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Short Communication

Perceived personality and campaign style of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump

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ABSTRACT

75 national and international experts in US politics evaluated the personality reputation of Trump and Clinton. They evaluated Clinton as average on extraversion, agreeableness, openness, narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, but high on conscientiousness and emotional stability. Trump was rated very low on agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability, average on openness, and very high on extraversion and the Dark Triad. Results are consistent with previous research based on ratings from psychology scholars. Experts also evaluated their campaign style. Trump campaign was seen as populist, negative, and based on fear appeals. Clinton was also evaluated as high in negativity but using a less populist rhetoric and making an average use of emotional appeals.

1. Introduction¹

The 2016 US election saw unprecedented attention to the personality and public personas of candidates. Trump was usually portrayed as thin-skinned, narcissistic, bellicose, and disagreeable, whereas Clinton was seen as dependable, organized, and experienced, albeit cold and arrogant. However, little systematic evidence supports this assessment. In this article we compare the personality reputation, and selected aspects of campaign style, of the two candidates via ratings from 75 national and international experts in elections and US politics. We will compare our results to a recent study (Visser, Book, & Volk, 2017) where the public persona of Clinton and Trump was rated by personality scholars; similar results would indicate good external validity for both studies.

The perceived personality of candidates can have direct electoral consequences (Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones, 2000), and participates to the way candidates present themselves to voters. With this in mind, we asked the experts to also rate the campaign style of the two candidates across three dimensions: populist rhetoric, negativity, and emotional (fear, feel-good) appeals.

1.1. Perceived personality of Trump and Clinton

The Big Five inventory (Goldberg, 1990) identifies five main

“socially desirable” traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness. Visser et al. (2017) report ratings from a sample of experts in personality psychology, who evaluated Clinton as relatively “normal” on extraversion and agreeableness, and Trump as high on the former and low on the latter. On conscientiousness and openness Clinton was rated as relatively high and Trump as low; both candidates were seen as having relatively low emotionality.

The Big Five inventory alone does however not capture “socially malevolent” personality traits, for instance the Dark Triad: narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. These traits are measured either independently (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) or in conjunction with the Big Five (e.g., the HEXACO model; Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015). The experts in Visser et al. (2017) assessed Trump's public persona as close to narcissism and psychopathy, and Clinton's to Machiavellianism. We expect similar trends in our data.

1.2. Perceived campaign style of Trump and Clinton

No unified framework exists for the study of the campaign style of candidates. We focus here on their use of populist rhetoric, negative campaigning, and emotional (fear, feel-good) appeals.

First, two elements are associated with “populist” communication: people-centrism and anti-elitism (Mudde, 2004). People-centrist

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appeals promote a group assumed sovereign by nature (“the people”), seen as underprivileged or misunderstood, whereas anti-elitism targets the system (the politicians, the establishment) and opposes “elites who live in ivory towers and only pursue their own interests” (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007: 324). Additionally, populist communication often relies on a simple and informal language (anti-intellectualism), as well as on harsh rhetoric and lack of respect towards opponents (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2016).

Second, going “negative” during election campaigns indicates criticizing and attacking opponents instead of self-promotion. Whether negativity is good or bad for democracy is subject of a major debate in political science (Nai & Walter, 2015), but few contest its ubiquitousness in modern elections. Negativity can focus on *policy* (the record, ideas or program of rivals), or *character* (their personality, values, or behaviour; Kahn & Kenney, 1999).

Third, emotional appeals intend to stir affective responses in those exposed to them, and subsequently affect their behaviour. Most studies on the role of emotions in politics rely on the Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000), which models differential effects of enthusiasm and anxiety. Anxiety/fear awakens citizens' attention and stimulates information processing, making them easier targets for persuasion (Nai, Schemel, & Marie, 2017). Enthusiasm encourages citizens to participate but strengthens their previously held beliefs (Marcus et al., 2000). We focus here on fear and feel-good (enthusiasm) appeals, intended to fuel those emotional responses.

Trump is expected to rely more heavily on populist discourse, especially on anti-elite rhetoric and informal style. We expect both candidates to score high in negativity due to high polarization in US politics, although Trump should make a stronger use of negative messages in line with studies showing higher negativity for candidates in opposition (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2004) and lagging behind in the polls (Maier & Jansen, 2017). Concerning the focus of attacks we expect a strong use of character attacks by both candidates; Finally, Trump should be perceived as using fear rather than feel-good appeals.

2. Method

2.1. Data and participants

We use data from a dataset that provides measures of personality and campaigning style of candidates in elections worldwide (NEG^{ex}).² It includes measures for Clinton and Trump, based on ratings from 75 domestic and international experts in US politics and elections contacted in the weeks after the election. Experts in the sample lean slightly to the left; three out of four are US citizens, and 30% are female. All experts are highly familiar with US elections (Table A2 in the supplementary material).

2.2. Measures of perceived personality

For the Big Five we rely on the Ten Items Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), which is short but satisfactory in terms of convergent validity (Ehrhart et al., 2009).³ For each personality trait experts evaluated two statements that are averaged, which yields five variables ranging from 0 ‘very low’ to 4 ‘very high’. For the Dark Triad we designed a shorter version of the “Dirty Dozen” (Jonason & Webster, 2010); based on the principal component analyses described in their article (2010: 422) we selected the two items that correlate the highest with each trait and use them as a battery (see supplementary material and Table 1).⁴ As for the Big Five, the Dark

Triad variables range from 0 ‘very low’ to 4 ‘very high’. Reliability for all scales is high.⁵

2.3. Measures of perceived campaign style

Experts evaluated the candidates' populist rhetoric by assessing to what extent they i) identify with the common people, ii) use an anti-establishment rhetoric, iii) use an informal style, and iv) treat opponents with respect. Negativity of the campaign was assessed on a scale ranging from –10 ‘exclusively negative’ to 10 ‘exclusively positive’; experts also had to evaluate whether candidates used character or policy attacks and their use of fear and feel-good appeals.⁶ For personality and populism experts were asked to rate one randomly selected candidate only (e.g., Big Five for Clinton and Dark Triad for Trump), which reduces the risk that experts rationalize the differences between the two candidates. All experts rated negativity and use of emotional appeals for both candidates.⁷

2.4. Ideology of experts

Our sample of experts is slightly tilted towards the left (Table A2), which could affect aggregated ratings. We regressed all expert ratings on their ideological profile and find (Table A3) that this only marginally affects their evaluations. Nonetheless, we calculated “corrected” ratings for an “ideologically average” expert (Benoit & Laver, 2006) as the marginal value for an expert that scores 5.5 on the left-right scale (midpoint). Comparison between original and “corrected” ratings (Table A4) shows few significant differences; importantly, differences between candidates, as discussed below, exist also for “corrected” ratings. We can confidently exclude any substantial ideological bias.

3. Results

3.1. Perceived personality

Experts evaluated Trump as having very high extraversion and very low agreeableness, confirming trends in Visser et al. (2017). On those two traits Clinton is evaluated as relatively average. However, the difference is large enough to be statistically significant ($d = 1.94$ and 2.26 , respectively; $p < 0.001$). As in previous studies, Clinton scores relatively high on perceived conscientiousness, while Trump scores very low ($d = 3.57$, $p < 0.001$).

Our results diverge with Visser et al. (2017) on the candidates' perceived openness; while their results show Clinton high and Trump low on this trait, we find an average score for both candidates ($d = 0.45$, $p < 0.1$). The measure of openness in Visser et al. also includes dimensions of aesthetic appreciation and inquisitiveness, on which the two candidates diverge drastically; the two candidates are however rated similarly on creativity and unconventionality, on par with our measure of openness.

We also find a substantial difference ($d = 3.18$, $p < 0.001$) on emotional stability between the two candidates: if Clinton is perceived as relatively high in this trait, Trump is, again, perceived as extremely low. Finally, our results confirm Trump's high scores for perceived narcissism and psychopathy. On those two traits Clinton is assessed as relatively average ($d = 2.06$ and 1.84 , respectively; $p < 0.001$). For Machiavellianism as well our experts rated Trump more severely than Clinton ($d = 1.51$, $p < 0.001$).

⁵ Extraversion: $\alpha = 0.79$, Agreeableness: $\alpha = 0.86$, Conscientiousness: $\alpha = 0.88$, Emotional stability: $\alpha = 0.83$, Openness: $\alpha = 0.51$, Narcissism: $\alpha = 0.69$, Psychopathy: $\alpha = 0.86$, Machiavellianism: $\alpha = 0.71$.

⁶ See the supplementary material for questions wording and scales.

⁷ With an anticipated effect size of Cohen's $d = 1.0$ and a statistical power level = 80, the minimum sample size per group (two-tailed hypothesis) is $N = 17$.

² <https://www.alessandro-nai.com/negative-campaigning-comparative-data>.

³ See the supplementary material.

⁴ Our measure of narcissism captures need for admiration, and not the “grandiosity” dimension (indirectly captured by extraversion).

Table 1
Perceived Big Five, Dark Triad, and campaign style of Clinton and Trump.

	Clinton			Trump			Differences		Effect sizes		
	Avg	SD	N	Avg	SD	N	Diff	Sig diff	d	95% CI (lb)	95% CI (ub)
Big Five											
Extraversion	2.00	1.05	33	3.61	0.44	28	+1.61	***	1.94	1.33	2.55
Extraverted, enthusiastic	2.03	1.21	33	3.39	0.74	28	+1.36	***	1.33	0.77	1.89
Reserved, quiet	2.03	1.19	33	0.18	0.48	28	−1.85	***	1.98	1.37	2.59
Agreeableness	2.03	1.05	33	0.18	0.39	28	−1.85	***	2.26	1.62	2.91
Critical, quarrelsome	2.09	1.16	33	3.93	0.26	28	+1.84	***	2.11	1.48	2.74
Sympathetic, warm	2.15	1.23	33	0.29	0.66	28	−1.87	***	1.84	1.24	2.44
Conscientiousness	3.48	0.76	33	0.68	0.81	28	−2.81	***	3.57	2.76	4.38
Dependable, self-disciplined	3.48	1.03	33	0.39	0.88	28	−3.09	***	3.20	2.45	3.96
Disorganized, careless	0.52	0.91	33	3.04	1.00	28	+2.52	***	2.65	1.96	3.33
Emotional stability	3.12	0.95	33	0.43	0.70	28	−2.69	***	3.18	2.43	3.94
Anxious, easily upset	0.85	1.03	33	3.25	1.27	28	+2.40	***	2.09	1.47	2.72
Calm, emotionally stable	3.09	1.28	33	0.11	0.31	28	−2.98	***	3.09	2.34	3.83
Openness	2.22	0.80	32	1.87	0.77	27	−0.35	†	0.45	0.07	0.96
Open to new experiences, complex	2.94	1.16	32	1.07	1.21	27	−1.86	***	1.58	0.99	2.17
Conventional, uncreative	2.52	1.09	33	1.32	1.12	28	−1.19	***	1.09	0.55	1.63
Dark Triad											
Narcissism	2.87	0.70	27	3.91	0.26	34	+1.04	***	2.06	1.44	2.69
Wants to be admired by others	3.30	0.61	27	3.88	0.41	34	+0.59	***	1.14	0.60	1.69
Wants attention from others	2.44	1.09	27	3.94	0.24	34	+1.50	***	2.01	1.39	2.63
Psychopathy	1.70	1.30	27	3.66	0.83	34	+1.96	***	1.84	1.24	2.45
Shows a lack of remorse	1.93	1.38	27	3.53	1.16	34	+1.60	***	1.27	0.72	1.82
Tends to be callous or insensitive	1.48	1.42	27	3.79	0.73	34	+2.31	***	2.12	1.49	2.75
Machiavellianism	2.22	1.01	25	3.44	0.62	33	+1.22	***	1.51	0.92	2.09
Might manipulate others to succeed	2.81	1.06	26	3.88	0.33	34	+1.07	***	1.45	0.88	2.02
Tends to use flattery to succeed	1.64	1.25	25	3.00	1.15	33	+1.36	***	1.14	0.58	1.70
Perceived campaign style											
Populist communication style	1.34	0.51	28	3.09	0.64	34	+1.75	***	2.99	2.26	3.72
Identifies w common people	2.25	1.27	28	1.35	1.41	34	−0.90	*	0.67	0.15	1.18
Treats opponents w respect	2.61	0.96	28	0.06	0.24	34	−2.55	***	2.08	1.46	2.70
Uses informal style	1.32	0.98	28	3.41	1.02	34	+2.09	***	2.61	1.93	3.29
Uses anti-elite rhetoric	0.39	0.57	28	3.65	1.01	34	+3.25	***	3.88	3.03	4.72
Uses feel-good appeals	5.75	1.94	64	2.72	2.37	64	−3.03	***	1.40	1.01	1.79
Uses fear appeals	5.62	2.36	65	9.22	1.27	65	+3.60	***	1.90	1.49	2.31
Tone of campaign	−0.77	3.94	67	−6.73	3.49	67	−5.96	***	1.60	1.21	1.99
Personal (v. policy) attacks	3.43	0.64	65	4.20	0.77	65	+0.77	***	1.08	0.72	1.46

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, †p < 0.1.

3.2. Perceived campaign style

According to our experts, Trump made strong use of an informal style and anti-establishment rhetoric, while rarely treating his opponents with respect, unlike Clinton, who is surprisingly rated as using appeals that identify with “the people” significantly ($p < 0.05$) more often than Trump. All in all, however, Trump's campaign was significantly more perceived as populist than Clinton's ($d = 2.99$, $p < 0.001$). Experts assessed that Trump relied heavily on fear appeals and very little on feel-good appeals, whereas Clinton was evaluated as making average use of both feel-good and fear appeals ($d = 1.40$ and 1.90 , respectively; $p < 0.001$). Finally, Trump's campaign was seen as more negative than Clinton's, and more based on personal attacks ($d = 1.60$ and 1.08 , respectively; $p < 0.001$).

4. Discussion

The 2016 election asked the American people to decide between two very different characters. Our experts evaluated Clinton as average on extraversion, agreeableness, openness, narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, but high on conscientiousness and emotional stability; Trump was portrayed as very low on agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability, average on openness, and very high on extraversion and the Dark Triad. These results are consistent with what reported in Visser et al. (2017), which provides convincing external validity to both studies.

Our results also suggest that the differences between the two public

personas are reflected in their campaign style. Experts assessed Trump's campaign as fear-based, populist – albeit more so in regards to anti-elitism than people-centrism – and negative (mostly character attacks). Clinton's campaign, while also evaluated as negative, was seen as relying less on populist rhetoric only averagely on emotional appeals.

Although limited to two cases, our results suggest that the personality reputation of candidates might be related to their campaign style. Strong negativity and character attacks could be related to a neurotic and psychopathic reputation. Feel-good messages could foster perceptions of agreeableness, and some forms of populism could be perceived as narcissism. If the perceived personality of candidates matters for their success (Lilienfeld et al., 2012), and if campaign strategies participate to that perception, then the two ought to be studied jointly. Research showing an association between personality and individual communication behaviors (de Vries, Bakker-Pieper, Konings, & Schouten, 2013) supports this idea.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.09.020>.

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