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Personality Matters: The Evaluation of Party Leaders in Canadian Elections

8

Amanda Bittner

When voters go to the polls on election day, they have many things to consider. Political scientists have expended a great deal of energy trying to determine what exactly voters are thinking about when they decide to vote for one party over another. What we know as a result of those efforts is that there are many factors that influence vote choice and that different factors matter for different people at different times. Indeed, the chapters in this volume illustrate the wide variety of influences on the vote – from partisanship to the economy, from gender to country of origin, from our interpretation of poll results to our understanding of federalism and the roles of different levels of government.

One factor that is not discussed in the other chapters, but that is a component of the Michigan (Campbell et al. 1960) and political choice (Clarke et al. 1979) models, is the impact of party leaders on vote choice. Although the impact of voters' perceptions of leaders has been examined by a number of scholars (Winham and Cunningham 1970; Brown et al. 1988; Johnston et al. 1992; Johnston 2002; Gidengil, Everitt, and Banducci 2006), the literature is not conclusive about the evaluations of party leaders and the effects of those evaluations on vote choice. Although some suggest (for example, Johnston 2002) that Canadians take the personalities of leaders into account on voting day, and that party leaders are the "superstars" of Canadian politics (Clarke et al. 1991), other studies of Canadian elections have argued that evaluations of leaders have only a weak influence on individuals' voting decisions (Blais et al. 2002). Once other factors (such as sociodemographic effects on vote choice, values, beliefs, and economic perceptions) are taken into account, leaders themselves account for very little in voters' decisions and subsequent election results.

This chapter assesses the state of the literature to date and extends and updates the analysis of the Canadian case. By examining data from the Canadian Election Studies (CES) from 1988 to 2006, the chapter assesses the evaluation of leaders' traits over time as well as the impacts of those evaluations on vote choice. Three main conclusions are drawn: first, that voters do indeed evaluate leaders' personality traits; second, that these evaluations have an impact on vote choice; and third, that these evaluations are made en masse – that is, voters do not work in a vacuum, and leaders are evaluated in comparison with one another. The chapter concludes by discussing the shortcomings in our understanding of this topic – in particular, the lack of information we have regarding the psychological mechanisms involved in leader evaluation – and suggesting directions for future research.

Theory

Is Personality Important? Why Should We Focus on Leaders?

Dating from the earliest years (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960), most studies of voting behaviour have pointed to the critical role played by long-term forces: party identification, ideological beliefs, and the socioeconomic or demographic characteristics of voters. Authors suggest that who we are as people – characteristics intrinsic to socialization and personal background – affects how we vote. Thus, for example, gender affects vote choice and issue attitudes (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart and Norris 2000; Gidengil et al. 2003), as do partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) and other sociodemographics (Conover and Feldman 1986; Bartels 1996). Contemporary scholarship continues to point to the incredible explanatory power of these variables in vote choice, issue attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. Many of the other chapters in this volume examine variables such as religion, ethnicity, partisanship, and gender, thus contributing to a rich literature on the importance of long-term forces in elections.

Although the importance of stable and long-term forces is fundamental to understanding voting behaviour, a comprehensive look at voters' decisions must also consider "short-term" forces. Stokes, Campbell, and Miller (1958) note that short-term fluctuations in vote choice and preferences cannot really be accounted for by long-standing predispositions: gender and ethnicity do not normally change between elections, and

partisanship, though it moves a little, is a fairly static and long-term identification (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Johnston 2006) that does not really fluctuate from day to day in a campaign. Stokes, Campbell, and Miller (1958) suggest that candidates and issues can account for short-term change where long-term factors cannot. Stokes (1966) echoes these earlier comments, suggesting that party identification is not sufficient to explain shifts in vote choice, because it does not really change, whereas evaluation of leaders is constantly shifting and thus has greater potential for explaining fluctuations in the vote. Miller and Shanks (1996) support these arguments for the inclusion of short-term forces in vote models with their updated version of Campbell et al.'s (1960) "funnel of causality," the block recursive model, in which both long-term and short-term forces have their proper places in models of vote choice (see the introductory chapter for a discussion of this model).

Although all of these observations point to reasons that we ought to include evaluations of leaders in vote models, they do not necessarily explain *why* it is that voters focus on leaders in the first place. One possible reason is the media focus on party leaders and the "horse race" during election campaigns. A number of scholars have observed that media coverage of election campaigns tends to prime leaders, which has the effect of encouraging voters to base their attitudes more heavily on leaders than other factors (Mendelsohn 1993, 1994, 1996; Gidengil et al. 2000; Gidengil and Dobrzynska 2003). The idea is that since the media focus so heavily on leaders' personalities – what the leaders are doing, what they are saying, and where they are in the "race" – it is natural that, as consumers of the media, voters are also likely to focus heavily on party leaders when making their choices at the ballot box.

In addition to the effects of media priming, it has been suggested that deciding how we feel about others is a relatively "easy" process. People evaluate others regularly in everyday life: Cottrell, Neuberg, and Li (2007: 2) suggest that "humans, as discriminately social creatures, make frequent judgments about others' suitability for interdependent social relations." They suggest that, as individuals, our time is limited, and we cannot devote ourselves to being friends with everyone; therefore, we must make judgments about whether or not others are worth our time. Perhaps making judgments about party leaders is much the same thing: Rahn et al. (1990) suggest that, even for those voters who are not terribly interested or involved in politics, the formation of candidate images ough

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to be fairly simple, since it mirrors activities that we perform on an everyday basis. We do not need to develop an entirely new skill to be able to decide how we feel about others, so it is more likely that we will evaluate leaders and that those evaluations will factor into vote choice.

In addition to the "ease" or inevitability of the evaluation of leaders, and the fact that we are primed to think about leaders during election campaigns, it is conceivable that considering leaders might be a reliable way to make inferences about a candidate's future performance in office. Glass (1985) suggests that the evaluation of candidates and leaders might be a response to the complexity of political life. Circumstances might change, and a candidate might need to adopt new policies, but he or she is unlikely to be able to change his or her personality. Perhaps, then, personality is more reliable than platform or party as an indicator of how the individual will act in office. Rosenberg et al. (1986) put forth a complementary argument, suggesting that image and physical appearance matter because they provide clues about a candidate's character and fitness for public office. How a leader presents himself or herself provides us with some indication of the individual's ability to do the job.

Another possibility is that individuals use leaders as a "shortcut" to help them decide which party to vote for. That is, less informed voters, who lack the knowledge or political sophistication required to make voting decisions based on policy platforms and party stances on issues, decide whether or not they like the party's leader and vote for the party largely on that basis. Research by Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) supports the idea that people can figure out what they oppose or support if they can simplify their options and that, among the less educated, affect (or how one feels about something or someone) plays a significant role in explaining policy preferences. You might not know a lot about a candidate, but with relative ease you can decide whether or not you like him or her, and you can therefore simplify your vote choice by acting on that feeling. Thus, there are many reasons that we might expect citizens to consider leaders when making decisions at the ballot box, and more research is needed for us to understand the evaluation process.

More Important than Just "Feelings": Why We Should Focus on Personality Traits

Blais et al. (2002, 165) note that "an election is not just about choosing which party will form the government, it is also about who is going to

think about leaders when deciding which party to vote for, since one of these individuals will get the job. Although the role of leaders in Canadian elections has been examined a number of times (Clarke et al. 1979; Brown et al. 1988; Johnston et al. 1992; Mendelsohn 1993, 1994, 1996; Stewart and Carty 1993; Blais and Boyer 1996; Gidengil et al. 2000; Blais et al. 2002; Johnston 2002; Gidengil and Dobrzynska 2003; Gidengil, Everitt, and Banducci 2006), the effect of voters' evaluations of the specific traits and characteristics held by leaders is still not clear.

The bulk of the discussion on the impact of leaders has focused on the impact of overall attitudes toward leaders on election outcomes: essentially, the net effect of "feeling thermometers" on vote choice. And though some scholars have looked at the role of traits themselves in the Canadian context (Johnston et al. 1992; Johnston 2002; Gidengil, Everitt, and Banducci 2006), a more systematic assessment of the role of personality traits is necessary to really understand both how people evaluate leaders' personalities and how those evaluations affect vote choice. Furthermore, a look at the evaluations of actual traits rather than feeling thermometers might help to clarify the role of leaders in elections since the thermometer is not only a very general measure but also might not be the most reliable source of information about voters' evaluations of leaders. As Johnston (2002, 174) notes, the feeling thermometer "carries too much nonpersonality freight. Even with party identification and the like controlled, it is still infused with party, group and policy judgments." By focusing solely on traits, we might get a more precise picture of what voters think about when they evaluate leaders and how those evaluations affect vote choice. Furthermore, we can gain greater insight into which traits matter most – traits relating to intelligence and strength of leadership or traits relating to honesty and trustworthiness?

There is a rich literature on "person perception" in cognitive and political psychology. Scholars in these fields have spent years assessing personality traits of individuals and leaders, and how as a society we perceive those traits in others, as part of a larger study of the human psyche and our perceptions of our environment. MacRae and Bodenhausen (2000) suggest that the perception of personality traits in others takes place as part of general "categorical thinking" by individuals. That is, to make the world ordered, meaningful, and predictable, we think categorically about others. Much of this thinking is subconscious and the result of the way in which our minds store and process information. Cognitive

to be fairly simple, since it mirrors activities that we perform on an everyday basis. We do not need to develop an entirely new skill to be able to decide how we feel about others, so it is more likely that we will evaluate leaders and that those evaluations will factor into vote choice.

In addition to the "ease" or inevitability of the evaluation of leaders, and the fact that we are primed to think about leaders during election campaigns, it is conceivable that considering leaders might be a reliable way to make inferences about a candidate's future performance in office. Glass (1985) suggests that the evaluation of candidates and leaders might be a response to the complexity of political life. Circumstances might change, and a candidate might need to adopt new policies, but he or she is unlikely to be able to change his or her personality. Perhaps, then, personality is more reliable than platform or party as an indicator of how the individual will act in office. Rosenberg et al. (1986) put forth a complementary argument, suggesting that image and physical appearance matter because they provide clues about a candidate's character and fitness for public office. How a leader presents himself or herself provides us with some indication of the individual's ability to do the job.

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More Important than Just "Feelings": Why We Should Focus on Personality Traits

Blais et al. (2002, 165) note that "an election is not just about choosing which party will form the government, it is also about who is going to be Prime Minister." As such, it seems reasonable that Canadians will

think about leaders when deciding which party to vote for, since one of these individuals will get the job. Although the role of leaders in Canadian elections has been examined a number of times (Clarke et al. 1979; Brown et al. 1988; Johnston et al. 1992; Mendelsohn 1993, 1994, 1996; Stewart and Carty 1993; Blais and Boyer 1996; Gidengil et al. 2000; Blais et al. 2002; Johnston 2002; Gidengil and Dobrzynska 2003; Gidengil, Everitt, and Banducci 2006), the effect of voters' evaluations of the specific traits and characteristics held by leaders is still not clear.

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what are known as "schemata" (Lau and Sears 1986). Schemata, the plural form of "schema," can be likened to a series of hierarchical storage cabinets in our minds, each cabinet essentially reflecting a different category or topic, with links between categories.

Each schema in the mind affects the way in which we gather new information as well as how we call up old information (Lodge and Hamill 1986). Scholars have suggested that schemata play an important role in how we perceive and interact with the world: they provide categories for labelling people, events, and places, they influence what information gets both stored in and recalled from memory, and they allow us to integrate what we already know into our interpretations of new circumstances where we lack a complete picture – essentially, in new situations, they allow us to "fill in the blanks" with information that we already have (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Conover and Feldman 1989).

It has been suggested that the process of evaluating political candidates and party leaders fits within the schemata framework. Kinder et al. (1980) suggest that voters agree on the traits that an ideal president should possess. They argue that voters then use this "presidential prototype" or schema as a shortcut to decision making. The idea is that voters apply existing categories (the prototype) to the leadership candidates and evaluate them based on the traits that an ideal candidate should possess. It is as if the voter opens up his or her filing cabinet, takes out the file labelled "presidential prototype," and checks to see whether the candidate's traits match those inside the file. A comparison is made between the individual candidates running in the election and the ideal model.

In the Canadian context, Brown et al. (1988) assess the extent to which the concept of schemata applies to how Canadian voters evaluated the traits possessed by party leaders during the 1984 federal election. They find that schemata or prototypes of leaders get used repeatedly, as voters consider the same types of factors when evaluating all of the leaders. This finding suggests that looking more closely at the role of trait evaluations in vote choice is a useful exercise, for it would allow us to get a deeper insight into the way in which voters think "categorically" about leaders. Rather than just looking at overall feelings toward a leader, by looking at traits we might gain a deeper understanding of how people evaluate leaders.

Early in the study of person perception and leadership candidates, Kinder et al. (1980) suggested that the presidential prototype consists of

time, a number of scholars have expended much effort determining the extent to which these dimensions of traits really are those that voters think about or whether traits more realistically fit into different dimensions. Over the years, scholars have suggested that voters evaluate traits in categories numbering anywhere from two to twelve (see, for example, Kinder et al. 1980; Kinder 1983, 1986; Glass 1985; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Brown et al. 1988; Bean and Mughan 1989; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Bean 1993; Brettschneider and Gabriel 2002; and Johnston 2002), with the majority suggesting that traits fall into some combination of the following four main categories: *integrity, competence, leadership,* and *empathy.*

More recently, cross-national, over-time examination of trait evaluations in election studies suggests that it makes the most sense to think about traits as falling within two main "umbrella" dimensions: *competence* and *character* (see Bittner 2008 for a more complete review of the literature and detailed data analysis). A typology based on these two dimensions refines the existing literature: the competence dimension broadly includes traits falling into both the "leadership" and the "competence" dimensions listed above, and the character dimension includes traits that were previously thought to belong in both the "integrity" and the "empathy" dimensions. The labels themselves do not signify substantively different understandings of the ways in which voters perceive party leaders: they represent a collapsing of the four previous dimensions into two, based on patterns and correlations in the evaluations of party leaders of thirty-five different election studies.[1] Because the dimensions themselves do not change, even if the specific traits considered within them might differ slightly from year to year, looking at traits in this way allows us to consider evaluations of leaders' character and competence, regardless of the changes that have taken place in the question format. This operationalization of trait dimensions will allow us to gain a better understanding of evaluations and the impacts of those evaluations.

Methodology

As mentioned, though the specific traits might change from election study to election study, the *nature* of the traits within each dimension does not really change. Generally speaking, the competence category tends to be composed of traits related to intellect and strength of leadership, whereas traits in the character category relate to the individual's

what are known as "schemata" (Lau and Sears 1986). Schemata, the plural form of "schema," can be likened to a series of hierarchical storage cabinets in our minds, each cabinet essentially reflecting a different category or topic, with links between categories.

Each schema in the mind affects the way in which we gather new information as well as how we call up old information (Lodge and Hamill 1986). Scholars have suggested that schemata play an important role in how we perceive and interact with the world: they provide categories for labelling people, events, and places, they influence what information gets both stored in and recalled from memory, and they allow us to integrate what we already know into our interpretations of new circumstances where we lack a complete picture – essentially, in new situations, they allow us to "fill in the blanks" with information that we already have (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Conover and Feldman 1989).

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Early in the study of person perception and leadership candidates, Kinder et al. (1980) suggested that the presidential prototype consists of two main types of qualities: personality and performance. Since that time, a number of scholars have expended much effort determining the extent to which these dimensions of traits really are those that voters think about or whether traits more realistically fit into different dimensions. Over the years, scholars have suggested that voters evaluate traits in categories numbering anywhere from two to twelve (see, for example, Kinder et al. 1980; Kinder 1983, 1986; Glass 1985; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Brown et al. 1988; Bean and Mughan 1989; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Bean 1993; Brettschneider and Gabriel 2002; and Johnston 2002), with the majority suggesting that traits fall into some combination of the following four main categories: *integrity, competence, leadership,* and *empathy.*

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Methodology

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analysis has revealed the strength of the connection between traits within each category, regardless of which country or year we look at (Bittner 2008). In short, the traits are related, and they are largely measuring aspects of the same thing, whether character or competence. When aggregated, the character dimension in Canada includes the following traits: honest, trustworthy, compassionate, moral, and can't be trusted; the competence dimension includes the traits intelligent, arrogant, competent, knowledgeable, strong leader, and weak leader.[2] All traits were coded on a 0-1 scale, with 1 representing the most positive evaluation of the leader for a particular trait, and 0 representing the most negative evaluation of the leader for the trait. These evaluations were then combined to create an index for each of the two trait dimensions. By doing this for each of the main party leaders in each of the elections in question, we can compare voters' perceptions of the party leaders along the two different trait dimensions.

To explore the role of evaluations of party leaders in the vote calculus, the analysis proceeds in two parts. The first includes an assessment of the overall trends in ratings of Canadian party leaders over time, and the second includes multivariate analysis of the impacts of leader evaluations on vote choice. If leaders matter in the vote calculus, then we ought to expect that (a) voters differentiate between leaders and (b) that evaluations will have an independent impact on vote choice in the multivariate analysis.

Results

Figures 8.1 and 8.2 track the evaluations of the trait dimensions of the leaders of the main parties over time. Figure 8.1 illustrates the differences in evaluations of the party leaders on the competence dimension. The zero line reflects the average of the evaluations of all leaders on this trait dimension in each election year, and thus the trend line for each party leader reflects how much better or worse he or she did in comparison with the mean.[3] Figure 8.2 illustrates the differences in evaluations of the party leaders on the character dimension, with the same reference point: the average rating for all leaders on this trait in each year.

As a glance at the trend lines suggests, there are some substantial differences in the way that respondents viewed the leaders of different parties on the two trait dimensions, and these differences change from year to year. Three main observations stem from an examination of the trend lines. First, respondents do indeed differentiate between party leaders

Figure 8.1

Trait Evaluations: Competence (average rating for each party leader compared to mean for all leaders)

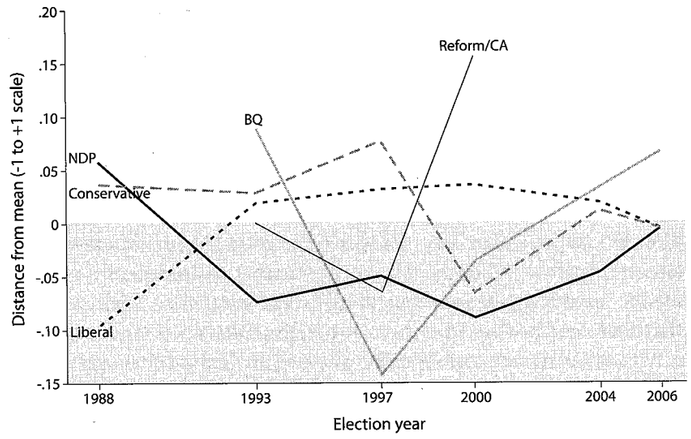
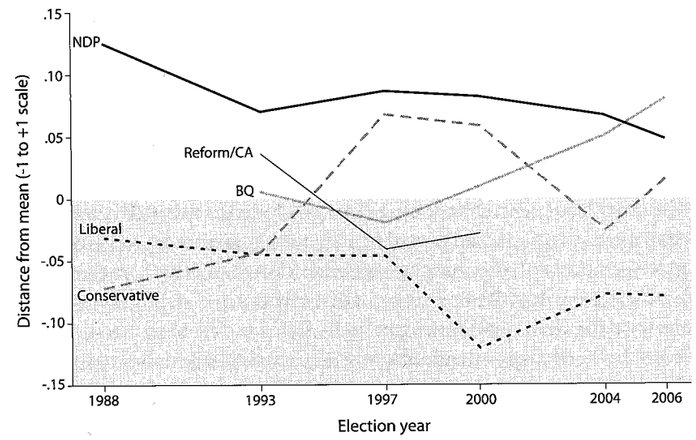


Figure 8.2

Trait Evaluations: Character (average rating for each party leader compared to mean for all leaders)



analysis has revealed the strength of the connection between traits within each category, regardless of which country or year we look at (Bittner 2008). In short, the traits are related, and they are largely measuring aspects of the same thing, whether character or competence. When aggregated, the character dimension in Canada includes the following traits: honest, trustworthy, compassionate, moral, and can't be trusted; the competence dimension includes the traits intelligent, arrogant, competent, knowledgeable, strong leader, and weak leader.[2] All traits were coded on a 0-1 scale, with 1 representing the most positive evaluation of the leader for a particular trait, and 0 representing the most negative evaluation of the leader for the trait. These evaluations were then combined to create an index for each of the two trait dimensions. By doing this for each of the main party leaders in each of the elections in question, we can compare voters' perceptions of the party leaders along the two different trait dimensions.

To explore the role of evaluations of party leaders in the vote calculus, the analysis proceeds in two parts. The first includes an assessment of the overall trends in ratings of Canadian party leaders over time, and the second includes multivariate analysis of the impacts of leader evaluations on vote choice. If leaders matter in the vote calculus, then we ought to expect that (a) voters differentiate between leaders and (b) that evaluations will have an independent impact on vote choice in the multivariate analysis.

Results

Figures 8.1 and 8.2 track the evaluations of the trait dimensions of the leaders of the main parties over time. Figure 8.1 illustrates the differences in evaluations of the party leaders on the competence dimension. The zero line reflects the average of the evaluations of all leaders on this trait dimension in each election year, and thus the trend line for each party leader reflects how much better or worse he or she did in comparison with the mean.[3] Figure 8.2 illustrates the differences in evaluations of the party leaders on the character dimension, with the same reference point: the average rating for all leaders on this trait in each year.

As a glance at the trend lines suggests, there are some substantial differences in the way that respondents viewed the leaders of different parties on the two trait dimensions, and these differences change from year to year. Three main observations stem from an examination of the trend lines. First, respondents do indeed differentiate between party leaders

Figure 8.1

Trait Evaluations: Competence (average rating for each party leader compared to mean for all leaders)

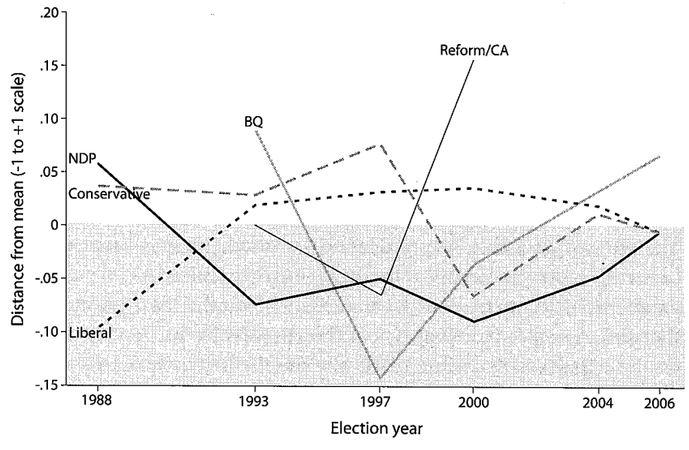
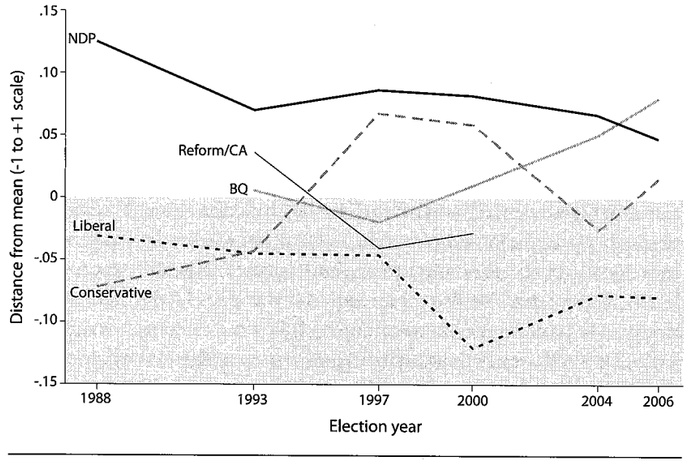


Figure 8.2

Trait Evaluations: Character (average rating for each party leader compared to mean for all leaders)



(they are not simply evaluating all Liberal leaders the same or all NDP leaders the same). Second, the data suggest that respondents differentiate between trait dimensions when they think about a particular leader: in many circumstances, a given leader was rated substantially higher or lower on one trait dimension compared with the other (respondents are not simply evaluating a particular leader positively overall). Third, the data also suggest that a single leader might be perceived differently in different election years, suggesting that perceptions can change and that, over time and in different contexts, people evaluate leaders differently.

Voters Differentiate between Party Leaders

The data suggest that respondents do a good job of differentiating between leaders and do not simply decide that all leaders of one party are the most competent or that all leaders of another party always have the most character. It does appear as though NDP leaders tend to dominate the character dimension, usually having the highest character ratings of all leaders. Even with their perceived strength in this area, it remains clear that voters do not evaluate leaders based solely on a party cue but distinguish between the individuals themselves, as in the 2006 election, when Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe had higher ratings than NDP leader Jack Layton. That voters are able to distinguish between leaders suggests that they are generally "up to the task" of leader evaluation and can make a distinction between the individual and the party as well as between one leader and the next. None of the lines is flat, and, with the exception of the NDP leaders' dominance over the character dimension (and the Liberal leaders' corresponding lack of success on this dimension), leaders generally are perceived quite differently from year to year.[4]

Tracing the Conservative leaders' ratings over time provides ample proof of the way that a leader is not simply perceived to be "a certain way" because of the party banner under which he or she is running. This party saw more leadership change over the six included in this analysis studied than any other Canadian party.[5] In 1988, Brian Mulroney was evaluated more positively on the competence dimension than John Turner, though less positively than Ed Broadbent, and he was perceived the most negatively on the character dimension. In the following election, his successor, Kim Campbell, was evaluated slightly more negatively on the competence dimension and slightly more positively on the character dimension. Jean Charest's evaluations in 1997 deviated even more substantially: Charest

dimension, an increase of nearly 0.05 points over his predecessor, and on the character dimension he rose above the pack as well with a rating nearly 0.15 points higher than Campbell's in the previous election and fared better than all party leaders other than Alexa McDonough, leader of the NDP.

In 2000, Joe Clark's competence rating plummeted in comparison with Charest's (nearly a 0.15 point drop), placing Clark lower than almost all other leaders. His character, however, was still evaluated fairly positively, though slightly lower than that of McDonough. The year 2004 saw the emergence of the new Conservative Party, an amalgamation of the old Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance, with a new leader at its helm. Stephen Harper was evaluated more positively on the competence dimension than Clark had been, bringing his rating above the mean, though evaluations of his character were more negative than Clark's had been in the previous election. In 2006, Harper continued to lead the Conservative Party, and still we see differences in the way that he was perceived: confidence in his competence decreased, whereas the rating of his character rose since the previous election. Simply put, in each election, the leader of the Conservative Party was evaluated differently from his or her predecessor. Voters perceived differences between each individual.

Voters Differentiate between Leader Traits

In addition to being able to differentiate between individuals, voters appear to be quite capable of teasing out the different kinds of characteristics held by individual party leaders. Not a single point on a line for one of the parties in the character dimension could be superimposed over a point on a line for the same party in the competence dimension. Evaluations of the Liberal Party leaders illustrate this point.

In 1988, John Turner was evaluated more negatively on the competence dimension than he was on the character dimension (nearly a 0.07 point difference). Similarly, in 1993, Jean Chrétien received a higher than average rating on competence and a lower than average rating on character, with a spread, again, of nearly 0.07 points. The 1997 election only served to widen the gap, with a difference of nearly 0.08 points between his competence and his character ratings. In 2000, the gap widened further, with his character rating more than 0.15 points lower than his competence rating. In 2004, Paul Martin's competence rating was approximately

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bit, since even though his character rating remained similar to that of the previous election his competence rating dropped by approximately 0.03 points.

Voters do not simply decide that they either do or do not like a leader and then give him or her positive or negative ratings on both dimensions accordingly. They actually distinguish between the leader's different traits and give separate evaluations for each dimension.

Voters Evaluate the Same Leader Differently from One Election to the Next

There are a number of examples in which the same individual led a party in more than one election. The Liberals were led by Jean Chrétien in the elections of 1993, 1997, and 2000; Stephen Harper led the Conservatives in the 2004 and 2006 elections; Alexa McDonough led the NDP in the 1997 and 2000 elections; Preston Manning led the Reform Party in 1993 and 1997; and Gilles Duceppe has led the Bloc Québécois since 1997. Earlier I suggested that no line in either graph is flat. Perhaps even more interesting is that none of the segments of the lines within the reign of a single individual is flat either. The competence line for Chrétien does not move much between 1993 and 2000, and the character line for McDonough does not fluctuate much between the 1997 and 2000 elections. But even these two leaders, who received fairly similar evaluations on a single dimension from one year to the next, received wildly different evaluations from year to year on the other dimension. Evaluations of Chrétien's character plummeted between 1997 and 2000, and evaluations of McDonough's competence dropped in that same time frame.

These differences from one year to the next suggest that learning is probably taking place: voters become more familiar with the party leaders, and as they "know" them better their evaluations change accordingly. In addition to allowing voters to become more familiar with a leader, the longer the individual leads the party the more opportunities he or she has to demonstrate his or her true nature – whether we are speaking of the individual's honesty and compassion (character) or intelligence and strength of leadership (competence). Evaluations of Gilles Duceppe suggest that, as voters became more familiar with him, they saw him in a more positive light, giving him higher ratings on both trait dimensions. Similarly, as voters became more familiar with Preston Manning, they perceived him more negatively, giving him lower ratings on both dimensions. However, the bigger question is to what extent do these evaluations

The Effects of Character and Competence on Vote Choice

Table 8.1 illustrates the impact of a number of variables, including evaluations of leaders' traits, on vote choice for the three main national parties, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, and the New Democratic Party. The table depicts odds ratios and standard errors from a logistic regression analysis, a model employed to reflect the fact that the dependent variable, vote for a particular party, is binary. The data from 1988 to 2006 were pooled, and the regression analysis was performed on all the Canadian data simultaneously rather than by year. The demographic and control variables included in the model are not shown,[6] allowing us to focus on the variables of interest.

The first column in each pair of models reflects the effect of partisanship and evaluations of the party's leader on vote choice for that party, whereas the second column also incorporates the effects of evaluations of the other two main national parties.[7] The inclusion of evaluations of the other two party leaders follows previous scholarship, which suggests that the evaluation of leaders is comparative and that we can better understand the effects of evaluations if we look at them as a group (Rahn et al. 1990; Nadeau, Niemi, and Amato 1996). A couple of key findings emerge from the analysis: first, character and competence do matter, and they matter more than a number of other variables.[8] Second, the data confirm that voters evaluate leaders as a group, comparing them with one another.

The Relative Importance of Traits and Partisanship

Table 8.1 illustrates that voters' evaluations of leaders affect vote choice, regardless of which party we look at. The first two columns present the impacts of variables on Liberal vote choice, and immediately we note the importance of ratings of the Liberal leaders' character and competence. After partisanship, evaluations of the Liberal leaders' personality traits are the most important factors influencing votes for the Liberal Party. The second column indicates that those individuals giving the Liberal leader the highest rating (a rating of 1 on the scale) on the character dimension are more than eleven times more likely to vote for the Liberal Party than those who give the leader the lowest rating (a rating of 0) on this dimension. Similarly, those giving the Liberal leader the highest rating on competence are over eight times more likely to vote for the Liberal Party than those who give the leader the lowest rating on this

bit, since even though his character rating remained similar to that of the previous election his competence rating dropped by approximately 0.03 points.

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ble 8.1

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	Liberal vote		Conservative vote		NDP vote	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
ɔeral PID	4.470 (0.305)*	4.414 (0.354)*	0.343 (0.028)*	0.509 (0.049)*	0.471 (0.046)*	0.587 (0.063)*
ɔnservative PID	0.319 (0.029)*	0.423 (0.047)*	4.730 (0.379)*	4.178 (0.400)*	0.180 (0.026)*	0.222 (0.034)*
ɔP PID	0.352 (0.041)*	0.338 (0.045)*	0.128 (0.021)*	0.155 (0.029)*	10.622 (1.162)*	10.359 (1.212)*
ɛher PID	0.134 (0.021)*	0.122 (0.024)*	0.193 (0.027)*	0.155 (0.025)*	0.203 (0.044)*	0.178 (0.039)*
ɔeral leader character	*10.280 (1.382)**	*11.675 (1.833)**		0 ɔ3 (0.051)*		0.440 (0.089)*
ɔeral leader competence	*4.723 (0.647)**	*8.459 (1.466)**		0.245 (0.044)*		0.472 (0.098)*
ɔnservative leader character		0.224 (0.035)*	*9.523 (1.443)**	*15.250 (2.793)**		0.342 (0.067)*
ɔnservative leader competence		0.632 (0.098)*	*4.742 (0.748)**	*11.222 (2.217)**		0.532 (0.104)*
ɔP leader character		0.649 (0.109)**		0.307 (0.059)*	*6.682 (1.432)**	*10.881 (2.490)**
ɔP leader competence		0.629 (0.102)*		0.475 (0.089)*	*3.851 (0.769)**	*5.158 (1.119)**
ɔservations	9,870	7,737	9,447	7,737	8,037	7,737
ɪg likelihood	-4,016.8959	-2,986.2172	-3,528.4335	-2,596.0876	-2,289.0899	-2,094.557

ignificant at $p < .01$; ** significant at $p < .001$

A glance at this table might lead one to suspect that evaluations of party leaders are actually more important than partisanship, given the size of the odds ratios: in the second column, we see that Liberal partisanship has an odds ratio of 4.41, indicating that Liberal identifiers are over four times more likely to vote for the Liberal Party than non-identifiers. Contrasted with an odds ratio of 11.68 for evaluations of the Liberal leaders' character, we might think that evaluations of personality traits are more important than identification with the party. In fact, this is an artifact of the way in which the variables are coded. Party ID is a binary variable, and individuals are coded either as partisans of the party (1) or as others (0). Evaluations of character and competence are coded similarly on a 0-1 scale, but the majority of respondents evaluate the leaders somewhere in the middle, with the bulk giving ratings that fall between 0.2 and 0.7 on the 0-1 scale. Indeed, the mean Liberal leader character rating is 0.46, with a standard deviation of 0.27, whereas the mean Liberal leader competence rating is 0.57, with a standard deviation of 0.28. The comparison between those providing a rating of 0 with those providing a rating of 1, therefore, is more extreme than comparing the effects of ratings in the "real world."

To provide a more realistic idea of the relative impacts of partisanship and leader evaluations, simulations were run using Clarify.[9] With all other variables set at their means, Liberal partisans were 29 percentage points more likely to vote for the Liberal Party than were non-Liberals. In contrast, those giving the Liberal leader an evaluation on the character dimension one standard deviation above the mean were 23 percentage points more likely to vote for the Liberal Party than were those individuals giving the leader a character evaluation one standard deviation below the mean. Similarly, those giving the Liberal leader a competence evaluation one standard deviation above the mean were 20 percentage points more likely to vote for the Liberal Party than were those individuals giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean.

Thus, partisanship matters, and it matters a lot. These results support over half a century of research on voting behaviour, suggesting that partisanship is the variable with the most predictive power and is most indicative of vote choice. This finding applies regardless of which party we look at, although based on Table 8.1, it appears as though partisanship has the most impact on votes for the NDP. The odds ratios are over 10 for NDP partisanship (the final two columns in Table 8.1), suggesting that partisans are more than ten times more likely to vote for the NDP

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NDP PID	0.352 (0.041)*	0.338 (0.045)*	0.128 (0.021)*	0.155 (0.029)*	10.622 (1.162)*	10.359 (1.212)*
Other PID	0.134 (0.021)*	0.122 (0.024)*	0.193 (0.027)*	0.155 (0.025)*	0.203 (0.044)*	0.178 (0.039)*
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Observations	9,870	7,737	9,447	7,737	8,037	7,737
Log likelihood	-4,016.8959	-2,986.2172	-3,528.4335	-2,596.0876	-2,289.0899	-2,094.557

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After partisanship, evaluations of character and competence are the largest predictors of vote choice. In particular, evaluations of a given party's leader have the largest impact on vote choice for that party. If we look at each of the second columns in Table 8.1, we see that evaluations of personality traits have a substantial impact on vote choice. As mentioned, the odds ratios for evaluations of the Liberal leaders' character and competence are 11.68 and 8.46, respectively, suggesting that, even when we control for partisanship and other demographic variables, voters are between eight and twelve times more likely to vote for the Liberal Party if they rate the leader positively.

In explaining vote choice for the Conservative Party, odds ratios for evaluations of the Conservative Party leaders' character and competence are 15.25 and 11.22, respectively, suggesting that those individuals giving the Conservative leader the highest rating on character are over fifteen times likelier to vote Conservative than those individuals giving the leader the lowest rating on this dimension. In real terms, however, this means that those giving Conservative leaders a character rating one standard deviation above the mean are nearly 20 percentage points more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than those giving the leaders a rating one standard deviation below the mean. Similarly, those giving the leader a competence rating one standard deviation above the mean are nearly 19 percentage points more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than those giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean on this dimension (in contrast, Conservative partisans are 25 percentage points more likely than non-Conservatives to vote Conservative).

In understanding vote choice for the NDP, it is notable that the odds ratios for partisanship are the largest, whereas the odds ratios for evaluations of the NDP leaders' character and competence are smaller than those for the evaluations of other party leaders. The odds ratios for evaluations of the NDP leaders' character and competence are 10.88 and 5.16, respectively, and running these numbers through Clarify suggests that those giving the leader a character rating one standard deviation above the mean are 8 percentage points more likely to vote NDP than those giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean. Similarly, those giving the leader a competence rating one standard deviation above the mean are 6 percentage points more likely to vote NDP than those giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean. In contrast, with all other variables set at their means, partisans

Thus, partisanship is a larger indicator of vote choice than evaluations of leaders, for all three major parties, but evaluations have a discernible and substantial impact on vote choice.

In terms of vote choice, one interesting result from the above is that the impact of the leaders' traits is more substantial for both the Liberal and the Conservative Party than it is for the NDP. That the odds ratios for the NDP leaders' trait evaluations are lower in the NDP vote choice model than the Liberal or Conservative leaders' evaluations in their respective vote models points to the importance of comparison: not all leaders matter in the same way.[10] Furthermore, the odds ratios presented indicate that not all traits matter in the same way: the data indicate that evaluations of *character* affect vote choice more than evaluations of *competence.* This finding might disappoint those who would have voters consider nobler factors such as policy stances and platforms when deciding which party to vote for. It is perhaps problematic that leaders' personalities appear to matter more than issues,[11] but surely a leader's competence ought to have a larger effect on vote choice than his or her character. These data do confirm earlier results in Canada based on both fewer election studies (Johnston 2002) and comparative analysis (Bittner 2008), suggesting that character is more important than competence. Johnston et al. (1992) also find that character evaluations influence overall "feelings" toward a leader more than competence evaluations. What is not yet clear is why. It is possible that character traits are more important since they are less likely to change, whereas an individual's competence can change (through learning or experience, for example).[12] More research is needed to determine the mechanisms by which individuals evaluate leaders – it might shed some light on the issue of the relative importance of the two trait dimensions.

Voters Evaluate Leaders as a Group

Perhaps most interesting are the dynamics that we see in the transition from one column to the next for each vote model presented in Table 8.1 – that including the evaluations of the leaders of the other two major parties has an important effect on the size of the odds ratios. For all three parties, including evaluations of the other leaders has the effect of *boosting* the size of the odds ratios of the evaluations of the party's leader. Thus, in the Liberal vote model, by including evaluations of the Conservative and NDP leaders, the odds ratios of the Liberal leader evalua-

After partisanship, evaluations of character and competence are the largest predictors of vote choice. In particular, evaluations of a given party's leader have the largest impact on vote choice for that party. If we look at each of the second columns in Table 8.1, we see that evaluations of personality traits have a substantial impact on vote choice. As mentioned, the odds ratios for evaluations of the Liberal leaders' character and competence are 11.68 and 8.46, respectively, suggesting that, even when we control for partisanship and other demographic variables, voters are between eight and twelve times more likely to vote for the Liberal Party if they rate the leader positively.

In explaining vote choice for the Conservative Party, odds ratios for evaluations of the Conservative Party leaders' character and competence are 15.25 and 11.22, respectively, suggesting that those individuals giving the Conservative leader the highest rating on character are over fifteen times likelier to vote Conservative than those individuals giving the leader the lowest rating on this dimension. In real terms, however, this means that those giving Conservative leaders a character rating one standard deviation above the mean are nearly 20 percentage points more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than those giving the leaders a rating one standard deviation below the mean. Similarly, those giving the leader a competence rating one standard deviation above the mean are nearly 19 percentage points more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than those giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean on this dimension (in contrast, Conservative partisans are 25 percentage points more likely than non-Conservatives to vote Conservative).

In understanding vote choice for the NDP, it is notable that the odds ratios for partisanship are the largest, whereas the odds ratios for evaluations of the NDP leaders' character and competence are smaller than those for the evaluations of other party leaders. The odds ratios for evaluations of the NDP leaders' character and competence are 10.88 and 5.16, respectively, and running these numbers through Clarify suggests that those giving the leader a character rating one standard deviation above the mean are 8 percentage points more likely to vote NDP than those giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean. Similarly, those giving the leader a competence rating one standard deviation above the mean are 6 percentage points more likely to vote NDP than those giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean. In contrast, with all other variables set at their means, partisans are 35 percentage points more likely than non-NDPers to vote NDP. Thus, partisanship is a larger indicator of vote choice than evaluations of leaders, for all three major parties, but evaluations have a discernible and substantial impact on vote choice.

In terms of vote choice, one interesting result from the above is that the impact of the leaders' traits is more substantial for both the Liberal and the Conservative Party than it is for the NDP. That the odds ratios for the NDP leaders' trait evaluations are lower in the NDP vote choice model than the Liberal or Conservative leaders' evaluations in their respective vote models points to the importance of comparison: not all leaders matter in the same way.[10] Furthermore, the odds ratios presented indicate that not all traits matter in the same way: the data indicate that evaluations of *character* affect vote choice more than evaluations of *competence.* This finding might disappoint those who would have voters consider nobler factors such as policy stances and platforms when deciding which party to vote for. It is perhaps problematic that leaders' personalities appear to matter more than issues,[11] but surely a leader's competence ought to have a larger effect on vote choice than his or her character. These data do confirm earlier results in Canada based on both fewer election studies (Johnston 2002) and comparative analysis (Bittner 2008), suggesting that character is more important than competence. Johnston et al. (1992) also find that character evaluations influence overall "feelings" toward a leader more than competence evaluations. What is not yet clear is why. It is possible that character traits are more important since they are less likely to change, whereas an individual's competence can change (through learning or experience, for example).[12] More research is needed to determine the mechanisms by which individuals evaluate leaders – it might shed some light on the issue of the relative importance of the two trait dimensions.

Voters Evaluate Leaders as a Group

Perhaps most interesting are the dynamics that we see in the transition from one column to the next for each vote model presented in Table 8.1 – that including the evaluations of the leaders of the other two major parties has an important effect on the size of the odds ratios. For all three parties, including evaluations of the other leaders has the effect of *boosting* the size of the odds ratios of the evaluations of the party's leader. Thus, in the Liberal vote model, by including evaluations of the Conservative and NDP leaders, the odds ratios of the Liberal leader evaluations increase. As the first column indicates, the odds of voting for the

Liberal Party are over ten times greater among those giving the Liberal leader a positive evaluation on character compared with those giving the leader a negative evaluation on character. When we control for evaluations of the other two leaders (the second column), the odds of voting for the Liberal Party are nearly twelve times greater among those giving the leader a positive evaluation on character compared with those giving the leader a negative evaluation on character. This result is even more pronounced when we look at evaluations of the Liberal leaders' competence, with the odds ratios nearly doubling in size when the evaluations of the other leaders are included in the model.

The same occurs for Conservative and NDP leaders in their respective vote models. In the Conservative vote model, controlling for evaluations of the Liberal and NDP leaders' personality traits boosts the size of the odds ratios of evaluations of the Conservative leaders' character and competence from 9.5 to 15.3 and 4.7 to 11.2 respectively. Similarly, controlling for Liberal and Conservative leaders' personality trait evaluations has the effect of boosting the odds ratios of evaluations of the NDP leaders' character and competence from 6.7 to 10.9 and 3.9 to 5.2 respectively. These results indicate that people consider leaders en masse: that the model is improved by the inclusion of other leaders' evaluations provides support for the idea that voters evaluate leaders in comparison with one another and that leaders are not evaluated in a vacuum.

Conclusion

Based on the data analysis presented, a number of conclusions about the role of leaders in Canadian elections can be made. First, we have observed that the evaluation of leaders' traits is an important factor incorporated into vote choice – less important than partisanship but substantially more important than sociodemographics or attitudes toward policy issues. Second, a leader's character is apparently more important than his or her competence in influencing the vote for his or her party. Third, voters evaluate leaders' traits in comparison with one another: we do not really get the full picture of how evaluations of Jean Chrétien influenced the Liberal vote in 1993, 1997, or 2000 until we consider evaluations of the other party leaders in those elections.

But do we really know all there is to know about the evaluation and impact of leaders' traits? Although the purpose of this chapter was to present the state of the literature and the current understanding of the

impact of leaders in Canadian elections, there are certainly more questions that ought to be raised. This chapter set out by listing a number of potential reasons that voters evaluate leaders, none of which was actually investigated. We know that Canadian voters evaluate and consider leaders when they go to the ballot box, but we still do not really know why. Is it because they lack information about "more important" things, such as policy platforms and the state of the economy? Or is it something else? What role does voters' knowledge of politics play? Do the more knowledgeable focus more on policy issues than the less knowledgeable? Do they focus more on the leaders' competence than character? Do they perceive leaders in the same way as those who are less knowledgeable? There is substantial reason to expect that political knowledge is likely to influence evaluations of leaders as well as the impacts of those evaluations: generally, those who are more knowledgeable have been found to behave differently and hold vastly different attitudes and opinions from those who are less knowledgeable (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Bartels 1996; Bittner 2007b; Roy 2007). An examination of the role of political knowledge would provide us with a deeper understanding of voters' evaluations of party leaders. Elsewhere (Bittner 2008), I began this process and made some headway into the impact of voters' knowledge levels on evaluations, but more research is still needed.

By exploring the role of political knowledge, we can also address the question of why individuals evaluate leaders as part of the voting process: is evaluation the result of media priming, greater "reliability" or insight gained by focusing on leaders, or a "shortcut" in decision making, because it is an "easy" process? These are very different explanations that might manifest themselves in different ways. We might expect that, if people are evaluating leaders to overcome a lack of information about policy platforms, or because doing so is simply easy, then the less informed or less knowledgeable should incorporate evaluations of leaders more substantially into their vote choices, whereas the more knowledgeable would not need to rely so heavily on leaders to make their decisions. In contrast, if voters evaluate leaders as a result of media priming or because they can gain greater insight into future performance in office, then the most knowledgeable (who, presumably, are both more exposed to the media and better positioned to use the "greater insights" gained) would incorporate the evaluations of leaders more substantially into their vote choices.

Liberal Party are over ten times greater among those giving the Liberal leader a positive evaluation on character compared with those giving the leader a negative evaluation on character. When we control for evaluations of the other two leaders (the second column), the odds of voting for the Liberal Party are nearly twelve times greater among those giving the leader a positive evaluation on character compared with those giving the leader a negative evaluation on character. This result is even more pronounced when we look at evaluations of the Liberal leaders' competence, with the odds ratios nearly doubling in size when the evaluations of the other leaders are included in the model.

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Although comparative scholarship on the evaluation of party leaders has explored the issue of political knowledge to some extent, the results remain inconclusive, and more research is needed to understand the mechanisms involved. Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk (1986) find that those with higher levels of education are more likely than less informed voters to consider a candidate's personality. Cutler (2002) and Glass (1985) reach similar conclusions, suggesting that it is not only the least informed who respond to leaders' characteristics. These findings coincide with Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock's (1991) detailed assessment of the considerations made by voters with differing levels of political sophistication. They note that affect *does* function as a shortcut for less informed voters and that, though all voters incorporate how they feel when making choices, the most informed/sophisticated do so most of all. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that the evaluation of leaders might act as a shortcut, helping the less informed to compensate for their lack of information. However, this might not be the only explanation for why people evaluate leaders – the "media priming" and "greater insight" explanations are also supported by the results, perhaps even more so than the "shortcut" explanation. Indeed, recent work investigating these questions (Bittner 2008) suggests that this is the case, leaving room for further investigation in the future.

This chapter has provided a number of insights into the evaluation of leaders in Canada and the impact of these evaluations on vote choice. We know that voters consider and evaluate party leaders' personality traits and that they distinguish one leader from the next, both across parties and within parties over time. We also know that voters do not simply evaluate each party leader in isolation but evaluate leaders in comparison with one another. Furthermore, we know that these evaluations affect vote choice more than either sociodemographics or attitudes toward issues. Finally, it appears that a leader's character affects vote choice more than his or her competence – Canadians are giving the leader the biggest job in the country, and whether they can trust that leader to do the job really matters.

Notes

1 Organizing and conceptualizing traits into overarching dimensions is particularly valuable in that doing so facilitates longitudinal assessment of the evaluation of leaders' traits where it otherwise would not be possible. One of the main difficulties with assessing [illegible] which surveys change over time. These changes are characteristic not only of Canadian Election Studies but also of all election studies. Question formats change, the types of traits that respondents are asked to evaluate change, and (obviously) leaders change, all of which make isolating and examining patterns in evaluations a real challenge. Although previous research suggests that question format does have an effect on our understanding of the effects of trait evaluations (Bittner 2007a), these effects are not so substantial as to preclude longitudinal analysis of traits even with the changes in question format over time.

2 As a group, these are the eleven traits included in the closed-ended trait evaluations of at least one of the Canadian Election Studies included in this analysis, and they are grouped together to form each of the dimensions.

3 Means presented are based on the average of evaluations made by all respondents, regardless of the respondent's region of residence. This means that, in the figure, the Bloc leader rating is compared with the ratings of other leaders made by respondents in all provinces, even though usually the Bloc leader was evaluated only by respondents in Quebec. Interestingly, when the same charts are generated only for Quebec, the lines do not change substantially. Although evaluations of the Bloc leader do not change (not surprising since the ratings presented are based mainly on Quebec respondents), small differences do exist for the other party leaders: the NDP and Liberal Party leaders are viewed more negatively in Quebec, on both dimensions, and the Conservative Party leader is generally viewed more positively in Quebec. The Reform Party leaders were also evaluated more positively in Quebec, on both dimensions, with one exception: Stockwell Day was seen as less competent among the Québécois than in the rest of Canada (a difference of 0.1 on the 0-1 scale).

4 It might be argued that differences in perceptions of leaders over time are the result of how the dimensions are constructed. If the specific traits included in the character and competence dimensions change, then should ratings not be expected to change as well? Perhaps, except that the dimensions are quite cohesive, even if the specific traits in the dimensions change from year to year. Furthermore, this concern overstates the extent to which traits are different in each election study. Between 1988 and 2000 in particular, there was a high degree of consistency in the traits incorporated into the CES. Sixty percent of the traits incorporated in the surveys for each year are identical, indicating that, where we see changes in the mean evaluations, they likely reflect "real" changes from year to year. Furthermore, when we track evaluations of a specific trait over time, for example, the extent to which the Liberal leader is perceived to be compassionate, ratings vary substantially, ranging from 0.17 to 0.57 (results not shown). These results support the notion that leaders are indeed perceived quite differently from year to year.

5 Brian Mulroney, Kim Campbell, Jean Charest, Joe Clark, and later Stephen Harper all led the Conservative Party over this time period.

6 Demographic and control variables include dummy variables for sex, religion, income, education, native French speakers, ethnicity, and employment status. In addition, dummies for each election year are included to control for variation in leader effects. All coding decisions are available from the author on request. The influence of these variables is substantially smaller than the impacts of the variables displayed in Table 8.1. Their odds ratios, usually statistically significant, range from [illegible]