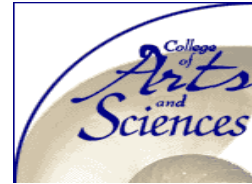


Importance of Issues and Candidate Characteristics in the Presidential Election

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Abstract

Ratings of the importance of political issues and personal characteristics of political candidates were collected from 588 college students in the six weeks prior to the 2008 Presidential election. After factor-analytic reduction of items, results of this analysis supported prior research describing a variety of leadership styles. Some leader characteristics were more strongly correlated with specific policy preferences than others. The results supported the notion that different leadership styles are preferable for different issues or tasks. Correlations among leadership styles suggested the need for multiple leadership characteristics.

Introduction

The democratic process permits citizens to contribute to the selection of their own leader from within. In the United States, the office of President represents the highest form of leadership, and selection of a leader is performed every four years. Differences in leadership characteristics, behaviors, and styles impact subordinates and outcomes. Fleishman, Harris, and Burt (1955) described two basic categories of leadership behavior: initiating structure and consideration. Initiating structure was represented by leader behaviors that aim to establish patterns of organization and ways of getting tasks done. In contrast, consideration was defined as leader behaviors that demonstrate the leader's care, mutual trust, and respect for subordinates. Other researchers made a similar distinction between job-centered and employee-centered leadership behavior (Liker, 1961). These reflect a basic distinction between leader behaviors emphasizing task completion and those emphasizing enhancement of interpersonal environment in a group (Jex & Britt, 2008). To distinguish ineffective leadership from effective leadership is necessary. However, there is no ideal set of leader behaviors that will guarantee effective leadership in all situations. Therefore, leadership behaviors should vary depending on situation (Fleishman, et al., 1955).

Path-Goal theory explains the role of a leader to help subordinates becomes successful (House, 1971). Path-Goal Theory states that a successful leader affects his or her subordinates by raising the level of expectation. In other words, a leader should be able to express the "path to the goal", and it is necessary to adapt leadership style to match with the subordinates and the situation. Path-Goal theory describes four different leadership styles. *Directive leadership* is characterized by a leader who establishes task patterns and responsibilities for subordinates, indicating precisely how to get things done. *Directive leadership* style is most appropriate for experienced, successful leaders of subordinates with limited job-related abilities. *Supportive leadership* focuses on behaviors that demonstrate care and concern for subordinates, such as inquiring about subordinates' well-being. *Achievement-oriented leadership* is characterized by a leader who aspires to help subordinates develop their performance to an ultimate level, which is suitable when subordinates have a strong ability for the task. *Participative leadership* is characterized by a leader who regularly seeks input from subordinates on work-related matters, with the aim of considering that input before making important decisions for the group.

The present research sought to identify the Presidential leadership preferences of college students and examine the relationship between leadership preferences and various political issues facing the incumbent leader and the nation.

Method

Participants

Participants included 588 students on a southeastern campus. The sample was comprised largely of women (66.4%), Caucasians/Whites (71.4%), Evangelical Protestants (35.3%), and Republicans (41.4%) from middle class families (49.5%). The gender and racial/ethnic distributions obtained were representative of the university population. The religious and political party distributions obtained were representative of the surrounding region from which the student body is drawn.

Method (continued)

Procedures

In the six weeks before the 2008 Presidential election, 588 college students anonymously completed questionnaires assessing the importance of candidate characteristics and major political issues as part of a larger, IRB approved study of political behavior. Questionnaires were completed in 15 classrooms of varying sizes, subjects, and majors.

Measures

The importance of 35 candidate characteristics and 33 major political issues were rated by respondents on a five point, Likert-type scale. Candidate characteristic items described attributes and traits of potential relevance to leadership ability of the candidate. Political issue items described major political topics and tasks faced by government and contemporary political leaders.

Results

To identify patterns of preferred leadership styles, the 35 candidate characteristic items were subjected to principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. After deletion of cases with outliers and missing data, examination of item distributions revealed only three items with mild negative skewness (education, trustworthiness, and dedication). Four cross-loading items (appearance, dedication, authoritative, and competent) were deleted from the final item pool. The final solution extracted four factors, explaining 56.25% of the total variance from the remaining 31 items: (1) rational leadership, (2) emotive leadership, (3) experience and achievements, and (4) demographics. Items and factor loadings are shown in Table 1. The internal consistency of the 31 items ($\alpha = .92$) and each of the four factors (α from .81 to .91) was high. Correlations among the factors ranged from $r = .16$ to $.75$ ($p < .01$ for all; Table 2).

To examine the underlying dimensions of the political issues, principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the 33 items. In the first analysis, the "terrorism" item loaded onto more than one factor and was removed from subsequent analyses. The final solution extracted eight factors, explaining 63.29% of the total variance, from the remaining 32 items: (1) social policies, (2) domestic security, (3) environmentalism, (4) foreign affairs and conflicts, (5) policy reform, (6) religious freedom, (7) reproductive health, and (8) economic and education. Table 3 displays items and factor loadings for the rotated factors. The internal consistency of the 32 items was high ($\alpha = .91$); however, there was a wide range of internal consistencies for the factors (α from .46 to .86).

Correlations between four dimensions of candidate characteristics and eight dimensions of political issues revealed low to moderate positive relationships (r ranged from .12 to .45, Table 4). For example, the social policies issue positively correlated with both rational leadership and emotive leadership ($r = .41$ and $.35$, respectively) while the domestic security issue correlated positively with both rational leadership and experience and achievements leadership ($r = .38$ and $.45$, respectively). However, the demographic leadership characteristics factor had lower correlations with the eight issues factors.

Table 2

Intercorrelations Between Candidate Characteristics

Candidate Characteristics	Emotive leadership	Experience/achievement	Demographics
Rational leadership	.76	.57	.16
Emotive leadership	-	.53	.24
Experience/achievement		-	.36
Demographics			-

Note: All r value equal $p < .05$

Results (continued)

Table 1

Factor Loading for Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation of the Importance of Candidate Characteristic Questionnaire

Item	Factor loading			
	Rational leadership	Emotive leadership	Experience/achievement	Demographics
Future-oriented	.73			
Focus on long-term planning	.72			
Action-oriented	.70			
Focus on immediate action	.66			
Environmentally aware	.55			
Decisive	.53			
Ambitious	.52			
Visionary	.52			
Eloquence		.79		
Charisma		.73		
Assertiveness		.68		
Compassion		.68		
Warmth		.66		
Believability		.64		
Toughness		.60		
Thoughtful		.58		
Trustworthiness		.58		
Broad-minded		.52		
National security experience			.82	
International experience			.80	
Political experience			.78	
Military experience			.66	
Patriotism			.61	
Educational background			.42	
Gender				.94
Race				.94
State of residence				.73
Age				.67
Religious affiliation				.57
Family background				.51
Political party affiliation				.50

Table 3

Factor Loading for Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation of the Importance of Political Issue Questionnaire

Item	Social policy	Domestic security	Environment-mentalism	Foreign affairs/conflicts	Policy reform	Religious freedom	Reproductive health	Economy/education
Medicare	.85							
Medicaid	.84							
Social security	.71							
Health care	.70							
Welfare	.61							
Taxes	.50							
Labor and employment	.44							
National defense		.72						
Trade		.66						
Homeland security		.65						
Judiciary and court systems		.63						
Immigration		.62						
Veteran's affairs		.59						
Transportation		.54						
Off-shore oil drilling		.42						
Recycling			.82					
Energy conservation			.79					
Global warming			.79					
Conflict in Iraq				.88				
Conflict in Afghanistan				.87				
Foreign affairs				.44				
Civil liberties					.73			
Campaign reform					.60			
Commerce and business					.58			
Religious freedom						.84		
Religious values						.79		
AIDS / HIV							.76	
Abortion							.66	
Agriculture							.49	
Education								.63
Economy and budget								.57

Results (continued)

Table 4

Intercorrelations Between Candidates Characteristics and Political Issues

Candidate Characteristics	Social policy	Domestic security	Environ-mentalism	Foreign affairs/conflict	Policy reform	Religious freedom	Reproductive health	Economy/education
Rational leadership	.41	.39	.30	.27	.27	.22	.27	.25
Emotive leadership	.35	.35	.21	.23	.22	.16	.23	.20
Experience/achievement	.26	.45	.13	.31	.22	.22	.19	.18
Demographics	.19	.27	-	.14	-	.17	.21	-

Note: All r value equal $p < .05$

Discussion

Results of this analysis supported prior research describing a variety of leadership styles. As anticipated, some leader characteristics were more strongly related to specific policy preferences than others, supporting the notion that different leadership styles are preferable for different issues or tasks.

The rational leadership factor identified was consistent with initiating structures (Fleishman, et al., 1955) and directive leadership in Path-Goal theory (House, 1971), both of which emphasize leader behaviors aimed at task completion (e.g., ambitious, decisive, action-oriented). Similarly, the emotive leadership factor was consistent with consideration (Fleishman, et al., 1955) and supportive leadership in the Path-Goal theory (House, 1971), which describe leadership that is expressed through interactions with people, that show a sense of care and concern (e.g., trustworthiness, charisma, warmth, compassion).

Moreover, correlations among leadership styles suggested the need for multiple leadership characteristics. For example, results suggested that experience and achievement are important characteristics of a Directive leadership style. The high correlation between the rational leadership and emotive leadership suggests that effective leadership must consider both the individual characteristics and the situational circumstances (Fleishman, et al., 1955). To provide effective leadership, a leader must adapt his or her leadership style to the circumstances. The correlations between leadership characteristics and political issues suggest that some leadership styles may be preferred over others for specific problems or issues. For example, social policy issues address the well-being of people, and it would naturally be expected that one who deals with such issues must have a genuine concern for human welfare or display supportive leadership or consideration. The correlation between social policies and emotive leadership supports such a notion. Similarly, domestic security issues were related to rational leadership characteristics and experience and achievements style to handle these issues. Lastly, demographic characteristics of candidates were not strongly correlated with political issues.

Strengths of the study include the large sample size that represented the student body and focus on young, college voters. One weakness of the study is that results from a college student sample may not generalize to the larger population. Secondly, for the rational leadership and emotive leadership factors, we did not examine the validity of these factors by correlating them with a standardized leadership scale. For future research, we recommend the use of standardized leadership scales.

References

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