your top 3 choices.

In 2008, survey respondents identified several key traits they considered most important in a presidential candidate. The top attributes included being honest and trustworthy, a strong leader, capable of bringing the right kind of change, and sharing the respondents' values. Caring about people like the voters and having relevant experience were also highly valued. Patriotism and independence were mentioned to a lesser extent.⁹²

In a 2015 telephone poll conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics, attributes such as integrity, level-headedness, authenticity, willingness to compromise, and the ability to relate to voters were highly valued in a presidential candidate (Table 1). Traits like having an outsider's perspective and business experience were less desired.

⁹² Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion*, 31.

These historical findings demonstrate the enduring importance of integrity, honesty, and strong leadership in the public's perception of the ideal presidential candidate. Additionally, the desire for compromise and shared values highlights the significance of a candidate's ability to connect with the electorate.

Chapter 1: Candidates' Projection of Personality Traits

In recent years, the role of personality traits in politics, particularly in the context of presidential elections, has gained increasing attention. While existing research has primarily focused on campaign advertisements as the primary channel for projecting candidates' personalities, this chapter seeks to delve deeper, examining the speeches and public statements made by the candidates themselves during presidential debates.

The aim of this shift in focus is twofold. Firstly, it permits a closer examination of the candidates' direct engagement with issues of leadership and character. This is of critical importance as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how they communicate their standpoints on these key attributes to voters. Secondly, by examining their meticulously constructed speeches, we gain a unique look into the internal psychological attributes distinguishing one candidate from another.

The focus of this chapter is a content analysis of presidential debates spanning two decades from 2000 to 2020. Specifically, we aim to identify and quantify the mention of core personality traits: honesty, leadership, strength, empathy, and knowledge. By determining the frequency and emphasis placed on these traits during debates, we hope to shed light on the personalities candidates project.

In defending, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically", Greenstein points out that characterizations of personality structures in politics are not entirely persuasive due to the lack of universally accepted personality theories and agreed-upon terminologies.⁹³ In the context of our content analysis of presidential debate speeches, this research aims to examine the manifestation of the political environment during the presidential election cycle. The patterns observed can be treated as indicators of an important dimension in the study of personality and politics. Greenstein contends, "If the connections between personalities of political actors and their political behavior are obscure, all the more reason to illuminate them".⁹⁴ This encapsulates the primary goal of this research - to shed light on the often overlooked, but crucial, relationship between personality traits and political behavior.

Methodology

To undertake this analysis, a systematic coding approach was developed, identifying specific words associated with these traits. For the trait of honesty, the words "honest" and "honesty" were coded. The trait of strength was identified by the words "strong" and "strongly". Leadership was coded based on the words "leader", "leaders", and "leadership". The trait of empathy was specifically captured in the coding process by identifying the presence of the words "care" and "cares." It is important to note that terms related to healthcare, such as "health care", "Medicare", "Obamacare", and other similar health-related terms, were not included in the coding of empathy. Lastly, knowledge and experience were coded based on the occurrence of the words specifically. This coding

⁹³ Greenstein, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?" , 121.

⁹⁴ Greenstein, "Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?", 125.

methodology allows for a consistent and objective assessment of the candidates' speeches, keeps the assessment simple, and enables us to analyze the prominence and emphasis of these specific traits in their discourse.

Speech Content Analysis

TABLE 2 2000 DEBATES: GENERAL ELECTION PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE⁹⁵⁹⁶⁹⁷

ELECTION/DEBATE			CHARACTER TRAIT COUNT					
YEAR	DEBATE	CANDIDATE	HONEST/ HONESTLY	LEADER(S)/ LEADERSHIP	STRONG/ STRONGLY	CARE(S)	KNOWLEDGE/ EXPERIENCE	TOTAL
2000	FIRST	BUSH	-	3	10	1	1	15
2000	SECOND	BUSH	1	-	14	9	-	24
2000	THIRD	BUSH	1	2	14	4	-	21
CANDIDATE TOTAL			2	5	38	14	1	60
2000	FIRST	GORE	-	3	5	2	5	15
2000	SECOND	GORE	3	10	7	-	-	20
2000	THIRD	GORE	-	2	6	5	2	15
CANDIDATE TOTAL			3	15	18	7	7	50
ELECTION TOTAL			5	20	56	21	8	110

* The (-) symbol indicates the candidate did not mention the trait observed

In the analysis of the 2000 presidential debates, it can be observed in Table 2 candidate Bush placed significant emphasis on the traits of leadership and empathy. Throughout the three debates, he mentioned strong/strongly a total of 38 times, with the highest number of mentions occurring in the second debate and third debates (14 mentions). In the third debate, Bush emphasized the significance of education and parental accountability, providing an example of the coded word "strong" to highlight his

⁹⁵ Gore, Al, and George W. Bush. "2000 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, 3 Oct. 2000, <https://www.debates.org/>.

⁹⁶ Gore, Al, and George W. Bush. "2000 Presidential Debate: Second Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, 11 Oct. 2000, <https://www.debates.org/>.

⁹⁷ Gore, Al, and George W. Bush. "2000 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, 17 Oct. 2000, <https://www.debates.org/>.

stance on these issues. He stated, "That's why I'm so strong for accountability. I believe we ought to measure a lot, three, four, five, six, seven, eighth grade. We do so in my state of Texas. One of the good things we've gone[sic] in Texas is we have strong accountability because you can't cure unless you know."⁹⁸

Vice President Al Gore made a total of 15 mentions of leadership, with the highest number of mentions occurring in the second debate. In the second debate, which took place at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Gore stated, "Like it or not, we are now -- the United States is now the natural leader of the world." Additionally, he stated, "We have to be bold. We have to provide leadership." These statements could reflect a motive by Gore to promote leadership as an important trait in selecting a president. Gore also mentioned strength 18 times and knowledge/experience 7 times throughout the debates.

The higher number of mentions of knowledge and experience by Vice President Gore compared to Governor Bush suggests a strategic decision by Gore to highlight his extensive political background and qualifications. This emphasis on his expertise may have been intended to reinforce his image as a seasoned statesman and demonstrate his readiness for the presidency. In the first debate, Gore stated, "I think the American people should take into account who we are as individuals, what our experience is, what our positions are on the issues and proposals are. I'm asking you to see me for who I really

⁹⁸ Gore, "2000 Presidential Debate: Third Debate."

am. I'm offering you my own vision, my own experience, my own proposals".⁹⁹ In contrast, Governor Bush may have chosen to prioritize his image of strength.

George W. Bush had a total of 60 trait-mentions across the debates, while Al Gore had 50. Collectively, these debates resulted in a total of 110 trait-mentions. In subsequent elections, both Al Gore and George W. Bush would emerge as the candidates with the highest number of trait-mentions. This result indicates the candidate's shared recognition of leadership and strength as key attributes in their communication strategies during the 2000 debates. Both candidates actively emphasized the importance of an individual's character, as reflected in their substantial overall count of trait-mentions. While both Gore and Bush highlighted these traits, Governor Bush placed a slightly greater emphasis on them.

TABLE 3 2004 DEBATES: GENERAL ELECTION PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹¹⁰²

ELECTION/DEBATE			CHARACTER TRAIT COUNT					
YEAR	DEBATE	CANDIDATE	HONEST/ HONESTLY	LEADER(S)/ LEADERSHIP	STRONG/ STRONGLY	CARE(S)	KNOWLEDGE/ EXPERIENCE	TOTAL
2004	FIRST	BUSH	-	9	12	-	-	21
2004	SECOND	BUSH	-	3	3	1	-	7
2004	THIRD	BUSH	-	4	9	-	-	13
CANDIDATE TOTAL			0	16	24	1	0	41
2004	FIRST	KERRY	-	8	5	-	1	14
2004	SECOND	KERRY	-	-	2	3	-	5
2004	THIRD	KERRY	1	4	2	5	-	12
CANDIDATE TOTAL			1	12	9	8	1	31
ELECTION TOTAL			1	28	33	9	1	72

⁹⁹ Gore, "2000 Presidential Debate: First Debate."

¹⁰⁰ George W. Bush and John Kerry. "2004 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, September 30, 2004. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁰¹ George W. Bush and John Kerry. "2004 Presidential Debate: Second Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 8, 2004. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁰² George W. Bush and John Kerry. "2004 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 13, 2004. <https://www.debates.org/>.

The 2004 presidential debates were held in three key states: Florida, Missouri, and Arizona. These locations were strategically chosen as they represented important battleground states in the election.¹⁰³ Florida, with its large number of electoral votes, was particularly significant as it had played a crucial role in the closely contested 2000 presidential election.¹⁰⁴

In the 2004 election, incumbent candidate Bush continued to emphasize his leadership qualities, with 16 mentions of leadership and 24 mentions of strong/strongly throughout the debates (Table 3). This indicates a consistent emphasis on projecting strength and leadership as part of his campaign strategy. In the first debate, Bush expressed his perspective on Iraq and Afghanistan, stating, "By being steadfast and resolute and strong, by keeping our word, by supporting our troops, we can achieve the peace we all want." And on the international coalition supporting operations in the Middle East, he said, "Our coalition is strong. It will remain strong, so long as I'm the president."¹⁰⁵ It is worth noting these themes align with his messaging from the previous election. The repetition of these themes indicate a deliberate strategy to reinforce his image as a strong and capable leader.

Senator Kerry made a total of 31 mentions across various traits. Specifically, he made 12 mentions related to being a leader, 9 mentions of being strong, and 8 mentions of caring for others. Senator Kerry, in the third debate held at Arizona State University, spoke about caring, stating, "One percent of America got \$89 billion last year in a tax cut,

¹⁰³ Nagourney, Adam, and Katharine Q. Seelye. "Bush and Kerry Focus Campaigns on 11 Key States." *The New York Times*, October 24, 2004.

¹⁰⁴ Bragg, Rick. "The 2000 Elections: The Voters; Florida, Amid Recount, Learns the Power of One." *The New York Times*, 9 Nov. 2000.

¹⁰⁵ Bush, "2004 Presidential Debate: First Debate."

but people working hard, playing by the rules, trying to take care of their kids, family values, that we're supposed to value so much in America — I'm tired of politicians who talk about family values and don't value families."¹⁰⁶ These patterns demonstrate Kerry's focus on the character qualities of strength and empathy throughout his campaign. Kerry's overall number of trait-mentions was comparatively low in comparison to both President Bush and the candidates of the 2000 election.

TABLE 4 2008 DEBATES: GENERAL ELECTION PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸¹⁰⁹

ELECTION/DEBATE			CHARACTER TRAIT COUNT					
YEAR	DEBATE	CANDIDATE	HONEST/ HONESTLY	LEADER(S)/ LEADERSHIP	STRONG/ STRONGLY	CARE(S)	KNOWLEDGE/ EXPERIENCE	TOTAL
2008	FIRST	MCCAIN	1	4	-	4	5	14
2008	SECOND	MCCAIN	-	4	3	1	5	13
2008	THIRD	MCCAIN	1	3	1	2	1	8
CANDIDATE TOTAL			2	11	4	7	11	35
2008	FIRST	OBAMA	-	-	2	-	-	2
2008	SECOND	OBAMA	-	3	3	-	-	6
2008	THIRD	OBAMA	-	2	3	1	1	7
CANDIDATE TOTAL			0	5	8	1	1	15
ELECTION TOTAL			2	16	12	8	12	50

In comparison to the previous presidential elections in 2000 and 2004, the number of trait-mentions in the 2008 debates was significantly less. Both candidates, Senator McCain and Senator Obama, had a relatively lower number of total trait-mentions across the three debates (Table 4).

¹⁰⁶ Bush, "2004 Presidential Debate: First Debate."

¹⁰⁷ Barack Obama and John McCain. "2008 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, September 26, 2008. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁰⁸ Barack Obama and John McCain. "2008 Presidential Debate: Second Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 7, 2008. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁰⁹ Barack Obama and John McCain. "2008 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 15, 2008. <https://www.debates.org/>.

Specifically, Senator Obama had a total of 15 trait-mentions throughout the debates. This stands as a significant decrease compared to the previous elections, indicating a possible shift in campaign strategies on how the Senator wished to be perceived. Perhaps Obama placed less emphasis on character traits to avoid direct comparisons to Senator McCain, instead focusing more on policy evaluations. In differentiating himself from Senator McCain, Senator Obama states in the first debate, "Well, Senator McCain is absolutely right that the earmarks process has been abused, which is why I suspended any requests for my home state, whether it was for senior centers or what have you, until we cleaned it up... But let's be clear: Earmarks account for \$18 billion in last year's budget. Senator McCain is proposing — and this is a fundamental difference between us — \$300 billion in tax cuts..."¹¹⁰ Despite the lower number of trait-mentions, Obama's emphasis on leadership and strength was relatively evident in his five mentions of leadership and eight mentions of being strong.

In contrast, Senator McCain had a total of 35 trait-mentions, with an emphasis on knowledge and experience. McCain's 11 mentions related to knowledge/experience were reminiscent of Al Gore's emphasis on these traits in the 2000 election. In the same debate, McCain attempted to diminish the experience of Senator Obama, stating, "There are some advantages to experience, and knowledge, and judgment. And I honestly don't believe that Senator Obama has the knowledge or experience and has made the wrong judgments in a number of areas, including his initial reaction to the Russian invasion..."¹¹¹ These statements reveal a political approach by McCain to highlight his own qualifications and expertise as a ranking United States Senator.

¹¹⁰ Obama, "2008 Presidential Debate: First Debate."

¹¹¹ Ibid

Overall, the 2008 debates marked a decrease in the frequency of trait-mentions when compared to previous elections. Notably, Senator Obama made the fewest mentions among all the candidates examined from 2000 to 2020. This indicates that variable emphasis is placed on character evaluations by candidates and voters during the campaign season. Other factors such as policy positions, ideology, and other campaign strategies may have taken precedence over highlighting specific character traits.¹¹² Research has shown the political environment is less favorably to character evaluations when voters are unable to perceive large differences in the competing candidate's leadership capabilities.¹¹³ Senators of varying lengths of service may not be valued differently on experience in the public's perception during elections. This election, at least, begins to exemplify that candidates approach the importance of character differently. While traits like strength and leadership still emerge as important themes, their significance may vary among candidates. The diminished significance attributed to character evaluations calls for a wider acknowledgment of the connection between voters and elected officials, highlighting the ever-changing nature of political landscapes and valued behaviors.

¹¹² Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 91.

¹¹³ King, *Do Leaders' Personalities Really Matter?*, 10.

TABLE 5 2012 DEBATES: GENERAL ELECTION PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE¹¹⁴¹¹⁵¹¹⁶

ELECTION/DEBATE			CHARACTER TRAIT COUNT					
YEAR	DEBATE	CANDIDATE	HONEST/ HONESTLY	LEADER(S)/ LEADERSHIP	STRONG/ STRONGLY	CARE(S)	KNOWLEDGE/ EXPERIENCE	TOTAL
2012	FIRST	OBAMA	-	2	-	1	-	3
2012	SECOND	OBAMA	-	2	2	1	-	5
2012	THIRD	OBAMA	-	22	2	2	-	26
CANDIDATE TOTAL			0	26	4	4	0	34
2012	FIRST	ROMNEY	-	5	1	8	6	20
2012	SECOND	ROMNEY	-	3	3	4	1	11
2012	THIRD	ROMNEY	1	13	19	-	-	33
CANDIDATE TOTAL			1	21	23	12	7	64
ELECTION TOTAL			1	47	27	16	7	98

The 2012 presidential debates featured incumbent President Barack Obama and Governor of Massachusetts Mitt Romney travelling to Colorado, New York, and Florida for a series of three debates. President Obama had a total of 34 trait-mentions, a relatively large increase from the last election, with a strong focus on leadership (26 mentions) and care (4 mentions). In contrast to George W. Bush, who, as the incumbent president, reduced his overall number of trait-mentions during his re-election campaign. In the 2012 election, Governor Romney had a higher number of trait-mentions overall, totaling 64.

Romney's performance in the 2012 debates demonstrated a significant emphasis on leadership, with 21 mentions, as well as a strong focus on strength, empathy, and knowledge/experience with 23, 12, and 7 mentions respectively (Table 5). His overall individual count of 64 trait-mentions surpasses the totals of both candidates in the 2008 debates. Interestingly, this election marked the fourth consecutive instance of elections

¹¹⁴ Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. "2012 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 3, 2012. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹¹⁵ Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. "2012 Presidential Debate: Second Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 16, 2012. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹¹⁶ Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. "2012 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 22, 2012. <https://www.debates.org/>.

studied where the Republican candidate consistently made more trait-mentions than the Democratic candidate, indicating a consistent pattern in the campaigns of the two major parties. The higher number of trait-mentions by Republican candidates may reflect the party's strategy to highlight a candidate's character traits as a means to appeal to voters.

President Obama demonstrated a significant increase in the number of trait-mentions compared to the 2008 debates, effectively doubling his overall count. Akin to President Bush, who emphasized the importance of maintaining a strong coalition in 2004, President Obama focused heavily on the theme of leadership in the 2012 debates. In discussing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, he stressed the need for responsible and consistent leadership by stating, "So, what — what we need to do with respect to the Middle East is strong, steady leadership, not wrong and reckless leadership that is all over the map. And unfortunately, that's the kind of opinions that you've offered throughout this campaign, and it is not a recipe for American strength, or keeping America safe over the long haul."¹¹⁷ On the topic of education he claims, "You know, under my leadership, what we've done is reformed education, working with governors, 46 states. We've seen progress and gains in schools that were having a terrible time."¹¹⁸

His 22 mentions of leaders/leadership in the third debate indicate a selected focus on the trait. It is noteworthy this count surpasses any other trait coded throughout the elections under analysis, highlighting the high significance placed on leadership qualities during this campaign cycle by the President Obama.

¹¹⁷ Obama, "2012 Presidential Debate: Third Debate."

¹¹⁸ Ibid

TABLE 6 2016 DEBATES: GENERAL ELECTION PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE¹¹⁹¹²⁰¹²¹

ELECTION/DEBATE			CHARACTER TRAIT COUNT					
YEAR	DEBATE	CANDIDATE	HONEST/ HONESTLY	LEADER(S)/ LEADERSHIP	STRONG/ STRONGLY	CARE(S)	KNOWLEDGE/ EXPERIENCE	TOTAL
2016	FIRST	CLINTON	-	5	2	1	2	10
2016	SECOND	CLINTON	-	2	-	4	2	8
2016	THIRD	CLINTON	-	1	2	-	4	7
CANDIDATE TOTAL			0	8	4	5	8	25
2016	FIRST	TRUMP	3	2	9	4	7	25
2016	SECOND	TRUMP	7	6	5	6	-	24
2016	THIRD	TRUMP	2	6	14	4	3	29
CANDIDATE TOTAL			12	14	28	14	10	78
ELECTION TOTAL			12	22	32	19	18	103

The 2016 presidential election showcased a contest between Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State during the Obama administration, and Donald Trump, a businessman venturing into his first presidential campaign. The candidates participated in a series of debates held in New York, Missouri, and Nevada.

Secretary Clinton had a total of 25 trait-mentions, with an emphasis on leadership (8 mentions) and knowledge/experience (8 mentions). Trump, on the other hand, had a higher overall count of 72 trait-mentions, focusing on traits such as strength (28 mentions), leadership (14 mentions), and honesty (12 mentions). The combined total for the election concluded at 103 trait-mentions (Table 6).

Analysis of the 2016 presidential debates reveals re-emerging patterns in the trait-mentions of the candidates. Donald Trump stands out with a total of 78 trait-mentions, the highest count among all the candidates examined in this study. This surpasses Mitt

¹¹⁹ Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump. "2016 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, September 26, 2016. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹²⁰ Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump. "2016 Presidential Debate: Second Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 9, 2016. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹²¹ Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump. "2016 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 19, 2016. <https://www.debates.org/>.

Romney's count of 64 mentions in the 2012 election and marks a continued increase of trait-mentions since 2008. Trump's emphasis on traits such as leadership, strength, and honesty reflect his campaign's focus on projecting the image of a charismatic and character-driven leader. In the second debate, candidate Trump made statements regarding Secretary Clinton's honesty, stating, "OK, Honest Abe, Honest Abe never lied. That's the good thing. That's the big difference between Abraham Lincoln and you. That's a big, big difference. We're talking about some difference."¹²² When responding to Secretary Clinton's questions about his personal financial reporting, Trump remarked, "The buildings that were in question, they said in the same report, which was—actually, it wasn't even a bad story, to be honest with you, but the buildings are worth \$3.9 billion." These responses and similar statements suggest the importance Trump placed on defining the character differences between the two candidates.

Instead, Hillary Clinton's limited trait-mentions highlight her emphasis on knowledge and experience, reminiscent of previous candidates like Al Gore and John McCain. Clinton's focus on these traits aligns with her extensive experience as Secretary of State, presenting herself as a qualified candidate capable of addressing complex issues and global challenges. Hilary Clinton reflected on her upbringing and experience, stating, "We just have a different view about what's best for growing the economy...I have a different experience. My father was a small-businessman. He worked really hard."¹²³

Overall, the 2016 election witnessed contrasting approaches to character evaluation, with Trump strongly emphasizing a broader range of traits and Clinton targeting knowledge and leadership to a more limited degree.

¹²² Clinton, "2016 Presidential Debate: Second Debate."

¹²³ Ibid

TABLE 7 2020 DEBATES: GENERAL ELECTION PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE¹²⁴¹²⁵

ELECTION/DEBATE			CHARACTER TRAIT COUNT					
YEAR	DEBATE	CANDIDATE	HONEST/ HONESTLY	LEADER(S)/ LEADERSHIP	STRONG/ STRONGLY	CARE(S)	KNOWLEDGE/ EXPERIENCE	TOTAL
2020	FIRST	BIDEN	2	-	1	6	-	9
2020	SECOND	BIDEN		1	1	1	1	4
CANDIDATE TOTAL			2	1	2	7	1	13
2020	FIRST	TRUMP	3	1	2	6	1	13
2020	SECOND	TRUMP	-	2	2	6	-	10
CANDIDATE TOTAL			3	3	4	12	1	23
ELECTION TOTAL			5	4	6	19	2	36

In the 2020 election, Joe Biden and Donald Trump participated in two debates each. The election featured a reduction in debates due to scheduling conflicts and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁶ During the debates, Biden made a total of 13 mentions of different traits. He emphasized honesty (2 mentions), care (6 mentions), and had some mentions of leadership, strength, and knowledge/experience (Table 7).

Similarly, Donald Trump made a total of 23 trait-mentions throughout the debates. He focused on honesty (3 mentions), leadership (4 mentions), strength (6 mentions), care (12 mentions), and once mentioned knowledge/experience.

Both candidates had a combined total of 36 trait-mentions, but the cancellation of the second debate makes it difficult to fully evaluate the debates. President Trump had a higher number of trait-mentions, similar to the previous election, but overall, the trait count was low between the two candidates. This result mirrors the observation in 2008, where the candidates possibly presented similar images of experience. This was a notable

¹²⁴ Joe Biden and Donald J. Trump. "2020 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, September 29, 2020. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹²⁵ Joe Biden and Donald J. Trump. "2020 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 22, 2020. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹²⁶ Scherer, Michael, Johnson, Jenna, and Dawsey, Josh. "President Trump and Joe Biden clash in distant, dueling town halls." The Washington Post, 16 October 2020.

dynamic in the 2020 election, with the incumbent President Trump facing the experienced former Vice President and Senator Joe Biden.

The candidates' speech in the 2020 election demonstrates a pattern of discussion on empathy, with a relatively high number of mentions for only two debates. This might suggest projecting empathy was deemed an important character trait, possibly reflecting voter concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first debate, both candidates engaged in contentious exchanges, with Trump responding to accusations about his handling of COVID social-distancing policies by stating, "If you could get the crowds, you would have done the same thing. But you can't. Nobody cares." And on the care of veterans, he asserted, "And we now have a 91% approval rating at the VA, our vets. We take care of our vets. But we've rebuilt our military."¹²⁷ These statements were matched by the Vice-President in tone and delivery.

Biden, in response to the pandemic and its impact on the economy, stated, "And the idea that he is insisting that we go forward and open when you have almost half the states in America with a significant increase in COVID deaths and COVID cases in the United States of America, and he wants to open it up more. Why does he want to open it up? Why doesn't he take care of the... You can't fix the economy until you fix the COVID crisis."¹²⁸.

The former Vice-President would go on to address the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy by praising the personality and contributions of young immigrants protected under DACA. He stated, "Many of them are

¹²⁷ Biden, "2020 Presidential Debate: First Debate."

¹²⁸ Ibid

model citizens. Over 20,000 of them are first responders out there taking care of people during this crisis. We owe them. We owe them."¹²⁹

The cancellation of the second debate limited the opportunity to further evaluate the debates comprehensively. However, the low overall count of trait-mentions compared to previous elections suggests a shift in campaign strategies or the continued dynamism of voter preference, where the importance of character evaluations vary by election. The prominence of empathy and caring as character traits in the discussions may reflect the concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 election, with Trump as the incumbent and Biden as the former Vice President, further demonstrate the significance of character and policy evaluations by candidates during a presidential race. Even in cases where opportunities are limited, such as reducing the number of debates before an election, candidates consistently elect to make character evaluations as part of their appeals to voters.

Chapter 1: Conclusion

The analysis of trait-mentions in presidential elections from 2000 to 2020 reveals a fluctuation in the frequency of such mentions. The 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore witnessed a peak with 110 trait-mentions, while the 2012 election between John McCain and Barack Obama had the lowest count with only 50 trait-mentions overall. Candidates did not approach character evaluations equally but revealed strategic choices about the content and frequency of character appeals.

¹²⁹ Biden, "2020 Presidential Debate: First Debate."

Leadership and strength emerged as consistent focal points throughout the examined elections. Candidates from both Democratic and Republican parties consistently highlighted their leadership qualities and emphasized their strength in addressing various political, economic, and social challenges. Honesty and empathy were the two traits with the least mentions overall. Republican candidates consistently made more trait-mentions than their Democratic counterparts.

Another recurring theme was the importance of knowledge and experience. Candidates such as Al Gore in 2000, John McCain in 2008, and Hillary Clinton in 2016 dedicated a significant amount of their character appeals to defining experience and knowledge as important qualifications for the presidency. This finding suggests candidates strategically emphasize their experience and knowledge when an experience and knowledge advantage is perceived. However, each of these candidates failed to win the presidential nomination in their respective elections, further highlighting the fact character appeals are not always effective. Additionally, voters may not be open to knowledge and experience evaluations from leaders at later stages in the presidential election cycle. This observation underscores the importance of further investigation into the optimal timing of appeals or their point of highest efficacy in a dynamic political environment. Understanding the timing and context of candidate appeals could provide valuable insights into shaping effective campaign strategies and enhancing candidate-voter engagement throughout the election process.

The emphasis on specific character traits often reflected the prevailing issues of the time. In the 2020 debates, caring and empathy received significant attention, likely influenced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, candidates George W.

Bush and Barack Obama directly addressed the importance of leadership and strength in response to a public focus on military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These findings paint a clearer picture of character traits in presidential elections and their alignment with the political and societal landscape. Candidates demonstrated variation in the frequency and intensity of their character appeals. However, unlike the studies conducted by Geer and Cohen, this analysis did not evaluate the positive or negative connotations associated with these traits.¹³⁰¹³¹ Another aspect worth exploring would be to assess the trends and patterns related to the emphasis placed on specific character traits over time. This would provide further insights into the changing priorities and preferences of voters in relation to presidential candidates' character evaluations.

Chapter 2: Voters' Perception of Candidate Traits

As the discussion on candidate personality traits continues to gain attention in the sphere of political science, it is critical to shift focus towards the perceivers - the voters. How do voters evaluate candidates based on these traits? What importance do they place on characteristics like leadership, empathy, honesty, and knowledge? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by analyzing data from the American National Election Study (ANES). The ANES is a respected survey conducted during election cycles, capturing public opinion and political attitudes amongst U.S. citizens aged 18 or older across the 50 states and DC. Its vast dataset offers a rich source for the assessment of how voters evaluate candidates based on traits like leadership, empathy, knowledge, and honesty.

¹³⁰ Geer, In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns, 1

¹³¹ Ibid

This chapter's analysis is two-pronged. Firstly, a systematic review of ANES survey responses will be undertaken. Respondents were asked to rate the candidates on these specific traits using a Likert scale, ranging from extreme support to not well support. This data provides valuable insights into voter perceptions of these traits and their importance in candidate evaluation.

Subsequently, this analysis will be utilized in combination with the content analysis from Chapter 1. This integrative approach will enable us to conceptualize the traits voters find favorable in presidential candidates and track the consistency of these preferences over time. In doing so, this research will illuminate the evolving nature of candidate appeal and contribute to a broader understanding of voter behavior.

The upcoming section will present figures detailing the distribution of survey responses for candidate trait evaluations. These figures offer a visual representation of responses, color-coded by political affiliation, to underscore variations in trait evaluations amongst Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Please note, the color-coding highlights patterns and disparities where at least 51% of responses fall within a category. In this way, we aim to present a comprehensive overview of the data at hand.

Evaluations of Candidate Personality Traits

TABLE 8 2012 ANES TIME SERIES RESPONSES¹³²

Candidate: Mitt Romney

Strong Leadership

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	1%	5%	20%	25%	49%
Independents	2%	13%	31%	22%	33%
Republicans	14%	30%	28%	15%	13%
Total	4%	11%	23%	23%	39%

Really cares about people like you

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	0%	1%	8%	16%	75%
Independents	0%	1%	8%	16%	75%
Republicans	6%	21%	33%	17%	24%
Total	1%	4%	11%	16%	67%

Honesty

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	1%	3%	13%	21%	62%
Independents	1%	6%	23%	27%	43%
Republicans	11%	26%	26%	20%	17%
Total	3%	9%	17%	21%	50%

Knowledge

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	2%	9%	25%	31%	35%
Independents	3%	21%	33%	20%	22%
Republicans	14%	36%	30%	14%	8%
Total	5%	16%	26%	26%	27%

The survey data collected during the 2012 election adds to the information available on the public's perceptions of Mitt Romney's traits, including his leadership,

¹³² American National Election Studies. 2012. ANES 2012 Time Series Study [dataset and documentation]. www.electionstudies.org.

empathy, honesty, and knowledge during the presidential election cycle. The analysis of the data continues to reveal a pattern of variation in how different political groups view these traits.

Among Democrats, the majority of respondents perceive Romney's traits as moderate or slightly favorable. A significant proportion express a neutral stance or even negative perceptions towards his leadership, empathy, honesty, and knowledge. This suggests Romney's appeal may have been limited among Democratic voters, who may have had reservations or differing priorities when evaluating his character.

Independents, on the other hand, demonstrate a mixed perception of Romney's traits. Responses across different trait categories vary, indicating a diverse range of views among Independent voters. Some Independents viewed Romney's traits more favorably, while others hold more moderate or even negative perceptions. This variability highlights the challenge of appealing to Independent voters who may have a wide range of perspectives and priorities.

Republicans, in general, perceived Romney's traits more positively. A notable percentage of Republicans considered his leadership and empathy as strong or very strong. This suggests Romney resonated with his party's base, who viewed him as a capable leader and someone who genuinely cares about people. However, even among Republicans, there are respondents who hold more moderate or slightly favorable views of Romney's traits, indicating some diversity of opinion within the party.

TABLE 9 2012 ANES TIME SERIES RESPONSES¹³³

Candidate: Barack Obama

Strong Leadership

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	15%	32%	28%	12%	14%
Independents	7%	21%	27%	22%	27%
Republicans	1%	5%	13%	19%	62%
Total	8%	18%	21%	16%	37%

Really cares about people like you

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	20%	28%	24%	12%	16%
Independents	6%	22%	24%	22%	26%
Republicans	1%	5%	12%	19%	63%
Total	10%	17%	18%	16%	39%

Knowledge

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	23%	36%	22%	13%	7%
Independents	12%	33%	29%	17%	9%
Republicans	2%	11%	25%	28%	35%
Total	12%	24%	24%	20%	20%

Honest

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	17%	33%	26%	12%	12%
Independents	5%	18%	36%	17%	24%
Republicans	1%	4%	12%	20%	62%
Total	8%	19%	20%	16%	37%

Among Democrats, a significant percentage viewed Obama's leadership as very strong or strong. This indicates a favorable perception of his ability to lead. Similarly, a considerable proportion of Democrats perceive Obama as caring about people like them, demonstrating a positive evaluation of his empathy and connection with the public. In

¹³³ American National Election Studies. 2012. ANES 2012 Time Series Study [dataset and documentation]. www.electionstudies.org.

terms of honesty and knowledge, Democrats also view Obama's traits positively, with a notable proportion considering him to be a trustworthy person.

Independents show a more mixed perception of Obama's traits. While some Independents perceive his leadership, empathy, honesty, and knowledge as favorable, others hold more moderate or slightly favorable views. This variability suggests a diverse range of opinions among Independent voters, highlighting the candidate's challenge in appealing to this voting bloc.

Republicans, on the other hand, generally hold fewer positive views of Obama's traits. A minority of Republicans perceived his leadership, empathy, honesty, and knowledge as strong or very strong. Most Republicans, however, hold more moderate or negative views, indicating a significant partisan divide in their evaluation of Obama's character.

Overall, the survey data reveals valuable data on candidate perception during the 2012 election. While Obama receives generally positive evaluations from Democrats and some Independents, his character traits are viewed less favorably by Republicans. These findings help in defining the role of partisan affiliations in shaping the perceptions of candidate traits, underscoring the challenges faced by candidates in appealing to voters across party lines.¹³⁴ A comparable set of results is evident in Bittner's research, which examines the degree to which a leader's party affiliation influences voter perceptions and heightens partisan stereotypes.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 73.

¹³⁵ Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, 81.

TABLE 10 2016 ANES TIME SERIES RESPONSES¹³⁶

Candidate: Hillary Clinton

Strong Leadership

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	13%	27%	28%	15%	16%
Independence:	3%	13%	25%	21%	38%
Republican:	0%	3%	12%	20%	64%
Total	5%	14%	20%	19%	42%

Really cares about people like you

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	9%	21%	29%	18%	23%
Independence:	1%	9%	22%	19%	48%
Republican:	0%	2%	7%	14%	77%
Total	4%	10%	18%	16%	52%

Knowledge

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	28%	31%	21%	14%	6%
Independence:	3%	15%	26%	25%	31%
Republican:	10%	27%	29%	20%	14%
Total	13%	23%	25%	20%	19%

Honesty

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	3%	14%	30%	22%	32%
Independence:	1%	3%	15%	19%	63%
Republican:	0%	1%	4%	7%	89%
Total	1%	6%	16%	15%	62%

Democrats' views on Clinton's leadership are varied, with a noticeable percentage perceiving it as moderate or slightly favorable, indicating a mixed perception within the party. On the other hand, Democrats generally view Clinton more positively in terms of

¹³⁶ American National Election Studies. 2016. ANES 2016 Time Series Study [dataset and documentation]. www.electionstudies.org.

caring about people like them, seeing her as empathetic and connected to the public's concerns. However, her honesty is met with more diverse opinions, with some Democrats perceiving her as moderately honest, while others hold more negative views. In terms of knowledge, Democrats tend to have a relatively positive perception of Clinton, with a considerable proportion considering her knowledgeable. Overall, Democrats show a range of evaluations for Clinton's traits, with some positive and some more moderate or negative views.

Independents exhibit a similar perception regarding Clinton's traits. While some Independents perceive her leadership, empathy, honesty, and knowledge as moderately favorable, others hold more neutral or slightly negative views.

Republicans generally view Clinton's traits less favorably. A minority of Republicans perceive her leadership, care for people, honesty, and knowledge as moderate or slightly favorable, with a significant portion holding negative views. Further evidence of the partisan divide in the perception of Clinton's character traits can be seen, with Republicans generally evaluating her traits less positively. While Clinton receives a mixed evaluation of her leadership qualities within her own party, Democrats generally perceive her as caring and knowledgeable.

TABLE 11 FIGURE 12 2016 ANES TIME SERIES RESPONSES¹³⁷

Candidate: Donald Trump

Strong Leadership

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	1%	4%	9%	12%	74%
Independence:	2%	11%	17%	19%	51%
Republican:	10%	26%	24%	15%	24%
Total	4%	11%	15%	14%	57%

Really cares about people like you

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	0%	2%	5%	8%	85%
Independence:	1%	4%	15%	16%	63%
Republican:	6%	18%	26%	17%	33%
Total	2%	7%	13%	12%	67%

Knowledge

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	0%	3%	10%	13%	73%
Independence:	1%	6%	19%	20%	54%
Republican:	4%	18%	31%	21%	25%
Total	1%	7%	18%	17%	56%

Honesty

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrat:	1%	3%	7%	11%	78%
Independence:	1%	6%	17%	18%	59%
Republican:	5%	19%	29%	19%	28%
Total	2%	8%	15%	14%	61%

The survey data for Donald Trump's traits in the 2016 election reveals varying perceptions of his leadership, empathy, knowledge, and honesty amongst different political groups. Democrats' perception of Trump's leadership is predominantly negative,

¹³⁷ American National Election Studies. 2016. ANES 2016 Time Series Study [dataset and documentation]. www.electionstudies.org.

with only a small percentage viewing it as moderate or slightly favorable. Independents also show relatively low levels of extreme and very positive support for Trump's leadership, with a majority expressing more moderate views. Republicans, on the other hand, perceive Trump's traits more positively, with higher percentages considering his leadership, empathy, knowledge, and honesty favorably. Overall, the perception of Trump's traits varies significantly among different political groups, with Democrats generally holding more negative views, Independents showing mixed opinions, and Republicans expressing more positive evaluations, particularly in terms of his leadership.

TABLE 12 2020 ANES TIME SERIES RESPONSES ¹³⁸

Candidate: Joe Biden

Strong leadership

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	22%	35%	25%	10%	8%
Independents	8%	18%	24%	17%	32%
Republicans	2%	4%	9%	14%	70%
Total	12%	21%	20%	13%	34%

Really cares about people like you

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	35%	29%	19%	9%	7%
Independents	12%	21%	22%	18%	26%
Republicans	3%	5%	11%	21%	59%
Total	20%	20%	17%	15%	28%

Knowledgeable

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	26%	39%	21%	9%	5%
Independents	9%	24%	28%	17%	21%
Republicans	2%	7%	17%	25%	49%
Total	15%	25%	21%	16%	23%

¹³⁸ American National Election Studies. 2021. ANES 2020 Time Series Study Full Release [dataset and documentation]. February 10, 2022 version. www.electionstudies.org

Honest

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	26%	39%	21%	9%	5%
Independents	9%	24%	28%	17%	21%
Republicans	2%	7%	17%	25%	49%
Total	15%	25%	21%	16%	23%

The survey data on Joe Biden's traits in the 2020 election reveals continuing patterns in the public's perceptions. The analysis demonstrates variations in how different political groups perceive Biden's leadership, empathy, knowledge, and honesty. Among Democrats, a significant proportion viewed Biden's leadership as strong, caring, knowledgeable, and honest. Independents show a more moderate perception, with notable segments perceiving Biden's traits as strong but also exhibiting a considerable proportion of respondents who hold a moderate stance. Republicans, conversely, generally have a less positive view of Biden's traits, with only a small percentage considering them extreme or very strong.

Based on the survey data provided, there appears to be a significant difference in how Republicans viewed the Democratic candidates overall. In both the 2016 and 2020 elections, Republicans generally held less favorable views of the Democratic candidates compared to Democrats and Independents. This can be seen in their lower percentages of extreme and very positive ratings for traits such as strong leadership, caring for people, knowledge, and honesty. The data suggests a partisan divide in the perceptions of the Democratic candidates, with Republicans tending to hold more negative or neutral views.

TABLE 13 2020 ANES TIME SERIES RESPONSES ¹³⁹

Candidate: Donald Trump

Strong leadership

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	13%	13%	12%	12%	50%
Independents	4%	4%	5%	9%	78%
Republicans	45%	24%	13%	7%	11%
Total	19%	13%	9%	9%	50%

Really cares about people like you

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	9%	10%	12%	12%	56%
Independents	2%	3%	4%	5%	85%
Republicans	37%	27%	14%	8%	14%
Total	15%	12%	9%	8%	56%

Knowledgeable

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	2%	4%	5%	10%	79%
Independents	7%	12%	15%	15%	51%
Republicans	31%	30%	17%	8%	13%
Total	12%	14%	12%	11%	51%

Honest

	Extreme	Very	Moderate	Slightly	not well
Democrats	2%	2%	4%	4%	87%
Independents	5%	9%	15%	10%	61%
Republicans	19%	28%	25%	10%	17%
Total	8%	12%	14%	7%	58%

During the 2020 election, Republicans generally held more positive views of Trump's traits, including strong leadership, caring for people, knowledge, and honesty. This is evident in their higher percentages of extreme and very positive ratings for these traits. On the other hand, Democrats and Independents tended to hold more negative or

¹³⁹ American National Election Studies. 2021. ANES 2020 Time Series Study Full Release [dataset and documentation]. February 10, 2022 version. www.electionstudies.org

neutral views of Trump's traits, with lower percentages of extreme and very positive ratings. These findings highlight the partisan divide in perceptions of Trump's character among different political groups.

Chapter 2: Conclusion

The analysis of trait-evaluation data from past presidential elections reveals disparities in support along ideological lines. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents exhibit varying levels of support for different traits, with Independents often displaying a split in their ideological preferences. It is particularly striking certain traits, such as strong leadership, caring about people like you, and honesty, received minimal or no support in the extreme category for candidates of the opposing party. It is not unusual to see minimal political support from the opposing political party, but survey results indicate a growing divergence through multiple elections along character evaluations, rather than policy or ideology. For example, Hillary Clinton did not receive any strong support from Republicans in the traits of strong leadership, caring about people like you, and honesty, while Mitt Romney garnered 0% support from Democrats on empathy alone in the previous contest. In contrast, Democrats expressed significant support for Joe Biden in the trait of empathy, with 35% extreme support in the 2020 election. Donald Trump received nearly 70% of Republican support in the extreme category when evaluating strong leadership, yet, 87% of Democrats rated the President as not well. These results demonstrate the dynamic perceptions and priorities of different ideological groups when evaluating candidates based on specific character traits.

Building on our analysis of voter perceptions of candidate traits, Chapter 3 delves into an examination of voters' policy preferences, interpreting them as reflections of a candidate's strength and leadership. While the prior chapter offered insights into how voters perceive the personal qualities of candidates, this chapter highlights the existing gap in our understanding of the observable actions and political behaviors candidates exhibit, and how voters translate those actions into evaluations of the candidates. Ultimately, this aims to make clearer determinations of the political behaviors voters prefer from candidates, thereby enhancing the satisfaction they derive from political representation.

Chapter 3: Foreign Policy Support as a Projection of Leadership

Nineteen days before the 2016 presidential election, Republican candidate Donald Trump and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton engaged in their third and final televised debate. They addressed a plethora of foreign affairs issues, including multilateral treaties, international terrorist groups, cyber-attacks, immigration controls, military interventions, and HIV-AIDS relief efforts.¹⁴⁰ Their comprehensive discussions on these foreign policy topics hint at a potential electoral advantage in articulating their stances on such matters. This paper delves into the interplay between foreign policy support and evaluations of candidate personality.

Studies of American elections have previously indicated domestic ideological preferences often don't align with foreign policy beliefs.¹⁴¹ This phenomenon is termed

¹⁴⁰ Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump. "2016 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, September 26, 2016. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁴¹ Berelson, Bernard R., Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee. 1954. *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Election*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

“rational ignorance”.¹⁴²¹⁴³ Organizations such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and their counterparts are generally filled with experts in diplomacy, military, and specific regions, operating largely outside the realm of direct public scrutiny. Their inherent operational complexities often limit public access to information.¹⁴⁴ The general public is more frequently confronted with domestic issues like unemployment and inflation than nuanced topics like monetary policy and arms negotiations.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, attitudes towards international organizations might not stem from firsthand experiences but instead from associations and heightened awareness of pertinent issues.¹⁴⁶ Activities such as participation in the Model United Nations or multicultural events could shape perspectives on international organizations in the absence of direct encounters.

Technological advances in radio, television, and internet communication allow for a greater reach of reporting. Previous regional differences in opinions of foreign affairs have all but dissipated since World War II.¹⁴⁷ Today, mass media is the primary conduit for gathering information on foreign affair policymaking.¹⁴⁸ The frequency and severity of world events is less of a predictor of increases in the public’s foreign policy concerns

¹⁴² Chapman, Terrence L. 2007. “International Security Institutions, Domestic Politics, and Institutional Legitimacy.” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51: 134

¹⁴³ Almond, Gabriel A. 1950. *The American People and Foreign Policy*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

¹⁴⁴ Herberichs, Gerard. 1966. "On Theories of Public Opinion and International Organization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 30: 624.

¹⁴⁵ Aldrich, John H., John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida. 1989. "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates 'Waltz Before A Blind Audience?'" *The American Political Science Review* 83, no. 1 (March): 123.

¹⁴⁶ Aldrich, John H., Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, Jason Reifler, and Kristin T. Sharp. 2006. "Foreign Policy and The Electoral Connection." *Annual Review of Political Science* 9: 477.

¹⁴⁷ Holsti, Ole R. 2004. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

¹⁴⁸ Soroka, Stuart N. 2003. “Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy.” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 8: 27.

than the frequency of media reports on global issues.¹⁴⁹ Increasingly, electorates are better informed on the impact of international actors on domestic policy formation.¹⁵⁰¹⁵¹ Notably, when a foreign policy decision is endorsed by the UN Security Council, public support for the decision tends to rise.¹⁵²

As mentioned above, voters may be unable to directly influence the makeup of international organizations, but they do maintain electoral connections with representatives who can exert influence. Studies have found voters in presidential elections prioritize foreign policy over taxes, racial discrimination, social security, and environmental protection.¹⁵³ When voters can differentiate between candidates on foreign policy attitudes and foreign policy issue priority remains high, it becomes a significant variable in determining eventual winners.¹⁵⁴¹⁵⁵ For example, the United States involvement in the Vietnam War prompted an increase in presidential campaign messaging towards viable solutions and was a substantial electoral factor.¹⁵⁶

Presidential candidates can take advantage of opposing viewpoints when foreign policy salience is high, but when issue salience is low, no significant electoral outcomes are apparent and attempts to direct messaging towards foreign policy may yield little to

¹⁴⁹ Soroka, Stuart N. 2003. "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 8: 28.

¹⁵⁰ Cortell, Andrew P., and James W. Davies. 1996. "How Do International Institutions Matter? The Domestic Impact of International Rules and Norms." *International Studies Quarterly* 40 (4): 451.

¹⁵¹ Chapman, Terrence. 2009. "Audience Beliefs and International Organization Legitimacy." *International Organization* 63 (4): 733–764.

¹⁵² Ibid

¹⁵³ Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida (1989), 129.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 135.

¹⁵⁵ Aldrich et al. (2006), 487.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 488.

no result.¹⁵⁷¹⁵⁸ A case study of the 2000 presidential election found indications of low significance when foreign policy issues did not contain aspects of personal importance to potential voters.¹⁵⁹ Other examinations of the significance of foreign policy opinion in electoral decisions have taken a theoretical approach.

Models show voters are more likely to favor leaders who can issue credible threats with successful outcomes. Leaders who fail to defend the foreign policies they propose suffer from a decline in competency. Low competency leaders who fail to issue threats when intervention would have been warranted receive no competency improvements.¹⁶⁰ Politicians are incentivized to appear hawkish or determined to make military commitments but may suffer electoral consequences if they are viewed as escalatory. The domestic audience costs political leaders incur can be alleviated by cooperation with international organizations.¹⁶¹¹⁶² The globalized nature of today's world has brought foreign policy to the forefront of voters' consciousness.

Earlier case studies utilized ANES and Gallup Poll survey results to establish foreign policy salience in the presidential campaigns of the 1980s. Survey data clearly demonstrated the public's coherent attitudes on foreign policy, ability to access those attitudes when voting, and an ability to distinguish between the foreign policy platforms of candidates.¹⁶³ Criticisms of the study, however, allege that survey questions were not

¹⁵⁷ Anand, Sowmya, and Jon A. Krosnick. 2003. "The Impact of Attitudes toward Foreign Policy Goals on Public Preferences among Presidential Candidates: A Study of Issue Publics and the Attentive Public in the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33: 31.

¹⁵⁸ Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida (1989), 133.

¹⁵⁹ Anand and Krosnick (2003), 35.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, Alastair. 1998. "International Crises and Domestic Politics." *American Political Science Review* 92: 623.

¹⁶¹ Fearon, James D. 1994. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review* 88 (3): 577.

¹⁶² Chapman 2009, 745.

¹⁶³ Aldrich et al. (2006), 484.

designed to provide broad and deep coverage of opinions of foreign policy. Rather, questions were too narrowly scoped and limited the ability to generalize its findings.¹⁶⁴

Still, evaluations of foreign policy goals by candidates have shown substantial effects on candidate preference and allowed for analysis of broader foreign policy issues.¹⁶⁵ Theoretical models have identified traits of leadership, competency, and unbiased decision making in foreign policy decisions to have electoral significance.¹⁶⁶¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸ However, these studies limit the independent variables of election success to one or two factors. In our endeavor to grasp the salience of foreign policy in the electoral context, we adopt a twofold approach.

Firstly, we turn to the ANES survey results collected during the presidential campaigns spanning 2012 to 2020. A key question posed to the voters was, "What is the most important problem facing the country?" This question serves as a lens through which we can gauge the prominence of foreign policy in the voters' minds. By analyzing the responses, we aim to discern the extent to which foreign policy concerns are prioritized by the electorate and the nuances of their perspectives on international matters.

Subsequently, our analysis returns to a meticulous examination of the content of candidate speeches from the presidential debates, with transcripts sourced from The Commission on Presidential Debates. Presidential debates play a pivotal role in shaping

¹⁶⁴ Anand and Krosnick (2003), 35.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ Linos, Katerina. 2011. "Diffusion Through Democracy." *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (3): 678.

¹⁶⁷ Fearon, James D. 1994. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review* 88 (3): 577.

¹⁶⁸ Fang, Songying. 2008. "The Informational Role of International Institutions and Domestic Politics." *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2): 304.

issue awareness, influencing candidate favorability, and determining voter preferences.¹⁶⁹ Additionally, presidential debates provide candidates with the largest audience to convey their campaign messaging.¹⁷⁰ Such debates offer candidates an unparalleled platform to articulate their campaign narratives.

Each mention within these speeches - be it of countries, regions, state actors, or foreign entities such as terrorist organizations, refugees, and companies, as well as international treaties - was coded. To gain deeper insights, we did not merely stop at categorization. We further evaluated the tonality of these mentions, classifying them as positive, negative, or neutral. This detailed coding exercise equipped us with a clearer understanding of the candidates' stances on international policies and provided insights into their sentiments toward various global actors and issues.

This chapter delves into both these dimensions, intertwining quantitative data with qualitative insights, to present a holistic view of the interplay between voter perceptions, candidate presentations, and the overarching theme of foreign policy as a projection of a candidate's character.

¹⁶⁹ Benoit, William L., Glenn J. Hansen, and Rebecca M. Verser. 2003. "A Meta-analysis of the Effects of Viewing U.S. Presidential Debates." *Communication Monograph* 70 (4): 335.

¹⁷⁰ Schroeder, Alan. 2016. *Presidential Debates: Risky Business on the Campaign Trail*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Survey Results and Content Analysis

TABLE 14 ANES 2012 MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM SURVEY RESULTS

Most Important Problem Facing The Country	Response %
The Economy	32%
Employment	19%
Budget	10%
Health (all other)	4%
Partisan politics	3%
Taxes	3%
Politicians	3%
Budget priorities	2%
Education (all other)	2%
Other problem	2%

Source: American National Election Studies. 2012. ANES 2012 Time Series Study [dataset and documentation]. www.electionstudies.org.

In the 2012 ANES survey, voter priorities gravitated primarily towards domestic issues, with the economy dominating the concerns at 32%. Employment followed suit, capturing the attention of 19% of respondents, while budget considerations were cited by 10%. Health and education concerns made the list, but political dynamics, represented by categories like partisan politics, taxes, and politicians, also marked their presence, each with 3%. Interestingly, foreign policy did not prominently feature, highlighting an electoral focus centered more on internal matters during this period.

TABLE 15 SAMPLE FOREIGN POLICY MENTIONS 2012 DEBATES

2012 Presidential Debates		Code Criteria	
		State/Country, Leader, International Organization, Region, Treaty, Foreign Entity	
Comment Text	Candidate	Issue	Context
Iraq	Obama	War	Negative
Afghanistan	Obama	War	Negative
Al Qaida	Obama	Terrorism	Negative
Bin Laden	Obama	Terrorism	Negative
Latin America	Romney	Trade	Positive
China	Romney	Trade	Negative
Canada	Romney	Gas/ Trade	Positive
North America	Romney	Gas/ Trade	Positive
China	Romney	Trade/ Deficit	Negative
China	Romney	Trade/ Deficit	Negative
Middle East	Romney	Foreign Policy	Negative

Source: Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. "2012 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 3, 2012. <https://www.debates.org/>.

In the first debate of 2012, foreign policy emerged as a pronounced theme. President Obama focused on military and terrorism issues, referencing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in a negative context and addressing threats posed by Al Qaeda. Furthermore, he underscored the elimination of Osama bin Laden. Obama stated, "That's how we ended the war in Iraq, as I promised, and that's how we're going to wind down the war in Afghanistan. That's how we went after Al Qaida and bin Laden".¹⁷¹ On the other side, Governor Romney's emphasis was largely economic. He mentioned Latin America in a positive light, associating it with open trade, while his repeated mentions of China were consistently negative, particularly concerning trade and deficits. Romney also

¹⁷¹ Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. "2012 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 3, 2012. <https://www.debates.org/>.

spotlighted Canada and North America favorably, linking them with a potential energy deal.¹⁷² Moreover, he broached the topic of the Middle East, framing it within a broader foreign policy narrative and marking it as negative. This content reflects a divergence in priorities between the two candidates, with Obama leaning more on security issues and Romney on economic foreign policy aspects.

In the second debate, foreign policy surfaced prominently. Obama frequently referenced China, primarily with negative connotations associated with trade. Terrorism was also a recurrent theme, with multiple mentions of Al Qaeda, bin Laden, and Benghazi. Romney's foreign policy mentions spanned a wider range, from the Middle East's challenges to positive relations with Canada and Latin America. Romney explained, "We're going to bring that pipeline in from Canada. How in the world the president said no to that pipeline? I will never know. This is about bringing good jobs back for the middle class of America, and that's what I'm going to do."¹⁷³ Significantly, Romney's mentions of China, largely negative and centered on trade. However, Obama had more mentions of terrorism-related topics than Romney. Both showed concern for international trade and security, but the frequency and context of their mentions painted distinct priorities and perspectives.

In the discourse surrounding foreign policy and international relations during the campaign, both Obama and Romney frequently addressed the challenges and strategic considerations concerning the Middle East, emphasizing countries such as Syria, Iran,

¹⁷² Reed, Betsy. "Obama and Romney Take up Gas Prices and Energy Policy During Second Debate." *The Guardian*. October 16, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/17/obama-romney-energy-policy-debate>.

¹⁷³ Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. "2012 Presidential Debate: Second Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 16, 2012. <https://www.debates.org/>.

Egypt, and Libya. Their stances on these nations often revolved around issues of terrorism, nuclear policy, and economic sanctions. Romney made clear, "...with regards to standing for our principles, when — when the students took to the streets in Tehran and the people there protested, the Green Revolution occurred, for the president to be silent I thought was an enormous mistake."¹⁷⁴ The Arab Spring and its implications for regional stability also emerged as a significant point of discussion.

Additionally, the relationship with China, framed in terms of trade, military spending, and economic policies, was a recurring topic. Romney also touched upon relations with other nations like Russia, while Obama, again, highlighted accomplishments like the elimination of Osama bin Laden. Both candidates had extensive discussions on the complexities of the Afghan and Iraq wars, and the broader fight against Al Qaeda. The narrative underscores the intricate and multifaceted nature of U.S. foreign policy considerations during this period.

¹⁷⁴ Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. "2012 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 22, 2012. <https://www.debates.org/>.

TABLE 16 ANES 2016 MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM SURVEY RESULTS

Most Important Problem Facing The Country	Response %
The Economy	12%
Race Relations	9%
Employment	8%
Health (All Other)	6%
Unity/Division	6%
Budget	5%
Immigration	5%
Other Problem	5%
Politicians	4%
Economic inequality	4%

Source: American National Election Studies. 2016. ANES 2016 Time Series Study [dataset and documentation]. www.electionstudies.org.

A continuing trend in 2016, the economy remained a significant concern for voters, though its prominence reduced to 12%. Race relations emerged as a notable issue, garnering 9% of the responses, closely followed by employment at 8%. Health concerns and issues regarding national unity/division each received attention from 6% of respondents. Categories like budget, immigration, and other problems held equal footing, each amassing 5% of the responses. Meanwhile, the electorate's views on politicians and economic inequality mirrored each other, with both issues cited by 4% of respondents. The shift in concerns from 2012 to 2016 underscored evolving national dynamics and the emergence of race and unity as significant electoral considerations.

TABLE 17 SAMPLE FOREIGN POLICY MENTIONS 2016 DEBATES

2016 Presidential Debates		Code Criteria	
		State/Country, Leader, International Organization, Region, Treaty, Foreign Entity	
Comment Text	Candidate	Issue	Context
NATO	Trump	Budget/National deb	Negative
Planned Parenthood	Clinton	Moral values/Family	Positive
Planned Parenthood	Clinton	Moral values/Family	Positive
Planned parenthood	Clinton	Moral values/Family	Positive
Planned Parenthood	Clinton	Moral values/Family	Positive
WikiLeaks	Clinton	Homeland security	Negative
WikiLeaks	Clinton	Homeland security	Negative
WikiLeaks	Clinton	Homeland security	Negative
China	Trump	Homeland security	Negative
Syria	Trump	Terrorism/Islamic extremists	Negative
Russia	Trump	Electoral system	Negative

Source: Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump. "2016 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 19, 2016. <https://www.debates.org/>.

The 2016 U.S. Presidential debates offered a revealing look into the foreign policy priorities and perspectives of Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. A content analysis of the debates sheds light on the emphasis placed on various international issues, the tonality associated with these topics, and the nuances in the candidates' stances. With a total of 508 references to international themes, a significant chunk of the debates veered towards the global arena. The sentiment of these references was majorly negative, with 338 comments being rated so, while only 50 were positive, and 119 remained neutral.

The debates witnessed a wide range of topics, but specific areas stood out in terms of frequency. Countries formed the bulk of the conversation, amassing 226 comments. International organizations, state actors, geographical regions, international treaties, and foreign entities followed. In the second debate, Clinton remarked, “When I was secretary

of state, I went around the world advocating for our country, but also advocating for women's rights, to make sure that women had a decent chance to have a better life and negotiated a treaty with Russia to lower nuclear weapons. Four hundred pieces of legislation have my name on it as a sponsor or cosponsor when I was a senator for eight years."¹⁷⁵

Russia, particularly combined with references to its leader, President Vladimir Putin, dominated the discourse, receiving a whopping 86 mentions. It is noteworthy that ISIS and Iraq were the next focal points, reflecting the heightened concerns of international terrorism and regional stability. Candidate Trump on Russia stated, "Well, what Russia did with Assad and, by the way, with Iran, who you made very powerful with the dumbest deal perhaps I've ever seen in the history of deal-making, the Iran deal, with the \$150 billion, with the \$1.7 billion in cash, which is enough cash to fill up this room. But look at that deal. Iran now and Russia are now against us."¹⁷⁶

At its core, the bulk of the discussions revolved around pivotal international issues such as foreign policy direction, global terrorism threats, and significant global challenges like refugee crises, nuclear weapon proliferation, and intricate diplomatic relationships. A deeper dive into the candidates' specific positions, mirrored by the differences in their comment ratings, offers a clearer distinction of their approach and perspective on these pressing global matters.

¹⁷⁵ Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump. "2016 Presidential Debate: Second Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 9, 2016. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁷⁶Ibid

TABLE 18 ANES 2020 MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM SURVEY RESULTS

Most Important Problem Facing The Country	Response %
Health Care	30%
Race Relations	9%
Unity Division	8%
Government (All Other)	5%
The Economy	4%
Other Problem	4%
Partisan Poitics	4%
Politicians	4%
Health (All Other)	3%
Elections	3%

Source: American National Election Studies. 2020. ANES 2020 Time Series Study [dataset and documentation]. www.electionstudies.org.

By the 2020 survey, Health care emerged as the most pressing concern for respondents, accounting for a substantial 30% of the total. This was followed by race relations, which remained consistent from the 2016 data, at 9%. Unity/division concerns were also steady at 8%. The economy, which was a primary concern in previous years, saw a decline, capturing only 4% of the responses. The general sentiment toward government, as indicated by the category government (all other), stood at 5%. Several issues like other problems, partisan politics, politicians, and health (all other) shared similar sentiments, each taking up 3-4% of the total responses. Elections also made an appearance in 2020, cited by 3% of the respondents. The data from 2020 highlights a shift in priorities, with health care coming to the forefront, likely due to the global pandemic's impact.

In the ANES survey results from 2012, the economy was the primary concern, capturing 32% of respondents' attention. By 2016, the economy remained a leading issue,

albeit reduced to 12%, while race relations emerged as another significant topic at 9%. In 2020, the landscape of concern shifted dramatically, with health care emerging as the paramount concern for 30% of respondents. Results indicate foreign policy salience was significantly low for the 2016 presidential election. As previously discussed, low foreign policy salience can result in minimal electoral impact. Still, distinct differences in candidate policy positions can produce electoral significance in low foreign policy salience elections.¹⁷⁷¹⁷⁸

TABLE 19 SAMPLE FOREIGN POLICY MENTIONS 2020 DEBATES

2020 Presidential Debates		Code Criteria	
		State/Country, Leader, International Organization, Region, Treaty, Foreign Entity	
Comment Text	Candidate	Issue	Context
China	Trump	COVID	Negative
Favored Nations	Trump	COVID	Positive
China	Biden	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
Wuhan	Biden	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
Xi	Biden	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
Xi	Biden	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
China	Trump	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
China	Trump	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
Russia	Trump	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
China	Trump	Foreign policy/COVID	Negative
China	Biden	Trade	Negative

Source: Joe Biden and Donald J. Trump. "2020 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, September 29, 2020. <https://www.debates.org/>.

During the first debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the 2020 Presidential election, there were significant mentions and references related to foreign

¹⁷⁷ Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida (1989), 134.

¹⁷⁸ Anand and Krosnick (2003), 34.

nations, international treaties, and global issues. Both candidates frequently criticized China, with topics ranging from COVID, foreign policy, to trade. Biden particularly expressed negative views on China's role in trade and its handling of the COVID outbreak. Similarly, Biden raised concerns about Russia, especially with regard to President Putin's relationship with President Trump, using phrases like "Putin's Puppy."¹⁷⁹ Trump, on the other hand, brought up negative comments related to Ukraine and the Mayor of Moscow in connection to allegations of corruption and Joe Biden.¹⁸⁰

The environment was another key area of contention. Trump criticized the Paris Accord, an international treaty on climate change, but spoke positively about an environmental initiative called The Billion Tree Project.¹⁸¹ Meanwhile, Biden had mixed views on the Paris Accord but expressed concerns over Brazil's environmental policies. The debate highlighted the candidates' differing perspectives on international relations and global challenges.

During the second and final debate between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden, international relations, especially with China, took center stage. Trump's stance on China was mixed in the context of COVID response, oscillating between positive and negative remarks. In contrast, Biden consistently criticized China. Biden stated, "What I'd make China do is play by the international rules, not like he has

¹⁷⁹ Joe Biden and Donald J. Trump. "2020 Presidential Debate: First Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, September 29, 2020. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁸⁰ Herb, J. (2020, October 23). Trump falsely claims Joe Biden received \$3.5 million from Russia. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/23/politics/biden-3-5-million-russia/index.html>

¹⁸¹ U.S. Department of the Interior. "Trump Administration Furthers Commitment to One Trillion Trees Initiative." Press release. October 13, 2020. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/trump-administration-furthers-commitment-one-trillion-trees-initiative>.

done. He has caused the deficit in China to go up not down — with China, up not down.”¹⁸²

Election security emerged as a significant concern, with Biden bringing up Russia, China, and Iran as threat. NATO was discussed by both, though in different contexts. President Trump remarked, “Between the sanctions, nobody tougher than me on Russia. Between the sanctions between all of what I’ve done with NATO. You know, I’ve got the NATO countries to put up an extra 130 billion, going to \$420 billion a year, that’s to guard against Russia.”¹⁸³ Both candidates also made remarks about their personal involvement or alleged misdealing’s with countries like China, Ukraine, and Russia. The debate also touched upon military concerns in the South China Sea, and foreign policy decisions involving North Korea and Europe.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

American elections, historically rooted in domestic ideological battles, have seen a noticeable shift in focus towards foreign policy considerations over recent years. This transition can be attributed to the electorate becoming more informed about the influences of international actors on domestic policy decisions. While politicians might feel compelled to adopt a hawkish stance, appearing escalatory can backfire, incurring significant domestic audience costs. However, collaborating with international organizations can often mitigate these consequences. To understand the role of foreign policy in the electoral arena, our analysis intertwines findings from the ANES survey

¹⁸² Joe Biden and Donald J. Trump. "2020 Presidential Debate: Third Debate." Commission on Presidential Debates, October 22, 2020. <https://www.debates.org/>.

¹⁸³ Ibid

(from 2012 to 2020) with a detailed exploration of candidate speeches in presidential debates. The 2016 election emphasized economic issues, albeit its importance receded to 12% according to the ANES. The emergence of race relations as a pivotal issue, taking up 9%, was observed, closely trailed by employment concerns at 8%. Issues of health and national unity/division equally commanded the attention of 6% of survey participants. By 2020, healthcare dominated the discourse, resonating with an overwhelming 30% of the respondents, highlighting its significance in the electoral landscape.

Voters gravitate towards candidates who display resolute leadership, especially in times of crisis, seeking a leader who can navigate the nation through tumultuous waters. Such projection not only instills confidence domestically but also serves as a message to international actors, signaling the nation's stance and resilience. However, the perception of strength isn't merely about adopting a hawkish attitude; it's also about demonstrating wisdom, foresight, and an ability to collaborate. In the electoral arena, candidates who successfully strike a balance between showcasing robust leadership while advocating for diplomatic cooperation often resonate more profoundly with an electorate that values both assertion and restraint.

Conclusion

The interplay between personality and politics is increasingly important in modern political theory due to its significant impact on voter perceptions and election outcomes. Understanding this influence is essential for political scientists. Building on research which dates to the 1930s—highlighted by Harold Laswell's seminal work "Psychopathology and Politics"—this study aims to fill a gap in current scholarship.

Laswell advocated for broadening our understanding of political behavior to include both high-level and everyday activities within governmental institutions. Importantly, political actors function within specific contexts and bring their own predispositions, which trigger political responses. In some situations, personality traits are more likely to be evident. This research focuses on how candidates emphasize traits like strength and leadership, especially through their positions on foreign policy. By employing a comprehensive three-pronged methodology – from dissecting presidential debates to harnessing insights from the ANES – this study illuminates the persistent value voters place on honesty and leadership in their ideal presidential candidate.

Research methods in the study of personality and politics have progressed, employing a variety of techniques that offer insights into how personal traits shape political events and elections. Techniques such as single-case studies, aggregate analysis, and typological grouping have been especially impactful. While single-case studies can yield intriguing findings, they come with limitations like subjectivity, shallow depth due to a lack of psychological expertise, and difficulties in replicability. Current research often uses either a two or four-dimensional typology to categorize personality traits in a political context, focusing on areas like leadership and competency. Traditional metrics such as opinion surveys and approval ratings provide a broad view of a candidate's competence but often miss specific traits that voters value. Notably, in presidential debates from 2000 to 2020, candidates—particularly Republicans—made deliberate choices about which traits to highlight. Understanding these patterns can guide future campaign strategies and improve the relationship between candidates and voters.

Voter evaluations of candidates based on traits like leadership and honesty differ across political lines. The data shows stark contrasts between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents in their trait preferences. Especially noteworthy is the fluctuation within Independent voters, pointing to their diverse views. In recent elections, Republicans consistently viewed Democratic candidates less favorably. These findings emphasize the complexity candidates encounter in appealing to a diverse Independent electorate, which, especially in the 2016 and 2020 elections, showed a noticeable division into left-leaning and right-leaning subgroups, each with its own set of political perceptions and priorities.

Building on this complexity, our research highlights a broader shift in American elections from a focus on domestic issues to a growing emphasis on foreign policy matters. This shift underscores voters' expanding awareness of how global dynamics influence domestic policy. Candidates use foreign policy to show leadership and competence. A hawkish stance might appeal to some but risks alienating others. Collaborating with international groups can temper this, presenting the candidate as both strong and diplomatic. Our study, which melds data from ANES surveys from 2012 to 2020 with an analysis of presidential debate speeches, reveals evolving voter priorities.

Voter priorities in the 2012 elections were dominated by the economy, with both Romney and Obama reflecting these concerns in their stance on international trade relations, especially concerning Latin America and China. By 2016, while economic concerns persisted, they were overshadowed by rising issues like race relations, health, and employment. The debates of this year pivoted around global challenges such as terrorism, nuclear threats, and international relations, with Russia and Putin taking center

stage. By 2020, healthcare took the forefront, consuming 30% of voter concerns. In these debates, China's role, especially concerning COVID and trade, became a focal point. Election security and international alliances, like NATO, were discussed extensively. The trend suggests a pivot in American elections from purely domestic concerns to an increasing emphasis on foreign policy, highlighting the electorate's growing awareness of global influences on local policy decisions.

The research indicates that preference for specific personality traits varies notably across partisan lines, especially among Independent voters. In the 2020 election, Republicans generally viewed President Trump more favorably in terms of traits like strong leadership, empathy, knowledge, and honesty, as evidenced by higher percentages of extreme and very positive ratings. Conversely, Democrats and Independents were more likely to hold neutral or negative views on these traits, showing lower percentages of extreme and very positive ratings. These diverging perspectives underscore the extent to which partisan stereotypes can shape perceptions of a candidate's character across different political affiliations.

Future research could work towards standardizing the methodology in the intersectional field of personality and politics, allowing for more consistent and comparable findings across studies. Additionally, a nuanced examination of the specific traits candidates prioritize could provide valuable insights into electoral psychology and strategy. While this study focused on presidential debates, investigating trait projection in other political environments such as party primaries or state elections could reveal varying dynamics and enrich our understanding of this complex interplay.

In summary, this research seeks to deepen our comprehension of the relationship between candidate character portrayals, voter trait inclinations, and the amalgamation of domestic and international policy priorities in sculpting the landscape of U.S. presidential elections. By doing so, it aspires to pave the way for enhanced political representation and clarity in the roles of government's most esteemed positions. Ultimately, the aim is to foster an environment of transparency and integrity in leadership, ensuring that it serves the collective welfare of the nation.

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