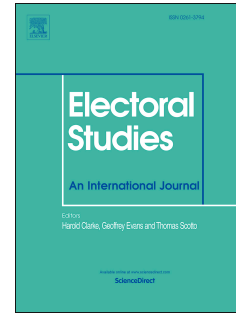


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The relative weight of character traits in political candidate evaluations: Warmth is more important than competence, leadership and integrity

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The relative weight of character traits in political candidate evaluations: Warmth is more important than competence, leadership and integrity

Abstract:

Decades of research has found that voters' electoral decisions to a significant degree are affected by character evaluations of candidates. Yet it remains unresolved which specific candidate traits voters find most important. In political science it is often argued that competence-related traits are most influential, whereas work in social psychology suggests that warmth-related traits are more influential. Here we test which character trait is the more influential in global candidate evaluations and vote choice using observational data from the ANES 1984-2008 and an original experiment conducted on a representative sample of English partisan respondents. Across the two studies we find that warmth is more influential than competence, leadership and integrity. Importantly, results hold across a wide range of alternative specifications and robustness analyses. We conclude by discussing theoretical and practical implications of the results.

Key words: Political candidates, character traits, competence, warmth, candidate preferences, US presidents, vote choice.

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