US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Denise Baron

Project title: In my group or not? The influence of candidates' demographic attributes and group orientations on shaping voters' perceptions

Summary of project:

Among both Democrats and Republicans, the current levels of gender and racial representation in the US Congress are unprecedented. Despite an increase in diverse representation, people of colour and women face particular challenges as political candidates, especially in terms of controlling and shaping their public images. While previous research has investigated the role of demographic traits or partisan affiliation in shaping perceptions of politicians, the role of candidates' ideology, specifically group orientations such as national identity, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism, is less clear. This study investigates the relative influence of political candidates' various attributes, including demographics and ideology, on how voters perceive them, importantly assessing how multiple identities can intersect and produce positive or negative perceptions. Using a conjoint experiment, we investigate the causal relationship between voters' group orientations and their perceptions of candidates of varying identities and ideologies.

US CENTRE
SUMMER RESEARCH GRANT REPORT

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In my group or not?
The influence of candidates' demographic attributes and group orientations on shaping voters' perceptions

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Introduction

As elected officials in the US Congress and state capitols across the United States become more diverse, new research is needed to investigate how demographically and ideologically diverse candidates are judged by voters. My project aims to investigate which demographic and ideological attributes are the most influential in shaping complex judgements of candidates, and funding from the Phelan US Centre has allowed me to field a survey experiment in the US this summer.

Previous research suggests that voters rely heavily on partisanship as well as physical attributes when making voting decisions (for reviews, see Bartels, 2000 and Olivola & Todorov, 2010a). Specific aspects of a candidate's appearance attached to social identities, such as gender and ethnicity, have been shown to influence vote choice (e.g., Banducci, Karp, Thrasher, & Rallings, 2008). In fact, previous research implies that visual cues are more influential than some forms of additional information in forming social judgements (Olivola & Todorov, 2010b). However, this prior work has not taken into consideration how candidates' ideologies influence voters' perceptions of them. Additionally, the existing literature does not address how voters' ideology will also conditionally affect how they judge candidates with whom they agree or disagree, despite the growing neuroscience literature on this topic (e.g. Kaplan, Freedman, & Iacoboni, 2007; Leong, Chen, Willer, & Zaki, 2020).

Political psychology literature suggests that dimensions of our ideology, which tap into our orientations towards group membership, within group organisation, and between group hierarchy, are highly influential on our political attitudes and behaviour (for a review, see Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). These group orientations are often studied using construct measurements of national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism. Recent research confirms that these group orientations shape vote choice when voters are presented with candidates who share or conflict with their own group orientations (Baron, Sheehy-Skeffington, Lauderdale, under-review). In a novel survey experiment, participants were presented with two candidate profiles, including statements signalling the candidates' group orientations. Participants responded differentially to the same statements from candidates based on their own group orientations, voting for candidates who matched them and against candidate who conflicted with them (Baron, et al. under-review). Such findings suggest that group orientations likely influence and shape perceptions and judgements of political candidates.

My project investigates the extent to which candidates' identities and group orientations influence voters' perceptions of them and how different aspects of candidates' identities and ideologies combine to shape those perceptions. This study utilizes a survey experiment to ascertain the relative influence that group orientations exert on the formation of candidate perceptions within the context of other key candidate attributes. The conjoint design of this survey experiment allows us to identify which attributes are the most influential in shaping complex judgements of candidates. Moreover, the design of this experiment enables us to consider both the role of group orientations signalled by the candidate as well as held by voters.

The Phelan US Centre's funding has enabled me to collect data this summer and begin analysis. In the following report, I will detail how the data has been collected and the initial findings of this experiment.

Data collection methods and summary

This experiment includes two phases of data collection, and Appendix 1 details the costs of each phase. The first phase of data collection was conducted in June 2021, and the second phase was conducted in August 2021.

For this study, I obtained the permission of a Canadian political party to use photos of their candidates, which simulates real world conditions of candidate judgements and also ensures that none of the American participants would recognise the candidates. In the first phase, 112 American adults were presented with these candidate photos (without any additional information) and asked to rate them for

attractiveness, trustworthiness, and dominance. In the second phase, a separate sample of 801 American adults were presented with candidate profiles, which included the photos (of varying gender and ethnicity combinations), political party, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, and statements signalling high or low levels of national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism. All of the demographic and group orientation attributes were randomly varied so that we are able to isolate the effect of each attribute on shaping perceptions while controlling for all other attributes.

These are two examples of the profiles presented to our experiment participants.

Imagine that this is a Republican candidate for Congress in your local district. She is married and has 1 child.

These are statements the candidate has made either in writing or on social media before standing for office.

"I am first and foremost American."

"People who break the law should get stiffer sentences."

"Equality of all social groups should not be our primary goal."

Imagine that this is a Democratic candidate for Congress in your local district. She is lesbian, is living with a partner and has 3 children.
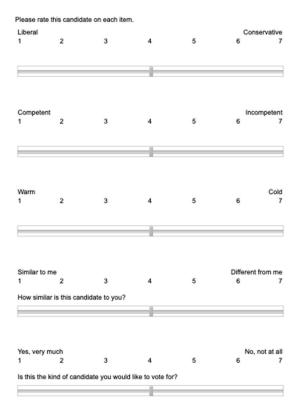

These are statements the candidate has made either in writing or on social media before standing for office.

"Being American isn't the most important part of my identity."

"People who break the law should get stiffer sentences."

"We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different social groups."

Each participants reviewed four candidate profiles. As displayed to the left, participants rated each candidate profile for left-right ideology (liberal to conservative), perceptions of competence, warmth, and similarity, and enthusiasm to vote for that candidate. Each profile was presented and rated by the participants before moving on the next profile. In the survey, participants also answered questions to measure their group orientations and demographics.

Results

While additional analysis is needed, a number of findings are clear in the initial results:

Perceptions of left-right ideology

1. Candidates' authoritarian and egalitarian statements have stronger effects on perceptions of candidate's left-right ideology than candidate's partisan affiliation. Candidates' national identification has about the same effect as partisan affiliation.
2. High authoritarianism, low egalitarianism, and high American identification were perceived as more right-wing, and their counterparts were perceived are more left-wing.
3. Non-white candidates were **not** perceived to be more left-wing. Being gay/lesbian was perceived as being more left-wing.

Conditional perceptions of competence and warmth and enthusiasm to support

4. The level of group orientations among the participants shaped their reactions to candidates expressing those group orientations, meaning participants reacted positively or negatively to the exact same candidate statements, depending on their own levels of group orientations. Participants' levels of authoritarianism, egalitarianism, and national identification **do** conditionally affect their perceptions of candidates' competence and warmth and enthusiasm to support.
    o For instance, those voters who are high in authoritarianism were more likely to positively rate candidates who expressed authoritarian statements and negatively rate candidates who expressed anti-authoritarian statements.
    o Overall, this sample of Americans rated candidates who expressed anti-egalitarianism more negatively, this wasn't true for everyone in the sample. Those participants who are low in egalitarianism were more likely to rate candidates positively who expressed anti-egalitarian views.
5. All three group orientations were more influential on candidate perceptions than political ideology and demographics. This suggests that when information about candidates' group orientation is available, voters are more likely to judge a candidate on that rather than relying on demographic stereotypes.

Judgements of candidates and intersectional effects

6. Overall, non-White and female candidates were not judgement more negatively in terms of perceptions of competence and warmth than their White and male counterparts.
7. However, certain demographic attributes were more influential on perceptions of competence and warmth for non-White and female candidates than they were for their male counterparts.
    o For instance, female candidates were judged more negatively if they were unmarried (including single, divorced, or living with a partner), and Black female candidates were judged the most negatively for an unmarried marital status.
    o Additionally, female candidates of all ethnicities were judged more negatively if they were childless.
    o Marital and parental status did not exert significant influence over perceptions of male candidates.
8. Interestingly, expression of certain group orientations also had different effects for certain candidates.
    o Overall, expressing anti-egalitarianism was judged negatively, but there's a significant difference between Black women and White women. Black women are judged nearly twice as negatively as White women for expressing anti-egalitarian sentiments.
    o Also, expressing high levels of American identification increased positive judgements of non-White candidates.
9. This indicates that candidates of varying identities are judged by different criteria along both demographic and ideological lines.

Conclusion, applications, and next steps

The initial results suggest that group orientations are highly influential on judgements of candidates. However the effects are likely not uniform across different demographic groups of candidates. We currently have findings that indicate group orientations, when signalled by a candidate, overcome demographic stereotypes in shaping perceptions of political candidates. Group orientations appear to be the most influential in shaping perceptions over, and yet demographic and ideological attributes appear to function differently for non-White and female candidates compared to their White and male counterparts.

Additionally, the findings of this experiment will be translated into recommendations for two organisations who work with political candidates, one in the US and one in the UK. Run For Something (RFS) supports progressive American candidates from non-traditional backgrounds, especially young people, people of colour and of varying sexual orientations, and women to run for local and state office. Activate recruits women from under-represented backgrounds to stand for Parliament and local councils in the UK and helps to fund their campaigns. Once the findings are ready to be shared, they will be presented to RFS and Activate so they are able to integrate the findings into their training, candidate support materials, and overall strategy.

Further analysis is needed to determine the relative influence of more intersectional identities, and in addition to the additional analysis of this US-based experiment, my collaborators and I are going to field this same experiment design in the UK. The Phelan US Centre's support has not only facilitated the collection of this data, but also enabled this study to make a larger impact beyond academia.

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