

## UNCERTAINTY AND CANDIDATE PERSONALITY TRAITS

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Due to the high level of uncertainty in the electorate about candidate issue positions, many scholars believe that voters instead use simpler cues such as personality traits to evaluate candidates. However, information about candidate personality traits is also subject to uncertainty. Using a new direct survey measure of uncertainty included in the 1995 and 1996 National Election Studies, we examine the effect of trait opinions on candidate evaluations and test the effect that uncertainty about those opinions has on the use of traits in an evaluation. We find that uncertainty about a candidate's personality traits reduces both the use of opinions about that candidate's traits in evaluations of that candidate and the overall evaluations of that candidate.

**There is little doubt** that citizens face an uncertain political world. It is difficult to make predictions about the possible behavior of politicians in the future (Downs, 1957). Candidates and public figures often have incentives to present ambiguous or vague information to the public (Page, 1978; Shepsle, 1972). Furthermore, the mass media presents political information to the public in short "spots," which focus more on the "horse race" of candidate competition than on substantive politics (Patterson, 1980). All of this ensures that the average citizen finds political information very costly to obtain and that the information is not necessarily accurate.

Recently, some scholars have focused attention on the role of uncertainty in elections (Alvarez, 1997; Bartels, 1986; Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Franklin, 1991). They reveal that there is a great deal of uncertainty about the issue positions of candidates, and thus the costs

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of issue voting are burdensome for the average citizen. In addition, this uncertainty affects how voters evaluate candidates in two ways. First, voters are less likely to evaluate a candidate in terms of an issue when they are uncertain about the candidate's position on that issue. Second, uncertainty about candidate issue positions has a negative impact on voter evaluations of a candidate. Thus, uncertainty about candidate issue positions means that voters are unable or unwilling to evaluate candidates on the basis of their issue positions and tend to dislike candidates whose issue positions are uncertain. These findings reveal that voters are risk averse. Voters would rather base their choice of candidates on information they are certain about, and they prefer to have more rather than less knowledge about the candidates they support.<sup>1</sup>

Given the high level of uncertainty about the issue positions of candidates, many have speculated that voters instead will rely on other information to make their candidate evaluations when they know little about the issue positions of the candidates (Alvarez, 1997; Popkin, 1991). Many political scientists contend that voters rely, among other things, on information about the personality traits of the candidates to supplement or replace costly issue information when determining candidate preference (Funk, 1997; Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982; Miller, 1990; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, & Sullivan, 1990). From the perceived personality traits of a candidate, voters can infer the credibility of the candidate (how likely it is that he or she will pursue policies promised during the campaign), as well as the ability of the candidate to deal with future issues unforeseen during the campaign. Furthermore, assessing the personality traits of a political candidate allows individuals to rely on inferential strategies that they employ in everyday life, unlike evaluations of a candidate's issue positions (Rahn et al., 1990). The ability to employ decision-making strategies learned in nonpolitical situations reduces the cost of evaluating candidates and is a plausible alternative to evaluating candidate issue positions in an environment where information is costly or unavailable (Popkin, 1991). Empirically, a number of studies have shown that candidate trait evaluations are very strong predictors of vote choice in American national elections (Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982; Miller, 1990; Miller et al., 1986) as well as in European parliamentary elections (Bean, 1993; Bean & Mughan,

1989; Stewart & Clarke, 1992). For these reasons, many political scientists feel that information about candidate personality traits plays a large role in evaluations of candidates.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to realize that for most individuals, information about the personality traits of candidates comes from the same sources as information about the issue positions of the candidates, generally media outlets. This means that information about the personalities of candidates is passed through the same noisy channels as information about their issue positions and is thus subject to the same types of distortions and biases that govern the flow of information about candidate issue positions. Although it is likely easier to interpret than issue information, trait information is still subject to uncertainty. Furthermore, if candidates have incentives to distort their issue positions to appeal to as many voters as possible, they should also have the incentive to distort information about their personality or leadership traits in ways designed to appeal to voters as well.

Thus, even the very type of information that many scholars regard as an alternative to high-cost issue information is only obtained at some price to the individual and is likely to be inaccurate, resulting in voter uncertainty about the personality traits as well as the issue positions of candidates. As voter uncertainty about the issue positions of a candidate has been shown to have a negative impact on voters' evaluation of that candidate and reduce the use of issues in determining candidate preference, it seems reasonable to expect that uncertainty about the personality traits of a candidate would have a similar effect. That is, we expect uncertainty about a candidate's personality traits to (a) reduce the use of opinions about that candidate's traits in evaluations of that candidate and (b) reduce the overall evaluations of that candidate.

The goal of this article is to examine this uncertainty and its effects using new survey questions designed to elicit respondent uncertainty about candidate evaluations. The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section introduces and examines the measures of opinions about candidate traits and certainty about those traits. We are particularly interested in establishing the validity of the direct measure of uncertainty used in this article. The section "Trait Uncertainty and Candidate Evaluation" examines the effect of trait opinions on candidate evaluations and tests the effect that uncertainty about those

opinions has on the use of traits in an evaluation. The final section presents the conclusions.

### MEASURING UNCERTAINTY ABOUT CANDIDATE TRAITS

Despite a recent trend toward examining the empirical significance of uncertain information in American politics, no consensus has emerged as to how to best measure uncertainty in the electorate. One of two general methods has been used in the past to measure uncertainty in surveys; indirect measures of uncertainty, which infer the uncertainty of survey respondents through other information on the survey, and direct measures of uncertainty, where respondents are invited to state how certain they feel about various survey answers they provide. We discuss each in turn.

Indirect measures of uncertainty take one of two forms. Either researchers employ an objective measure of uncertainty by examining the difference between respondent answers to survey questions and the “correct” answer to the question (Alvarez, 1997), or they use a statistical model that estimates respondent uncertainty from demographic characteristics of the respondent (Bartels, 1986; Franklin, 1991). Although it is the respondent’s *subjective* uncertainty that is predicted to affect voting behavior, *objective* measures of uncertainty are often good approximations of subjective uncertainty (Alvarez, 1997).<sup>3</sup> These methods can be applied to a wide range of surveys, but each requires strict assumptions about how respondents answer survey questions that often prove problematic (Alvarez, 1997). Estimating respondent uncertainty through the demographic characteristics of a respondent requires that the relationship between these characteristics and uncertainty be known, otherwise the misspecification of the model will result in inaccurate estimates of respondent uncertainty. Estimating uncertainty by the difference between the “correct” answer to a survey question and a respondent’s answer requires that the researcher know the “correct” answer and that all respondents use the survey question in the same way.

In contrast to the indirect measures of uncertainty, direct survey questions about uncertainty capture a respondent’s *subjective* uncertainty. Furthermore, direct measures of uncertainty are not hampered

by the assumptions required by the indirect measures. Alvarez and Franklin (1994) developed and examined a series of survey questions that probe a respondent's certainty about their own position and the positions of various political figures on standard 7-point issue scales.<sup>4</sup> They conclude that these certainty questions are an accurate measure of how well informed survey respondents are about their own positions and the positions of candidates on issue scales. Unfortunately, direct measures of uncertainty are not yet widely employed in surveys. However, two recent surveys by the National Election Studies (NES) included direct measures of respondent uncertainty in their evaluations of candidate personality traits. In the remainder of this section we will examine these direct measures of certainty to ensure they are meaningful when applied to candidate traits, as has already been established for candidate issue positions.

The NES certainty questions referred to above asked respondents about their evaluations of the leadership and morality of Clinton and Dole (1995 NES Pilot) and of the same traits for Clinton, Dole, and Perot (1996 NES).<sup>5</sup> These certainty questions all have exactly the same wording. For example, in the 1996 NES study, respondents were first asked about Clinton's morality: "Think about Bill Clinton. In your opinion, does the phrase 'he is moral' describe Bill Clinton extremely well, quite well, not too well, or not well at all?" Then, all of the respondents who answered that were asked about their certainty of this opinion with the following question: "How certain are you about this? Very certain, pretty certain, or not very certain?" The responses to the latter question are what we call the individual's certainty about the particular candidate trait.

We begin our analysis of the responses to these certainty questions by examining the response marginals for the 1995 and 1996 NES data. The survey response marginals are given in Tables 1 (1995) and 2 (1996). Each table presents the responses to the certainty questions for each candidate.

Beginning with the results from the 1995 NES Pilot study, we see that there is considerable certainty for Clinton's trait evaluations. Roughly one third of the sample stated they were "very certain" of their evaluation of Clinton's leadership and morality. Only about 11% of the sample said they were "not very certain" about either of Clinton's traits. On the other hand, the results for Dole show that slightly

**TABLE 1**  
**Respondent Certainty for Candidate Traits (1995 Pilot Study)**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Clinton Traits Certainty</i>			
	<i>Provides Strong Leadership</i>		<i>Moral</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Very	162	33.33	153	31.48
Pretty	263	54.12	255	52.47
Not very	55	11.32	57	11.73
Don't know	3	0.62	2	0.41
Not ascertained	0	0.00	0	0.00
Inappropriate (not applicable)	3	0.62	19	3.91
<i>Response</i>	<i>Dole Traits Certainty</i>			
	<i>Provides Strong Leadership</i>		<i>Moral</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Very	111	22.84	101	20.78
Pretty	260	53.50	253	52.06
Not very	74	15.23	73	15.02
Don't know	1	0.21	0	0.00
Not ascertained	1	0.21	0	0.00
Inappropriate (not applicable)	39	8.02	59	12.14

fewer respondents were very certain of whether Dole was a strong leader (23%), whereas just under one third of the sample were very certain of Dole's morality. These results demonstrate that there was a good deal of heterogeneity in how certain survey respondents in 1995 felt about their evaluations of both Clinton and Dole's leadership and morality. Although respondents were more certain of their evaluation of the incumbent's traits than of the challenger's, it is clear that most respondents in this survey sample did not feel perfectly informed in their evaluations of candidate traits.

In Table 2 we present the survey response marginals for Clinton, Dole, and Perot from the 1996 NES study. Here, instead of asking the certainty question for the trait "provides strong leadership," the certainty question was posed for the closely related trait "gets things done." Beginning with Clinton, in 1996 we see that 27% of the respondents were very certain in their opinion about whether Clinton "gets things done," whereas almost 15% were not very certain whether Clin-

**TABLE 2**  
**Respondent Certainty for Candidate Traits**  
**(1996 National Election Study [NES])**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Clinton Traits Certainty</i>			
	<i>Gets Things Done</i>		<i>Moral</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Very	462	26.95	546	31.86
Pretty	957	55.83	797	46.50
Not very	273	15.93	333	19.43
Don't know	2	0.12	0	0.00
Not ascertained	1	0.06	1	0.06
Inappropriate (not applicable)	19	1.11	37	2.16
<i>Response</i>	<i>Dole Traits Certainty</i>			
	<i>Gets Things Done</i>		<i>Moral</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Very	366	21.35	446	26.02
Pretty	828	48.31	831	48.48
Not very	388	22.64	339	19.78
Don't know	1	0.06	1	0.06
Not ascertained	1	0.06	1	0.06
Inappropriate (not applicable)	130	7.58	96	5.60
<i>Response</i>	<i>Perot Traits Certainty</i>			
	<i>Gets Things Done</i>		<i>Moral<sup>a</sup></i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Very	410	23.92	107	16.72
Pretty	761	44.40	246	38.44
Not very	355	20.71	193	30.16
Don't know	0	0.00	0	0.0
Not ascertained	2	0.12	0	0.0
Inappropriate (not applicable)	186	10.85	94	14.69

a. The Perot question on morality was removed from the 1996 NES on September 25, 1996. Sample size for this question only reflects responses before that date.

ton “gets things done.” Respondents were somewhat less certain in their assessments of Dole’s abilities to “get things done” because 21% were very certain and 23% were not very certain. Also, respondents were virtually as certain of their assessments of Perot’s ability to “get things done” as they were of Dole. But respondents were quite uncertain about Perot’s morality; only 17% were very certain about their

evaluation of this trait for Perot and 30% were not very certain. The response marginals in 1996 exhibit similar patterns to those in 1995, with respondents feeling most sure about their evaluations of the incumbent Clinton, and somewhat less sure of their evaluations of the challengers Dole and Perot.

It is also worth noticing that the item nonresponse relating to these survey questions is extremely low. This is exactly what previous research has found regarding item nonresponse for certainty about issue placements (Alvarez & Franklin, 1994); both these results in previous work and in this analysis demonstrate that survey respondents seem to understand and to be quite willing to answer these survey questions.

The survey marginals for these candidate trait certainty questions show that there is a great deal of heterogeneity between survey respondents in how certain they are of candidate traits. In addition, we have shown that respondents are somewhat more certain of the traits of the sitting incumbent president relative to his two competitors and that there was a great deal of uncertainty about at least one trait for the non-major party presidential candidate (Perot) in 1996. At first glance, the direct measurement of certainty appears to yield sensible estimates of the type and level of uncertainty in the electorate.

However, we obviously must do more to examine the validity of these survey questions. One of the major arguments in the literature on voter uncertainty about candidate traits is that those individuals with greater costs of information ought to be more uncertain about the issue positions of candidates (Alvarez, 1997; Alvarez & Franklin, 1994; Bartels, 1986; Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Franklin, 1991). We extend this argument to the case of respondent uncertainty about candidate traits.

As information about candidate traits is transmitted to voters in the same way as information about candidate issue positions, we expect that many of the same factors that affect uncertainty about candidate issue positions will also affect uncertainty about candidate trait attributes. Previous work on voter uncertainty has demonstrated that as individual information costs increase, uncertainty about candidate issue positions increases (Alvarez, 1997; Bartels, 1986). If we demonstrate a similar relationship between indicators of information costs and responses on candidate trait uncertainty, we can be confident that the latter survey questions indeed are tapping into individual uncer-

**TABLE 3**  
**Ordered Probit Models of Trait Certainty (1995 Pilot Study)**

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Clinton Leadership</i>	<i>Clinton Moral</i>	<i>Dole Leadership</i>	<i>Dole Moral</i>
Watches news	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04† (0.02)	-0.07** (0.02)
Race	-0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.13* (0.06)	-0.11† (0.07)
Gender	0.36** (0.11)	0.30** (0.11)	0.25* (0.11)	0.04 (0.11)
Education	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.12† (0.06)	-0.16* (0.06)
Information	-0.11* (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.11* (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)
Strength PID <sup>a</sup>	0.00 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.13* (0.05)
$\mu_1$	-0.64 (0.23)	-0.42 (0.23)	-1.25 (0.25)	-1.93 (0.26)
$\mu_2$	1.03 (0.23)	1.22 (0.24)	0.47 (0.24)	-0.16 (0.24)
<i>n</i>	469	454	434	419
$\chi^2$	23.56**	11.21†	28.30**	29.99**

NOTE: Standard errors are in parentheses.

a. PID = party identification.

† denotes estimates significant at  $p = .10$ . \* Denotes estimates significant at  $p = .05$ . \*\* Denotes estimates significant at  $p = .01$ , all two-tailed tests.

tainty about candidate traits. To do this we use a multivariate model to test for the empirical relationship between information costs and candidate trait uncertainty in both the 1995 and 1996 NES studies. Because responses to the uncertainty question are trichotomous (coded 1 for *very certain*, 2 for *pretty certain*, and 3 for *not very certain*), we use an ordered probit model. To measure the information costs of respondents, we include variables for whether the individual watches the nightly television news, whether they are a member of a minority group, their gender and educational attainment, their general level of chronic information, and the strength of their partisanship.<sup>6</sup>

Watching news on television and higher levels of education are both expected to reduce the costs of information and thus uncertainty, leading us to expect a negative coefficient estimate for these variables. The coefficients on chronic information and strong partisanship are also expected to be negative, as possession of these traits indicates

**TABLE 4**  
**Ordered Probit Models of Trait Certainty**  
**(National Election Study 1996)**

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Clinton Gets</i>		<i>Dole Gets</i>		<i>Perot Gets</i>	
	<i>Clinton Moral</i>	<i>Things Done</i>	<i>Dole Moral</i>	<i>Things Done</i>	<i>Perot Moral</i>	<i>Things Done</i>
Watches news	-0.05** (0.01)	-0.05** (0.01)	-0.07** (0.01)	-0.07** (0.01)	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.05** (0.01)
Race	-0.04 (0.09)	-0.22* (0.09)	0.22* (0.09)	0.19* (0.09)	0.56** (0.18)	-0.03 (0.09)
Gender	0.18** (0.06)	0.22** (0.06)	0.19** (0.06)	0.26** (0.06)	0.19† (0.10)	0.27** (0.06)
Education	-0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.08* (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.08 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.03)
Information	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.11** (0.02)	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.08** (0.02)
Strength PID <sup>a</sup>	-0.12** (0.03)	-0.15** (0.03)	-0.10** (0.03)	-0.16** (0.03)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.03)
$\mu_1$	-1.03 (0.13)	-1.14 (0.13)	-1.46 (0.13)	-1.60 (0.13)	-0.94 (0.21)	-0.86 (0.13)
$\mu_2$	0.30 (0.12)	0.51 (0.12)	0.02 (0.13)	-0.09 (0.13)	0.33 (0.21)	0.53 (0.13)
$n$	1,652	1,666	1,595	1,562	542	1,509
$\chi^2$	65.44**	91.07**	137.17**	134.91**	28.99**	67.50**

NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses. See Table 2 for explanation of low  $n$  in Perot moral.

a. PID = party identification.

† denotes estimates significant at  $p = .10$ . \* denotes estimates significant at  $p = .05$ . \*\* denotes estimates significant at  $p = .01$ , all two-tailed tests.

greater interest in the political process and thus lower costs of information. A positive coefficient estimate is expected for gender and race, reflecting the greater costs of information to (and thus greater uncertainty of) these subsets of the electorate.

The results from these ordered probit models are given in Tables 3 (1995) and 4 (1996). Table 3 reports the ordered probit estimates for Clinton (strong leadership and morality) first, followed by the results for Dole on the same two traits. The 1995 results demonstrate a number of important points, although there are not many observations in this particular pilot study. Costs of information are strongly related to this certainty measure: Respondents who watch the evening television news, who are male, and who have higher levels of education and

political information are all more certain of each candidate trait. Many of these effects are higher when uncertainty about Dole's traits are considered. Less information was available to citizens about Dole's traits than the incumbent president's in 1995, and thus factors that reduce the cost of information would be expected to have a greater effect when information is scarce. One interesting result that emerges in Table 3 is the high level of reported certainty among minority respondents, contrary to our expectations. High levels of minority support for Democratic candidates are likely introducing some degree of endogeneity into these estimates; minority respondents who have already formed a candidate preference would thus be more likely to be subjectively certain of the relative merits of the candidates. However, the same pattern does not emerge when strong partisans are considered, as the effect of partisanship on uncertainty is weak.

In Table 4 we provide similar estimates from the 1996 NES study, presenting the two trait certainty responses for Clinton, then Dole, and last Perot. Costs of information once again emerge as a key determinant of uncertainty about candidate traits, and with the additional observations available in the 1996 NES study, statistically significant patterns begin to emerge. Television news exposure, education, and chronic information all reduce the level of uncertainty about the traits of all three candidates in a statistically significant way. Strength of partisanship also contributes to the reduction of uncertainty for the two major party candidates, but not Perot. As in 1995, women are less certain of the trait attributes of the candidates. Finally, minorities enjoy more certainty when Clinton's traits are considered but, in a return to the hypothesized relationship between costs of information and certainty, are more uncertain when considering the traits of Dole and Perot.

The strong relationship revealed between costs of information and uncertainty about candidate trait attributes in the above analysis gives some confidence that the direct measures of uncertainty examined here do capture the uncertainty that respondents have about candidate personality traits. With a valid measure of respondent uncertainty established it is now possible to test how individual uncertainty about candidate traits affects candidate evaluations.

## TRAIT UNCERTAINTY AND CANDIDATE EVALUATION

Previous research has established that voter uncertainty about the issue positions of candidates both reduces the use of issues in candidate evaluations and has a negative impact on candidate evaluations. Our hypothesis is that uncertainty about the personality traits of candidates will have the same impact on candidate evaluations. We employ a straightforward model of candidate evaluation to test the effect of uncertainty about candidate traits on evaluations of that candidate. The dependent variable, or the overall measure of candidate evaluation, is the feeling thermometer rating of each candidate by the survey respondent. This rating is a scale from 0 to 100, with higher numbers indicating higher evaluations of the candidate (a greater feeling of “warmth” toward the candidate). As independent control variables we include measures of each respondent’s ideology and partisanship. The ideology variable is a 7-point scale, coded so that higher numbers indicate a more conservative respondent, whereas lower numbers indicate a more liberal respondent. The partisanship variable is also a 7-point scale, coded so that higher numbers indicate stronger identification with the Republican Party, whereas lower numbers indicate stronger identification with the Democratic Party (the midpoint indicates an Independent). We expect the ideology and partisanship variables to take on a negative sign for the Democratic candidate (Clinton) and a positive sign for the Republican candidate (Dole). These variables are not expected to have an effect on the Independent candidate (Perot).

Three independent variables are included to test the hypothesis that uncertainty about candidate trait attributes will affect candidate evaluations. The first variable is the independent effect of each of the two candidate traits for which we have certainty measures in each NES study. This variable is coded as a 1 if the respondent feels the named trait fits the candidate “extremely well,” 2 if the response is “quite well,” 3 if “not very well,” and 4 if the response is “not well at all.” We expect the coefficient on this variable to have a negative sign, as all of the traits included in the regressions were favorable traits, and a candidate who is perceived to hold one of these traits could expect more favorable evaluations. The second variable is the independent

effect of the respondent's uncertainty about each trait, coded as in the previous section. This variable tests our hypothesis that uncertainty about candidate personality traits will reduce the overall evaluation of that candidate. If voters are risk averse, we expect them to shy away from candidates about whom they know little. Thus, we expect a negative coefficient for this variable. The third variable is the interactive effect between the candidate's trait and the respondent's uncertainty about this trait. This variable measures how the use of candidate personality traits in candidate evaluations changes with uncertainty and tests our hypothesis that uncertainty about a candidate's personality trait will reduce the use of that trait in evaluations of that candidate. We expect this interaction coefficient to be positive. The intuition for this can be developed using the following example. Assume that the model is a simple linear equation:

$$Y = -\beta_1 U - \beta_2 T + \beta_3 (U * T) \quad (1)$$

If we want to know how uncertainty mitigates the effects of the trait ( $T$ ) on the evaluation ( $Y$ ), we take the partial derivative of the evaluation with respect to the trait:

$$\frac{\partial Y}{\partial T} = -\beta_2 + \beta_3 U \quad (2)$$

Let's assume that  $\beta_2 = 12$  and that  $\beta_3 = 4$ . With these hypothetical values, when an individual is certain about the trait ( $U = 1$ ), the expression in Equation 2 equals  $-8$ ; however, when the individual is uncertain about the trait ( $U = 3$ ), then the expression in Equation 2 equals 0. Thus, for the uncertain person, the effect of the trait on the evaluation is zero, whereas for the certain person the effect is nonzero. Finding a positive coefficient on this variable will confirm our hypothesis that uncertainty about candidate personality traits reduces the use of these traits in candidate evaluations. We present the results of these models in Tables 5 (1995) and 6 (1996).

We begin with the results from the 1995 NES Pilot study. The evaluation model fits the data quite well for Clinton (adjusted  $R^2$  of .68) but not as well for Dole (adjusted  $R^2$  of .45). The two control variables (partisanship and ideology) perform as expected, with conservatives and Republicans tending to evaluate Dole more favorably, and

**TABLE 5**  
**Effects of Traits and Certainty on Candidate Evaluations, 1995**

	<i>Clinton</i>	<i>Dole</i>
Constant	172.94** (11.58)	105.27** (10.79)
PID <sup>a</sup>	-3.45** (0.51)	2.43** (0.49)
Ideology	-1.80* (0.70)	0.30 (0.70)
Moral	-11.23** (3.25)	-13.86** (3.31)
Strong leadership	-25.98** (3.73)	-12.93** (3.57)
Certainty moral	-4.59 (5.14)	-7.08 (4.77)
Certainty strong leadership	-24.47** (6.10)	-5.25 (5.11)
Moral × Certainty Moral	2.92† (1.71)	2.82 (1.84)
Strong Leadership × Certainty Strong Leadership	8.48** (1.97)	3.30† (1.93)
<i>n</i>	313	294
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.68	.45

NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses.

a. PID = party identification.

† denotes estimates significant at  $p = .10$ . \* denotes estimates significant at  $p = .05$ . \*\* denotes estimates significant at  $p = .01$ , all two-tailed tests.

liberals and Democrats tending to evaluate Clinton more favorably. Both partisanship and ideology have the predicted signs and have statistically significant effects in the Clinton model, whereas only partisanship has a statistically significant effect in the Dole model. Although the constant in the Clinton model is much higher than in the Dole model, this does not indicate that Clinton had a large edge in respondent evaluations; all else equal, both candidates receive similar evaluations.<sup>7</sup> The difference in constants is a result of the scaling of the ideology and partisanship variables.

Respondent opinions about the traits of the candidates have a very strong effect on their evaluations of the candidates, as hypothesized. For both “morality” and “strong leadership,” a candidate who a respondent feels is lacking one or both of these traits is evaluated far

**TABLE 6**  
**Effects of Traits and Certainty on Candidate Evaluations, 1996**

	<i>Clinton</i>	<i>Dole</i>	<i>Perot</i>
Constant	159.74** (6.08)	75.15** (5.72)	98.14** (10.84)
PID <sup>a</sup>	-4.47** (0.30)	3.35** (0.29)	-1.11** (0.58)
Ideology	-1.82** (0.42)	3.04** (0.44)	0.29 (0.91)
Moral	-20.54** (1.62)	-11.92** (2.07)	-19.53** (4.08)
Get things done	-12.56** (1.86)	-9.16** (2.11)	-7.18** (3.38)
Certainty moral	-12.71** (2.55)	-6.06** (2.36)	-7.55* (4.80)
Certainty get things done	-4.42** (2.64)	-2.07 (2.60)	-3.48 (4.68)
Moral × Certainty Moral	5.77** (0.86)	2.72** (1.09)	3.76** (1.93)
Get Things Done × Certainty Get Things Done	2.19** (1.00)	0.94 (1.05)	1.76 (1.80)
<i>n</i>	1,297	1,219	405
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.69	.48	.23

NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses.

a. PID = party identification.

† denotes estimates significant at  $p = .10$ . \* denotes estimates significant at  $p = .05$ . \*\* denotes estimates significant at  $p = .01$ , all two-tailed tests.

less favorably than by those respondents who believe that the candidate possesses these traits. The effects of these variables on candidate evaluations are large and statistically significant across both traits and both candidates. The coefficient on “strong leadership” for Clinton is especially large (about twice the value of the other trait coefficients), indicating that this personality trait was especially important in respondent evaluations of Clinton. The 1995 NES Pilot study was conducted primarily in October of that year, after Dole had declared his candidacy but before the wide national exposure of the primary season in early 1996. Even though Dole had been the Republican leader in the Senate for the past 11 years, respondent evaluations of his leadership did not carry as much weight as they did for the incumbent president. In contrast, the leadership abilities of Clinton were much

more salient at the time of the pilot study, as the Oklahoma City bombing in April and the looming crisis in Bosnia brought the issue of presidential leadership to the fore. Respondent opinions about Clinton's leadership in these and other crises obviously had a greater impact on evaluations of Clinton than opinions about Dole's effectiveness in the Senate had on evaluations of Dole. Many researchers in the past have found competence and leadership skills to be stronger predictors of vote choice than personal attributes such as morality (Funk, 1997; Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982; Miller, 1990; Miller et al., 1986; Rahn et al., 1990), and that is exactly what we observe here.

Uncertainty about candidate traits also has the hypothesized effect on evaluations of the candidate, although the effect of respondent uncertainty about their opinions of candidate traits is generally not as strong as the opinions themselves. The estimated coefficients for uncertainty about candidate traits are always negative but are statistically significant only for Clinton on "strong leadership." Again, the prominent role of leadership in evaluations of the incumbent president emerges, as seen by the large coefficient on respondent certainty of Clinton's leadership traits. Overall, uncertainty about personality traits has a strong effect on candidate evaluations; a 1-point increase in uncertainty about a trait translates into anywhere from a 5- to 24-point drop in the thermometer score for that candidate. This confirms our hypothesis that uncertainty about candidate traits will negatively affect evaluations of that candidate. Finally, the estimated coefficient for the interaction between uncertainty and trait evaluations also takes on the hypothesized sign. Positive in all instances, the interaction coefficient is statistically significant in all but one case. This indicates that respondents who were certain of their perceptions of a candidate's traits were more likely to use them in their evaluations of that candidate, as hypothesized.

The results from the 1996 NES study are given in Table 6. Again, the regression model fits quite well for Clinton, moderately well for Dole, and less well for Perot. The control variable exhibits the same pattern observed in the regressions for 1995, with Democrats and liberals evaluating Clinton more favorably, and Republicans and conservatives evaluating Dole more favorably. Ideology had little effect on evaluations of Perot, but he did enjoy slightly more favorable evaluations from Democrats.

Once again the trait coefficients are negative and statistically significant across all candidates and traits. Morality now emerges as the more important trait in evaluations of all candidates, in contrast to 1995. This is likely the result of the emphasis placed on “character” by the Dole campaign. Throughout the general election campaign Dole consistently attacked Clinton’s morality, focusing attention on the Whitewater scandal and possible illegal campaign contributions from foreign interests, among other ethical concerns. Perot also questioned Clinton’s moral standing, and as a result the issue of presidential character came to have a large impact on evaluations of the candidates. In the end, the 1996 presidential election campaign did not significantly revolve around the basic competence of the major party candidates—Clinton had been a very effective president in terms of getting legislation passed, especially in the last 2 years of his first term, whereas Dole’s long leadership term in the U.S. Senate certainly certified him as someone who could get things done. But, with the consistent claims of scandals in the White House, and in Arkansas before Clinton was president, and with the unveiling of significant campaign finance abuses by the Democratic Party, it seems to have been the case that the morality of the candidates became the significant trait attribute in this campaign. Uncertainty about trait evaluations was also a negative factor in all instances and significant for morality (and for “gets things done” in the case of Clinton). Uncertainty about Clinton’s morality had an especially large impact on evaluations of Clinton; his refusal to answer the ethical charges leveled by Dole and Perot no doubt contributed further to this uncertainty. The effects of uncertainty on candidate evaluations are strong; a 1-point increase in uncertainty leads to a drop in a candidate’s thermometer score that ranges from 2 to 13 points. Finally, the interaction terms are all positive, and four of six attain statistical significance.

The interactive effects presented in these models are sometimes difficult to ascertain by looking at regression coefficients, so to enhance the interpretation of these results we present examples of them graphically in Figures 1 and 2. What we have done here is graph the relationship between each candidate trait, voter uncertainty about the trait, and the overall candidate evaluation for Clinton in 1995 and 1996.<sup>8</sup> We plot the interactive effects of trait evaluations and uncertainty by showing three lines in each panel of Figures 1 and 2, one line

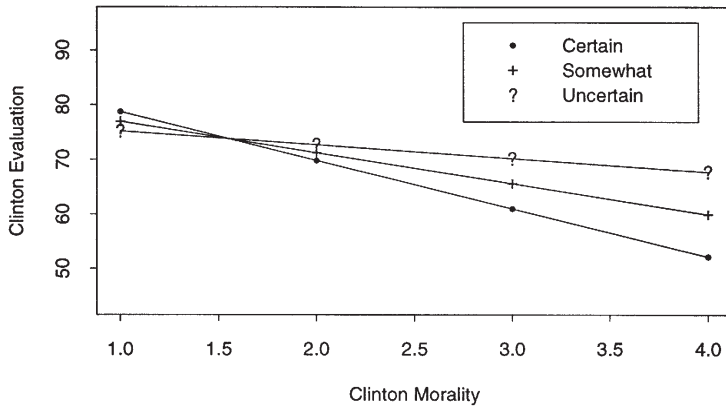
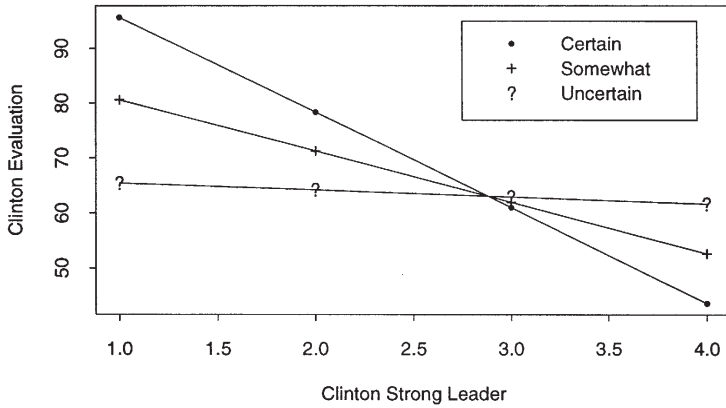


Figure 1: Clinton Evaluations by Trait and Certainty, 1995

for each level of uncertainty. The downward slope of these lines indicates that those who evaluate Clinton more favorably on personality traits (lower numbers on the X-axis) are also more positive in their overall evaluation of Clinton.

The second important result highlighted in Figures 1 and 2 is a clear demonstration of the strength of the interaction between uncertainty and trait evaluations. In both figures and for both traits we see that the impact of the trait on overall evaluations of Clinton varies with the cer-

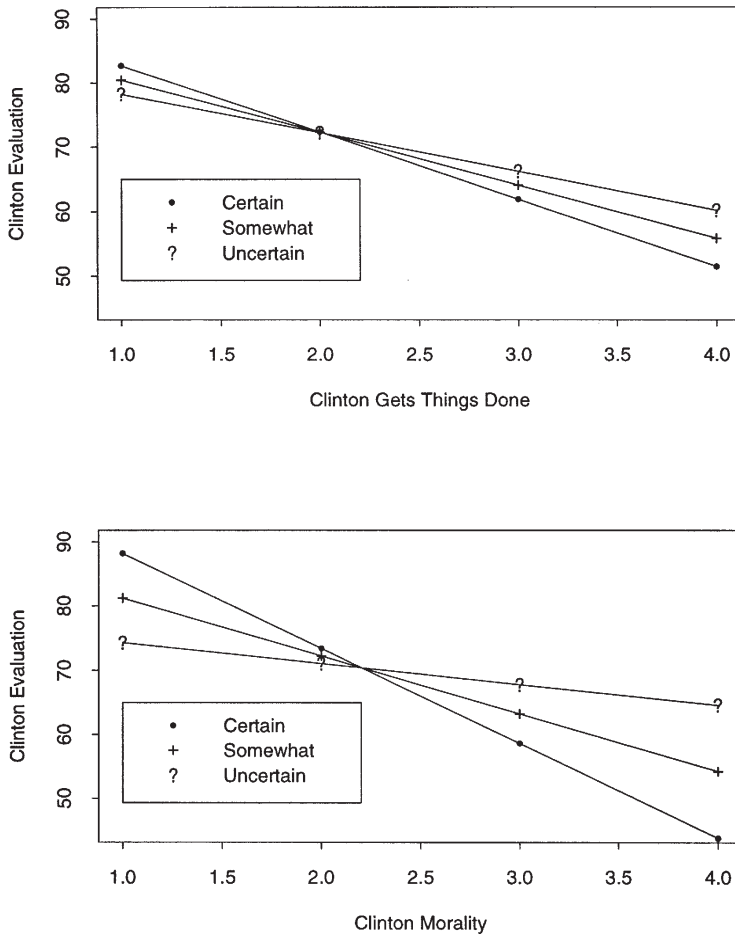


Figure 2: Clinton Evaluations by Trait and Certainty, 1996

tainty of the individual. The slope of the line representing the change in thermometer score for Clinton by evaluations of his personality traits is steeper for certain individuals and flattest for uncertain individuals. This indicates that personality traits have the largest impact on evaluations of Clinton when an individual is certain of their evaluation of that trait.

The shift in which traits were more important in candidate evaluations from 1995 to 1996 is also clearly visible when Figures 1 and 2 are

compared. In Figure 1 (1995) we see a much more dramatic effect of trait evaluations on evaluations of Clinton overall in the top panel (leadership) than in the bottom panel (morality), especially for certain respondents. Figure 2 (1996) displays the opposite pattern; now the effect of evaluations of Clinton's morality is stronger than the effect of leadership evaluations.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results from the analysis of the 1995 and 1996 data provide strong support for the fundamental arguments of this article. We find systematic evidence that shows that voters are not certain about their trait evaluations of political candidates, just as they are not certain about the issue positions of these same candidates. This affects candidate evaluations in two ways. First, for respondents who are uncertain about a particular candidate trait, that trait matters less in their evaluation of the candidate than for a respondent who was certain about a particular candidate trait. Second, respondent uncertainty about a particular candidate's traits reduces the overall evaluation of that candidate by the respondent. These results parallel those uncovered when examining candidate issue positions (Alvarez, 1997; Bartels, 1986; Franklin, 1991).

Furthermore, we demonstrated that in the regression models we presented using the 1996 NES data, there was a systematic finding—assessments of each candidate's morality were much more strongly related to overall evaluations than were assessments of whether the candidates are able to get things done. This contrasts with the findings of a year earlier, when leadership abilities were the most powerful influence on evaluations of Clinton. Obviously, Dole's efforts during the general election campaign to make an issue of "character" succeeded in raising doubts about Clinton's morality.

Our research sheds light on two important debates in the literature about the role of candidate trait assessments in the overall process of candidate evaluation. First, our research supports the recent findings of Funk (1997), who demonstrated that political information or expertise plays a significant role in facilitating the use of trait attributes in candidate evaluation, contrary to the earlier results of Rahn et al.

(1990). It is quite clear from our results that there exists substantial heterogeneity in the certainty of voter evaluations of candidate traits and that these differences in the electorate affect the strength with which these traits factor into voter evaluations of candidates. Second, our results paint a much more complicated picture of whether some trait dimensions are more useful to voters, especially the politically informed, in developing their evaluations of candidates. Most studies have shown that competence and leadership skills are typically stronger predictors of vote choice than personal attributes of candidates (Funk, 1997; Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982; Miller, 1990; Miller et al., 1986; Rahn et al., 1990); Funk (1997) argued that this was especially true for politically informed individuals.

However, our results showed that although leadership was a stronger predictor of candidate preference in the 1995 data, especially among the certain voters, we found the reverse in the 1996 data. It seems that political context plays a role in determining when some candidate traits might be more politically relevant than others. Throughout 1995 and 1996, the American economy was growing and the country was at peace. We would expect to see Clinton emphasize his leadership skills in this context, and in 1995 evaluations of leadership skills emerge as a key component in candidate evaluations. In 1996 the Dole campaign, realizing it could not attack Clinton on leadership during good times, chose to emphasize morality and "character." This strategy was successful in that the impact of evaluations of morality on candidate evaluations surpassed that of leadership in 1996, but it was not enough to allow Dole to defeat Clinton in the 1996 election. In the future, an important research agenda will be to examine the relationship between direct measures of candidate trait uncertainty and the information flows during presidential campaigns, in order to trace the relationship between the dynamics of campaign context and voter information about candidates.

Finally, the direct measures of uncertainty examined in this article showed themselves to be valid indicators of the uncertainty felt by respondents when considering the traits of candidates, both from their relationship to costs of information and their theoretically predicted effects on our models of candidate evaluation. With the success enjoyed by this direct measure here and elsewhere (Alvarez & Franklin, 1994), we expect to see further applications of this type of direct

measure in the study of voter uncertainty. The effects of the subjective uncertainty that the direct measure captures were clearly reflected in evaluations of candidates. It is increasingly apparent to those who study voter behavior in elections that citizens grapple with uncertainty when faced with even the most basic political choices. Although most research in this area has focused on the impact that uncertainty has had on the ability of the public to undertake “issue voting,” this analysis reveals that even information as easily understood as candidate personality traits comes at a price. Thus, even the “low-information cues” that voters are thought to rely on when the cost of issue information is too high are subject to uncertainty.

## NOTES

1. If we assume a quadratic utility function for each voter over the issue space, then the utility yielded by candidate  $A$  to voter  $i$  on a particular issue is given by  $u_i = -(p_A - p_i)^2$ , where  $p_A$  is the position on the issue taken by candidate  $A$ , and  $p_i$  is the ideal point on the issue for voter  $i$ . We can represent the uncertainty of voter  $i$  about the position of candidate  $A$  as a probability distribution on the issue space, allowing the voter to assign probabilities to different positions as the true position of candidate  $A$ . With uncertainty, the expected utility yielded by candidate  $A$  to voter  $i$  is given by  $Eu_i = -(\alpha - p_i)^2 - \sigma_\alpha^2$ , where  $\alpha$  is the mean and  $\sigma_\alpha^2$  is the variance of the probability distribution the voter assigns to the position of candidate  $A$ . We can see here that uncertainty about a candidate’s issue position reduces the expected utility for that candidate, regardless of the actual position of the candidate on the issue. The greater the uncertainty about the candidate’s true issue position the greater is  $\sigma_\alpha^2$ , and the greater is the loss in utility to the voter. For a detailed exposition of the effects of uncertainty on voter utility, see Banks (1990) or Alvarez (1997).

2. The empirical support for this speculation is decidedly mixed. Alvarez (1997) found that

although the results are mixed, it generally appears that contrary to my expectations, voters who are less certain of the policy positions of the candidates do not appear to turn to partisan cues in their voting decision to a greater extent than relatively certain voters. (p. 152)

3. Direct measures of uncertainty are highly correlated with many of the indirect measures of uncertainty discussed here. For a comparison of direct and indirect measures of uncertainty, see Alvarez (1997, chap. 4.)

4. Throughout this article we will use the terms *uncertainty* and *certainty* interchangeably when talking about voter information about issues and traits; generally we will refer to the direct survey questions about the information of voters about these aspects of candidate evaluation as certainty questions.

5. Unfortunately, the National Election Studies (NES) decided to remove some Perot questions during the middle of the 1996 study; the Perot morality items were removed from the sur-

vey instrument in late September 1996. This means that roughly half of the preelection sample were asked this item.

6. The details of the coding of these independent variables is as follows. Television is coded as 1 if the individual watches the nightly news and 0 otherwise. Gender is coded 1 for women and 0 for men, whereas race is coded 1 for minorities and 0 for Whites. Chronic information is a 4-point scale constructed from correct and incorrect responses by the individual to four factual political questions, with higher numbers indicating a larger number of correct answers. Education is a 4-point scale with higher numbers indicating greater educational attainment. The strength-of-partisanship variable is a 4-point scale, with higher numbers indicating stronger self-reported identification with a political party.

7. For example, if a moderate Independent (a 4 on both the ideology and partisanship scales) evaluated both Clinton and Dole at a "2" for both traits and stated that certainty about those traits was also a "2," then the predicted thermometer score for Clinton is 65.00, and the predicted thermometer score for Dole is 62.43, a difference of less than 3 points.

8. To produce this figure we simply used the regression coefficients for Clinton presented in Tables 5 and 6. We produced predicted values for Clinton's overall evaluation by multiplying these coefficients by various values of the trait and uncertainty variables. All other variables in the equation were generally set to their midpoints and multiplied by the appropriate coefficient, although it is important to note that the values of these other variables have no impact on the slopes of the lines in Figures 1 and 2. Graphs representing the same relationships for Dole and Perot in 1996 and Dole in 1995 were also created. In general, these graphs demonstrated the same relationships we see in Figures 1 and 2. These graphs are available from the authors upon request.

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