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The Ties That Bind: Candidate Appearance and Party Heuristics

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Abstract

Studies on voting behavior have implications for academia and for real world applications. One of the main topics covered in studies of voting behavior is the use of heuristics to make voting decisions. A heuristic is a mental shortcut used to make a decision, and often times does not account for any careful consideration. According to the literature, an individual's party identification is the most commonly used heuristic in voting behavior. A voter will align with a political party based on preferences in policy (or perceived preferences) and vote for any candidate who bears the party's designation. There is also a growing field of literature on another heuristic in voting behavior, that of candidate appearance. By examining the physical appearance of a candidate a voter will make judgments based on specific cues, and decide whether or not to vote for a candidate. This study attempts to establish a link between the two heuristics; can candidate appearance active the party identification heuristic in voters? To study this, a candidate was created that had no clear partisan alignment, but was given partisan appearance cues through the manipulation of his tie color. Respondents were asked to evaluate the candidate based on his image and a brief biography and were asked if they would vote for the candidate in the election. Upon examining the results only two variables were significant in predicting vote choice. The respondent's knowledge score was negatively associated with voting for the candidate, as knowledge score increased the likelihood of a vote decreased holding all other variables constant. Tie color was statistically significant for the respondents in the Independent political party group of respondents, as they were more likely to vote for the candidate for the green tie if they were an Independent. This study establishes some precedent for links between the two heuristics and paves a pathway to further studies based on other experimental manipulations to convey partisanship in appearance

Keywords: Voting behavior, party identification, partisanship, candidate appearance, heuristics, tie color, elections, electorate

Introduction

       Voting behavior of the electorate is an increasingly important field of study in the discipline of Political Science and has significant implications for democratically based societies. For the discipline, understanding voting behavior helps us understand issues that are important to voters, how much political knowledge they have and even how specific policies can be crafted in legislatures. For society, voting behavior is indicator of who is going to be elected and how it is that candidate gets elected.

       The predominant explanation for voting behavior at this point comes from heuristics, or shortcuts, that a voter uses to make decisions. These shortcuts are used to make decisions in either a shorter amount of time or because there is a large amount of information to sort through before making a decision. One of the most commonly used heuristics in voting behavior is that of Party Identification (Campbell 1960; Bartels 2002). The dominance that this heuristic has over the voting behavior of citizens is evident in what is known as straight ticket voting. Traditionally, one votes by individually selecting a candidate in each race. Straight ticket voting is when a voter goes to the polls and selects a political party from the options provided, which will have them vote for the candidate for every available elected position that is from the selected political party.

       Another emerging heuristic in voting behavior is that of candidate appearance. Several studies have been completed to determine if specific characteristics of a candidate's appearance will make them more or less likely to be elected (Brusattin 2012; Lawson 2010). Examples of these characteristics include race, and facial cues that invoke feelings of trust and honesty. An important question to ask is, can candidate appearance be used to invoke the use of the Party

Identification heuristic? Simply put, are there cues in candidate appearance that would activate a voter's party identification bias and result in their voting for a candidate? This paper will seek to answer that question. If it is possible for candidate appearance to activate the Party Identification heuristic this would have implications for the future of elections and the discipline itself. As political scientists we could better evaluate the decision making process that occurs in voting and predicts outcomes as they relate to this behavior. In society, candidates would have found an easier way to get themselves elected with a minimal increase in effort.

Literature Review

Voting behavior has long been a well-studied topic in the discipline of political science. The amount of literature on the subject is in part due to the real world implications that come from voting behavior. Voters are responsible for who gets elected in office which ultimately leads to policy decisions with ramifications for the economy and the public good in general. Studies on this topic have revealed the use of heuristics in the decision making process of voters. A heuristic can best be defined as a "knowledge shortcut". Heuristics are used by all citizens despite their level of sophistication or knowledge (Brussattin 2012) which means they play a large role in behavior due to their widespread use. However, the effect of heuristics on behavior is more contested than their usage itself. Some studies conclude that heuristics allow those with less political knowledge or interest to act as though they posses higher levels of political knowledge by allowing them to use the shortcut to access already established knowledge bases (Boudreau 2009). Other studies contend that the usage of heuristics actually hurt the voter's ability to make well-grounded decisions. Dancey and Sheagal (2012) discuss this in their experiment that analyzes how heuristics can lead low-information voters to be uninformed and

high-knowledge voters to be misinformed. Popkin (1991) argues that the use of heuristics has led to "low information rationality". Low information rationality has the potential to lead to misinformation based on personal preferences and a created narrative that may not be based in fact.

One of the most widely used heuristics by voters is party identification. Campbell et al. (1960) establish political party as one of the heuristics used to make decisions through a system of cues and perceptions. The effect of party and its use as a heuristic was confirmed in a study by Bartels (2002). The results of this study show that political party is a "pervasive dynamic force" that plays a major role in the mind of the voter (Bartels 2002, 138). The use of party identification has been shown to have a particular impact in low information voters compared to the general electorate. Results from this study showed that when provided with political party affiliation in surveys, low information voters were shown to use that cue as the basis for their vote choice (Schaffner and Streb 2002). Party cues are also utilized by voters to determine their issue positions as well. This is important to note because of the establishment of issue based voting in the literature of voter behavior as established by the study of the 1992 Presidential Election by Alan Abramowitz. This study focused on the issue of abortion and its impact on the election outcome based on the issue positions of the candidates and their party affiliation (Abramowitz 1995). This issue was the most significant issue upon analysis and established a link between issues and party affiliation. William Jacoby also discusses the ties between partisan identification and issue attitudes. He concludes that a partisan tie is a source of cues and perceptions that help guide the formation of opinions in voters (Jacoby 1988). Critics of the

prevalence of the party identification heuristic have been able to establish that there are other factors that impact vote choice, but party affiliation is still a driving force (Meier 1975).

Party identification is not the only heuristic that is used by voters when they make their vote choice, as the candidate's appearance is also used as a heuristic. Candidate appearance contains a variety of factors and is generally evaluated in the context of electoral success. Factors include race, gender, and facial cues related to desirable character traits. Terkildsen (1993) discusses how racial prejudice had a negative influence on the evaluation of African American candidates, and thusly on potential voter choice of the evaluators. Those with darker skin encounter what she refers to as the triple bias of "race, prejudice, and skin color", which is demonstrated to negatively impact the evaluation of candidates in a greater fashion. Race also plays a role in identifying party affiliation as black candidates along with women are perceived to be more liberal and Democratic (McDermott 1998). Party identification is not the only perception that comes from gender. Character traits are associated with specific examples, like toughness and aggressiveness with males and compassion and passivity with females (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a, 1993b; Leeper, 1991; Rosenwasser & Dean, 1989). These character traits can be used when forming vote choice, for example, wanting a tough candidate if your issue of focus is crime and you will vote based on that issue. Other studies have looked solely at facial cues in candidate appearance and its influence in the mind of the voter (Lawson et al. 2010). What all of these studies convey is that different factors or even combinations of them in a candidate's appearance impact candidate evaluation and ultimately voting behavior.

Research

According to the literature available on the two heuristics, candidate appearance can be used to invoke the party identification heuristic and influence voting behavior. To test this, first a method of portraying partisanship in appearance was necessary. To achieve this conveyance of information the color of the tie worn by the candidate would be altered in an image of the same candidate. With the picture being held constant, the only variable being manipulated is the color of the tie to control for any impact from other variables. Three different colors would be used to indicate partisanship, blue for Democrat, red for Republican, and green for partisan Independents (See Figures 1-3 in the Appendix). The picture of the candidate was placed next to a brief candidate biography that displayed a style common to candidate biographies that representatives had been using on their websites. DW NOMINATE scores were consulted to find a moderate Republican, moderate Democrat, and a more partisan Democrat and Republican to ensure that the instrument biography would be non-partisan. After consulting these actual candidate biographies, a generic biography was constructed that did not display overt partisan messages that would lean toward one party or another. A survey was placed at the bottom of the page that asked demographic questions, political knowledge questions, and questions about the candidate pictured and described above the survey. The resulting document is a one page color survey that is reproduced in Figure 4 in the Appendix.

There are several assumptions that need to be met when sampling a population. The first assumption is that it is a random sample. To meet this assumption, 11 different class sections of introductory classes were chosen to take the survey. The sections were chosen to ensure the randomness of respondents in the sample, not by the classes themselves, but their composition.

To achieve this two different class types, an introductory level American Government class, and the University 110: First Year Experience class that all incoming students are required to take. The diversity of the student composition of these sections comes from the required enrollment in the freshman class by all students. The introductory level government class was taken because it is one of two available class types that satisfy the core requirement for all students at the university, again giving a diverse group of students. After the class sections had been chosen they were randomly assigned a colored survey to receive. One class would all receive the same color survey so that there was no manipulation apparent to the respondents that could bias the results. The colors were distributed equally amongst the sections to avoid a saturation of the sample with one color versus another.

Prior to being surveyed, the classes did not know that they would be partaking in a study. The surveys were given to the professors who would administer the survey at the beginning of class and then collected before class material was given. The professors were unaware of the nature of the survey and also unaware of the color they received (a copy of the instructions can be found in Figure 5 of the Appendix). After the data was collected it was compiled into a data set to be analyzed. Among the models run was a logistic regression model. Two different statistical regression models are included in this paper that displays the statistically significant results. Table 1 (next page) displays the model with each of the parties separated out as well as the race variable. The Republican matching variable, Democrat matching variable and the Independent matching variable represents the completion of a survey by a political party identifier with the tie color of that party (so a 1 in the Democrat matching variable means that a

democrat received and completed the blue tie survey). When the parties are separated out only

the Independent matching variable comes back significant as p<0.10.

Table 1: Logistic Regression of Vote Choice with Aggregation of Party Variables

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>z
Tie&Party Match	.304101	0.2980384	1.02	0.308
Male	.0588632	0.2834233	0.21	0.835
Age	-.0676596	0.0524961	-1.29	0.197
White	.0932396	0.3005124	0.31	0.756
Knowledge Score	-.3015275	0.1655098	*-1.82**	*0.068**
Respondent Voted	.0321051	0.3171714	0.10	0.919
Constant	2.277882	1.047655	2.17	0.03

Log likelihood	-160.42528

Number of obs = 249
LR chi2 (6) = 7.17
Prob >chi2 = 0.3053
Pseudo R2 = 0.0219

Notes: [*] $p < .10$, **$p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

This means that an Independent respondent is more likely to vote for a candidate with a green tie as compared to the rest, holding all other variables constant.

Also note the other statistically significant variable in this table, knowledge score (p<0.10). Knowledge score was measured by asking three political knowledge questions about American politics. The three questions were then aggregated to determine a respondent's knowledge score. Unlike the Independent matching variable, the knowledge score variable has a negative coefficient. In Table 2 (as seen on the next page) we see the same statistical significance for the knowledge score variable but the party variables have been aggregated into an overall Matching variable and race has been aggregated into white versus non-white respondents. The aggregation of the party variables into the match variable is insignificant despite containing the significant Independent variable component.

Other variables that were measured and tested include the gender of the respondent, the age of the respondent, the race of the respondent and whether or not the respondent had previously voted in an election prior to the completion of this survey. You can see these variables included in both Table 1 and Table 2 with no statistical significance.

Analysis

By examining the data it is possible to draw a few conclusions. The only variable that is consistently statistically significant is knowledge score. Knowledge score is statistically significant at the p>0.10 level and the coefficient is in the negative direction. This means that as knowledge score increases the likelihood of voting for Dan Smith decreases. This trend is present in both the model that separates the parties individually and the one that combines the

matches from all of the parties (See Figures 1 & 2). Pairing this evidence with some of the

literature, it does add support to the usage of heuristics among low information voters. However,

Table 2: Logistic Regression of Vote Choice without aggregation of Party Variable

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>z
Republican Matching	.141	.480	0.29	0.769
Democrat Matching	-.138	.474	-.029	0.771
Independent Matching	.840	.470	*1.79**	*0.074**
Male	.067	.289	0.23	0.818
Age	-.062	.048	-1.28	0.200
White	.502	.920	0.92	0.358
Black	.765	1.25	1.25	0.211
Hispanic	-.136	.863	-0.16	0.875
Knowledge Score	-.319	.171	*-1.86**	*0.063**
Constant	1.79	1.144	1.56	0.118

Log likelihood	-157.9293

Number of obs = 249
LR chi2(6) = 12.16
Prob>chi2= 0.2043
Pseudo R2 =0.0371

Notes: *p < .10, **p < .05, *** p < .01.

what the data also suggests is that party identification is not the heuristic that was utilized in their decision to vote for Dan Smith. The generic non-partisan biography candidate was free from any issue position indicators that could have activated the party identification heuristic. Traditionally, biographies of candidates will include issue positions and other partisan cues that signal to voters what political party they belong to, and the lack of these indicators could have potentially confused voters. Some of the answers from the open-ended question about the respondents vote choice on the survey were indicative of that confusion. The two more frequent responses to that question were in regards to his political party affiliation or issue positions (whether general or specific).

Overall, we can see from Table 2 that tie color does not activate the party identification heuristic as this experiment was designed to invoke. The variable 'match' was the compilation of the three previously separated party identification/tie color match variables (so a 1 in the match variable means that a Republican respondent received and completed a red tie survey, a Democrat received and completed the blue survey and the Independent received and completed the green survey). This variable came back insignificant with a p-value>0.10. The conclusion that we can draw from this is that for tie color does not matter to partisans in the aggregate. However, when the parties are separated into their own independent variables (so each component of the match variable is separated out by party), the green tie color is significant (p-value<0.10) to the Independent respondents. This means that an independent seeing a green tie is more likely to vote for that candidate than if he were wearing a blue or red tie. There are a few possible explanations to why this may occur. As an Independent respondent, they have labeled themselves essentially as "non-partisan" as they do not identify with a specific party. Having

resisted joining a specific party they are therefore more sensitive to partisan cues such as the color associated with the two major political parties. An independent seeing the candidate image with a red tie or a blue tie could have determined based on the color of his tie his partisanship and therefore not voted for him due to his perceived bias. Independents seeing a green tie then would have evaluated the candidate based on the biography or possibly projecting their own values onto the candidate who did not have any overt biases or values. Perceiving no bias would have eased the ability for an Independent, who also by definition has no bias, into projecting their views onto the candidate and voting for him. The generic biography and non-partisan alignment could have also projected a specific characteristics or set of characteristics onto the candidate that the sample saw as desirable, such as his moderate views and community involvement. While there are a few conclusions that can be drawn from this study, the research question has been answered and largely rejected. From this experiment, it does not appear as though the party identification heuristic in voting behavior can be activated through candidate appearance for all respondents. While the hypothesis was accepted from the Independent respondents, in general it was rejected, as the aggregation of the parties returned insignificant.

Conclusion

This studied attempted to establish a link between the party identification heuristic and candidate appearance. Party identification as a heuristic of voting behavior is well established in the existing literature as is the heuristic of candidate appearance. By manipulating the tie color of an otherwise non-partisan candidate, the belief was that partisan voters would identify the partisanship in the candidate's appearance and vote for him. This study was able to conclude that for all of the parties, the manipulation of the tie color was insignificant in obtaining votes for

the candidate. However, when the parties were evaluated individually, for Independent respondents tie color was significant. This study also supported research in the field regarding information levels and voting behavior. While the manipulation of tie color in a candidate's picture may not have been significant in voting behavior, it is not inconsiderable to think that other manipulations meant to convey partisanship could not activate the party identification heuristic. Further analysis on this topic could involve position issues or political party affiliation included with a candidate picture (for example, pairing known Republican issues with a blue tie picture). There is also the potential for the use of interaction terms that could have displayed differing results by examining the amplification of the variables with each other. This paper provides a base of research on the use of candidate appearance and party identification heuristics in voting behavior and helps to explain, although fairly minimally so factors in the decision making process.

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Appendix

Figure 1 Blue Tie Picture

Figure 2 Red Tie Picture

Figure 3 Green Tie Picture

Figure 4 Example Survey

Send Dan Smith to Washington

Dan Smith is the young politician that America needs in office. Dan received a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and has become a local restaurateur. He has been successfully running this business for almost 10 years. He is also a dedicated husband, and has been married to his wife Madison for eight years and has two children, Elizabeth and Jonathan. Dan has been active in his community for several years, serving on the PTA of his children's school as well on the Board of Directors of a local charity. Dan Smith also has the legislative experience one would expect in a candidate for the U.S. Congress, having served in the state legislature for 4 years now. His committee assignments include the Transportation and Ethics committees. Mr. Smith believes that he can bring the drive and dedication that he has demonstrated in both his political and professional life to Washington D.C. Issues that are particularly important to Dan are government accountability, education reform, and job creation. As a business owner, Dan Smith has championed these causes by operating in both an honest and transparent manner, while bringing both prosperity and jobs to his community.

QUESTIONS

What is your Gender?
Male   Female

How old are you?
_____

What do you consider your State of Residence?
_____

What Race do you consider yourself?
White   Black   Hispanic   Asian
Other_____

Do you consider yourself to be a:
Democrat   Independent   Republican
Other_____

Have you ever voted in an election?
Yes   No

How long is the President of the United States term of Office?
_____

How many _Senators_ are there in the U.S. Congress?
_____

What percentage vote is required for Congress to overturn a Presidential veto?
_____

After reading the information above, would you vote for Dan Smith?
Yes   No

Why or Why Not?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Figure 5 Survey Instructions

Thank you all for taking some time out of your classes to help me with me thesis. The survey in this packet is a one page survey that includes a candidate's picture, a biography, and some questions for the students to answer.

The survey should be distributed to the students, who may fill it out with any writing instrument, as long as it is legible. When the survey has been distributed please read the following instructions:

- **Please observe the candidate's image and read the brief biography that accompanies the picture**
- **When you are done with that, please fill out the questions by either circling the appropriate answer or filling in the blank**
- **When you are done please bring them up to the front and put them in the envelope**
- **Reminder, do not put your name on the survey, as your answers are anonymous**
- **Thank you again, for assisting me in my thesis, your cooperation is much appreciated**

When the class has finished the survey's, please seal the envelope and return them to Dr. Frederick Wood's mailbox in the faculty mailroom

Thank you again; I really appreciate your assistance with this research

B. Reilly