Candidate evaluations across the aisle: Cross-cultural evidence that out-partisans value candidate warmth more than in-partisans

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Abstract

Partisans view their own candidates through rose-colored glasses and see competing candidates much more negatively. However, recent advances in political behavior reveal that such directional motivated reasoning is not simply about love and hate but also about more nuanced shifts in preferences. Combining two insights from the psychological sciences—coalitional reasoning and a general dislike of self-interested leaders—we form the novel prediction that voters pay more attention to out-party than to in-party candidates' warmth. We show firm evidence for this prediction relying on election studies data with candidate warmth impressions from twenty-seven elections from seven countries (Australia, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the US) between 1984 and 2016; and a re-analysis of existing experimental data (total N=140K). Our paper reveals sophisticated psychological mechanisms regulating the importance of candidate warmth and implies that candidates seeking to reduce the partisan gap should establish a warm image.

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1 Introduction

Citizens' ability to elect their political leaders is a core feature of democracy. It is, arguably, the primary means by which citizens can influence policy decisions (Schattschneider, 1960). A vast number of political science articles show that in addition to considerations about policy agreement with different candidates, voters also draw on impressions and evaluations of candidates' personalities and personal characteristics (Campbell et al., 1960; Funk, 1999; Hayes, 2005; Kinder et al., 1980; Popkin, 1994). But perceived character traits have an influence beyond elections in shaping perceptions of legitimacy as well (Hibbing & Alford, 2004; Smith et al., 2007). This raises questions such as "What traits do voters care about when they evaluate political candidates?" and "What underlying psychological processes guide candidate preferences?"

In this manuscript, we offer a novel take on these questions as we investigate candidate evaluations relying on two fundamental insights from the psychological sciences. Specifically, we combine research showing that voters generally dislike ill-intended and self-interested leaders (Boehm, 1999; Bøggild, 2020; Hibbing & Alford, 2004) with work on coalitional psychology and partisan bias (Bartels, 2002a; Gaines et al., 2007; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Pietraszewski et al., 2015). On this basis, we argue that voters should adjust the importance of candidates' intentions depending on whether they are on the same or the opposing side of partisan divisions as the candidate. Because ill-intended behavior by a candidate is likely to affect out-partisan voters more than in-partisan voters, we predict that perceptions of intention-related character traits—such as warmth, reliability and trustworthiness (following Fiske et al., 2007)—have a greater effect on global candidate evaluations among voters who do not identify with the candidate's party (out-party voters) than among voters who identify with the candidate's party (in-party voters).

Despite the prominence of the in-group/out-group distinction in public opinion and political psychology research, it has been surprisingly absent in previous work on candidate evaluations. Yet, we find overwhelming support for the prediction across three separate studies. Study 1 relies on a unique dataset constituting an original combination of eighteen election surveys covering six countries (Australia, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the UK) with vast differences in terms of political institutions, party systems and political cultures spanning more than two decades. Study 2 extends the analysis to the US building on American National Election Study (ANES) data from nine elections. Finally, in study 3 we leverage existing survey experimental data (re-analyzing Cassese and Holman's (2018) "Trait Attack Study") to gain causal traction for our theoretical claim. Across the three studies the intention-related character perception of warmth constitutes a stronger predictor of global candidate evaluations for out-party candidates than for in-party candidates. Importantly, we contrast this finding with perceptions of skill-related character traits such as competence (following Fiske et al., 2007) and show that competence remains equally important for in-party and out-party candidate evaluations. In other words, voters only upregulate the importance of intention-related traits such as warmth when evaluating out-party rather than in-party candidates. These findings are consistent across a wide range of robustness checks.

Our results shed new light on candidate evaluations and the underlying psychological processes. Specifically, we add the important theoretical distinction between out-party and in-party candidate evaluations and show how certain traits are weighted differently depending on whether the target candidate shares the voter's party affiliation or not. In this way, we contribute to the literature demonstrating the often heterogeneous effects of different traits across candidates and electoral contexts (Funk, 1999; Goren, 2002, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Laustsen, 2017; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009). Our results also hold valuable insights for understanding

when and how political candidates can garner legitimacy in office and support for their policies – even across party lines.

2 Partisan-motivated reasoning, political opinions and candidate evaluation

Perhaps the most established finding across more than 60 years of research in political behavior is the importance of party affiliation and partisanship. Voters tend to vote for the candidate who represents the party they affiliate with, and they tend to perceive the political world through partisan lenses. These insights were already captured in *The American Voter*, which proclaimed that “few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties” (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 121) and that “[i]dentification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (p. 133).

Recent research further illuminates the depth of partisan divisions by demonstrating that attachment to the two major parties constitutes a deeper social divider in contemporary American society than race and religion (Iyengar et al., 2012). Similar results have been found recently in Great Britain, Spain and Belgium (Westwood et al., 2018). Moreover, through psychological processes of directional motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006), these heartfelt attachments to one party and strong oppositions towards the opposing parties lead to a series of downstream behavioral consequences: Partisans engage in selective exposure, pay more attention to sources with whom they agree (Jerit & Barabas, 2012), interpret concrete pieces of news in line with their partisan beliefs (Lebo & Cassino, 2007), and they selectively ascribe responsibility for economic growth (or the lack thereof) in ways that fit their worldview (Bisgaard, 2019). Likewise, partisans avoid incorporating relevant facts in their opinion formation and therefore differ in their reports and perceptions of even objective conditions (Bartels, 2002a; Gaines et al., 2007; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Importantly, partisan bias affects evaluations of political candidates such that a candidate with whom a voter shares partisanship is more positively evaluated both globally and on any specific character trait than a candidate from the competing party (Bartels, 2002b, 2002a). In short, partisan-motivated reasoning causes a range of biased—one might even say distorted—views of the political and the social world.

2.1 Limits to partisan-motivated reasoning

Although the strong influence of partisan motivation on political behavior is virtually undisputed, this does not mean that partisans only view the political world in black and white (Bisgaard, 2015; Bullock et al., 2015). The candidate evaluation literature brings ample evidence to this argument. A series of studies illuminate the complex nature of candidate evaluations and how certain traits often exert heterogeneous effects depending on candidates’ party, voters’ ideology and the electoral context. Winter (2010) shows how the Democratic and Republican parties are stereotypically associated with femininity and masculinity, respectively. Hayes (2005) demonstrates that the two American parties hold ownership of different character traits in candidates—Republicans of leadership and morality; Democrats of compassion and empathy—which produces interesting opportunities for strategic campaigning on character traits (see also Barker et al., 2006). Relatedly, Laustsen (2017) shows that liberals and conservatives—because they perceive the social world as peaceful and threatening, respectively—value different traits in candidates. Finally, Goren (2002, 2007) finds a negativity bias in trait evaluations such that partisans are especially likely to rate out-party candidates negatively on traits owned by their own party.

In sum, “partisan motivation does more than simply, and somewhat crudely, color character impressions in a manner that is favorable to one’s partisan orientation” (Goren, 2007, p. 322).

While partisan-motivated reasoning admittedly affects candidate evaluations directly—creating a partisan gap in which one’s own candidate appears in a much more positive light than a competing party’s leader—other important mechanisms also shape how partisans evaluate candidates. This article unites two central insights from the psychological sciences—coalitional thinking and humans’ general aversion towards exploitative leaders—and offers a novel theory about how partisan goals draw citizens’ attention to particular features and traits in candidates across and within party lines. Below, we unfold this argument in detail and generate our prediction.

3 The importance of candidate intentions across and within party lines

As highlighted above, partisanship is one of the most salient coalitional markers in modern politics, causing a range of distinctions between us (in-partisans) and them (out-partisans). In this article, we argue that voters are psychologically predisposed to be more attentive and responsive to the intentions of out-party leaders compared to the leader of their own party.

The psychological sciences provide compelling evidence that the foundation of the tendency to treat others based on shared versus different group affiliation is a central characteristic in human psychology. Studies show that the human mind is psychologically designed to pick up on any relevant markers of coalitional affiliations among unknown individuals and categorize the individuals accordingly (Pietraszewski et al., 2015). This fundamental tendency leads to preferential or discriminatory behaviors directed at individuals with shared and unshared group affiliation, respectively (e.g. Huddy, 2001; Tajfel, 1982). Shared coalitional membership thus constitutes an important predictor of positive reciprocal relationships (Habyarimana et al., 2007).

Another central feature of human psychology is awareness towards authority figures, that is, leaders. In particular, evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists have uncovered how humans are equipped with psychological systems to detect self-serving and exploitative leaders (Boehm, 1999; Hibbing & Alford, 2004; Bøggild, 2018, see also Tyler, 1990). For instance, Boehm (1999) theorizes how egalitarianism is a consequence of “reverse dominance hierarchies” caused by alliances among lower-ranked individuals within a group to overthrow exploitative leaders. Relatedly, the human mind possesses a “cheater detection system” for identifying individuals breaking social rules and norms (Cosmides, 1989), and in a recent study Bøggild (2018) uncovers how this system also operates to detect self-interested leaders who constitute a threat to the well-being of rank-and-file group members. In sum, these studies show that humans possess a fundamental disdain for self-serving behavior in individuals entering leading positions.

In this article, we combine these two fundamental insights about human psychology—coalitional reasoning and aversion to self-interested leaders—to form a novel prediction about the circumstances under which voters should be particularly sensitive to signs of ill intentions in a leader. As we argued above, partisanship strongly colors political impressions, attitudes and behaviors aligning the voter with the party she supports. That is, partisanship constitutes the most salient coalitional marker in politics, and because of the nature of coalitional reasoning in general and in politics in particular, politicians have strong incentives to benefit their own supporters (Dahl, 1971; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017). From the perspective of the voter, this also means that she should rightfully anticipate better treatment from the leader of her own party compared to any leader from rival and opposing parties. Conversely, a voter is more likely to be the target of a leader’s ill intentions and actions if she does not belong to the same party (often because actions that benefit one part of the electorate are costly for another). This is our primary interest in this article. Because voters are more likely to feel the negative consequences

of a leader's ill intentions and actions whenever they find themselves on the opposite side of partisan divisions than the leader, they ought to be particularly sensitive to leader intentions in these situations. The concrete possibilities of how voters potentially fall victim to candidates' ill intentions are endless—counting symbolic as well as distributive policies—but the central point remains the same: Supporters of competing parties are likely to bear the costs. Indeed, this is such a fundamental feature of politics that it is reasonable to assume that citizens have a good understanding of their vulnerability in opposition. Following this logic, voters should be particularly attentive to the intentions of leaders of competing parties. Meanwhile, in-partisan voters' sentiments towards ill-intended leaders could be bluntly summarized by the infamous – and most likely apocryphal – statement FDR made about the ruthless Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza: “he may be a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch”.

3.1 Models of candidate traits: Warmth as the central measure of intentions

Importantly, psychological models of social perceptions agree on the existence of two fundamental dimensions of trait impressions across various domains of social relations (Fiske et al., 2007). The first dimension is most often labelled warmth and captures perceptions of others' intentions. Key character traits associated with warmth are therefore trustworthiness, reliability, morality, honesty, compassion and friendliness. Admittedly, this is a broad category, which could be split further in several ways (see for instance Goodwin et al., 2014; Funk, 1997). Yet, as our hypothesis concerns candidates' intentions in general, we employ a broad conceptualization of warmth consisting of both sub-dimensions. That said, where the available data sources permits, we investigate if results are robust when splitting warmth into sub-dimensions of integrity and empathy (see Study 2).

The second fundamental dimension relates to perceptions of others' abilities and skills, and consequently, it is labelled competence. The key character traits associated with the competence dimension are skillfulness, efficacy, intelligence, knowledge, leadership and agency (Fiske et al. 2007, 2002). These two dimensions emerge very consistently across studies and appear to be spontaneously encoded by the mind (Bor, 2017; van Leeuwen et al., 2012).

Studies of voters' character impressions of political candidates have not always applied this two-dimensional model of character impressions (e.g. Hayes, 2005; Funk, 1999; Kinder et al., 1980). Yet, more recent work suggests that the trait dimensions employed in most election surveys do comply with the two fundamental dimensions of warmth and competence, respectively (e.g. Bittner, 2011; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013). Moreover, across various studies, the warmth dimension is also found to constitute a very salient trait dimension for judgment and decision making in the domain of politics and electoral behavior (Funk, 1999; Kinder et al., 1980). Indeed, a recent study based on the American National Election Study and an experiment conducted with British partisan respondents suggests that warmth constitutes the most important trait dimension in candidate evaluations (Laustsen & Bor, 2017).

However, most of these previous studies overlook the possible heterogeneity in the importance of warmth across groups (although see Laustsen 2017 and Bøggild and Laustsen 2016). This leads us to expect that the importance of warmth—because it directly measures perceptions of an agent's intentions—to global candidate evaluations is moderated by partisan affiliation. Specifically, we propose that warmth is weighted more in global candidate evaluations across party boundaries than within because a candidate's cold, unpredictable and untrustworthy behavior (i.e. ill intentions) is likely to affect out-party voters the most. Consequently, voters should deem warmth particularly important in out-party compared to in-party candidates, which is summarized in our key hypothesis:

Voters value warmth more for out-party candidates than for in-party candidates in forming global evaluations.

Crucially, this prediction also implies that the conditional relationship for warmth to global candidate evaluations is not universal to all character traits in candidates. Thus, we contrast our prediction about warmth with traits related to the other large and conceptually distinct dimension of character and trait perceptions, competence (Fiske et al. 2007). Importantly, perceptions of competence refer to a candidate's skills and abilities and not to whether she is likely to have intentions from which the follower could suffer or benefit. There is no good reason to believe that the competence of a political leader affects out-partisans more than in-partisans, and thus, we expect that voters do not value competence more in out-party compared to in-party candidates. Rather, our prediction holds that only warmth is upregulated in global out-party compared to in-party candidate evaluations.

4 Research design and methods

We test our prediction in three studies relying on nationally representative election surveys from six countries with parliamentary systems (Study 1), a presidential system, the United States (Study 2), and also on experimental data (Study 3). Studies 1 and 2 combined build on twenty-seven election surveys and almost 140,000 evaluations of major prime minister and presidential candidates spanning seven countries and over thirty years. Our analyses cover a diverse set of countries in terms of institutional settings (e.g. unicameralism vs. bicameralism, majoritarian vs. proportional vs. mixed electoral systems etc.), party systems (e.g. two-party systems vs. multiparty systems) and political culture (e.g. traditions for majority vs. minority governments, the degree of party loyalty among elected politicians and broader differences between individualistic versus collectivistic cultures). Studies 1 and 2 thereby exploit the benefits of comparative data following a most different systems logic and ensure the high external validity of our tests. This is one of the largest, most diverse comparative datasets in the candidate evaluations literature (for notable efforts see Bittner, 2011; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Silva & Costa, 2019). Meanwhile, Study 3 reanalyzes experimental data from Cassese and Holman (2018) and provides tentative evidence that the hypothesis holds even if confounding is purged via random manipulation of the independent variables. We justify our focus on the relationship between specific candidate trait impressions and global evaluations in Section A of the Supplementary Online Materials (SOM).

5 Study 1: International pooled dataset

5.1 Data¹

To test our prediction, we rely on a unique dataset of eighteen election studies from six countries with parliamentary political systems (Australia, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the UK), merging election studies that include both warmth and competence evaluations for the main candidates running for a top executive position. The resulting unique dataset provides insights from nationally representative samples that are geographically, culturally and historically diverse (1993-2013). The data includes evaluations from 39,797 respondents and 39 political candidates, with 2.4 candidates evaluated per respondent on average. This yields a sample of 96,319 observations.

¹ Materials ensuring full reproducibility of our analyses are deposited at <https://osf.io/j62qd/>.

Comparative datasets are still rare in the candidate evaluations literature (but see Bittner, 2011; Silva & Costa, 2019), despite their considerable benefits. All candidates and elections are unique, so any analysis relying on a limited pool of cases is subject to concerns about external validity. By contrast, our inquiry increases our confidence that our results are not unique to a candidate, election or country. It averages out idiosyncrasies, providing estimates closer to population means, and offers a more realistic view of the variance.

The downside of pooling independent surveys is that they sometimes use different scales and operationalizations. In the following, we present the variables and the transformations employed for merging the different datasets. Throughout the analyses, our dependent variable is measured by respondents' evaluations of the main prime ministerial candidates on standard global evaluation scales. Specifically, all respondents were asked to rate the candidates on an 11-point like-dislike scale.² In the analyses, we rescale this variable to 0-100 to help interpretation of our coefficient estimates as percentage changes.

The main independent variable, warmth impressions, is measured with questions prompting an evaluation of the candidates' trustworthiness or reliability. Reliability and trustworthiness are semantically close, and they have been shown to tap into the warmth trait dimension by previous research in political science (Bittner, 2011) and social psychology (Fiske et al., 2007; Fiske 2018). That said, a potential limitation of these indicators is that – as discussed earlier – they both belong to the integrity sub-dimension of warmth, ignoring traits related to the empathy sub-dimension. We return to the distinction between the two sub-dimensions in Study 2 which includes trait questions related to both. In tandem, studies 1 and 2 permit testing our key hypothesis across a range of institutional and cultural settings and with operationalizations covering both sub-dimensions of warmth.

Across the different datasets, perceptions of candidates' competence is measured in multiple ways. In Australia, we average over the variables knowledgeable and intelligent. In the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway), we rely on impressions of knowledge. In the German data, respondents are asked to what extent they believe the candidates have "sensible ideas" about the economy.³ Finally, the British Election Studies explicitly address competence. There is considerable evidence that all these traits are closely related and reliably measures competence in candidates and in other individuals in general (Kinder et al. 1980; Fiske et al. 2007; Wojciszke and Klusek 1996). Table B1 in the supplementary online materials (SOM) gives an overview of our data, including descriptive statistics and sample sizes. The measurement of traits ranges from 4- to 11-point scales. We center and standardize all independent variables by subtracting the group (candidate year) mean and dividing by two standard deviations. This yields unbiased estimates in models with varying slopes, which can be interpreted as the predicted percentage change in the global evaluations when we move from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean (Gelman, 2008).

² The only exception is Australia 1993, which used the terms favorable/unfavorable on the same 11-point scale instead.

³ Competence as economic manager is an important facet of candidate competence, which received considerable attention from scholars working in the rational choice tradition (Duch & Stevenson, 2008). There is good reason to assume that it was a particularly relevant attribute in the years following the Great Recession (note the two German surveys are from 2009 and 2013). Because the trustworthiness trait aligns very well with the other countries in the data and the competence dimension is only meant to provide a contrast to it, we deem it suitable to keep Germany as part of Study 1. That said, all results remain virtually identical if Germany is omitted from the analysis.

All election studies have straightforward questions tapping into partisan identification. We operationalize shared coalitional affiliation as identification with the party nominating the candidate. Our in-party variable is coded “1” whenever respondent and candidate belong to the same political party; otherwise “0”. In other words, we lump together coalition partners, opposition partisans and independents under the label “out-party”. This leads to a conservative test of our hypothesis because we code candidates nominated by a different party than the respondent’s as an out-party candidate even though the candidate’s and the respondent’s parties may belong to the same party group or coalition. We conduct robustness checks in the online appendix to justify our decision to include independents and offer additional insights on this topic in Study 2. Finally, we adjust for three socio-economic variables—age, gender and education (the latter recoded as a categorical variable with three categories)—in the analysis. This is admittedly a limited set of covariates. However, the differences between the countries and the surveys in our dataset make it difficult to broaden our selection of covariates. Descriptive statistics and distributions for the variables in the models are shared in the SOM (Table B2 and Figures B1-B3).

5.2 Estimation and modelling procedures

Our key prediction is that the relationship between perceived warmth and global evaluations of a candidate is conditional on the coalitional affiliation between the candidate and the respondent. Accordingly, we investigate the interaction between warmth impressions and partisan alignment (shared versus un-shared partisanship between the respondent and the candidate). We expect that the interaction between warmth impressions and partisan alignment will be negative (because our partisanship variable reflects shared partisanship (in-party) when coded “1”). Importantly, we predict that this interactive relationship will not exist for competence impressions, and the interaction between competence and partisan alignment is therefore expected to be close to zero.

The fact that our data consists of multiple evaluations per respondent, multiple respondents per survey and per country gives rise to an important methodological challenge. Responses given by the same respondent or by citizens of the same country are likely to be (more) similar to each other. Such clustering in the data may cause violation of the assumption of independent error terms in regression modelling, which may lead to downward bias in standard errors and, thus, increase the false positive error rate. We seek to avoid this bias by accounting for clustering with linear multilevel modelling.

Our model has three levels.⁴ On level 1 (L1 – evaluations), global evaluations of the candidates are regressed on perceptions of candidate warmth and competence, and both traits are interacted with the in-party dummy. In addition, we adjust for age, gender and education. On level 2 (L2 – individual respondents), we allow for varying intercepts. On level 3 (L3 – candidate years), we allow for varying intercepts and varying slopes for warmth, competence and their interaction with the in-party dummy.⁵

5.3 Results

First, we note that our results support recent arguments that – just as in social perception in general – warmth carries a larger weight in global candidate evaluations than competence.

⁴ We built our model in four steps, which are outlined in the online appendix along with Table B3. Below, we focus on Model 4, which provides the best representation of our data and allows testing of our hypotheses.

⁵ We use country years instead of candidate years as the level 3 grouping variable yields identical results. See Table B5, model 8 in the online appendix.

Replicating findings based on the ANES (see Laustsen & Bor, 2017), Model 1 in Table B4 indicates that a two standard deviation difference in warmth evaluations translates to more than two times larger benefit in global evaluations than the same difference in competence evaluations.

Next, we turn to our key prediction that the weight assigned to warmth is larger in out-party than in in-party candidate evaluations. The negative coefficient for the interaction between warmth and the in-party dummy in Model 4, Table B4 provides support for this hypothesis ($\beta = -6.8$, $p < 0.001$). In line with our prediction, warmth is more strongly associated with the evaluations of out-party candidates (28 percent predicted change, $p < 0.001$) than with evaluations of in-party candidates (21 percent predicted change, $p < 0.001$). Importantly, this partisan bias seems to be unique for warmth and not a general pattern for all trait evaluations. This is demonstrated by the small and insignificant interaction between competence and the in-party dummy ($\beta = -0.5$, n.s.). The effect of competence impressions on global evaluations for a two-standard deviation change is constantly around 13 percent and is not conditional on partisan alignment between respondent and candidate.

Figure 1. Warmth is consistently more strongly associated with general evaluations of out-party candidates (red) than in-party (blue) candidates in Study 1, but competence is not.

Figure 1 illustrates these results by plotting predicted values of global evaluations (y-axis) for both the range of observed competence (x-axis left panel) and warmth (x-axis right panel) impressions. The two colors denote in- and out-party evaluations with blue and red, respectively. To acknowledge partisan bias in the trait impressions, we plotted the distribution of the trait variables separately for in- and out-party evaluations above the graph and thickened the section of the regression line containing 95 percent of all observations. All covariates are held constant at their mean.

First, Figure 1 demonstrates that although there is partisan bias in trait impressions, (in-party candidates are rated more favorably on both competence and warmth), there is substantial overlap between the two distributions, and thus, the comparison is meaningful. Second, it shows that, as predicted, the red line depicting the relationship between out-party warmth impressions and global evaluations is steeper than the blue line depicting the same relationship for in-party

evaluations. Third, it shows that this relationship is unique for warmth as the two lines are nearly parallel for competence.

Figure 1 also helps to put these results in perspective by looking at the size of partisan bias at different levels of warmth. Two hypothetical respondents who are identical in all aspects except their partisan alignment with a candidate will have a 21-point gap in their global evaluations if they judge the candidate to be one standard deviation below the average in our data (at the -0.5 line in our plot). This gap is reduced by 33 percent to 14 points if they judge the candidate to be one standard deviation above the average (at the 0.5 line).⁶

Figure 2. Candidate-level random effects show significant interaction effects for warmth for the majority of candidates. Horizontal error bars denote 95% CI, notches denote 86% CI. No overlap between notches is consistent with a statistically significant difference at 5%.

⁶ Note that, admittedly, in real life, it is difficult to find two respondents who differ in their partisan identity but agree on the perceived warmth of a candidate. Yet, this does not change our main takeaway much. The partisan gap is reduced by higher levels of warmth even if we allow the distance between the two lines to be measured, not parallel to the y axis but at a slant.

An important benefit of our analytical approach is that it also allows a more detailed inspection of candidate-specific differences. The candidate random effects are displayed in Figure 2. Candidates are displayed on the y-axis, whereas the coefficient estimates are on the x-axis. As before, blue denotes in-partisan, whereas red denotes out-partisan candidate evaluations. Figure 2 shows that the main hypothesis on the heterogeneous effect of warmth is supported in the majority of cases. For 23 of the 39 candidates in our data (59%), global evaluations are significantly more strongly associated with warmth impressions among out-partisans than in-partisans ($p_s < 0.05$). Only a single case (the incumbent Australian PM, Paul Keating, in 1996) shows a small but significant effect opposite to our prediction. In the remaining 15 cases, the interaction effect does not reach significance at conventional levels. Yet it is worth noting that the coefficient is in the predicted – negative – direction in 11 cases

Interestingly, there are no obvious trends in the candidate-level random effects (see Figure 2). This suggests that divergence from the main results (illustrated in Figure 1) are more likely to be due to random differences between elections rather than some important attributes of the candidate, political regime or culture. If the level of partisan bias in the importance of warmth evaluations was a function of candidate-specific attributes, we would see little changes for the nine candidates in our data who ran at multiple elections. Yet, the average within-candidate standard deviation of the warmth interaction effect ($\sigma = 4.4$) is close to the standard deviation across all candidate years ($\sigma = 6.4$). Finally, obvious country-level trends are also absent with all six countries having at least one candidate supporting our hypothesis. Consequently, the results seem to be consistent across candidates and countries with only random divergences from the general pattern.

5.4 Robustness analyses

Below, we extensively test the robustness of our findings through a series of alternative substantive and modelling approaches. To ensure brevity, we report only the purpose of a specific robustness test and its main conclusion regarding the warmth-in-party interaction (full models reported in the supplementary online materials). First, to test if the pattern is driven by either left-wing or right-wing candidates, we split our sample on candidates' ideological leaning based on their parties' belonging to either a left-wing or a right-wing coalition (Table B5). Other studies have established that left-wing candidates are generally perceived as more warm (Hayes 2005) and right-wing candidates as more competent (Bittner 2011). Asymmetries in such trait ownerships could potentially cause the aggregate pattern presented above. However, the robustness analyses show that our hypothesis is supported among both left-wing and right-wing candidates, although the pattern is more pronounced and substantially stronger among right-wing candidates.

Second, we investigate if our results are driven by inclusion of independent voters (or voters affiliated with other parties than the main candidates') in the out-partisan category. In doing so, we simply separate the independent voters from out-partisans, yielding the following three categories of voters: in-partisans, out-partisans and independents (Table B6). Our analysis demonstrates that warmth ratings and global evaluations are associated similarly among independents and out-partisans. This justifies the decision to lump together independents and out-partisans in the main analysis, and it provides at least some evidence for our theory that shared partisanship between candidate and voter constitutes the key theoretical distinction reducing the role of warmth for global candidate evaluations.

Third, we test if the results hold using an alternative estimation strategy relying on the kernel smoothing estimator from the *interflex* R package (Hainmueller et al., 2019). Most importantly, the kernel estimator relaxes the assumption of a linear interaction effect. Our previous models impose the assumption on the data that the partisan gap in global evaluations is reduced linearly for each unit change in warmth. Moreover, this model also relies on alternative statistical procedures to correct for multiple observations per respondent and per candidate. Specifically, the models use candidate year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by individuals (instead of multilevel modelling). The results replicate our previous findings and indicate that the interaction effect is close to being linear for the relevant range of warmth impressions – that is, between one standard deviation below and above the average (Figure B5).

Finally, we show that our significant results are not an artefact of adding socioeconomic covariates to the model, nor are they contingent on lumping together two slightly different operationalizations for the warmth impressions. In other words, our results hold when we leave out age, gender and education from the model, and they also hold when the model is estimated for warmth impressions alone (i.e. not controlling for competence and its interaction with shared partisanship). Likewise, they are remarkably consistent across surveys tapping into warmth by asking respondents to evaluate candidates' reliability and trustworthiness, respectively (see Tables B7). The latter finding reinforces a long line of psychometric research demonstrating the robustness of warmth effects irrespective of the specific traits used to measure it.

5.5 Discussion

Altogether, Study 1 provides strong support for our prediction; yet, it suffers from three important limitations. First, it relies on a crude dichotomous measure of partisan alignment. This operationalization offers a conservative test of the hypothesis, yet fails to nuance whether the partisan gap is also reduced from weak to strong identifiers of opposition parties. Second, Study 1 lacks data from presidential systems in which candidate trait evaluations have been found to play a large role (Eberl et al., 2017; Funk, 1999; Popkin, 1994). Finally, due to the availability of trait measures in the election studies included in Study 1 warmth was only operationalized with items measuring the integrity sub-dimension. Study 2 seeks to address these limitations.

6 Study 2 – American National Election Studies data

6.1 Data

Study 2 relies on data from the American National Election Studies. We analyze all election year surveys with candidate trait evaluation variables. The data spans nine elections between 1984 and 2016 with evaluations on both presidential candidates from each year, consisting of 21,453 individuals and 42,246 observations.

Our main dependent variable is a general feeling thermometer rating of Presidential candidates. Respondents are invited to reveal their “feelings toward some of our political leaders” rating “the person” on a scale, where higher ratings mean “favorable and warm” feelings, whereas lower ratings mean that the respondent doesn't “feel favorable toward the person and ... [doesn't] care too much for that person”. This is obviously a very broad question and it is a semantic mishap that it includes the very label (“warm”), which – following the social and candidate evaluations literature – we use for our focal theoretical construct. Remember that to measure (the broad trait dimension) warmth, we rely on carefully selected specific traits, such as trustworthiness and reliability in Study 1.

Indeed, in Study 2 we follow the literature and average ratings of “caring”, “compassionate”, “moral” and “honest” to form a warmth index and ratings of “intelligent”, “knowledgeable” and “strong leader” to form a competence index (see Tables C1 and C2 in the SOM for more info on our variables). As in Study 1, we rescale the trait variables by centering at the group mean and dividing by two standard deviations.

For the partisan alignment variable, we flip the standard seven-point partisan identity scale if for Democratic candidates. Thereby, our partisan alignment variable is a continuous measure of identifying with the candidate’s party. This variable is scaled from 0 (strong identification with out-party) to 1 (strong identification with in-party). Our models adjust for demographic covariates: age, gender, level of education, income and race.

6.2 Estimation and modelling procedures

We follow the same modelling procedure as in Study 1. We build a multilevel linear model, regressing global evaluations on warmth ratings, competence ratings, partisan alignment, the interaction terms of the trait ratings and partisan alignment and demographic covariates. Our model includes varying intercepts for individuals and both varying slopes and varying intercepts for candidate years.

6.3 Results

Our results replicate findings from Study 1 closely and provide additional support for our hypothesis (see Table C3). There is a linear interaction between warmth and partisan alignment such that the more strongly a respondent identifies with the party of the candidate, the less important warmth impressions become ($\beta = -8.2$, $p < 0.001$). A two-standard deviation change in warmth impressions corresponds to a 27-percent predicted change ($p < 0.001$) for a respondent strongly identifying with the out-party, but only a 19-percent predicted change ($p < 0.001$) for a respondent strongly identifying with the in-party

Figure 3. Warmth is consistently more strongly associated with general evaluations of out-party candidates (red) than in-party (blue) candidates in Study 2, but competence is not.

Figure 3 helps to put these effects into perspective. As before, to offer realistic points of comparisons, we plot the distribution of the trait impressions split by partisan alignment (set to strong out-partisan and strong in-partisan sentiments). We also highlight the section of the predicted line containing 95 percent of all observations. All covariates are held constant at their mean or median.

The size of the partisan gap in global evaluations among identical respondents rating a candidate one standard deviation below average on warmth (at -0.5 in Figure 3) is 28 points. Meanwhile, this gap is only 20 points for respondents rating the candidate one standard deviation above the mean warmth rating for the given candidate (at 0.5 in Figure 3). This constitutes a notable 29 percent reduction in the size of the partisan gap. As in Study 1, there is no evidence that this effect is a result of a generic partisan bias. The association between competence ratings and global evaluations is slightly stronger at higher levels of partisan alignment ($\beta = 2.3$, $p < 0.05$).

Figure 4. Candidate-level random effects show significant interaction effects for warmth in 14 of the 18 candidates. Horizontal error bars denote 95% CI, notches denote 86% CI. No overlap between notches is consistent with a statistically significant difference at 5%.

Figure 4 displays the candidate-level random effects from our model, demonstrating that we find the predicted interaction effect in over three quarters of the analyzed candidates. The partisan gap in the weight of warmth ranges from a small but statistically significant gap in the wrong direction (3.5) for Walter Mondale in 1984 to a large gap in the expected direction (-19.3) for Bill Clinton in 1996. Again, there are no obvious time, party or candidate trends in

our data. Zooming in on the four candidates who ran at multiple elections (H.W. Bush, Clinton, W. Bush, and Obama), we see that the standard deviation of the partisan gap within candidates is similar ($\sigma = 4.0$) to the standard deviation across all candidates in our data ($\sigma = 5.8$).

6.4 Robustness analyses

Again, we extensively test the robustness of our findings, following the same procedures as in Study 1. Table C4 in the online appendix demonstrates that higher warmth reduces the partisan gap in global evaluations among both Democratic (model 5) and Republican (model 6) candidates. Moreover, grouping observations by elections instead of candidate years yields identical results (model 7). Finally, our results hold even if we drop all covariates from the model, including competence impressions (model 8).

One of the benefits of relying on ANES data is that we can make use of a fine-grained seven-point variable of partisan alignment. This allows us to relax the linearity assumption with regard to partisan alignment. To do so, we rerun our model treating the partisan alignment variable as a seven-point categorical variable. We rely on bootstrapping to calculate the marginal effect of warmth at every level of partisan alignment. Figure C4 demonstrates that – in line with our theory – the results are driven by a shared partisan alignment diminishing the importance of warmth. Whereas warmth has a roughly equally large effect among strong out-partisans, weak out-partisans, out-party leaners and independents, we see a decrease among in-party leaners, weak in-partisans and, particularly, strong in-partisans.

We also test our hypothesis utilizing the kernel smoothing estimator, employing fixed-effects terms for candidates and clustered standard errors for respondents (Figure C5). We split the partisan alignment variable into a dummy by grouping out-partisans and independents versus in-partisans. Just as in Study 1, we see that the partisan gap remains the same at low and average levels of warmth, whereas it is declining rapidly at above average levels of warmth.

The ANES data also allows us to split warmth impressions into its subcomponents: integrity (moral and honest) and empathy (caring and compassionate). Table C6 replicates our main results relying on both of these measures, indicating that in-partisans' global candidate evaluations are less influenced by both integrity and empathy than out-partisans. The effect size estimates are similar across both sub-dimensions, reinforcing our confidence that results obtained from Study 1 would likely replicate with empathy-related trait impressions too.

6.5 Discussion

Based on two large datasets comprising geographically, culturally and historically diverse countries and electoral systems, we demonstrated that in-party candidates' global evaluations are less associated with perceived warmth compared to out-party candidates. This pattern does not reflect "classic" partisan-biased candidate evaluations (Bartels, 2002a). Rather than reflecting generally rose-colored evaluations of in-party candidates, the results show how the relative weight assigned to a specific trait, warmth, differs as a function of shared or un-shared party affiliation between the candidate and the voter. Moreover, the pattern further differs from standard notions of partisan bias as, in line with the prediction, it was only present for warmth and not for competence. Additionally, previous studies have found that ideological differences between candidates or voters also affect the importance of different character traits in global candidate evaluations (Barker et al., 2006; Hayes, 2005; Laustsen, 2017). Yet, these alternative theoretical accounts cannot explain why warmth is moderated by partisan alignment either. That said, the greatest limitation of Studies 1 and 2 is that they build on observational data and thereby suffer from somewhat low internal validity. We cannot rule out that either omitted variable bias or reverse causality explains the robust associations we found in seven countries and across dozens of candidates. Study 3 therefore turns to the issue of causality.

7 Study 3 – Experimental evidence

Study 3 reanalyzes experimental data from Cassese and Holman’s (2018) paper on the effects of gender and party stereotypes in negative campaigning. Here, we focus on their “Trait attack study” (Study 1). Participants read a mock newspaper article about a primary election for a US Senate race. The article was manipulated in a Gender (2: Male, Female) $\times$ Party (2: Republican, Democrat) $\times$ Attack Type (3: None, Masculine/Competence, Feminine/Warmth) between-subjects design. After reading the newspaper article, all respondents answered a question on how likely they would be to vote for the given candidate.

Here, we focus on the feminine trait attack as it was operationalized very similarly to our definition of warmth, targeting the candidate’s “compassion and the ability to get along with others” (Table D1 lists the specific cues employed). Meanwhile, the control condition included no attack, and the candidate was described in a few short sentences lacking any particular trait cues. Respondents rated the candidate on a number of traits as a manipulation check. Reassuringly, the candidate in the feminine trait attack condition was rated as significantly less warm than the candidate in the control condition (Control: mean (SD) = 0.64 (0.2), Attack: mean (SD) = 0.50 (0.21), $\Delta M = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$).

To measure partisan alignment, we follow the same strategy as in Study 2 and recode a standard seven-point partisan identity scale to reflect whether the respondent identifies with the party of the candidate. The experiment also included a candidate gender manipulation. We control for this in our models but ignore it for the present analysis. The main dependent variable is likelihood of voting for the candidate, measured on a seven-point-scale running from “extremely unlikely” to “extremely likely”. We rescaled this variable to 0-1.

570 Americans completed the study through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in either the control or the feminine attack condition. Unfortunately, this sample is underpowered to provide a strong test of our hypothesis.⁷ Therefore, we report both standard p-values from a null-hypothesis significance testing and Bayesian posteriors. In both cases, we run a linear interaction model in which voting for the candidate is a function of 1) partisan alignment between candidate and respondent, 2) being in the control or warmth attack condition, 3) the interaction between partisan alignment and the assigned campaign attack condition, and 4) the gender of the candidate (manipulated experimentally).⁸

Figure 5 plots predicted values for each condition, mimicking the layout of previous plots with low warmth candidates on the left side of the x axis. Strong in-partisan respondents in the control condition are very likely to vote for the candidate ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 0.23$) but less so in the trait attack condition ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.25$). Strong out-partisans are less likely to vote than in-partisan in both the control ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.3$) and the trait attack conditions ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.25$). Figure 5 demonstrates that a warmth attack is twice as painful in the eye of out-party respondents ($\beta = -0.15$) than in-party respondents ($\beta = -0.08$). Although these results are still plausible assuming no interaction between trait impressions and partisanship ($p = 0.29$), from a Bayesian perspective, the probability that out-party respondents are more affected by a warmth attack than in-party respondents given this data is 85 percent.

⁷ Under reasonable assumptions, the required sample size to detect the proposed interaction with 80% power is 3,720 (see SOM section D for details).

⁸ In the Bayesian model, we applied to all parameters weakly informative priors that help identifying our models without influencing our estimates (Gelman et al., 2008). Accordingly, the coefficient estimates from the frequentist and Bayesian models are essentially identical.

Figure 5. Study 3. Re-analysis of Cassese and Holman’s (2018) “Trait Attack Study”. The partisan gap increases for candidates attacked for their lack of warmth.

It is noteworthy that, again, the conditional relationship between trait impressions and partisanship is not uniform across all traits. If we repeat our analysis for the masculine trait attack (targeting the candidates’ strength and assertiveness), we find the opposite pattern: The attack is less concerning for out-party respondents ($\beta = -0.01$) than for in-party respondents ($\beta = -0.09$).

8 Conclusions and general discussion

This article builds on two insights from psychological science that people possess a sophisticated coalitional psychology and that they disdain ill-intended leaders. Consequently, we hypothesized that voters pay more attention to out-party than to in-party candidates’ intentions and potential exploitative tendencies. We tested this prediction in three studies. Studies 1 and 2 relied on two large datasets of 57 candidates from seven countries with almost 140,000 observations following a most different systems logic. These two studies provide firm and remarkably consistent evidence for our prediction: The relationship between warmth perceptions of political candidates and global evaluations was 25-30 percent stronger for out-party candidate evaluations than for in-party evaluations. Moreover, across the six countries included in Study 1 results also replicate the recent notion by Laustsen & Bor (2017) that generally—across all voters— warmth is the most important character trait. However, a limitation of election survey data is its observational nature. Consequently, to gain causal leverage, Study 3 re-analyzed Cassese and Holman’s (2018) Feminine Trait Attack Study and found evidence consistent with our predictions (although not reaching statistical significance).

Our results hold important theoretical, practical, and methodological implications for candidate evaluations, and acceptance of policy decisions across party lines. First, our findings underscore Funk’s (1999) urge to think more seriously about the real content of various specific traits along which candidates are routinely evaluated. This article shows how conceptualizing a distinct

trait—warmth—in relation to specific processes of political reasoning—partisan motivation—can lead to novel insights. Our findings parallel work on leader evaluations across another coalitional marker, namely race, demonstrating that people are more concerned about the dominance (i.e. low warmth) of candidates from racial out-groups versus in-groups (Bøggild and Laustsen, 2016). Future research could try to broaden this perspective further by investigating preferences for warmth in relation to candidate gender.

Our main analyses in Studies 1 and 2 focus on global evaluations of top executive candidates. Building on a long line of research establishing the strong link between trust and compliance (Tyler, 1990), we believe our results imply that political leaders may use their personal warmth and trustworthiness to boost legitimacy of their decision, in particular among out-partisan citizens. In other words, we posit that global candidate evaluation is a substantively relevant outcome in itself that could shape citizens' compliance in a wide range of domains such as following physical distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic or directions for waste recycling.

Yet, one might still wonder whether a similar relationship between partisan identity and warmth perceptions applies to other types of political leaders (e.g. legislative or local candidates) and other outcomes, most importantly vote choice. Both of these questions are important avenues for future research. Regarding the former dilemma, our theory implies that the answer should be yes. It builds on strong, deep-seated mechanisms of human psychology, which are triggered in a wide range of leader evaluations (probably even outside of politics). When it comes to vote choice, however, the picture is less clear. On the one hand, Study 3 offers tentative evidence that vote intentions for fictitious candidates are conditional on an interaction of partisanship and warmth. On the other hand, swapping global evaluations with vote intention for US Presidential candidates (the only directly elected candidates across the datasets from Study 1 and 2), we do not find the predicted relationship. As reported in Table C7 and Figure C6, independent voters rely on warmth impressions more than either strong in- or strong out-partisans. While this result indicates that we need to be cautious when advising campaign strategists to use warmth appeals as a tool to steal voters from other parties, it has to be noted that highly polarized American presidential elections are likely a very hard test case. Perhaps future research could combine these two dilemmas and investigate if elections in countries or contexts, where trait impressions are stronger and partisan identities are weaker could show dynamics similar to what we find for vote choice too.

Finally, we believe that this paper (in particular Studies 1 and 2) highlights the important, yet often overlooked methodological benefits of employing a comparative research strategy when studying political candidates. The bulk of the candidate evaluation literature relies on single-country studies, predominantly on the US (but see Bittner, 2011; Costa Lobo & Curtice, 2015; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Silva & Costa, 2019). Merging representative surveys from multiple countries opens up avenues of new possibilities for researchers interested in the interplay of candidate evaluations and cultural, institutional or other macro-level factors. We employed a most different systems logic to demonstrate that warmth is particularly strongly related to out-party candidate evaluations across diverse settings. Demonstrating the consistency of findings internationally, however, is but one strategy to employ comparative data. Future research should further explore the similarities and differences in candidate evaluations between countries with different political institutions, party systems or media landscapes.

Despite the robustness of our results, this paper also has limitations. Most importantly, most evidence for our hypothesis comes from two large observational studies. Meanwhile, our (re)analysis of experimental data shows large but not statistically significant effects consistent with our prediction. Consequently, we can only draw limited causal conclusions about the

relationship between distinct impressions of warmth and global candidate evaluations and how this relationship differs across compared to within party lines. Second, our paper builds on a diverse set of data and, thus, necessarily employs different operationalizations of our key variable, warmth. We consider this to be an important sign of the generalizability of our theory. Notwithstanding the specific warmth-related trait measured in a study, the same pattern emerges again and again. Admittedly, however, this costs us our ability to make clear comparisons in the effects across countries.

Subject to these limitations, this paper demonstrates that warmth impressions, but not competence impressions, are valued more by citizens who do not share the candidate's party affiliation than among those who do. Unlike much existing work on partisanship and motivated reasoning in political and electoral behavior, this paper does not suggest that citizens simply dislike everything from out-parties and praise everything from their own party. Instead, citizens adjust their global evaluation criteria of political candidates according to whether they share a candidate's partisanship or not, and this, in turn, leads citizens to skillfully anticipate and forecast potential harmful decisions to which they might themselves fall prey. We consider this as yet another sign of voters'—frequently overlooked—sophistication in navigating the political arena.

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