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INDIVIDUAL AND CONTEXTUAL VARIATIONS IN POLITICAL CANDIDATE APPRAISAL

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In this note we elaborate on the conditions under which on-line and memory-based strategies of political candidate evaluation can be implemented. We suggest that the structure of information may be an important contextual variable affecting the voter's choice of these strategies. In addition, we propose that citizens with less political sophistication are particularly sensitive to structural differences in the political information environment. We use an experimental design that manipulates the information-processing context to test these ideas. Our results suggest that the context in which information is presented plays a critical role in moderating the influence of individual differences in political sophistication.

Recent theories of vote choice have focused on the role of information in voters' decision making (see, e.g., Popkin 1991). Today's candidate-centered campaigns supply citizens with ample information. When presented with these data, how do voters use them to assess the candidates? Current cognitive models of candidate evaluation suggest that the answer to this question may depend on whether the raw data are processed on-line, as the voter acquires it, or whether the information is stored away, perhaps to be retrieved sometime later (see Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989).

The timing of the voter's production of candidate judgments is the key element differentiating on-line and memory-based modes of processing. If voters begin evaluating candidates at the time of information acquisition, judgments are said to be made on-line. In this mode of processing, each new piece of information that voters receive about a candidate is used to update the judgment, similar to the way in which Fiorina (1981) envisions a "running tally" of partisan evaluations. When voters need to produce an overall judgment about the candidate (whether in the voting booth or in order to answer a "feeling thermometer" question on a national survey), they would simply retrieve the tally without *reviewing the information upon which it is based.* By contrast, in memory-based judgments, voters have not constructed a running tally; instead, they pull together pieces of information they retrieve from memory, integrating them into an overall evaluation at the time that the judgment needs to be produced. The terminology used to describe these processes is somewhat misleading, because both modes are memory-based (see Hastie and Pennington 1989). However, if processing has been on-line, what is retrieved from memory is the previously constructed summary judgment. With memory-based judgments, on the other hand, this overall evaluation has not been made. Therefore, the voter must retrieve specific items from memory in order to construct it.

The difference in memory retrieval in the two modes leads to a critical prediction. If voters have computed a judgment on-line, then there is no need for them to review the specific information upon which it is based in order to make most decisions. The evaluation *has already been constructed and stored in memory,* so that there is no need to review the information from which the global summary was abstracted. The voter simply retrieves the summary judgment. Empirically, this translates into a prediction of the relative independence (in a correlational sense) of summary candidate evaluations and the evaluative implications of the specific information that individuals can recall about a candidate. Conversely, if voters have not been engaged in on-line processing, then when asked for a summary assessment, they must construct one at that time, based on the specific information they can recall about the candidate. When the judgment is memory-based, then, we can expect a strong correspondence between the specific information that individuals can recall about a candidate and their general assessments of the candidate.

CONTINGENCIES IN THE PROCESS OF CANDIDATE APPRAISAL

Both motivation and cognitive capacity appear to affect individuals' choices about which processing strategy to employ. If individuals approach an information acquisition situation with the explicit goal of forming an evaluation of someone, then they appear to adopt an on-line strategy (Srull and Wyer 1986). Indeed, on-line processing of information is so pervasive that investigators have had to go to extraordinary lengths to disrupt what appears to be a natural inclination to evaluate other people spontaneously (see Hastie and Park 1986). Motivation, however, may not be sufficient under some circumstances.

Bargh and Thein (1985), for example, suggest that individuals must have adequate processing capacity to perform the information integration activity that is required in the on-line processing mode. If individuals' capacities are overwhelmed, they may not be able to implement an on-line strategy, even if they are specifically motivated to form an impression of another person. If cognitive capacity is overloaded during information acquisition, individuals are not able to construct—and subsequently store—an on-line evaluation. When these individuals are later asked to make an overall evaluation, they must perforce rely on the relatively "raw" information they were able to encode in order to construct their judgments (i.e., memory-based processing). Under these overload conditions, then, we can expect to see a strong correlation between the information that is recalled and the summary judgments that individuals generate.

Both motivation and ability to process may be influenced by individual differences. For example, Bargh and Thein (1985) found that for individuals with "efficient processing structures," information overload did not appear to affect their ability to implement an on-line strategy. McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh (1990) obtained similar results in their study of political candidate evaluation. Political sophisticates were much more likely to process information on-line, a finding that they attribute to political sophisticates' more efficient processing capacities.

We shall contribute to the growing recognition of the heterogeneity in information processing by suggesting that the information context may also influence individuals' ability to implement an on-line appraisal strategy. We present some results from an experiment designed to investigate the role of context in candidate evaluation processes. Our results suggest that the structure of the political environment may compensate for individual differences in cognitive resources under some circumstances.

CONTEXT AND CANDIDATE EVALUATION

Scholars have recognized that variations in the quantity and quality of information available affect how voters make up their minds (see, e.g., Bartels 1988; Popkin 1991; Westlye 1991). A more subtle constraint imposed by the context of candidate evaluation may inhere in the *structure* of information. Some information environments are organized rather simply. For example, a presidential nominee's acceptance speech or a candidate "infomercial" is a simple information structure, at least in terms of forming an evaluation of that candidate. While a lot of information may be presented at one time, the structure is nonetheless highly person-centered. By contrast, a debate between candidates is a more complex setting. It features two or more individuals, each of whom presents information on a number of different dimensions, usually in some alternating format. Early televised debates among the contenders for the 1992 Democratic nomination, for example, included as many as five participants talking about issues that ranged from nuclear power to tax cuts.

These two kinds of information structures—person-centered and dimension-centered—capture a wide variety of political communication settings. Newspapers and news magazines, for example, often present long profiles of the candidates one at a time. Candidates' stump speeches are also person-centered forms of communication. These same candidates, however, will also appear in political debates, and the news media often compare the candidates along specific issue dimensions. These two types of formats are perhaps no better epitomized than by the two vehicles through which Ross Perot introduced himself to the public in the 1992 campaign: "infomercials" and participation in the presidential debates.

We believe that information structure can affect voters' processing strategies by influencing both the motivation to process and the ability to process the information presented. Dimension-centered formats, such as political debates, may attract viewers' attention (all else equal) because of the inherent conflictual nature of such presentations. The proposals by the Bipartisan Commission on Debates to eliminate the journalist panel of questioners from the 1992 presidential debates, for example, were justified largely on the grounds that this change would force the candidates to challenge each other directly, thus making the confrontation more interesting to the viewer. Furthermore, the added complexity of a multiple-person stimulus environment may arouse viewer attention, in part because the requirements of television as a medium necessitate more complex structural features (e.g., frequent cuts from one candidate to the other) in order to capture the ongoing communication in a debate context. The structural features of television (e.g., cuts, zooms, and edits) have been shown to affect viewers' attention involuntarily (see Lang 1990; Thorson, Reeves and Schleuder 1985).

Although person-centered structures may be less involving than debatelike confrontations, we believe they may require less effort and resources to process the information. For the same reasons that debates capture viewers' attention, they may also interfere with other processing tasks if individuals' processing capacities are exceeded. The interference seems the most pronounced when the material is unfamiliar to the viewer (Thorson and Lang 1992). Unfamiliar information requires more capacity to process. This may explain why Just, Crigler, and Wallach (1990) found that levels of learning about a candidate's issue positions were actually lower when this information was conveyed in a political debate than when it was presented in the form of a political commercial. For familiar information, on the other hand, emotional arousal and complicated structural features may enhance processing, because viewers are less bored.

These findings suggest that the relationship between motivation and ability to process may be

complex. At high levels of viewer involvement, the resources necessary to attend to the information may compete with the resources necessary for other tasks such as comprehension and information integration that are required in on-line processing. At low levels of involvement, however, viewers may not be as interested in attending to the messages and therefore may not pay enough attention to the information to absorb its implications.

Different types of voters may be affected differently by the structure of information presentation. We hypothesize here that individuals with less political sophistication may be especially affected by contextual features. The politically sophisticated know more than the unsophisticated. This knowledge enables them to handle new political information with greater facility, for any new morsel can be integrated more easily into what is already known. This greater cognitive capacity gives sophisticates more flexibility in their use of cognitive strategies (Fiske, Kinder, and Larter 1983; Showers and Cantor 1985). Given this cognitive dexterity, they should be less constrained by the structure of information imposed on them. For individuals less well versed in politics, on the other hand, following public affairs is more strenuous. Nonsophisticates may find their capacities overwhelmed by the attentional demands of a more complicated, debate-focused presentation format. Thus our central hypothesis is that there is an interaction between the type of information environment and the individual's skills, a contingency that should moderate the importance of sophistication in the use of on-line or memory-based strategies.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

In a real campaign, it would be virtually impossible to isolate voters before they have had any exposure to the candidates. Even if we could, we could never measure all the information to which they subsequently would be exposed. We believe, therefore, that an experimental design is necessary to test our hypotheses about information structure. By employing fictitious candidates as stimulus material and manipulating information structure, we are able to have control over the voters' information environment.

With the assistance of a local playwright, we crafted a "political campaign" that pitted two candidates against each other in a race for a state legislative seat. Our candidates, Ron Vanderkenning and Larry Drake, were actually professional actors we secured through a local talent agency. We filmed the "candidates" at a university television studio in a setting resembling a public affairs program.

Research participants viewed a 15-minute campaign composed of three distinct types of information: personal background, policy positions, and political party membership. In the personal background component, each man spent almost two minutes providing the audience with details of his upbringing, education, occupation, family life, previous political experience, and religious affiliation. The candidates were evenly matched on each feature. For example, both were married and each had an upper-middle-class profession.

In the policy portion, each candidate described his position on six issues: family farm policy, education, the business climate and taxes, social service spending, defense spending, and trade policy. Each issue statement lasted from 30 to 45 seconds. Ron's platform was moderately conservative, and Larry's was moderately liberal.

In the third informational component, each candidate paid tribute to his respective political party. In this segment, the candidates extolled the virtues of past party heroes and highlighted established party cleavages but did not mention any specific issues.[1]

In the present study, we varied the *focus of comparison* by manipulating the videotaped debate. In the high-person focus, or *candidate-centered* condition, subjects viewed Ron's exposition in its entirety before they were introduced to Larry. In the *debate* version of this manipulation, a dimension-centered presentation was created by having the two candidates take turns delivering information in response to prompting from an off-camera narrator. Importantly, the information conveyed by the candidates *was precisely the same* in the debate condition as in the candidate-centered condition, but the addition of the narrator's voice and the intercandidate shifts transformed the context from one focused on each candidate into one more centered around a comparison of the various political characteristics of the two men.

In exchange for a cash payment, 126 individuals participated in our study. We recruited participants through advertisements in a daily newspaper. Approximately half of the subjects were undergraduates at a large midwestern university. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 79, with a mean of 26 years. Most of the subjects (75%) were political independents. Of the independents, 16% leaned toward the Republican party, and 37% leaned toward the Democrats. The high degree of independence may be an artifact of how we ascertained partisanship, a single seven-point scale, rather than the conventional three-part National Election Study (NES) question.[2]

Upon arriving for their appointments, subjects were presented with a letter of instruction to read. They also listened to a tape-recorded version of the letter in order to reinforce the instructions. This letter was printed on official-looking letterhead stationery bearing the name of a fictional public relations firm, BARK Associates, Inc.

Subjects watched the video after receiving the instructions. In the debate condition, the opening shot of the video showed both Ron and Larry seated around a small table. An off-camera voice welcomed the men to "Inside Scoop." The narrator then told the candidates that the audience would like to hear a little bit about their backgrounds and invited Mr. Vanderkenning to go first. The camera then cut to Ron, who provided the biographical information con-

tained in the personal background vignette. After Ron finished, the camera focus shifted to Larry, who then proceeded to share his biography with the audience. This back and forth between the two men was repeated for each of the six policies and the political party segment, with the narrator's voice providing brief transitions between each area. During each of these candidate alternations, the camera came back to the two men seated around the table. In the person-centered condition, the two candidates were never pictured together and a narrator was not used.

Immediately following the presentation, subjects were given eight minutes to complete a distractor test. It contained questions of general knowledge in history, science, geography, and literature. Subjects then filled out a questionnaire testing their memory for the material presented, asked for their evaluations of the candidates, measured their perceptions of the candidates' stands on the issues, surveyed their knowledge of politics, asked for their political predispositions and basic demographic characteristics.

MEASURES

Sophistication. The measurement of political sophistication has been contentious (see, e.g., Luskin 1987; Krosnick 1990). We followed the common practice of building a composite index from several different measures. To form our index, we standardized and then summed four variables: self-reported interest in politics, exposure to television news, behavioral participation in political activities, and the number of correct answers to a five-question political information test. Coefficient alpha for the scale is .62. A median split was used to create two sophistication groups: political sophisticates and nonsophisticates.

Party Identification. Subjects' party identification was measured with a single seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

Policy Similarity. We created a measure of policy similarity in order to assess the degree to which a subject's issue preferences matched our candidates' platforms. Subjects indicated their attitude toward several public policies on seven-point scales. For each issue, subjects were given a policy similarity score. If their attitude fell on the Republican side of the scale, subjects received a score of 1, indicating similarity to Ron. If a subject's attitude rating was closer to Larry's (the Democratic) position, on the other hand, the subject received a similarity score of −1. And if subjects rated their attitude at the middle of the issue scale, at position 4, or did not have an attitude on the issue, they received a similarity score of 0 for that issue. To obtain an overall measure of policy similarity, the policy similarity scores were summed across the five issues areas for which we gathered subjects' attitudes. The resulting measure of policy similarity variable had a range of −5 to 5, with 5 indicating maximum similarity to the Republican, and −5 denoting maximum similarity to the Democratic, candidate.

Comparative Candidate Evaluation. Comparative candidate evaluation is the dependent variable in our regression equation. Overall evaluation of each candidate was assessed by a seven-point semantic differential with anchors of *dislike* and *like*. A comparative candidate evaluation variable was constructed by subtracting subjects' rating of Larry on the liking scale from their rating of Ron. The resulting variable ranged from −6 to +6, with higher scores indicating greater liking for Ron.

Comparative Candidate Memory. Subjects were given a free recall task after viewing the video and completing a distractor test. They were told to write down everything they could remember about what they had heard and seen on the video, numbering their thoughts as they went. They were given as much time as they needed to do the task. The next page of the questionnaire instructed them to go back through their entries, indicating whether what they had remembered was positive, negative, or neutral about the candidates. We used positively and negatively valenced recall memory to construct a measure of comparative candidate memory. For each candidate separately, a "net" memory score was obtained by subtracting the number of negative items subjects recalled about the candidate from the number of positive items recalled. If subjects recalled more positive than negative attributes about Ron, for example, their net memory scores for Ron would have been positive. A comparative candidate memory variable was constructed from these two net scores by subtracting the net score for Larry from the net score for Ron. If the net scores for Ron and Larry were the same, the subject's comparative memory score would have been 0. If Larry's net score was higher than Ron's, then the comparative memory variable would have been negative, and if Ron's net score was higher than Larry's, the comparative memory variable would have been positive.

EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS

To examine our expectations about the interaction of sophistication with information structure, we correlated the measure of comparative candidate memory with the comparative candidate evaluation variable within the four groups of subjects defined by the combination of the two levels of sophistication and the two different information formats. As can be seen in Figure 1, consistent with our reasoning, the correlation is quite a bit stronger for the debate–low sophistication group, indicating greater memory-based processing. Furthermore, the difference between the correlation in the two different structures is much smaller for those individuals defined as high in

FIGURE 1

The Correlation Between Comparative Memory and Comparative Candidate Evaluation by Candidate-centered and Debate Information Structures and Political Sophistication Levels

	Candidate-Centered	Debate	Row r
Low Sophistication	.28	.69	.57
High Sophistication	.49	.31	.39
Column r	.42	.54	

Note: Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients.

sophistication than the corresponding difference for those low in sophistication, also supporting our contention that the low sophisticates would be more sensitive to the different information environments.

To test the statistical significance of these differences, we use a regression-based model. It assumes that comparative candidate evaluation is a function of subjects' partisanship, policy predispositions, and valenced recall memory of the information presented on the videotape. By construction, party identification, policy similarity, and comparative candidate memory should be positively related to the dependent variable. We test our hypothesis by using two-way and three-way interaction terms. The candidate-centered information structure is coded as 0 on a dummy variable and the debate condition as 1. Political sophistication is also a dummy variable, scored 1 for sophisticates and 0 for the nonsophisticates. If sophistication moderates the relationship between memory and judgment, as others contend (McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh 1990), then the coefficient for the interaction of the sophistication dummy variable and the comparative memory variable should be statistically significant and negatively signed. If the debate structure interferes with on-line processing, as we argue, then the coefficient for the interaction of the structure dummy variable and the comparative memory variable should be positively signed, indicating that in the debate condition, the relationship between memory for information and overall candidate judgments is significantly stronger. Finally, if structure and sophistication interact as we hypothesize, then memory-based processing should be significantly greater for the nonsophisticates in the debate condition. If our key hypothesis is correct, then the coefficient for the three-way interaction term formed by multiplying the memory variable by the sophistication and structure dummy variables should be significant and negatively signed. This result would indicate that in the debate condition, the relationship between memory and overall candidate judgments was significantly weaker for political sophisticates.

These expectations produce the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Comparative candidate evaluation} = {} & b_0 \\ & + b_1 \text{ (party identification)} + b_2 \text{ (policy similarity)} \\ & + b_3 \text{ (comparative memory)} \\ & + b_4 \text{ (sophistication dummy)} \\ & + b_5 \text{ (structure dummy)} \\ & + b_6 \text{ (sophistication} \times \text{structure)} \\ & + b_7 \text{ (structure dummy} \times \text{sophistication dummy)} \\ & + b_8 \text{ (memory} \times \text{structure dummy)} \\ & + b_9 \text{ (memory} \times \text{sophistication dummy)} \\ & + b_{10} \text{ (memory} \times \text{sophistication dummy} \\ & \quad \times \text{structure dummy).}\end{aligned}$$

Given our a priori expectations, our key hypothesis tests are one-tailed.

The results of our estimation are displayed in Table 1. Recall memory, other things being equal, appears to bear little on subjects' overall evaluations of the two candidates once partisanship, policy similarity, and the interactions are controlled. Contrary to recent research on on-line processing (McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh 1990), sophistication per se does not seem to influence the strength of the relationship between memory and judgment. The interaction term does not have a significant coefficient and its sign is in the wrong direction. Structure, on the other hand, has the hypothesized impact on the ability to implement an on-line strategy. The significant interaction coefficient is consistent with the interpretation that a debatelike format overloads individuals' capacities, forestalling the kind of integrative activity that is required in an on-line strategy. This forces individuals to rely on the information they can recall at a later time to make their candidate judgments, producing a significant memory–judgment relationship. Finally, the strongly significant three-way interaction supports our central hypothesis handsomely. For the sophisticates, information structure matters little. The resulting memory coefficient in the debate condition is virtually zero (i.e., .02 + .16 + .32 − .47 = .03), and in the candidate-centered condition it is just slightly higher (i.e., .02 + .16 = .18). For the nonsophisticates, on the other hand, the candidate-centered condition results in no linkage between memory and judgment (B = .02), an indication that they were able to implement an on-line strategy in

TABLE 1

The Relationship between Comparative Memory and Comparative Candidate Evaluation by Information Structure and Political Sophistication

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	UNSTANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS
Party identification	.28* (.16)
Policy similarity	.18* (.09)
Comparative memory	.02 (.11)
Comparative memory × sophistication	.16 (.14)
Comparative memory × structure	.32** (.12)
Comparative memory × structure × sophistication	−.47** (.17)
Sophistication dummy	−.68 (.56)
Structure dummy	−.18 (.54)
Structure dummy × sophistication dummy	−.37 (.81)
Adjusted R^2	.33
N	104

Note: Structure = 1 if debate, 0 if candidate-centered. Sophistication = 1 for high, 0 for low. Standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable is comparative candidate evaluation.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.

the less cognitively demanding person-centered condition. However, the strength of the memory–judgment relationship is considerably higher in the debate condition for the nonsophisticates (.02 + .32 = .34).

Table 1 strongly demonstrates the role of context in the cognitive processing of political information. The candidate-centered condition seems to have encouraged an on-line appraisal strategy among the nonsophisticated. Consistent with our argument about the conditional impact of sophistication, there is no significant relationship between recalled information and summary candidate assessments for the nonsophisticated in the less cognitively demanding environment. Under this condition, in fact, it is experts who appear slightly more dependent on memory for their judgments, suggesting that the candidate-centered format was not as motivating to them as the debate format. The debate format, however, was *not* conducive to on-line processing among those with less well developed political skills.

CONCLUSION

Political candidate information comes packaged in different ways, particularly as candidates look for ways to exploit new technologies. Presidential candidates in the 1992 campaign were responsible for many information innovations, including videocassette distribution, talk show appearances, and "infomercials." Interestingly, many of these new ways of communicating with voters featured the candidate in a structure that we have been describing as person-centered. Indeed, the Discovery Channel took cues from the candidates when it sponsored a very nontraditional presidential candidate "debate" during the primary season that featured each of the remaining contenders (except the president) giving a 20-minute "talking head" presentation. If we are to discover what voters know and when they know it (to borrow the Watergate phrase of former Tennessee senator Howard Baker), it is essential to understand how these different types of information environments affect the processing of information. Our results suggest that information structure does matter, particularly for those voters who are more sensitive to the information-processing demands of the environmental setting. Our results, therefore, may help us understand why candidate commercials have been found to be particularly important sources of information for voters as they consider their choice. Our results also suggest that some contextual tinkering with traditional debate formats may be necessary if they are to be more useful for voter learning about the candidates.

Our results point to the conclusion that citizen differences in political sophistication may be less consequential in some circumstances than political cognition research typically suggests. According to our findings, an on-line type of information-processing strategy is equally available to all types of voters—as it should be, given that we employ it so routinely in everyday life (see Rahn et al. 1990)—but the sophisticated, perhaps because of their greater skills, can implement it even in a cognitively demanding environment. Thus the nature of the political environment, through its influence on both motivation to process and ability to process, may be as important as individual differences in understanding the heterogeneity of political information processing.

Notes

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1. Transcripts are available upon request.
2. Aldrich and his colleagues (1982) found similar results in their report of experimental question designs in a 1979 NES pilot study. In a split-half design, half of the respondents were asked the usual NES partisanship questions, while the other half were presented with a seven-point-scale format for measuring partisanship, similar to the seven-point-issue-scale design. They found that one in six respondents were "pure" independents when the traditional measure was used but that one in two were "pure" independents (i.e., chose the midpoint, or 4, response) when presented with the seven-point-scale measure of partisanship.

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