

CAN CANDIDATES' IMAGE WIN ELECTIONS?

A Counterfactual Assessment of Leader Effects in the Second Italian Republic

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Abstract. Nowadays it is commonplace to argue that candidates' personal characteristics play a large part in determining how individuals vote. In the domain of political marketing this assumption is often given for granted, and no clear conceptual understanding of how image crafting techniques affect voters has emerged. This article is an attempt to link political marketing's concern for *impression management* strategies with our knowledge of leader effects in democratic elections. A counterfactual analysis of post-election survey data from the last three Italian elections demonstrates that political candidates can actually gain votes – and at times win elections – due to the way in which their personality profile is perceived by voters.

Keywords: counterfactuals, political impression management, leader effects, parliamentary elections, personality traits

Acknowledgments

[...]

INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic erosion of traditional cleavage and partisan loyalties throughout all advanced industrial democracies (Franklin *et al.*, 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Voters' progressive de-attachment from political parties implies an increasing tendency to cast a vote based on short-term concerns, such as policy preferences, performance judgments, or candidate images (Dalton, 1996). To cope with these changes in the electoral market, political parties have gone *catch-all* (Kirchheimer, 1966). In order to extend the electoral basin beyond the socio-ideological cleavages to which they usually referred (Mair *et al.*, 2004), parties have become ever more flexible in terms of issue stands, and tend to base increasingly their election profiles on features more engaging to voters – such as the *leadership factor* (Farrell and Webb, 2000). In this respect, the “essentially visual and personality-based medium of television” (Mughan, 2000: 129) has been crucial in emphasizing the role of political leaders at the expense of the respective parties.

Due to the intertwined effect of technological innovations in the media and organizational change within their own parties, political leaders have gained center stage with respect to both political communication (Swanson and Mancini, 1996) and voters' reasoning (Miller *et al.*, 1986; Rahn *et al.*, 1990; Garzia, 2011a). Nowadays, and in the light of this, it is often assumed that “leaders' personalities and personal characteristics...play a large[r] part in determining how individuals vote in democratic elections” (King 2002: 4). In the case of political marketing, this assumption is often given for granted (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, 2007). Many would concur that “a market oriented approach to political elections is...increasingly inevitable” (Newman, 1994: ix). Pre-campaign market research (e.g., opinion polls, focus groups) is invaluable if we are to understand “what type of leadership is most in demand by those segments of

the electorate that are also potential constituencies” (Campus, 2010: 4). Nonetheless, even though political marketing “can succeed with repackaging, repositioning, and makeovers... we lack a clear conceptual understanding of how this affects voters” (Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy, 2007: 21).

This article is an attempt to link political marketing’s concern for *impression management* strategies (De Landtsheer *et al.*, 2008) with our knowledge of the psychological dynamics of *impression formation* at the individual level (McGraw, 2003). It will do so by investigating the net electoral effect of politicians’ personality (as perceived by voters) in democratic elections. Based on the widespread consensus among media consultants, pollsters, campaign managers (and politicians themselves) about the crucial effect of candidates’ personal qualities on individual vote decisions (Miller and Shanks, 1996: 415), constantly greater efforts are invested in modern *candidate-centered* campaigns (Wattenberg, 1991). Yet sound evidence for the electoral impact of politicians’ perceived personality is, at best, scant (see: King, 2002). Analyzing the extent to which voters’ choices are actually based on candidates’ personality profile is thus the aim of this article.

An increasingly employed technique in the study of leader effects is the so-called *counterfactual* strategy (Bean and Mughan, 1989; Crewe and King, 1994; Jones and Hudson, 1996; Dinas, 2008; van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010). This strategy emphasizes the asking and answering of explicit «*What if?*» questions (King, 2002), and it sheds light on the electoral effect of the personality profile of a specific candidate by forecasting the extent to which the electoral outcome would have changed had that candidate’s personality been perceived differently by voters. In an *age of manufactured images* (Newman, 1999), this seems a particularly appropriate strategy to understand the effects that political marketing can bear on voting decisions.

The empirical analysis will concentrate on the last three parliamentary elections held in Italy. Since 1994, Italian politics has been characterized by a bi-polar competition between broad coalitions of parties, as well as by the resilience of Silvio Berlusconi as leader of the centre-right coalition. Furthermore, the last three elections saw three different centre-left leaders (e.g., Francesco Rutelli in 2001, Romano Prodi in 2006, and Walter Veltroni in 2008) contending with Berlusconi for the premiership. This occurrence allows us to investigate in a *quasi-experimental* setting the effect of different candidates (and hence different personalities) on the electoral performance of centre-left coalitions while keeping constant the leader of the opposing coalition.

The article proceeds as follows: next section introduces the literature on candidates' politically relevant personality traits and reviews the available empirical evidence for their impact in democratic elections; the following section outlines the methods of analysis; the empirical findings are then presented and, in the last section, discussed along with their major implications for political marketing theory and practice.

POLITICALLY RELEVANT TRAITS AND THEIR IMPACT ON VOTING

BEHAVIOR: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE SO FAR

Voting for a particular candidate can be due to a conglomerate of (often heterogeneous) factors. Political marketing research, however, concurs in identifying two features of candidates' electoral appeal as most crucial: namely, their *personality* and their *issue stands* (Garramone, 1983). The relationship between a candidate's election program and his (or her) perceived personality has been widely investigated in recent years (Scammel, 1995; Harris, 2000). In this paper, I will concentrate on the electoral effect of the personality factor; however, the analysis that follows will also take into account the role

played by issues, in order to isolate the independent effect exerted by candidates' personality on the outcome of democratic elections.

If political leaders make an impact on voters – and on elections in turn – common sense concludes that “this must be due, in very large part, to their personal qualities” (Blondel, 1987: 115). The question is: what qualities are we talking about? The early literature found more than forty personal (e.g., physical and psychological) characteristics associated in one way or another with leadership (Bass, 1981). Similarly, a recent volume edited by Anthony King moves from the consideration that twenty-six different attributes might have in principle a bearing on voting decision (King, 2002: 9). Despite this conspicuous number of aspects of a candidate's personality on which voters can base a global evaluation, empirical evidence shows that voters develop a mental image of political leaders *as persons* on the basis of a restricted number of categories, and namely: *competence* (the extent to which a leader is perceived as a qualified, intelligent manager), *leadership* (the heroic, mythical dimension of leadership, as captured by qualities such as strength and patriotism), *integrity* (the degree to which a leader is perceived as a honest, moral person) and *empathy* (the ability of the leader to connect to his followers) (Kinder, 1986; Funk, 1996; McGraw, 2003). Great attention has been devoted to the relative importance attributed by voters to each of these characteristics. According to Mondak (1995a; 1995b) what really matters for electoral success is a blend of competence and integrity. When it comes to overall personality assessments, however, Kinder *et al.* (1979) demonstrate that the presence/absence of each of these characteristics in politicians' personality, as perceived by voters, contributes in a substantially uniform manner to their thermometer evaluation.

From a political marketing perspective, the individual-level dynamics of *impression formation* (Funk, 1996) are of crucial relevance. Candidates must be aware of

their self-presentation in order to engage successfully into *political impression management* (De Landtsheer *et al.*, 2008). Great efforts are invested in the process of image crafting. Such an emphasis on the right image represents a clear hint of politicians' expectation that their image matters to voters (Newman, 1999; 2002). But is it really the case? To what extent are voters' choices based on candidates' perceived personality traits? It goes without saying that an affirmative answer to such questions would make a strong point in favor of marketing consultants' and image crafters' efforts, thus justifying the contention that nowadays "winning parliamentary or presidential elections without marketing is nearly impossible" (Cwalina *et al.*, 2008: 1).

Evidence from the voting literature highlights the relevance of *direct leader effects* on electoral outcomes – that is, the influence exerted by a leader or candidate "by virtue of who he or she is, how he or she appears and how he or she publicly comports him or herself" (King, 2002: 4). In his seminal contribution to the study of leader effects on voting behaviour, Stokes (1966) demonstrates that Eisenhower's personality brought an electoral gain of four to eight points to the Republican Party in the U.S. Presidential elections of 1952 and 1956 respectively, while the differential in popularity between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960 resulted – for many observers surprisingly – in two percentage points in favour of the losing candidate, Richard Nixon. As to the election of 1964, Stokes shows how a weak candidate as Goldwater could cost the Grand Old Party as much as five percentage points, giving the way to Johnson's victory. More recent analyses are less confident in the electoral impact of presidential candidates' personality. In their investigation of the four American presidential elections held between 1980 and 1992, Miller and Shanks (1996) conclude that in none of these cases voters' perception of leaders' personality traits had a significant effect on the overall election outcome. The same conclusion is reached by Bartels (2002). However, his analysis also takes into

account the elections of 1996 and 2000. And whereas the former was not influenced by any sort of direct leader effect, the author points out that the latter “might have been decided” by George W. Bush’s advantage over Al Gore in terms of perceived personal qualities, which is quantified in a half percentage point of the votes. As Bartels points out, “[w]hat is surprising is not that the electoral impact of candidate traits in 2000 was modest, since that has generally been the case in recent presidential elections. What is surprising is that in 2000 the modest effect of candidate traits was, quite probably, large enough to be decisive” (Bartels, 2002: 69).

How far voters will base their voting decision on the personal profile of individual candidates depends clearly on the political and institutional structure in which an election is fought. Presidential elections encourage focusing on personalities to a greater degree than do parliamentary ones (McAllister, 1996). Nevertheless, a number of analyses of Westminster democracies have highlighted the electoral impact of leaders’ personality also in such parliamentary settings (Bean and Mughan, 1989; Stewart and Clarke, 1992; Bean, 1993; Crewe and King, 1994; Jones and Hudson, 1996; Mughan, 2000). In their most celebrated work, Bean and Mughan (1989) focused on the impact of candidates’ personality traits in the British and Australian elections of 1983 and 1987 respectively. Through their *counterfactual* analytical strategy, the authors reach the conclusion that “[i]f Foot had possessed Thatcher’s personality profile, Labour’s vote in the 1983 general elections would, other things being equal, have been some six to seven percentage points higher than it was” (*ibid.* 1175).

So far, only few studies analyzed the electoral effect of party leaders on Italian elections (Venturino, 2000; Sani, 2002; Barisione, 2007) and none of them investigated the role of their perceived personality traits (as an exception, see: Garzia, 2011b). In order to overcome this gap, the present study will concentrate on the last three general elections

held in Italy (in 2001, 2006 and 2008 respectively) employing the counterfactual methodology developed by Bean and Mughan (1989). This will provide us with a tentative answer to the main research questions: *How many votes did the leaders gain (or lose) to their coalitions thanks to their personalities' perception by the voters? Was the direct leader effect decisive for the electoral outcome?*

DATA AND ANALYTICAL METHODS

Through OLS multiple regression, I will estimate the number of percentage points by which the centre-left vote share in the last three Italian elections could have increased/decreased had the same proportion of voters credited its leader with each quality (e.g., competence, empathy, integrity, and leadership) as credited Berlusconi with it. In this way, I will provide a hypothetical projection of how these elections would have turned out had centre-left leaders been perceived to possess the range of politically relevant personality traits in the same proportion as their opponent, Silvio Berlusconi.

The data used in this analysis come from the ITANES post-election surveys held between 2001 and 2008 (nationally representative multistage sample conducted through face-to-face interviews/CAPI; $n_{2001}=3209$; $n_{2006}=1377$; $n_{2008}= 3000$). The dependent variable is the vote at the election in analysis, recoded with a value of '0' to every vote cast for centre-left coalition parties, and a value of '1' for every vote to those in the centre-right coalition. Votes for minor parties and blank ballot papers (as well as "didn't vote", "don't know" and "no answer" responses) are excluded from the analysis. The main predictors comprise the battery of leaders' personality traits that have been found to subsume voters' overall evaluations of politicians: competence, empathy, integrity, and leadership (Kinder, 1986; Funk, 1996; McGraw, 2003). ITANES respondents were asked

whether, in their opinion, each coalition leader possessed those characteristics or not (dichotomized variables). In order to isolate the independent effect of candidates' personality traits on the electoral outcome, the model controls for the impact exerted by voters' proximity/distance to candidates' issue stands, as measured by their orientation on the left-right scale (self-placement)ⁱ.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents perceiving the four characteristics under analysis to be possessed by each political leader in the relevant election year. As a first approach to this data, it is interesting to observe the *overall perception* of candidates (that is, the mean value for the four traits as reported in the last column of the table). In 2001, Berlusconi's profile stands four points higher than Rutelli's. This is mostly due to the gap between the two in terms of perceived competence (+15 percentage points in favour of Berlusconi) and leadership strength (+13). With respect to 2006 we observe, on the one hand, a strong gap among the candidates in terms of perceived leadership strength (43 percentage points in favour of Berlusconi); on the other hand, the centre-left leader is widely perceived as more honest (+34 percentage points), competent (+8) and able to understand people's problems (+26). Overall, Prodi's image overcomes Berlusconi's by six percentage points. As to 2008, despite the significant lead of Berlusconi in terms of leadership strength (+43 percentage points, as in 2006) and of Veltroni in terms of integrity (+32), their respective overall score is substantially comparable.

<--- Table 1 about here --->

Some interesting patterns seem to emerge from the data reported in Table 1. To mention only a few, it is worth mentioning Berlusconi's constant lead in terms of leadership strength, as well as centre-left leaders' primacy in terms of perceived integrity. To be sure, the distribution of personal qualities and their effect on voting behaviour are two conceptually different things. In fact, it does not matter to our purposes whether centre-left leaders are usually perceived as more honest persons or Berlusconi as a very strong leader if these qualities do not *move* votes at the polls.

Table 2 presents the bivariate relationship between each of these personal characteristics as perceived by individual respondents and their vote choice (cell entries are point-biserial correlation coefficients). All coefficients are statistically significant ($p < .01$) and signed as expected. In other words, favourable evaluation of leaders' personal characteristics and the vote for their respective coalition are always directly related – even though one notes that coefficients' magnitude is overall stronger in the case of Berlusconi.

<--- Table 2 about here --->

Albeit useful for illustrative purposes, bivariate relationships can be misleading in the light of the potential intercorrelation between items. Furthermore, they cannot possibly take into account the effect exerted by relevant intervening variables such as voters' pre-existing ideological orientation. To overcome these limitations, I have estimated three ordinary least square (OLS) regression models (one per election year) in order to assess how each of the four leadership characteristics is related to vote choice when the effect of previous political orientations (respondents' left-right self-placement) is controlled forⁱⁱ. Table 3 present the regression estimates. Cell entries are unstandardized

b coefficients, and they must be interpreted “as the percentage difference in the probability of voting for the prime minister’s [coalition] between those seeing and not seeing that quality in the leader” (Bean and Mughan, 1989: 1170).

<--- Table 3 about here --->

As the table entries suggest, the effect of personal traits on vote choice is far from homogeneous with respect to the different leaders. The personal characteristics of Berlusconi more strongly related to centre-right vote are integrity and empathy. As to the former, voters seeing Berlusconi as honest in 2001 are 31 percent more likely to vote for his coalition than those who do not. Lower but yet absolutely relevant figures come from the estimates relative to both 2006 and 2008: in these cases, Berlusconi’s perceived honesty increased centre-right vote by a 20 percent factor. The electoral effect of other Berlusconi’s qualities is not as strong; nonetheless, perceiving him as able to understand people’s problems seems to increase centre-right vote substantially (14 percent in 2001; 20 percent in 2006; 11 percent in 2008). In the case of centre-left leaders, perceived personal qualities play a rather weaker part in our model – this being in all probability due to the overall stronger impact exerted by Berlusconi’s personality traits.

Although interesting to understand the individual-level dynamics of voting decision in Italian elections, these findings do not tell us much about the electoral impact of leaders’ perceived qualities on electoral outcomes. The remainder of this section will thus concentrate on the aggregate-level implications of the previous findings. More specifically, it will attempt to answer to the question: *how would the last three Italian elections have turned out had centre-left leaders been perceived to possess the various personal qualities in the same proportions as Silvio Berlusconi?* In doing so, I will

provide a hypothetical projection of what would have happened had the electorate perceived in turn Rutelli, Prodi, and Veltroni to be as honest, competent or empathic as they perceived Berlusconi.

The method I employ replicates the counterfactual strategy developed by Bean and Mughan (1989) in their analysis of Australia and Britain. At first, Berlusconi's distributional advantage on each characteristic is multiplied by the matching centre-left leader's regression coefficient (with the sign reversed) from Table 3. The result is an approximation of the number of percentage points by which the centre-left vote would have increased/decreased had the same proportion of voters credited each centre-left leader with that quality as credited Berlusconi with it. In other words, it is a measure of centre-left leaders' net worth in votes to their coalition. The results of this procedure, calculated for each election year under analysis, are presented in Table 4. A positive sign indicates in every instance an electoral asset for the centre-left leader.

<--- Table 4 about here --->

What emerges from Table 4 is the rather modest effect exerted by leader personalities on the outcome of the last three Italian elections. Being this finding is in line with previous analyses (King, 2002), it reassures us that the methodology employed is not actually overestimating the magnitude of leader effects on the aggregate electoral outcome. Nonetheless, our findings leave room for an independent effect of leaders' personal characteristics to affect election results. Perceived leadership strength emerges as the strongest electoral asset of Silvio Berlusconi: had centre-left coalition leaders credited with this quality by the same proportion of voters that credits Berlusconi with it, centre-left coalitions would have profited of an electoral advantage ranging between 0.8

(in 2001) and 3.5 (in 2008) percentage points. However, Berlusconi's lead in terms of leadership strength is widely counterbalanced by the votes lost to his coalition in virtue of his (lack of) perceived honesty, which represents indeed the major electoral asset of centre-left leaders (this being particularly the case in the last two elections). The counteractive effect exerted by these two characteristics is clearly reflected in the small magnitude of aggregate leader effects on the electoral outcome, ranging from 1 percent in 2001 to a mere 0.2 percent in 2008.

Nonetheless, these findings are relevant in at least two respects. First, because they hint at the fact that different competing personalities (i.e., two leaders characterized by higher and lower scores respectively on each dimension) might exert much stronger effects. Second, and most importantly to our purposes, because in one of the three elections under investigation – that of 2006, won by the centre-left coalition by a margin of less than 0.1 percent of the votes – even an aggregate leader effect as small as 0.4 percentage points might have been decisive for the victory of the coalition led by Romano Prodi.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the light of the findings presented in this article, it seems plausible to conclude that leaders' personality *do matter* for the outcome of democratic elections. Politicians can gain (or lose) votes due to the way in which their personality profile is perceived by voters independently from the electoral effect exerted by their programmatic stands on issues. At times, leader effects can even make the difference between victory and defeat. Although in extremely close elections – such as the Italian general election of 2006 – leaders' characteristics are *constantly* assumed to be potentially decisive (King 2002), this

analysis pointed out that the 2006 winner, Romano Prodi, would probably not have won if he, as a person, was perceived as (or less) appealing as his opponent, Silvio Berlusconi.

The fact that candidates perceived as more competent or stronger gain votes at the expense of less competent or strong opponents makes a strong case in favour of political marketing's impression management techniques. Elections are an arena where only a very limited number of factors can be manipulated, and candidate perceptions are ones that have clear consequences. Yet with a caveat: unlike issues on which voters may express an attitude supporting either side, *all* voters prefer candidates with desirable traits (Kilburn, 2005). Accordingly, to have an impact on electoral behavior, the politician's image must also overcome that of his opponent. By showing that leader effects are strongest when politicians are perceived more differently with respect to each trait dimension (e.g., Berlusconi's leadership, centre-left leaders' honesty), this article hints clearly at the importance of successfully "trespassing" on the opposing candidate's trait territory (Hayes, 2005).

Hopefully, political marketers operating in parliamentary contexts will find these few suggestions useful, as they add to our understanding of the dynamics of individual vote choice in ever more personalized contests such as Italian elections.

ⁱ Here, I rely on a conception of the left-right continuum as a “super-issue which summarizes the programmes of opposing groups” (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976: 244).

ⁱⁱ Since the dependent variable in this analysis is a dichotomy, logistic regression would have been more appropriate. However, the regression estimates from both logistic and ordinary least squares methods do not differ substantially with the data at hand. Hence the latter has been preferred for the straightforward interpretability of its results.

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Table 1 – Distribution of leaders' qualities, 2001-2008

	Competence	Integrity	Leadership	Empathy	MEAN
<i>2001</i>					
Rutelli	42	49	39	54	46
Berlusconi	57	36	52	56	50
<i>2006</i>					
Prodi	62	59	43	64	57
Berlusconi	54	25	86	38	51
<i>2008</i>					
Veltroni	61	61	39	62	56
Berlusconi	56	29	82	53	55

Source: ITANES 2001, 2006, 2008

Table 2 –Leaders’ perceived qualities and vote choice (Point-biserial correlation coefficients)

	Competence	Integrity	Leadership	Empathy
2001				
Rutelli	.48	.48	.53	.51
Berlusconi	-.57	-.79	-.72	-.71
2006				
Prodi	.56	.51	.49	.54
Berlusconi	-.45	-.74	-.19	-.70
2008				
Veltroni	.40	.32	.34	.42
Berlusconi	-.48	-.64	-.24	-.56

Note: All correlation coefficients are significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

Table 3 – The effect of leader qualities on voting behaviour (OLS estimates)

	<i>2001</i>		<i>2006</i>		<i>2008</i>	
	Rutelli		Prodi		Veltroni	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Competence	,031	,023	,036	,027	,057	,027
Leadership	,062	,023	,064	,022	,080	,022
Integrity	,028	,023	,070	,029	,086	,031
Empathy	,054	,024	,018	,030	,066	,030
	Berlusconi		Berlusconi		Berlusconi	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Competence	-,012	,024	-,018	,020	-,089	,025
Leadership	-,152	,031	,013	,030	-,051	,034
Integrity	-,313	,027	-,194	,029	-,204	,027
Empathy	-,141	,029	-,203	,028	-,110	,026
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Left-right placement	,051	,004	,084	,005	,086	,005
Constant	,909	,067	,385	,088	,263	,088
Adjusted R-squared	,794		,792		,687	

Note: Dependent variable: Vote choice (dummy; reference category: centre-left vote)

Table 4 – Direct leader effects in Italian elections, 2001-2008

	2001 Rutelli vs. Bersluconi	2006 Prodi vs. Bersluconi	2008 Veltroni vs. Bersluconi
Competence	-0,46	0,29	0,28
Integrity	0,36	2,37	2,76
Leadership	-0,8	-2,75	-3,46
Empathy	-0,11	0,47	0,6
TOTAL	-1,01	0,38	0,18
