

# Candidate Qualities through a Partisan Lens: A Theory of Trait Ownership

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*Using Petrocik's (1996) theory of issue ownership as a point of departure, I develop and test a theory of "trait ownership" that provides an explanation for the origins of candidate trait perceptions and illustrates an important way that candidates affect voters. Specifically, I argue for a direct connection between the issues owned by a political party and evaluations of the personal attributes of its candidates. As a result, the American public views Republicans as stronger leaders and more moral, while Democrats hold advantages on compassion and empathy. I also draw on "expectations gap" arguments from psychology and political science to demonstrate how a candidate may gain an electoral advantage by successfully "trespassing" on his opponent's trait territory. National Election Studies data from the 1980–2004 presidential elections are used to demonstrate the existence, durability, and effects of trait ownership in contemporary American political campaigns.*

In the summer of 1999, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush stood before an audience in Indianapolis, Indiana and promised that should he be elected, his administration would "rally the armies of compassion in our communities to fight . . . poverty and hopelessness." This would not, he said, "be the failed compassion of towering, distant bureaucracies," but rather a "government that serves those who are serving their neighbors," and a government that "shows its heart" (quoted in Ceaser and Busch 2001, 43–44).

More than a year later, at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, Bush's opponent, Al Gore, told the delegates who had just nominated him for president: "I stand here tonight as my own man," a man who has "taken on the powerful forces, and as president, I'll stand up to them and I'll stand up for you." The Vice President said he had "been there in the fight against big polluters," "had never backed down," and went on to use the words "fight," "fought," or "fighting" two dozen times during the course of the speech (Gore 2000).

To be sure, these issue-based appeals were attempts to win over constituencies that each candidate felt was cru-

cial to his chances for success in November, and Gore's declaration of independence was a not so subtle effort to distance himself from Bill Clinton. But the rhetoric of the 2000 campaign underscores a broader, yet little researched, feature of American politics: not only do the Republican and Democratic parties own *issues* (Petrocik 1996), but their candidates own *traits* associated with those issues. The American public sees Republicans as stronger leaders and more moral, while Democrats are perceived as more compassionate and empathetic. In 2000, Bush and Gore's electoral strategies were designed in part to overcome the trait-based disadvantages each had inherited by virtue of his party affiliation—Bush, by calling himself a "compassionate conservative," and Gore, by trying to emphasize his alpha-male leadership skills (Ceaser and Busch 2001; Seelye 1999).

There is no shortage of research on the role of traits in presidential elections.<sup>1</sup> But very little work has sought to examine the connections between traits, issues, and strategic candidate behavior. I develop here a theory of "trait ownership" that seeks to explain how the interaction of strategic candidate behavior and the nature of

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<sup>1</sup>Among the most frequently cited studies on candidate traits are Abelson et al. (1982); Funk (1999); Keeter (1987); Kinder (1986); Kinder et al. (1980); Miller and Shanks (1996); Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk (1986); and Sullivan et al. (1990), although there are many others. Bartels (2002) provides a useful overview.

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individual political information processing can produce durable party-based trait stereotypes that extend across multiple elections and candidates. In addition, the theory is used to demonstrate how voters reward candidates who successfully “trespass” on their opponent’s trait territory, illustrating one way political campaigns affect voters and shape election outcomes, a topic that has engaged political scientists in recent years (e.g., Shaw 1999).

I begin with an overview of the relevant literature that provides a framework for the theory and then specify several hypotheses that emerge from the discussion. Next, I use National Election Studies data from the last seven presidential campaigns (1980–2004) to show the existence of partisan trait ownership and the way perceptions of the candidates’ personal attributes affect the vote. The results demonstrate that trait-based partisan stereotypes are embedded in the American political system, that candidates have powerful incentives to tend to their personal images, and that political scientists have a compelling interest in understanding the role of personal traits in elections.

## A Theory of Trait Ownership

The theory of trait ownership provides explanations for the origins of trait perceptions of presidential candidates and how those perceptions can affect vote choice. First, trait ownership argues for a direct connection between the issues “owned” by a political party (Petrocik 1996) and the public perceptions of the personal attributes of the party’s candidates. Certain traits are associated with certain kinds of actions and behaviors. And since candidates tend to campaign on and talk frequently about the issues their party owns (Norpoth and Buchanan 1992; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Sellers 1998; Simon 2002), the public comes to associate certain traits with that party’s candidates. Trait perceptions are created and reinforced by issue ownership campaigning.

Second, the theory generates an explanation for one way that campaigns and candidates affect voters. If voters expect a party’s candidates to be representative of certain traits but not others, a candidate may gain an advantage if he can successfully “trespass” on his opponent’s trait territory. Drawing on “expectations gap” arguments from both psychology (e.g., Higgins 1987) and political science (Kimball and Patterson 1997; Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva 1999), I contend voters may be influenced when candidates overcome—or fall short of—trait-based stereotypes. Trait ownership provides a baseline for expectations, and trait trespassing can yield an electoral benefit.

## Candidate Strategy and Issue Ownership

While early models of campaign strategy emphasized the importance of the congruence between candidates’ and voters’ issue positions (e.g., Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984), more recent work has turned to the notion of agenda control. Because human beings process information, political or otherwise, in ways that tend to confirm what they already believe (Abelson 1959), persuasion is a difficult endeavor, and candidates who focus only on drawing voters close to their issue positions face a daunting challenge. As a result, scholars have begun to focus on how the strategies of agenda setting, priming, and framing (Budge and Farlie 1983; Druckman 2004; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Petrocik 1996; Riker 1990; Simon 2002) can influence the choices made by voters at the ballot box. Strategic candidates, then, are as attuned to the *topics* of election discourse as they are to the *positions* they take on particular issues.

As a result, candidates tend to craft campaign messages that selectively emphasize issues they believe will benefit them (Budge and Farlie 1983; Riker 1990; Simon 2002). Prominent in this line of research is the theory of “issue ownership” (Petrocik 1996), which is rooted in the understanding of political parties as reflections of the religious, ethnic, linguistic, and economic divisions within a society (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Because of the nature of coalitions, Petrocik argues, parties over time develop issue-handling reputations, whereby they are perceived by the public as more skilled at dealing with certain policy problems. In this formulation, candidates orchestrate campaigns designed not to persuade voters to adopt their issue positions but to make problems associated with their party’s owned issues “the programmatic meaning of the election and the criteria by which voters make their choice” (Petrocik 1996, 828). By repeatedly focusing on an issue, candidates can raise the salience of a political problem in voters’ minds, a phenomenon for which there is much empirical evidence within research on the mass media (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972).

In the United States, the Republican and Democratic parties have developed very different issue handling reputations, which has had a direct impact on the content of the campaigns run by each party’s candidates. Republicans tend to be regarded as more adept at handling matters of defense, taxes, and social issues (such as so-called family values). Democrats, meanwhile, own the issues of social welfare and social group relations (Petrocik 1996; see also Sides forthcoming). As a result, each party’s candidates

have conducted campaigns designed to place the focus on their party's issues (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Sellers 1998; Simon 2002), with opponents in the same race often having very different issue agendas (but see Sigelman and Buell 2004). Party labels provide cues about issue handling competence, and political conflict—of which campaigns are a central component—reinforces those perceptions.<sup>2</sup>

## How Candidate Behavior Creates Trait Ownership

There is good reason to suspect that issue ownership campaigning is just as important in shaping public perceptions of candidate traits, although so far this has gone unexplored in the literature. Social cognition research provides evidence for why this might be, as trait inference has been shown to be fundamental to person perception (e.g., Ross 1977; Ross and Anderson 1982; Srull and Wyer 1989). Since traits are not directly observable, individuals generally infer attributes of another person's personality from their actions and behavior (see Fiske and Taylor 1991). For example, a person who sees a young man helping an

elderly woman across the street would likely attribute the trait of kindness or compassion to the young man. If the young man instead lifted a \$20 bill out of the woman's purse, he is likely to be perceived as dishonest and untrustworthy. "When we judge the behavior of others, we assume that it reveals character" (Popkin 1994, 76), a process that allows people to make sense of an inherently complex world (Pittman and Heller 1987).

Since citizens rarely have a chance to see candidates in person, much less carry on a one-on-one conversation, trait inference is likely to be even more important in campaigns, as this represents the only real chance to form a global impression of a candidate (Lodge and Stroh 1993). Being only minimally attentive to politics, most people do this by using information shortcuts to make candidate assessments—in effect extrapolating from observable reality what they can only assume is true (Popkin 1994). These bits of data can be gleaned from televised images (Hart 1994), campaign advertising (Jamieson 1992), and other sources (e.g., Lupia 1994). In Popkin's (1994) famous example, Mexican American voters watching President Gerald Ford bite into an unshucked tamale likely inferred that Ford was not a candidate who understood their culture and concerns. Other, less dramatic, campaign behavior also provides clues about candidates' personal attributes. In particular, there is evidence that people infer candidate traits from issue information, which lies at the heart of my argument.

Although much work in political perception has focused on *trait-to-trait* (Conover 1981) and *party-to-issue position* inference (Feldman and Conover 1983), some research on person perception has argued for the connection among traits, issues, and behavior. Cantor and Mischel (1979), for example, suggest a direct link between positions on social issues and trait perceptions, although not in a political context. And in an experimental study, Rapoport, Metcalf, and Hartman (1989) found that voters frequently made inferences between candidate traits and issue information. Both *trait-to-issue* inference and *issue-to-trait* inference occurred, but subjects were consistently *more likely* to infer candidate traits from issue information than the opposite (Rapoport, Metcalf, and Hartman 1989). The findings suggest that the issues candidates talk about on the stump can have a powerful impact on the personal characteristics voters attribute to them.

Critically, if citizens infer trait information from the issues that candidates talk about, there should be substantial differences in perceptions of Republican and Democratic candidates, since campaign strategy dictates that each party's candidates talk about different issues. Because Democrats are the party of the worker, the elderly, and the less fortunate, and have for 70 years pursued policies to

<sup>2</sup>Although issue ownership is likely to be stable in the absence of a partisan realignment (Burnham 1970; Petrocik 1981; Sundquist 1983), Petrocik (1996) allows that the maintenance of issue-handling reputations depends on party performance. Thus, it is possible that Petrocik's data from the 1990s no longer accurately describe the parties' issue handling reputations. If that is the case, my connection of particular issues to partisan trait ownership would require revision. To determine whether this is the case, I collected public opinion data on the issue-handling reputations of the parties from January 2002 through January 2005 using Lexis-Nexis' polling database. This search yielded 121 questions bearing on the parties' ability to handle specific policy problems. For each poll, I subtracted the percentage of respondents saying the Democratic Party was more capable of handling an issue from the percentage of respondents who trusted the Republicans more on that issue. I then averaged together the results of all polls that dealt with the same issue. In general, the data show that conventional perceptions of the party's issue domains still hold true. Republicans maintain about a 5% advantage on civil and social order, which is somewhat smaller than their early 1990s margin (see Holian 2004 for an analysis of Bill Clinton's attempts to poach crime and law enforcement from the GOP), and a 6% advantage on matters of taxes and spending. The GOP holds a substantial advantage on defense and security (by 30%) and other foreign affairs issues (by 19%). The Democrats, meanwhile, have maintained their advantages on social welfare (Social Security, health care, etc.) by about 16% and the environment by 18%. The Democratic advantage on education has shrunk somewhat since the 1990s and now stands at about 6%, presumably a result of George W. Bush's reform efforts. In sum, public perceptions of the parties' issue handling abilities have changed some, but not in great magnitude. Critically, no issue has changed hands since the 1990s, which indicates that the issue-handling profiles that underlie my argument are still present.

expand government attention to those in need (Gerring 1998), Democrats find themselves campaigning at places like nursing homes and homeless shelters and generally demonstrating their willingness to reach out to those in need. A politician who appears to care about the welfare of the needy cultivates for himself an image of being compassionate and empathetic. Likewise, augmenting those appearances with promises to protect entitlement programs and aid to the poor, which a Democrat will often do, solidifies his image as one devoted to the downtrodden and less fortunate.

Republicans, on the other hand, have a coalition made up not of working classes and minorities but of business interests, the upper and middle classes, and social conservatives. Thus, Republican candidates find themselves giving campaign speeches about law and order, tax cuts, family values, military and defense spending—the issues Republicans own. Instead of politicking at union halls or in poor neighborhoods, Republicans mobilize their base at churches, defense contractors, business councils, and so on (West 1983). In response to rhetoric that frequently emphasizes toughness and individualism, citizens may come to view the Republican candidate as a strong leader and, as a product of the family values emphasis, particularly moral.

Furthermore, issue ownership campaigning helps feed partisan stereotypes that could make trait ownership especially durable. In the short-term, campaign behavior prompts differential trait attributions for Democratic and Republican candidates. In the long-term, the recurrence of such behavior every four years—and the policy battles that occur in Washington between elections—creates partisan stereotypes that subsequently shape future expectations for a party's candidates (Campbell et al. 1960; Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993). This is a process that could be facilitated by a variety of factors, such as media coverage that portrays Republicans and Democrats in different ways. Petrocik argues that partisan issue handling reputations are “regularly tested and reinforced” (1996, 828) by the dynamics of political conflict. To the extent that traits are connected to owned issues, conflict also helps cement perceptions of a party's candidates' personal attributes.<sup>3</sup>

If this description of the intersection of candidate strategy and individual-level trait inference is correct, Re-

publicans and Democrats should be perceived as representative of different traits. *Specifically, I hypothesize that Republicans will be perceived as stronger leaders and more moral than Democrats. At the same time, Democrats are likely to be viewed as more compassionate and empathetic than Republicans.*

## Trait Expectations and Voting Behavior

In addition to providing an explanation for the origins of trait perceptions, the theory of trait ownership can also provide predictions for one way candidates and campaigns affect voters. Specifically, the existence of party-based trait perceptions may generate a baseline of expectations in the minds of voters about how representative of certain traits each party's candidates should be *in comparison to their opponents*. The degree to which candidates deviate from these expectations—either in overcoming them or falling short—could shape voters' candidate evaluations and, subsequently, their vote choice.

This proposition seems plausible in light of psychological and political science research that has emphasized the importance of expectations in shaping evaluations of self, other individuals, and political objects. Discrepancy theory argues that low self-esteem is produced by an individual's failure to meet her own ideal expectations (Higgins 1987), and similar arguments have been made in other areas (Bem and McConnell 1970; Markus 1986). Furthermore, Aronson and Linder (1965) propose a “gain-loss” theory of person perception, in which the degree to which one person likes another is related to how positive or negative her previous interaction with that person had been. The more negative a previous confrontation had been—and thus, the more pessimistic a subject's expectation for a future interaction—the more favorably a future positive interaction was evaluated.

More recently, political scientists have used this “expectations gap” argument to explain individual perceptions of Congress and the president. Kimball and Patterson (1997) show that overall congressional approval is strongly related to the degree of disillusionment with Congress—that is, the difference between the way citizens believed Congress *should* work and their perceptions of how it *actually* functions. And in an extension of Kimball and Patterson's analysis, Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva (1999) find similar effects on presidential approval, confirming a line of argument popular among presidency scholars (Edwards and Wayne 1997; Lowi 1985; Tulis

<sup>3</sup>One might argue that differential trait perceptions are the result of stereotyping, and nothing more. That perspective, however, has no explanation for the *origin* of such stereotypes. Stereotypes do not emerge from the ether, and I argue that durable party-based trait inferences grow out of issue-ownership campaigning and partisan conflict. My formulation is not inconsistent with the notion of partisan stereotyping, but stereotyping alone cannot explain *why* a party's candidates might be chronically perceived as more or less representative of certain traits.

1987). In short, expectations appear to carry considerable weight in both interpersonal and political evaluations.<sup>4</sup>

The potential implications of these studies for understanding the impact of trait evaluations are straightforward: voters' choices may be influenced by the degree to which candidates deviate from trait expectations. If the parties own certain traits, voters likely enter a campaign with default expectations about the personal qualities each candidate will exhibit, and which qualities each candidate will not (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993). The Republican should be a stronger leader and more moral than his Democratic opponent, while the Democrat should appear more compassionate and caring. A candidate who overcomes these expectations—say, a Democrat who establishes himself as an unusually strong leader or a Republican who comes across as especially empathetic—might win over voters looking for information to distinguish between the two candidates. Likewise, a candidate who falls short of these party-based expectations—a Republican who shows little leadership ability or a Democrat who seems cold-hearted—may lose standing in the eyes of voters who expected more.

Indeed, Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva's (1999) study of expectations-based voting in the 1996 election showed that support for Bill Clinton was influenced not only by expectations for his own performance but also by the public's expectations for his challenger, Bob Dole. In other words, the effect of the expectations gap probably hinges on a comparative judgment, as is suggested by previous research on candidate evaluation (Rahn et al. 1990).

This raises the possibility that the traits that matter the most for candidates are the ones they do not own. Republicans may have the most to gain by eroding the Democratic advantage on Democratic traits, and vice-versa. While something of a paradox, the possibility has logic to it. Since positive traits are, presumably, universally desirable, most voters would like their president to represent the best of humanity (Sullivan et al. 1990). Thus, candidates who begin a campaign with a disadvantage on a nonowned trait have more to gain by erasing that deficit

<sup>4</sup>Numerous real-world examples highlight the potential of this argument. Consider Howard Dean's 2004 meltdown in the wake of his poor showing in the Iowa caucuses and the election-night "scream." The damage from Dean's full-throated exhortation to his supporters was not due simply to the fact that he cranked up the volume in his speech. Rather, the former Vermont governor may have been hurt because his performance violated the American public's—and the Washington press corps'—expectations for potential presidents. Presidents are expected to react coolly to events, not with unbridled passion. The speech was tame in comparison to what a college basketball coach might say to his players after a tough loss, but the expectations for a coach are very different than they are for a candidate.

than by increasing their advantage on an owned trait. Already perceived as compassionate and empathetic, for example, a Democrat would have an incentive to burish his leadership credentials and demonstrate his moral turpitude.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, I expect candidates have more to gain by eroding their opponent's party-based trait advantages than by maintaining their advantage on owned traits. *Republican candidates who are perceived as equally compassionate and empathetic as their Democratic opponents will do better than if the two candidates are perceived as equally strong leaders and moral. Conversely, Democratic candidates who are perceived as equally strong leaders and just as moral as their Republican counterparts should receive a bigger electoral boost than if they are perceived as equally compassionate and empathetic.*<sup>6</sup>

To sum up, the theory of trait ownership presented here suggests that perceptions of candidates' personal qualities are the product of strategic candidate behavior and the nature of political information processing. During campaigns, candidates focus on issues their party owns, which prompts the public to make trait inferences associated with those issues. In the end, Republicans and Democrats should be perceived as more or less representative of different traits. The theory also predicts that voters' choices will be affected to the extent that candidates deviate from the trait-based expectations established by their party affiliation. The next section turns to describing the

<sup>5</sup>Interestingly, there seems to be some evidence from the 2004 campaign that candidates buy into this proposition. For example, while much of the issue content of the Democratic National Convention was decidedly Democratic, the tone of John Kerry's speech and others' speeches about him seemed designed more to remind voters of his leadership skills rather than his empathetic nature (Purdum 2004). For example, the word "strength" appeared 17 times in Kerry's convention speech. In the same vein, the Bush campaign's Web site included a clickable tab labeled "Compassion," which trumpeted what the campaign regarded as its more gentle initiatives, embedded among the campaign's other signature issues. As a Republican, Bush may have been hoping to overcome his party's compassion deficit. These two pieces of anecdotal evidence suggest that both candidates realized the importance of trait trespassing, as the examples from the Bush and Gore speeches in the introduction to this paper also indicate.

<sup>6</sup>To be sure, traits may exert a modest influence on the vote in comparison to other factors, such as party identification and economic assessments, and some evidence suggests that trait evaluations are not independent of these variables (see Bartels 2002). My goal here is not to resolve this debate, nor am I suggesting that evaluations of the candidates' personal qualities' carry the weight conventional wisdom and political journalism often affords them. Rather, I am arguing that the durable trait perceptions can provide a baseline from which trait evaluations may shift. The effect of these shifting perceptions on vote choice could be small in comparison to other variables, but given the closeness of recent presidential elections, even modest effects seem to merit investigation.

data used to test these propositions and the subsequent empirical analysis.

## Data and Descriptive Results

Testing the initial proposition of the theory—that Republicans and Democrats are consistently perceived as more representative of certain traits—is relatively straightforward. The American National Election Studies have every four years since 1980 asked a series of questions about the presidential candidates' personal qualities. Much research has utilized these data (e.g., Kinder 1986; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; see Bartels 2002 for an overview), and several studies have dealt with the validity of the particular battery of trait questions asked on the survey (e.g., Abelson et al. 1982; Kinder et al. 1980). The questions asked have, unfortunately, not remained perfectly consistent over the seven elections under investigation here (1980–2004). Still, the data are appropriate for the specific hypotheses to be tested, since questions on the candidates' leadership ability, morality, compassion, and empathy have appeared regularly.<sup>7</sup>

In the surveys, respondents are asked to rate the major party presidential candidates on a variety of traits, with the questions asked similarly every year. For example: "Think about George W. Bush. In your opinion, does the phrase 'provides strong leadership' describe George W. Bush extremely well, quite well, not too well, or not well at all?"

The format for each trait question is the same, and respondents are queried about both major party candidates. Responses range from 1 to 4, which I have recoded so that 4 represents "extremely well," and 1 represents "not well at all." Thus, higher ratings represent more favorable assessments. In the analysis that follows, I have included only respondents who meet two conditions: they reported voting for one of the two major-party candidates and gave both a trait rating.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 presents the means of all responses to the trait queries from 1980 to 2004. Looking at the top four rows, which show the traits of primary interest, the data confirm the expectations. On the traits of strong leader and

<sup>7</sup>The specific years that each trait question was asked are shown in the note in Table 1. Also, all of the data from the 1980–2000 elections are drawn from the ANES' Cumulative Data File. The 2004 data come from the 2004 ANES prerelease, which was made available to the public in late January 2005.

<sup>8</sup>The results presented in Tables 1–2 are not substantively different when I include individuals who reported voting for a third-party candidate or who could rate only one of the candidates on a particular trait.

**TABLE 1** Mean Trait Scores for Democratic and Republican Presidential Candidates, 1980–2004

|  | Republican<br>Candidates | Democratic<br>Candidates | Difference* |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Strong Leader</b><br>(N = 7,152) <sup>a</sup> | 2.73<br>(.01)            | 2.50<br>(.01)            | .23         |
| <b>Moral</b><br>(N = 7,060) <sup>a</sup>         | 3.05<br>(.01)            | 2.75<br>(.01)            | .30         |
| <b>Compassionate</b><br>(N = 3,531) <sup>b</sup> | 2.67<br>(.01)            | 2.93<br>(.01)            | –.26        |
| <b>Empathetic</b><br>(N = 6,370) <sup>c</sup>    | 2.37<br>(.01)            | 2.69<br>(.01)            | –.32        |
| <b>Decent</b><br>(N = 2,387) <sup>d</sup>        | 3.16<br>(.01)            | 3.07<br>(.01)            | .09         |
| <b>Intelligent</b><br>(N = 5,605) <sup>c</sup>   | 2.96<br>(.01)            | 3.11<br>(.01)            | –.15        |
| <b>Knowledgeable</b><br>(N = 7,412) <sup>a</sup> | 2.93<br>(.01)            | 3.02<br>(.01)            | –.09        |
| <b>"Inspiring"</b><br>(N = 5,493) <sup>f</sup>   | 2.45<br>(.01)            | 2.45<br>(.01)            | .00         |

*Note:* Average ratings on a 1 to 4 scale, with a score of 4 indicating that the trait describes the candidate "extremely well," among major-party presidential voters. Standard errors are in parentheses. \*All differences except for inspiring are significant at  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test). Positive difference scores indicate that the trait describes the Republican better than the Democrat.

<sup>a</sup>Results are from ANES pre-election surveys, 1980–2004.

<sup>b</sup>Results are from ANES pre-election surveys, 1984–1992.

<sup>c</sup>Results are from ANES pre-election surveys, 1984–2004.

<sup>d</sup>Results are from ANES pre-election surveys, 1984–1992 and 2000.

<sup>e</sup>Results are from ANES pre-election surveys, 1980–1992 and 2000–2004.

<sup>f</sup>Results are from ANES pre-election surveys, 1980–1996.

moral, Republicans were on average rated more highly than Democrats (by .23 and .30, respectively). On the traits of compassionate and empathetic—which is actually asked as "really cares about people like you"—Democrats are evaluated more favorably (by .26 and .32), as indicated by the negative signs. To be sure, the statistical significance of the differences is due in part to the large sample sizes. But they are nonetheless present and represent some real divergence in the perceptions of each party's candidates. As expected, Republicans appear to own leadership and morality, while Democrats own compassion and empathy.

The scores on the traits peripheral to my argument (decent, intelligent, knowledgeable, and inspiring) are included in Table 1 to provide some additional support for the theory. There is no theoretical reason to expect either party's candidates to be more positively evaluated

on these particular traits, as there do not seem to be any issues to which those attributes are connected. And in looking at the data, the differences between the candidates on the four nonowned traits are much smaller than the differences on the owned traits (including no difference whatsoever on “inspiring”). Substantively, the data demonstrate that voters see the biggest differences between the candidates on traits that are connected to issues owned by one party or the other.

Table 2 presents the same data, broken down by election year. The pattern of differential trait perceptions for Republicans and Democrats is not simply the product of one or two candidates skewing the distribution. Not once was a Republican rated more favorably on compassion or empathy than his Democratic opponent. And Jimmy Carter in 1980 was the only Democrat to have a higher morality rating than his Republican opponent. Moreover, of the 23 calculated differences, the perceptions of the candidates point in the direction predicted by the theory 19 times. This ratio, greater than four-to-one, is notable in light of the variation among the candidates involved and the fact that the data cover a 24-year period. If we discount the ties (i.e., the nonsignificant differences), the data run counter to my hypotheses only twice—Carter on morality and Clinton on leadership in 1992.

As the Carter morality rating seems to suggest, voters are sensitive to the individual differences in the candidates’ personal characteristics. They do not simply give identical ratings to each party’s candidates across time. For example, morality ratings for Democrats ranged from a low of 2.12 (Clinton, 1992) to a high of 3.19 (Carter), while the Republican leadership ratings ranged from 2.51 (Bush, 1988) to 2.98 (Reagan, 1984). The 2004 data also are interesting. George W. Bush’s leadership rating of 2.79 is the second highest among the 14 candidates over the last 24 years, which is not a surprise, given the nation’s wartime status. John Kerry’s rating, however, is the third *lowest*, a result, one might surmise, of the Bush campaign’s unceasing efforts to paint the Massachusetts senator as a “flip-flopper” unwilling to make tough decisions (Bumiller, Halbfinger, and Rosenbaum 2004). Kerry did, as trait ownership would predict, hold an advantage on empathy, but his rating was the lowest among Democrats in all of the years the question was asked.

In general, Table 2 underscores that perceptions of the candidates’ personal characteristics clearly are conditioned by their party label, regardless of the particular electoral context. There appears to be something durable and recurrent in the way people perceive the major parties’ nominees’ personal qualities.

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 of course mask individual-level variation in the trait ratings. Partisans surely rate their party’s candidate more favorably than his opponent, as party identification is a powerful perceptual screen (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). But if the notion of trait ownership has merit, the data, broken down by partisan intensity, should reveal two patterns. First, and most importantly, pure independents, without partisanship to guide their evaluations, should rate the candidates in the direction predicted by the theory, viewing Republicans more favorably on leadership and morality while giving Democrats the edge on compassion and empathy. Second, the difference between strong partisans’ perceptions of their candidate and his opponent should be more extreme on their party’s owned traits than on opposition traits. That is, a pattern should appear suggesting that even strong partisans are somewhat sensitive to the ownership of traits by the opposing party. This would also indicate that trait evaluations are more than the result of individuals projecting positive traits onto their favored candidates.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1a–1d shows the mean differences (calculated by subtracting the Democratic rating from the Republican rating) for each trait for voters at each level of partisanship on a 5-point party identification scale.<sup>10</sup> Bars rising up from the zero line indicate a Republican advantage; bars pointing downward show a Democratic advantage.

Not surprisingly, partisanship mediates trait evaluations. But where partisanship is not a factor—among pure independents—trait ownership indeed appears. On the two traits owned by Republicans, leadership and morality, independents rate Republican candidates more favorably (by .28 and .21, respectively). At the same time,

<sup>9</sup>Projection is a potentially serious problem, since it could undermine the argument that trait evaluations influence vote choice. While people generally do give their preferred candidate higher ratings on most traits, there is ample evidence in the data that trait evaluations reflect something more than blind loyalty. In the seven election years, between 15% and 32% of two-party voters rated more favorably on at least one trait the candidate they did *not* vote for, and that figure is at least 25% in four elections. This is not to mention the large proportion of citizens who gave both candidates identical ratings on at least one trait—more than 50% in six of the seven elections (43% did in 2004). These numbers seem far too high to support the argument that trait evaluations are nothing more than projection. These data are available from the author upon request.

<sup>10</sup>I use the 5-point scale, which collapses leaners and weak partisans, instead of the 7-point scale because of intransitivity in the data (Keith et al. 1992; Petrocik 1974). Leaners consistently rate candidates in an equally partisan fashion as weak identifiers, making it appropriate to combine the two categories. There are no substantive differences in any of the analyses when the 7-point scale is employed.

**TABLE 2 Mean Trait Scores for Individual Presidential Candidates, 1980–2004**

|                      | 1980          | 1984           | 1988          | 1992          | 1996          | 2000          | 2004          |
|----------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
|                      | Reagan/Carter | Reagan/Mondale | Bush/Dukakis  | Bush/Clinton  | Dole/Clinton  | Bush/Gore     | Bush/Kerry    |
| <b>Strong Leader</b> |               |                |               |               |               |               |               |
| Republican           | 2.73<br>(.03) | 2.98<br>(.03)  | 2.51<br>(.03) | 2.59<br>(.02) | 2.75<br>(.02) | 2.73<br>(.03) | 2.79<br>(.04) |
| Democrat             | 2.15<br>(.03) | 2.39<br>(.02)  | 2.56<br>(.02) | 2.70<br>(.02) | 2.61<br>(.03) | 2.57<br>(.03) | 2.46<br>(.04) |
| Difference           | .57**         | .59**          | -.04          | -.11*         | .14**         | .16**         | .33**         |
| <b>Moral</b>         |               |                |               |               |               |               |               |
| Republican           | 2.94<br>(.03) | 3.18<br>(.02)  | 3.02<br>(.02) | 3.07<br>(.02) | 3.12<br>(.02) | 2.96<br>(.03) | 2.93<br>(.03) |
| Democrat             | 3.19<br>(.03) | 3.04<br>(.02)  | 2.92<br>(.02) | 2.38<br>(.02) | 2.12<br>(.03) | 2.94<br>(.03) | 2.74<br>(.03) |
| Difference           | -.24**        | .15**          | .10**         | .69**         | 1.00**        | .02           | .18**         |
| <b>Compassionate</b> |               |                |               |               |               |               |               |
| Republican           | –             | 2.67<br>(.03)  | 2.68<br>(.02) | 2.65<br>(.02) | –             | –             | –             |
| Democrat             | –             | 2.96<br>(.02)  | 2.85<br>(.02) | 2.95<br>(.02) | –             | –             | –             |
| Difference           | –             | -.29**         | -.17**        | -.29**        | –             | –             | –             |
| <b>Empathetic</b>    |               |                |               |               |               |               |               |
| Republican           | –             | 2.43<br>(.03)  | 2.47<br>(.03) | 2.19<br>(.03) | 2.41<br>(.03) | 2.39<br>(.03) | 2.38<br>(.04) |
| Democrat             | –             | 2.72<br>(.02)  | 2.75<br>(.02) | 2.77<br>(.02) | 2.61<br>(.03) | 2.63<br>(.03) | 2.58<br>(.03) |
| Difference           | –             | -.29**         | -.28**        | -.58**        | -.19**        | -.24**        | -.20*         |

Significant at \*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .01$  (two-tailed test). Standard errors are in parentheses.

independents give Democrats the edge on compassion and empathy (by .16 and .21).

Furthermore, evaluations by strong partisans are more extreme on traits owned by their party. The differences among strong Republicans were 1.52 on leadership and 1.27 on morality, but just .63 on compassion and 1.19 on empathy. Likewise, strong Democrats gave their party's candidates an advantage of 1.04 on compassion and 1.60 on empathy, but just .96 on leadership and .52 on morality. In short, independents clearly follow the patterns specified by trait ownership, and even strong partisans appear aware that the opposing party may have a long-term lease on certain traits.

## Trait Perceptions and Vote Choice

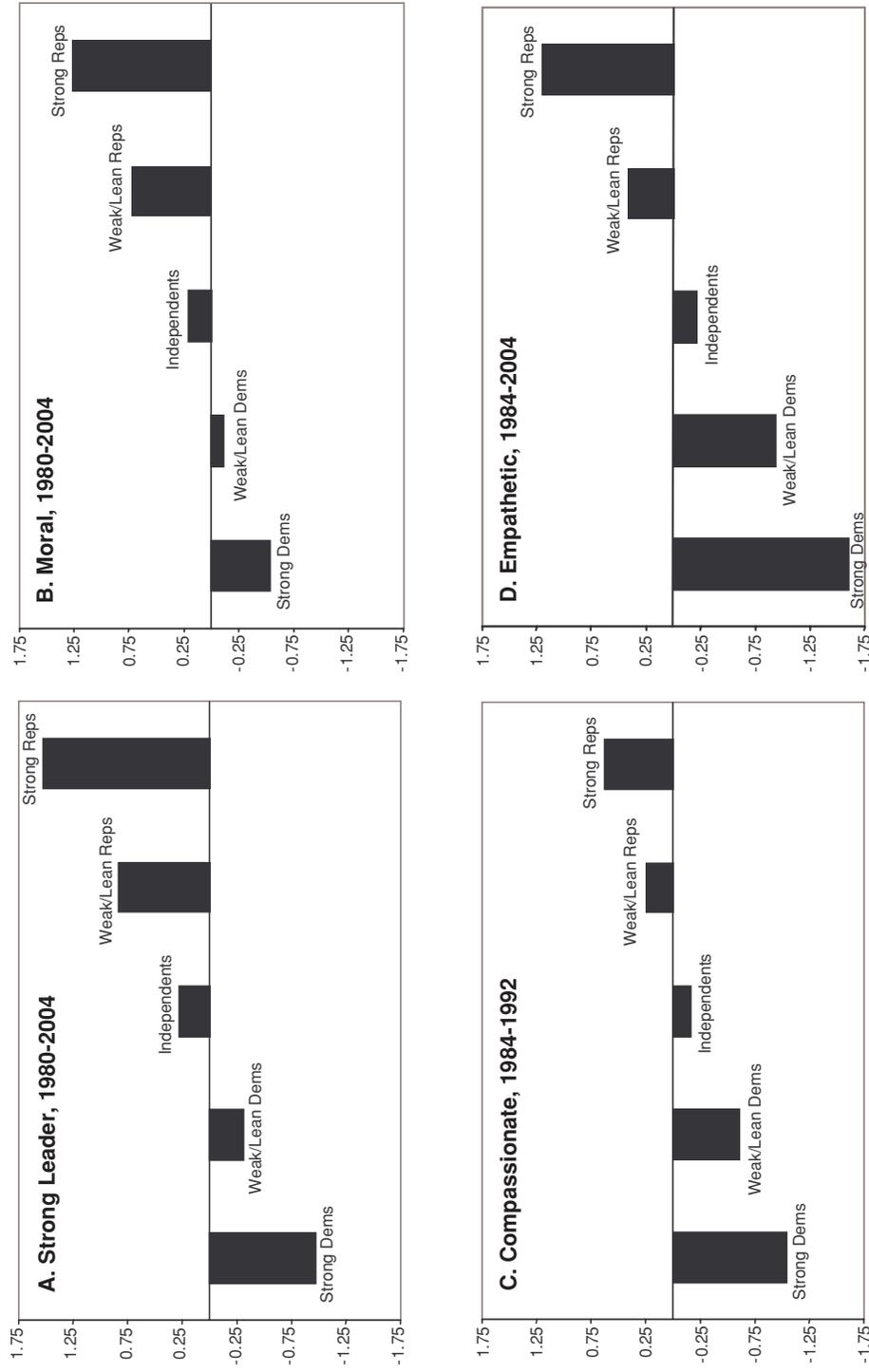
With the existence of trait ownership over the last two decades of elections established, I turn now to investigating the effects of trait ownership on vote choice. My "expectations gap" argument predicts that, controlling for

other factors, traits should influence vote choice, with the most substantial impact emerging from deviations in the expectations citizens have for candidates. That is, candidates have the most to gain by eroding their opponent's party-based trait advantages. To examine these propositions, I specified logistic regression models for each of the seven presidential elections between 1980 and 2004.

The dependent variable is the respondent's vote choice, coded 1 if the individual voted for the Republican and 0 if she voted for the Democrat.<sup>11</sup> The key covariates in the model are the differences in each respondent's assessments of the two candidates' leadership strength, morality, compassion, and empathy. These variables were constructed for each trait by subtracting the rating for the Democrat from the Republican rating. Each variable thus ranges from  $-3$ , the most pro-Democratic evaluation, to  $+3$ , the most favorable Republican evaluation. For example, a respondent in 1984 who gave Ronald

<sup>11</sup> As in the previous tables, third-party voters are excluded from the analysis.

**FIGURE 1 Comparative Trait Evaluations (Republican Candidate—Democratic Candidate), by Partisanship**



Reagan a leadership rating of 4 (“extremely well”) and Walter Mondale a 2 (“not well”) would yield a +2 difference score, indicating a more favorable impression of the Republican’s leadership abilities. Thus, I expect each of the trait difference coefficients to have a positive sign; increasingly favorable comparative trait evaluations for the Republican candidate should make a Republican vote more likely.

The models also include a number of control variables. The 5-point party identification scale controls for the effects of partisanship. Variables tapping the respondent’s policy positions on three issues that appeared in each of the ANES surveys under analysis here are also included—the government’s responsibility to provide jobs, aid to blacks, and levels of defense spending. Finally, the model contains variables for age, income, education, and race, which are conventionally used to control for the effects of various demographic characteristics on vote choice. One addition to these standard controls is church attendance, which measures how frequently a respondent attends church or other religious services. The frequency of church attendance is a useful way to control for the differential impact of morality as a salient presidential character trait.

The results of the logit models for each election year are presented in Table 3. For clarity of presentation, I have omitted the control variables.<sup>12</sup> The first, and most noticeable, result is that traits matter. Across elections, differences in the perceptions of the candidates’ personal attributes have a consistent and statistically significant effect on individual vote choice. Each of the 23 trait coefficients is positively signed, as expected, and only two are not significant.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The full results of the models are available from the author upon request. In general, the control variables reveal no major surprises. The party identification and race measures are consistently significant and signed in the expected directions. The respondent’s race is not a statistically significant factor only in 1992 and 2004. Most of the other demographic coefficients are insignificant, which is not surprising given the presence of candidate evaluation, policy, and party identification variables in the model. The policy variables generally have no independent effects, with only two significant coefficients out of a possible 21. The coefficients for aid to blacks in 1980 and defense spending in 1984 are the only significant policy measures. For both, the more conservative a respondent’s view, the more likely she was to vote for Ronald Reagan.

<sup>13</sup>Since there is some debate about the magnitude of the impact of candidate trait evaluations on vote choice (Bartels 2002; Kilburn 2005), I ran tests to gauge the differences in the fit of the models with and without the trait variables. If traits do not matter, the fit of the models should hardly be improved with the inclusion of the trait values. By a variety of indicators, the trait measures improve the fit of the model for each year. First, in each case, the inclusion of the traits in the model resulted in a statistically significant improvement, as measured by likelihood-ratio tests in STATA 8.0. Second,

Perceptions of the candidates’ leadership abilities and levels of empathy appear to be more important to voters’ than perceptions of their morality and compassion. In five of the six years, the coefficient for the difference in the candidates’ leadership ratings is larger than the coefficient for perceptions of morality; it is also larger than the coefficient for compassion in each of the three years that question was asked. Likewise, perceptions of the candidates’ ability to empathize were more important than morality and compassion in each election for which a comparison was available.

Because logit coefficients are not useful for determining the substantive impact of the variables of interest, I calculated predicted probabilities of a GOP vote for each of the trait variables. Figure 2 presents the mean probability of voting Republican across the seven elections given the various comparative trait evaluations, holding all other variables in the model at their sample mean values. In other words, the lines in Figure 2 represent the average probability of voting Republican across the election years for which each trait evaluation was available.<sup>14</sup>

At the far left of the graph, which represents the most favorable Democratic evaluation, the probability of voting for the Republican is extremely low. At the opposite end of the trait evaluation scale, the probability is quite high. But the action, as it often is in politics, is in the middle.

The prediction curves for the different traits provide support for the “expectations gap” hypothesis. A voter who perceives the Republican and Democratic candidates as equally compassionate has a .52 probability of voting for the GOP candidate. For empathy, the probability of a Republican vote is .53. In other words, if a voter sees both parties’ candidates as equally representative of these Democratic traits, the chance of a Republican vote is greater than 50%, all else being equal. At the same time, consider the likelihood of a Republican vote if an individual sees the candidates as equally representative of GOP traits. On moral, the probability drops to .48. And if a voter sees the candidates as equally strong leaders, the likelihood of a GOP vote is just .45, illustrating the potential gain for Democratic candidates in such a scenario.

including the trait variables resulted in an average improvement of 5.21% in the vote choices correctly predicted across the seven election years. The improvement ranged from a low of 3.57% (2004) to a high of 7.86% (1980). This is notable, since the models also included a variety of policy measures and demographic variables, as well as party identification. By comparison, the inclusion of the party identification variable improved the prediction of the models by only 2.08% on average.

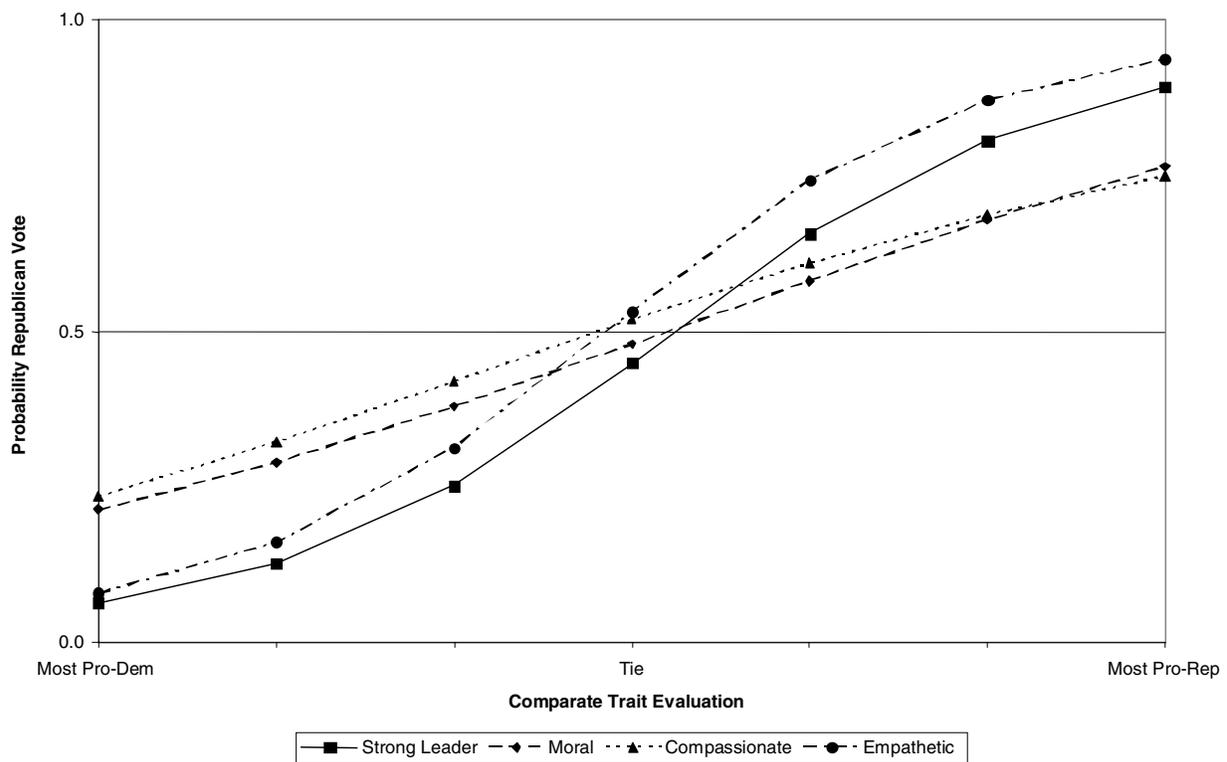
<sup>14</sup>The individual predicted probabilities for each election year are available from the author upon request.

**TABLE 3** Effects of Comparative Trait Evaluations on the Probability of Voting for the Republican Presidential Candidate, 1980–2004

|                                    | 1980                | 1984                | 1988                | 1992                | 1996                | 2000                | 2004                |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Strong Leader Difference</b>    | 1.363**<br>(0.143)  | 0.787**<br>(0.135)  | 1.108**<br>(0.163)  | 0.999**<br>(0.177)  | 0.468**<br>(0.169)  | 1.090**<br>(0.218)  | 0.677**<br>(0.217)  |
| <b>Moral Difference</b>            | 0.601**<br>(0.156)  | 0.401*<br>(0.189)   | 0.540**<br>(0.195)  | 0.571**<br>(0.153)  | 0.583**<br>(0.164)  | 0.582*<br>(0.269)   | 0.233<br>(0.240)    |
| <b>Compassionate Difference</b>    | –                   | 0.499**<br>(0.167)  | 0.564**<br>(0.182)  | 0.289<br>(0.192)    | –                   | –                   | –                   |
| <b>Empathetic Difference</b>       | –                   | 1.055**<br>(0.169)  | 0.578**<br>(0.181)  | 0.780**<br>(0.175)  | 1.527**<br>(0.208)  | 0.917**<br>(0.262)  | 1.265**<br>(0.257)  |
| <i>Control Variables Not Shown</i> |                     |                     |                     |                     |                     |                     |                     |
| <b>Constant</b>                    | –4.998**<br>(1.006) | –4.120**<br>(0.897) | –4.392**<br>(0.947) | –6.288**<br>(0.986) | –6.585**<br>(1.209) | –6.349**<br>(1.612) | –5.393**<br>(1.455) |
| <b>N of Observations</b>           | 750                 | 1,088               | 914                 | 1,088               | 950                 | 497                 | 532                 |
| <b>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></b>        | .599                | .675                | .667                | .737                | .751                | .727                | .768                |
| <b>Log Likelihood</b>              | –202.269            | –240.961            | –210.789            | –193.265            | –161.539            | –93.799             | –85.685             |
| <b>% Correctly Predicted</b>       | 89.60               | 91.18               | 90.92               | 93.57               | 93.68               | 93.56               | 93.42               |

Dependent variable: two-party vote choice (1 = Republican, 0 = Democrat).  
 Entries are coefficients from logistic regression models; standard errors in parentheses.  
 Significant at \*\*p < .01; \*p < .05

**FIGURE 2** Probability of Voting Republican, Given Various Levels of Trait Favorability, 1980–2004



**TABLE 4** Percent of Respondents Voting Republican Who Gave Both Candidates the Same Trait Rating, 1980–2004

|                      | Respondent's Party Identification |            |             |            |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|-------------|------------|
|                      | All                               | Republican | Independent | Democratic |
| <b>Strong Leader</b> | 41                                | 83         | 53          | 14         |
| <b>Moral</b>         | 45                                | 87         | 60          | 15         |
| <b>Compassionate</b> | 61                                | 91         | 64          | 24         |
| <b>Empathetic</b>    | 65                                | 90         | 62          | 28         |

This relationship persists across the various levels of trait favorability, especially for leadership and empathy. For example, a voter who believes the Republican to be a slightly stronger leader than the Democrat (a comparative rating of +1) has a .66 likelihood of a GOP vote. For a one-unit Republican advantage on empathy, however, the probability shoots up to .74. Likewise, the probability of a Democratic vote for an individual who sees the Democrat as a slightly stronger leader than the Republican is .75. But on the Democratic trait of empathy, the comparable probability is just .69.<sup>15</sup> All of these probabilities of course predict a vote for the candidate who gains a trait advantage. The important point is that the probabilities are higher when a candidate wins on a trait he *does not own*.

The expectations gap argument can be tested in another way. If the hypothesis does not have merit, then the Republican voting rates among citizens who see the candidates as equal on leadership or morality should be the same as those who see the candidates as equal on compassion or empathy. If the expectations gap effect exists, however, some differences should emerge in the GOP voting rates depending on the traits on which respondents see the candidates as equal.

Table 4 presents data for respondents who rated both candidates equally on traits. The numbers in the cells show the percentage of respondents who voted for the Republican candidate after having given both party's candidates an equal rating on a particular trait. Looking at the first column, which includes all respondents, regardless of party affiliation, a clear asymmetry appears. The likelihood of a Republican vote is much higher when the candidates tie on Democratic traits than when they tie on Republican ones. When the candidates tie on leadership and morality, the percentage of respondents voting

Republican is 41% and 45%, respectively. When the Republican manages to tie the Democrat on compassion and empathy, however, the percent voting Republican is considerably higher, at 61% and 65%.

Strikingly, the pattern persists when broken down by the respondent's party identification. Republicans were more loyal when they saw their candidate as equally compassionate and empathetic as the Democrat than when they saw the two candidates as equally strong leaders or moral. Likewise, among independents, the GOP voting rate is higher on the tied Democratic traits than on the tied Republican traits. Notably, more than one-quarter of Democrats defected to the Republican candidate when they perceived both candidates as equally empathetic, and nearly as large a proportion (24%) voted Republican when the candidates were seen as equally compassionate. At the same time, just 14% of Democrats defected when the Republican and Democrat were rated as equally strong leaders and 15% defected on morality.<sup>16</sup> These data are

<sup>15</sup>The absence of the same strong patterns on morality and compassion could be the product of several factors. One possibility is that morality is less important to voters, as suggested by its relatively small effects in Table 3. Conclusions about compassion are hindered by its presence in only three of the NES surveys used here.

<sup>16</sup>I also ran several additional analyses to test whether Democratic traits were more important for Republican candidates, and vice-versa. I specified two vote choice models similar to the ones in Table 3. In the first, I included all of the control variables and trait evaluations of only the Democratic candidate, as a way of testing the effect of the different traits on the likelihood of voting for the Democrat, regardless of perceptions of the Republican's traits. In five of the six years in which a comparison between leadership and empathy was available—1980 could not be used because it included only questions about leadership and morality—the coefficient for leadership was larger than for empathy, indicating that perceptions of the Democrat's leadership abilities were more important than his level of empathy. (Only in 1996 was the situation reversed.) I then ran the models using only perceptions of the Republican's traits. In three of the six election years, the coefficient for empathy was larger than that for leadership. While this is not extremely strong evidence that Democratic traits matter more for Republicans, the pattern did occur half of the time. Likelihood-ratio tests showed that the inclusion of the empathy variable improved the fit of the Republican model more than any other trait variable, while the leadership variable made the biggest contribution to the fit of the Democratic model. Finally, when the same analyses were run after pooling the data across election years, the expected results emerged: perceptions of empathy mattered more for Republican candidates, while perceptions of leadership ability mattered more for Democratic candidates. Since vote choice has been shown to arise from

remarkable, since it is among partisans where we would least expect to find such patterns.

What Figure 2 and Table 4 illustrate is that Republican candidates who can successfully portray themselves as at least as compassionate or empathetic as their opponents can turn a traditional Democratic advantage into an electoral asset. This process of “trait trespassing” works the same for Democrats. Making incursions into the Republican territory of morality and leadership can yield bigger advantages than Republicans can realize simply by maintaining their advantage. Voters expect the parties’ nominees to represent particular traits, and these expectations powerfully influence their perceptions and behavior.

## Conclusion

The personalities of presidential candidates have been afforded a prominent place in both popular political discourse and political science. Each campaign season, pundits and political observers scrutinize and deconstruct the major party candidates, their backgrounds, their characters, even their facial expressions. Political scientists, attuned to the importance of image and symbols in politics, have spent considerable time and effort analyzing the ways these personal qualities influence, or fail to influence, candidate evaluation, vote choice, and election outcomes.

I have sought to contribute to this literature by providing an explanation for the origins of trait perceptions and the ways they can affect vote choice. My theory of trait ownership connects particular character traits with the strategic campaign behavior that prompts candidates to focus their actions and words on issues their party owns. Over the last 25 years and seven elections—the period for which we have good trait data—Republicans have been perceived as stronger leaders and more moral than their Democratic opponents. Democrats, meanwhile, have maintained an advantage on compassion and empathy.

These durable party-based trait perceptions are not without consequence. Trait ownership generates expectations about the kinds of personal attributes a party’s nominees will have. If a candidate fails to live up to those expectations, or his opponent manages to erode an

a comparative judgment between candidates (Rahn et al. 1990), these are not properly specified models if we are interested in fully explaining voting behavior. But they do seem to point to the possibility raised in Figure 2 and Table 4, that “trait trespassing” can be extremely consequential in presidential elections. The results of these analyses are available from the author upon request.

owned-trait advantage, he will suffer at the polls. Republicans who can eliminate the Democratic advantages on compassion and especially empathy have much to gain, while Democrats do best by making inroads on leadership and morality.

While durable, trait ownership is not immutable. Petrocik (1996) notes that ownership of an issue can change in response to party performance or political events. Likewise, one might imagine that had a Democratic president guided the nation in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the comparative leadership ratings between the presidential candidates in 2004 would not have been as lopsided as they turned out to be (see Table 2). More fundamentally, trait ownership theoretically could change in a period of realignment (Burnham 1970; Sundquist 1983). If party coalitions shifted in a way that altered the issue concerns of each party’s constituencies (Petrocik 1981), the ownership of issues would, over time, undergo a change. As the campaign rhetoric of each party shifted to new issues—and new kinds of campaign behavior took place—each party’s nominees would likely come to be seen as representative of traits associated with those new owned issues. This would be an interesting hypothesis to test with the major realignments in American history, although the lack of data likely makes such an analysis impossible. The general point is that trait ownership could shift in response to changes in issue ownership.

Until such changes take place, however, the parties are likely to maintain the trait advantages demonstrated here. Republicans, then, have an incentive to pursue a strategy similar to George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservative” campaign, while Democratic nominees might be advised to find ways to burnish their leadership credentials. To be sure, personality is only part of the electoral equation, and the consequence of trait ownership is one of a myriad of concerns for candidates. But in a political environment characterized by the increasing prominence of entertainment outlets and “soft news” (Baum 2005), the relevance of traits in presidential campaigns is unlikely to recede anytime soon.

## Appendix

All the analyses in this article are based on data from the American National Elections Studies. Data for the elections of 1980–2000 come from the Cumulative Data File, while the 2004 data are drawn from the ANES 2004 prerelease. The following list provides numbers and descriptions for all variables used in the analyses. For each variable, the first number corresponds to the Cumulative

Data File, while the second represents the variable number in the 2004 prerelease.

## Trait Variables

The questions were asked in the following way: "I am going to read you a list of words and phrases people may use to describe political figures. For each, tell me whether the word or phrase describes the candidate I name. Think about (candidate's name). In your opinion does the phrase 'he is (trait)' describe (candidate's name) extremely well, quite well, not too well, or not well at all?"

The NES codes these responses with a 1 for "extremely well" and 4 for "not well at all." I recoded the data so that higher scores represented more positive assessments. Thus, in all the analyses here, 1 = "not well at all," 2 = "not well," 3 = "quite well," and 4 = "extremely well."

*Republican strong leader:* vcf0368, v043118

*Republican moral:* vcf0367, v043117

*Republican compassionate:* vcf0363

*Republican cares about people like me (empathetic):* vcf0369, v043119

*Republican intelligent:* vcf0362, v043121

*Republican decent:* vcf0364

*Republican inspiring:* vcf0365

*Republican knowledgeable:* vcf0366, v043121

*Democrat strong leader:* vcf0356, v043125

*Democrat moral:* vcf0355, v043124

*Democrat compassionate:* vcf0351

*Democrat cares about people like me (empathetic):* vcf0357, v043126

*Democrat intelligent:* vcf0350, v043128

*Democrat decent:* vcf0352

*Democrat inspiring:* vcf0353

*Democrat knowledgeable:* vcf0354, v043127

## Two-Party Vote Choice (Tables 3 and 4):

*Post-election vote choice:* vcf0704a, v045026—coded 1 = Republican, 0 = Democrat

## Control Variables (Not Shown in Table 3)

*Party Identification:* vcf0301, v043116—The 7-point party identification scale was collapsed to a 5-point scale with the following values: 1 = Strong Democrat, 2 = Weak and Leaning Democrats, 3 = Pure Independents, 4 = Weak and Leaning Republicans, 5 = Strong Republicans.

*Age:* vcf0101, v043250

*Income:* vcf0114, v043293x

*Education:* vcf0110, v043254

*Race:* vcf0106, v043299—coded 1 = white, 0 = nonwhite

*Govt. jobs:* vcf0809, v043152

*Aid to blacks:* vcf0830, v043152

*Defense spending:* vcf0843, v043142

*Church attendance:* vcf0130, v043223 & v043224—coded 1 = never/no religious preference . . . 5 = every week.

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