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**An Examination of Perceived Credibility of the 2008 Presidential Candidates:
Relationships with Believability, Likeability, and Deceptiveness**

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Abstract

This study analyzed the perceived credibility of the leading candidates for the presidency in 2008: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards, John McCain, and Rudy Giuliani. The political figures were rated on perceived competence, trustworthiness, goodwill, believability, likeableness, and deceptiveness. Participants were 342 undergraduates. The three dimensions of credibility predicted a significant amount of variance in candidates' believability and likeability. Contrary to previous research, goodwill was the strongest predictor of candidate believability.

Key Words: Political communication, Presidential Candidates, Credibility, Candidate Characteristics

More than 2500 years ago, Aristotle espoused that the source of a message contributes to the persuasiveness of that message. Credibility is the image of the source in the minds of receivers (Andersen & Clevenger, 1963). Aristotle referred to this image as the source's ethos and suggested that it was the source's most potent means of persuasion. Since that time, the impact of ethos/source credibility in the communication process has been studied extensively by researchers (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1971; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Miller & Hewgill, 1964; Wakshlag & Edison, 1979). The effectiveness of a source's message often depends upon the attitudes possessed by the receiver. Summaries of empirical research have consistently supported the central role played by ethos/credibility in persuasive discourse (Andersen & Clevenger, 1963; Haiman, 1948; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Self, 1996; Walter, 1948).

Source credibility is particularly important in the political communication context. Politicians are skilled communicators who influence public opinion. Credibility is a critical factor in the selection of opinion leaders (Richmond & McCroskey, 1975). The source credibility construct closely parallels the candidate image construct (for a summary, see Hacker, 2004). Candidate image is a major determinant in voter behavior and candidate selection (Dennis, Chaffee, & Choe, 1979; Hellweg, 2004; Trent et al., 1993). Candidate image is "a potentially manipulable set of meanings attached by voters to seeker or holder of political office" (Stephen, Harrison, Husson, & Albert, 2004). American presidential campaigns have been the subject of numerous studies (Aylor, 1999; Hacker, Zakahi, Giles, & McQuitty, 2000; Trent, Mongeau, Trent, Kendall, & Cushing, 1993; Trent, et al., 2001; Trent, et al., 2005; Trent, Trent, Mongeau, & Short-Thompson, 1997). Voter evaluations of candidates are multidimensional and perceiver determined (Andersen & Kibler, 1978; Nimmo & Savage, 1976). At the end of the campaign process, voters ultimately determine which candidate is the most credible. Candidate credibility, or image, is an important component of communication since messages from sources perceived to be highly credible are more persuasive (Burgoon, 1976; McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974; Miller & McReynolds, 1973). Conversely, messages from political candidates thought to be disreputable could have a boomerang effect (Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Pfau & Loudon, 1994).

The Focus of the Study

The purpose of the present study is two-fold. First, no research to date has attempted to replicate and extend the McCroskey and Teven (1999) study on credibility within the political communication context, exclusively. Replication is important for external validity, generalizability, and validation purposes. In particular, empirical evidence for the *goodwill/caring* dimension of credibility and appropriate measurement has only recently emerged (McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Goodwill or perceived caring is a critical aspect of source evaluations, especially in politics. Second, the current study examines the perceptions of credibility of the front-runner candidates for the United States presidency in 2008. Credibility relates to other attitudinal components of voters. Perceptions of believability, likeability, and deceptiveness are influential political candidate characteristics which bear importantly on voters' perceptions of candidate credibility. The present study is also timely and instructive since the 2008 presidential election is within one calendar year (at the time of this writing).

Credibility and Persuasion within Political Communication

Several studies have attempted to isolate presidential images in determining source

credibility or image (Anderson, 2002; Husson, Stephen, Harrison, & Fehr, 1988; Kjeldahl, Carmichael, & Mertz, 1971). Based upon contemporary social scientific research, source credibility or image is multidimensional. McCroskey and Teven (1999) identify three primary dimensions of credibility: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill. *Competence* consists of one possessing knowledge or expertise of a particular subject. If an officeholder is to be perceived as competent, he or she is viewed as having experience, knowledge and leadership abilities (Page, 1978). Competence is associated with votes and election outcomes (McCurley & Mondak, 1995; Mondak, 1995; Nimmo & Savage, 1976).

The second dimension of source credibility is *trustworthiness* or character. Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which an audience perceives the assertions made by a communicator to be valid (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Within a political campaign, trustworthiness is the degree to which voters trust a candidate. Character is a cornerstone of the presidency (Barber, 1985) and a predictor of vote choice (Peterson, 2005). Wanzenried and Powell (1993) assert that each candidate “brings a world view, behavior, and experiences, which compose the dimension of character, into the electoral or political process” (p. 406). Perceptions of a political figure’s involvement in a scandal can harm a candidate’s credibility (Funk, 2004; Wanzenried, Smith-Howell, & Powell, 1992). A decrease in source credibility negatively impacts receivers’ attitudes toward that source (Teven & Herring, 2005; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). If voters perceive that a political candidate is not being truthful, that politician is regarded as less credible and citizens are less likely to vote for or re-elect that individual (Abramowitz, 1991; Peters & Welch, 1980).

Goodwill is the third component of source credibility. Consistent with Aristotle’s conceptualization of intention toward receiver, Teven and McCroskey (1997) discuss goodwill as the degree to which an audience perceives the source caring for them and having their best interests at heart. Political candidate warmth/empathy is an important personal quality (Aylor, 1999; Brown et al., 1988; Miller, 1993). A candidate who expresses concern about the welfare of citizens might influence voters’ judgments of whether a candidate is likely to introduce or carry out policies which benefit them. It is necessary for politicians to be able to communicate to their constituents that they do care about them in order for voters to *perceive* them as caring. Positive relational messages from a candidate tend to impact his or her influence with voters (Pfau & Kang, 1991). A politician who relates well with voters is more likely to be perceived as a credible source.

Rationale

Presidential candidate credibility, or image, develops over the course of a campaign. These clusters of perceptions of candidates are processed by voters from a variety of sources-- news media, debates, advertising, and the communication behavior of the candidates themselves. Apart from campaign issues or stances on policy (Benoit, 2003), a political candidate’s characteristics and perceived credibility may be the most important issue in determining voter behavior (Stephen et al., 2004). “Source credibility operationalizations of images may succeed when voters are using those traits as arguments and fail when they are using them as cues while elaborating on candidates’ issue arguments” (Hacker, 2004, p. 116). Persona-based components are more critical because issues are not likely to be motivating unless they are salient to voters (Wayne, 2002).

Political campaigning is a social influence process (McBath & Fisher, 1969). As James McCroskey (1971) writes, “A political contest is in essence a contest in credibility and the

audience will vote for the person at election time whom they perceive to be the most credible” (p. 25). The present study sought to determine whether the results for source credibility obtained in two studies (McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Teven & McCroskey, 1997) could be replicated within the political communication context. Aristotle believed that the three credibility dimensions were each perceptual sources of influence on a receiver (Cooper, 1932). While some scholars have focused on isolating separate dimensions of credibility in efforts to determine which is the most salient with voters (cf., Funk, 1997), extant research within a wide variety of contexts indicates that each dimension contributes in unique ways to important communication outcomes and effects (Richmond, Smith, Heisel, & McCroskey, 2002; Schrodt & Witt, 2006; Wrench & Booth-Butterfield, 2003). A candidate’s credibility is the sum total of the voting public’s perceptions of that individual’s competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness. Hence, the electorate responds differently to the credibility and personal qualities of each presidential candidate.

Previous research has found candidate credibility to be an important predictor of global evaluations (Markus, 1982; Miller, 1990; Miller, Wattenburg, & Malanchuk, 1986). For a politician, a related outcome of being perceived as having high ethos/credibility is to be considered believable. It is difficult to get elected or retain office without being believed by the voters. For politicians, an added bonus of being perceived as credible is to be seen as likeable. However, credibility and likeability are separate constructs; one may be perceived as competent, but not necessarily respected or admired. A political candidate’s character is a strong predictor of liking (Aylor, 1999). Given the preceding framework, the following hypotheses were advanced:

- H1: Political candidates’ credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is positively related to perceptions of believability.
- H2: Political candidates’ credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is positively related to perceptions of likeability.

Though tempting to assert that most people use manipulation or manipulative behavior to achieve their goals, many politicians (like lawyers) are inherently strategic. They behave in ways calculated to engender positive audience perceptions and achieve goals. Ultimately, politicians are concerned with their own or their constituents’ best interests. Whether a politician is perceived to be manipulative rests with the individual voter. While many citizens enter politics to nobly serve the public, the reality is that politicians and special interests have attempted to manipulate citizens as long as recorded history (Jacobs, 2001). In their quest for office, politicians use negative advertising, sound-bite sloganeering, and pander to popular prejudice (Mills, 1995). Political rhetoric is used to strategically structure public opinion (Stone, 1989).

A Florentine statesman and political theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) remains one of the most controversial figures of political history. Machiavelli emphasized the need for maintaining a public appearance of virtue while practicing whatever means necessary to achieve one’s ends (Geis & Moon, 1981). Politics is an arena well suited for the Machiavellian personality. Political calculation is required to control events and for acquiring and maintaining power in socially competitive situations (Deluga, 2001). Machiavelli’s early writings, as well as the seminal work of Christie and his associates (Christie & Geis, 1970), have generated literally hundreds of studies relating to an examination of behavior and strategies associated with deception and persuasion. Politicians who use communication to manipulate others may be very successful. Some of these individuals have high morals, others do not--but they are both highly effective unless the people on the receiving end *perceive* them to be manipulating con artists--

then it works against the politician. In this spirit, the following hypothesis was advanced:

H3: Political candidates' credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is negatively related to perceptions of deceptiveness.

McCroskey and Teven (1999) found evidence in support of the idea that perceived credibility accounts for a significant portion of the variance in source believability and likeability. The degree to which each dimension of perceived credibility individually contributes to political figures' believability and likeability remains unanswered. In an effort to replicate and extend the McCroskey and Teven (1999) study, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: To what extent does perceived credibility predict candidates' believability?

RQ2: To what extent does perceived caring/goodwill predict candidates' likeability?

What makes the 2008 Presidential election unique and worthy of scholarly attention is that it is the first time since the 1952 election, and only the second time since the 1928 election, in which neither a vice-president nor an incumbent president will be either party's nominee. Hence, the time frame leading up to the 2008 presidential election is an appropriate opportunity to assess the credibility judgments that voters (both registered and potential) make regarding the leading candidates. Towards this end, the following research question was posed:

RQ3: Which 2008 presidential candidate was perceived as the most credible (competent, caring, and trustworthy), believable, likeable, and the least deceptive?

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants in this study were 342 undergraduate students enrolled in a variety of Communications courses at a large Western university. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Each participant responded to a questionnaire concerning one identified political communication source (see below). Questionnaires relating to one political candidate were randomly administered to the participants. Two-hundred and eighteen participants indicated they were females, 120 males, and four who did not respond to this item. The average age of the participants was 23.5 years, with a range of 18-50. The modal age was 21. Twenty-nine percent of the participants reported they were democrats, 26% republican, 25% percent moderate/independent, and 18% other. Two percent of the participants provided no political affiliation. Seventy percent of the participants were registered to vote. Data were collected between January 23-28, 2007.

Political figures. A total of five political sources were selected as stimulus objects. The three Democratic political figures selected were Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards. Two Republican political figures were also selected: John McCain and Rudy Giuliani. These political figures were selected as sources since they are believed by many to be the front-line contenders for their respective political party's nomination. Two other political figures were originally selected for the analysis (Mitt Romney and Fred Thompson), but on numerous occasions, participants reported they were not familiar with either presidential candidate.

Measurement

Source credibility. The three dimensions of ethos/credibility were each measured with six bipolar adjective items (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Approximately half of the eighteen scales on the instrument was reversed to reduce item-response bias. Additionally, the order of presentation of the credibility instrument utilized was varied. The estimated reliabilities of these

scales were as follows: competence, $\alpha=.83$; caring, $\alpha=.85$; trustworthiness, $\alpha=.89$. When all three were scored as a single measure of ethos/credibility, the α reliability was .93.

Believability and likeableness. The Generalized Belief Measure (GBM; McCroskey & Richmond, 1989) was used to measure perceptions of both believability and likeableness. This scale employs five bipolar adjective scales which focus on the degree to which someone accepts a statement as representing an acceptable belief. For the measure of believability, the participants were instructed as follows: "On the scales below, please indicate the degree to which you believe the person named previously is believable." For the measure of likeableness, the term likeable was substituted for believable. The α reliability for the GBM in each application was .95.

Deceptiveness. The GBM was also used to assess participants' perceptions of the political figure's deceptiveness. The general statement to which the participants responded was, "On the scales below, please indicate the degree to which you believe the person named previously is a con-artist (i.e., manipulative)." The items for the measure included *true/false*, *right/wrong*, *no/yes*, *disagree/agree*, and *correct/incorrect*. Cronbach's α for the scale was .97.

Data Analyses

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and score ranges for each of the measures employed in the study. To answer H1-H3, simple correlations were first computed to determine the general association between the ethos/credibility dimension scores and the criterion variables. To answer RQs 1-2, multiple correlation analyses were performed to assess the extent to which perceived credibility contributes to the predictability of candidates' believability and likeability. In order to determine which dimensions of credibility best predicted candidate believability and likeability, multiple regression analyses were computed. To answer RQ3, analyses on the central variables for each political candidate were conducted. For the primary data analyses, the data from all of the 5 political figures were combined.

Table 1 - Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Measures

Measure	Mean	S.D.	Score Range
Believability	25.33	6.20	6-35
Likeableness	26.26	6.22	11-35
Deceptiveness	13.82	8.48	5-35
Competence	32.43	6.50	11-42
Goodwill	27.14	6.97	11-42
Trustworthiness	30.72	6.83	7-42
Overall Credibility	90.30	17.80	36-126

Results

H1 predicted that political candidates' credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is positively related to perceptions of believability. This hypothesis was supported. The correlations of the three dimensions of candidate credibility with

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believability were as follows: competence ($r = .64, p < .001$), goodwill ($r = .77, p < .001$), trustworthiness ($r = .77, p < .001$), respectively. See Table 2 for the complete correlation matrix.

Table 2 - Simple and Multiple Correlations Between Ethos/Credibility Scores and Criterion Variables¹

Criterion Variable	Multiple Correlations	Simple Correlations		
		Goodwill	Trustworthiness	Competence
Believability	.74	.78	.79	.64
Likeableness	.44	.59	.60	.55
Deceptiveness	.44	-.58	-.65	-.39

¹All correlations significant at the .001 level.

H2 stated that political candidates' credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is positively related to perceptions of likeability. This hypothesis was also supported. The correlations of the three dimensions of candidate credibility with likeability were as follows: competence ($r = .55, p < .001$), goodwill ($r = .59, p < .001$), trustworthiness ($r = .60, p < .001$), respectively.

H3 predicted that political candidates' credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is negatively related to perceptions of deceptiveness. This hypothesis received strong support. The correlations of the three dimensions of candidate credibility with deceptiveness were as follows: competence ($r = -.39, p < .001$), goodwill ($r = -.58, p < .001$), trustworthiness ($r = -.65, p < .001$), respectively.

RQ1 asked about the extent to which perceived credibility predicts candidates' believability. The relevant results of the multiple correlations are reported in Table 2. Collectively, the three credibility dimensions predict approximately 74 percent the variance in believability (see Table 2). A multiple regression analysis revealed all three credibility dimensions contributed to candidate believability (goodwill/caring, $\exists = .49, p < .001$; trustworthiness, $\exists = .30, p < .001$; and competence, $\exists = .17, p < .01$).

RQ2 asked about the extent to which perceived credibility predicts candidates' likeability. Collectively, the three dimensions of credibility predict approximately 44 percent the variance in likeability. A multiple regression analysis revealed all three credibility dimensions contributed to candidate likeability (trustworthiness, $\exists = .28, p < .03$; competence, $\exists = .25, p < .02$; and goodwill/caring, $\exists = .23, p = .05$).

RQ3 sought to determine which presidential candidate was perceived as the most credible (competent, caring, and trustworthy), believable, likeable, and least deceptive. Table 3 reports the means on the three ethos/credibility sub-scores and the criterion measures for each presidential candidate. As was expected, the mean scores for the various candidates varied widely. The highest means for perceived credibility (all three dimensions) and lowest means for deceptiveness were recorded for Barack Obama. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Rudy Giuliani were also rated highly in terms of perceived competence. The lowest means recorded for

goodwill were associated with John McCain. The lowest means were recorded for Hillary Clinton on perceived believability.

Table 3 - Mean Scores for 2008 Presidential Candidates

Source	<i>N</i>	Believe	Like	Deceptive	Comp	Trust	Goodwill
Hillary Clinton	96	23.15	25.56	14.11	32.78	29.74	26.44
Barack Obama	57	28.07	30.14	9.07	34.29	34.50	29.36
John McCain	52	24.07	24.20	15.47	30.47	30.67	25.00
Rudy Giuliani	74	27.00	27.72	13.96	32.88	29.96	27.56
John Edwards	63	25.17	24.48	15.13	31.70	30.43	27.57

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to examine the perceived credibility of the 2008 presidential candidates and explore the relationships between voter perceptions of candidate credibility, believability, likeability, and deceptiveness. This investigation demonstrated that political candidate believability and likeability have significant, positive relationships (while deceptiveness has a significant negative relationship) with voters' perceptions of candidate credibility--competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness. The results of this study are significant since, as Miller and Reese (1982) assert, early impressions of the candidates serve as stable touchstones throughout the electoral process. Candidate image, or source credibility, is a major determinant in voter behavior and candidate selection (Dennis, Chaffee, & Choe, 1979; Hellweg, 2004; Trent et al., 1993).

The first hypothesis correctly predicted that political candidates' credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is positively related to perceptions of believability. Each dimension of political candidate credibility was positively and significantly related to believability: competence ($r = .64$), goodwill ($r = .77$), and trustworthiness ($r = .77$), respectively. The large correlations are most likely due to the similar nature of believability and credibility. Believability is presumably very important for political figures. The results for believability provide a practical payoff for political candidates of being perceived as competent, caring, and trustworthy.

H2 posited that political candidates' credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is positively related to perceptions of likeability. This hypothesis received strong support. The correlations of the three dimensions of candidate credibility with likeability were as follows: competence ($r = .55$), goodwill ($r = .59$), trustworthiness ($r = .60$), respectively. Relational communication plays an important role in perceptions of a candidate (Husson, et al., 1988; Pfau & Kang, 1991). Emotional reactions to political leaders are an important component to forming attitudes toward them and hence, a factor in voting (McHugo, Lanzetta, & Bush, 1991). In comparing two presidential candidates during a debate, Oft-Rose (1989) discovered that Michael Dukakis won most of the arguments during the debate, but voters still rated George Bush as more likeable, neutralizing any Dukakis advantage.

The third hypothesis correctly predicted that political candidates' credibility (perceived competence, goodwill/caring, and trustworthiness) is negatively related to perceptions of

deceptiveness. The correlations of the three dimensions of candidate credibility with perceived deceptiveness were as follows: competence ($r = -.39$), goodwill/caring ($r = -.58$), trustworthiness ($r = -.65$), respectively. The more politicians are perceived as manipulators, the worse it is for them. However, effective leaders (and politicians) are skilled in behaviors designed to create a desired image, including perceptions of credibility. Of particular interest here is both a real concern and common misunderstanding of manipulation and caring. Effective manipulators know how to communicate in ways that cause others to trust them. For instance, one study reported that, after being accused of cheating, high Machs gazed at the accuser to present an appearance of innocence whereas low Machs looked away (Exline, Thibaut, Hickey, & Gumpert, 1970). These sources are less likely to be seen as con-artists and perceived as actually caring about the receiver. Bill Clinton set a new standard for goodwill when he famously stated “I feel your pain.” The question for voters to ask is if the politician seems sincere. Apart from candidates’ behavior, performance, or media portrayal, voters assess their authenticity (Louden & McCauliff, 2004).

The results for H3 imply that it is not the level of manipulation that makes the difference, rather the communication of positive traits which makes the difference. Perception is far more important than reality; however, it should be easier for truly good people to communicate their positive intent than for the evil people to do so--which is Aristotle’s argument for the value of being an excellent rhetorician. Aristotle argues that “truth and justice are by nature more powerful than their opposites” (p. 5) and if good people are unsuccessful it is because their “neglect of the art needs correction” (p. 5). It is not the role of our field to expose the con-artists, but it is our job to teach people how to be effective communicators--even the con-artists. Part of this process is determining *when* people are deceptive. As a field, we have done an inadequate job of determining this ourselves (cf., Burgoon, 2005), much less teaching others how to do it.

RQ1 asked about the extent to which perceived credibility predicts candidates’ believability. Collectively, the three credibility dimensions predict approximately 74 percent the variance in believability. The multiple regression analysis revealed that goodwill/perceived caring contributed the most to candidate believability ($\beta = .49, p < .001$). Both trustworthiness ($\beta = .30, p < .001$) and competence ($\beta = .17, p < .01$) also demonstrated significant effects on believability. In terms of ability of the dimension scores individually to predict believability, goodwill was the most useful. Trustworthiness was less predictive and competence much less predictive. This is a departure from the McCroskey and Teven (1999) study which found the trustworthiness dimension to be the strongest predictor of believability.

Clearly, goodwill is an important characteristic of political candidates in the minds of voters. The goodwill/perceived caring dimension of credibility has been ignored by many contemporary researchers as a function of misanalysis and/or misinterpretation of data in a wide variety of empirical studies. Given its importance, future research should direct particular attention toward the relationship between goodwill/perceived caring, source evaluation, and voter selection within the political context. The goodwill/perceived caring dimension may be *the* critical factor in determining who is elected president in the coming year, given the great division that exists within the country today. The candidate who is able to transcend partisan politics, moves beyond self-interest, and speaks to the best interests of the country could be successful in winning the 2008 presidential election.

RQ2 asked about the extent to which perceived credibility predicts candidates’ likeability. Collectively, the three dimensions of credibility predict approximately 44 percent the

variance in likeability. In terms of ability to predict candidates' likeableness, all three dimensions of credibility were about equally predictive (trustworthiness, $\exists = .28, p < .03$; competence, $\exists = .25, p < .02$; and goodwill, $\exists = .23, p = .05$). The results of both RQ1 and RQ2 underscore the importance of perceived credibility as a determinant of candidate believability and likeability.

RQ3 asked which 2008 presidential candidate was perceived as the most credible (competent, caring, and trustworthy), believable, likeable, and least deceptive. As expected, the mean scores for the various political sources varied widely. Barack Obama received the highest means for perceived credibility (all three dimensions) and lowest for deceptiveness. This may be because he has been in politics for such a short time--serving in his first term as a U.S. senator from Illinois. Hence, the voters do not have as much information about him. At the time of this writing, Barack Obama has formally announced his candidacy for president. Once the honeymoon period subsides and primary debates begin, more scrutiny will come to bear on his candidacy. He is considered the ostensible alternative democratic candidate to Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2008.

Both Rudy Giuliani and Hillary Rodham Clinton were also rated highly in terms of perceived competence. These results should not be surprising. Rudy Giuliani received high marks for his leadership during the 9/11 crisis (Atcheson, 2003; Walsh, 2001). With the Democrats controlling both houses of Congress after the 2006 midterm elections, a centrist Republican candidate, such as Rudy Giuliani, who appeals to a wider variety of voters might be in a good position to win the nomination (Siegel, 2005, 2006). Most political observers also consider Hillary Clinton a competent, shrewd, and effective politician (Crawford, 2006).

The lowest ratings of for goodwill were associated with John McCain. These results were somewhat surprising. John McCain has always been known as an anti-corruption crusader ("G.O.P. Explorers," 2006). However, since the 2004 election, the Arizona senator has pushed for more, not fewer, troops in the Iraq war. McCain's fate as the front runner for the GOP presidential nomination in 2008 seems to be tied to the American public's growing impatience for the end of the war (Bailey, 2006). "Privately, some McCain supporters have begun to worry that the senator's hard line on the war may turn off the moderate, independent-minded voters who've long formed the bedrock of his primary support...We lost independents...McCain will have to get them back to win, or at least convince them to trust him" (Bailey, 2006, p. 40). Finally, the lowest mean scores for believability were recorded for Hillary Clinton. Though perceived as competent, Hillary Clinton's oft performed recitation of worthy ideas do not always add up to a compelling vision (Morris & McGann, 2005) nor her "coy pretense of indecision" (Morris, 2004, p. 11). Some have observed that, in her public appearances, Hillary Clinton seems physically uncomfortable (Wolff, 2000). These factors in the minds of voters may be contributing to her lack of believability.

Limitations

A limitation of the study includes the sample used. College students are not likely to be representative of the country and voting public as a whole. Moreover, the population sampled is regional in nature. Second, source credibility itself has limits. From the ELM perspective (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), credibility has little or no impact on highly involving topics or on pro-attitudinal messages (i.e., candidate's supporters). Third, caution should be exercised to not over-interpret the results of this research, particularly when speculating or making predictions on election outcomes. The results from this study should only be considered a "snap-shot" of the perceived credibility of the 2008 presidential candidates at one point in time. Certain events,

developments, candidate behavior, and/or (mis)statements can change the trajectory of a campaign. Had the data been collected a few months before or after, different results for evaluations of the candidates may have emerged. Future research should collect longitudinal data to assess the degree to which credibility perceptions of the 2008 presidential candidates change over time.

Conclusions

The credibility literature has repeatedly shown the relationship with persuasiveness and the importance of engendering more favorable personal perceptions. This study identified some perceptions which are related to voters' perceptions of presidential candidates. Judgments concerning the credibility of the 2008 presidential candidates are manifestations of voters' attitudes towards those candidates. The findings provide insight into how college-age voters perceive and distinguish presidential candidates in a national election. Future research should assess voter individual difference variables which might impact their perceptions of presidential candidates. Cynicism may be a strong predictor of voter trust or mistrust of candidates and voting intentions. Additionally, voters' perceived homophily with individual candidates may impact judgments of credibility. One of the leading presidential candidates is female (Clinton) while another is African-American (Obama). Hence, voter sex and ethnicity may be of particular interest with the 2008 election. Andersen and Kibler (1978) discovered that attitude homophily is a strong predictor of voter preference. Additional information about these matters cannot help but contribute to our understanding of the nature of source credibility in political campaigns, particularly between presidential candidates and the voting public.

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