

A COMMUNICATION MODEL OF THE IMPACT OF PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATE CHARACTER TRAITS ON VOTE PREFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

A COMMUNICATION MODEL OF THE IMPACT OF PRESIDENTIAL
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This dissertation presents a communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference and outlines how the communication environment surrounding US presidential elections influences the selection of salient candidate character traits, how these traits are framed by mediated communication, and reports their influence on vote preference which is dependent on voters' level of news media use. A conceptualization of traits and the theoretical basis for how and why they may play a role in vote preference is presented and suggests traits provide an easily accessible heuristic allowing citizens to make predictions for future behavior of a candidate if elected. The theoretical foundation of the model is based on the integration of agenda-setting, priming and framing theories. The moderating role of media use on the relationship between perceptions of candidate traits and vote preference is also explicated. Support for this model is presented in three case studies that analyze three different datasets across two US elections. Specifically, the 2004 and 2008 general elections are explored using the 2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Studies (NAES) and an October 2008 dataset from Pew Research Center. These data provide empirical evidence supporting the theoretic argument driving this dissertation. All three case studies produce similar and

consistent results and the congruence of the findings across different elections and multiple data sources contributes to the robustness and validity of the communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference offered in this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1: A Communication Model of the Impact of Candidate Character Traits on Vote Preference

Throwing back a few beers in small-town taverns, bowling a couple of frames on old wood lanes, ordering a cheesesteak in South Philadelphian lingo, and leaning over the back of a pick-up truck – jacket off, sleeves rolled up – listening to struggling Mid-West farmers are all newsworthy events in modern presidential campaigns. None of these activities signal specific policy positions held by those running to be in the Oval Office, yet they are not without purpose. These photo/video opportunities play a central role in campaigns' efforts to shape their candidate's image. Presidential campaigns are in part a contest over character.

Empirical interest in the effects of candidate character started over a half a century ago when Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes placed their influence at the tip of their proposed “funnel of causality” model in *The American Voter* (1960). The complex relationship among media, perceptions of candidate traits, and vote preference, however, is still not completely understood. Past research examining the link between traits and vote choice has found relatively small, but statically significantly, relationships (Bartels, 2002; Miller & Shanks, 1996). Other studies have looked at the priming of candidate personal attributes from news media as a second-level to agenda-setting that McCombs and his colleagues have termed “attribute agenda-setting” (Becker & McCombs, 1978; McCombs, 2005; Weaver et al. 1981). Examinations of the news media's impact on the meaning ascribed to these attributes by framing them in terms of traits have been mostly found in historical and rhetorical studies of past campaigns (e.g.

Jamieson, 1992; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). The impact of salient issues on broad candidate evaluations has been clearly reported by Shanto Iyengar and his colleagues (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 1982). Only recently have researchers conceptually and empirically tied media priming and framing effects to shifts in perceptions of candidates' traits (Hardy & Jamison, 2005; Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010; Johnston, Hagen, & Jamieson, 2004,).

In the following chapters I bring together elements from these research agendas to advance our knowledge of the complex relationships among campaign communication, candidate traits and vote preference by presenting, and empirically testing, a communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference.

This chapter presents a conceptualization of traits and the theoretical basis for how and why traits may play a role in vote preference in that they provide an easily accessible heuristic allowing citizens to make predictions of future behavior of a candidate if elected. A literature review of research on candidate traits' impact on vote preference is provided. This chapter also explicates the integration of communication theories that forms the communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference and the moderating role of media use on the relationship between perceptions of candidate traits and vote preference.

In subsequent chapters I will detail empirical support for this model. Chapter 2 presents a case study that focuses on the salience of the Iraq war and shows how, in August 2004, Democratic Senator John Kerry's lost ground on the trait "strong leader" - largely attributable to the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT) campaign – impacted

vote preferences. Chapter 3 presents a case study that focuses on the economic meltdown in September and October 2008, concerns over Senator John McCain's age, how the Democratic campaign successfully ascribed the trait "erratic" to the Republican, and how this impacted vote preference.

The 2008 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES) reported that Senator John McCain consistently scored higher than Senator Barack Obama on most of the trait measures. McCain lost the election which presents a potential challenge to the notion that traits matter. In chapter 4, I examine the possibility that the NAES failed to capture one of the more salient traits ascribed to Senator Obama and rely on data from a October 2008 Pew Research Center survey that asked about the trait "inspiring" to make my case. Finally, a summary of the findings and their implications, a discussion of limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research are presented in chapter 5.

1-1: Conceptualizing Traits

The conceptualization of personality traits that forms the basis of the theoretical perspective for this dissertation comes from an article published in 1938 by University of Chicago psychologists Harvey Carr and F. P. Kingsbury:

A trait is a conceptual attribute or definition of the reactive nature of an individual. The nature of the individual is defined on the basis of certain observable behavioral characteristics. Not all observable characteristics are used for this purpose. The definition is based only upon those characteristics (1) which society regards as of sufficient importance to identify and name, and (2) which are regarded as expressions or manifestations of the constitutional nature of the individual. The term 'constitutional nature' refers to all of those relatively permanent and enduring organic conditions that characterize a given individual and differentiate him from his fellows, and these organic conditions may both be innate and acquired in respect to origin (Carr & Kingsbury, 1938, p. 497).

Carr and Kingsbury argued that traits are lexical categorizations for how an individual responds to his or her environment – a person’s *reactive nature*. Yet, traits are much more than just descriptors. When a person reacts to their environment in a persistent pattern, traits are used by others to characterize the *constitutional nature* of this individual – the core of a person’s character or personality.

Carr and Kingsbury suggest that there is a sequential order in understanding a person’s character. First, we view one’s reaction to the environment and then name it with a trait that “society regards as of sufficient importance to identify and name” and after viewing this reaction repeatedly we use this trait to characterize the person’s constitutional nature. Carr and Kingsbury give the following example:

[W]e observe that a given individual acts aggressively and persistently in his endeavors. We also judge that these two modes of conduct are of some significance in accounting for the success of his endeavors. Let us also assume that we have observed these two modes of conduct under such a variety of circumstances that we are forced to conclude that they are expressions or manifestations of his constitutional nature – that the individual acts in these specified ways because he is made that way. Under these conditions we define this person as an individual who acts persistently and aggressively, or as a persistent and aggressive individual.

In this typical illustration, we observe certain *adverbial* characteristics of the individual’s behavior. He acted persistently and aggressively. In defining the reactive nature of the individual, we use *adjectival* terms. He is a persistent and aggressive individual. When we regard these attributes as objects of thought abstracted from the individuals to whom they belong, they become *nouns*, and we refer to them as persistence and aggressiveness (Carr & Kingsbury, 1938, p. 497-498, original emphasis).

A trait is a name assigned to an observed trend in an individual’s behavior. Because traits are assessed as *tendencies* in behavior they allow for predictions of future behavior.

1-2: The Predictive Value of Traits

Most human transactions require trust, or a level of confidence regarding how important others will act. In so far that well-practiced behaviors are automatic or habitual and are reliably linked to future action, past behavior is a robust predictor of future behavior (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). Specific behaviors are bounded to specific situations and over time individuals manifest consistent behavioral patterns that represent their “true self” or “constitutional nature.” Personality traits differ from transient mood states in that the former are relatively enduring. The identification of personality traits in others helps foster interpersonal relationships because traits aide in the prediction of future behavior and minimize uncertainty, risk and doubt. Relationships would be extremely difficult to manage without a means for categorizing behavior that informs expectations of future interactions. Once an individual is defined in terms of traits, a readily accessible heuristic is available when one wishes to predict his or her future behavior.

In sum:

1. Traits are attributes of the reactive nature of an individual that define his or her constitutional nature.
2. The selection of important traits is a social and lexical (or communication) process.
3. Trait inferences are drawn from observed past behavior.
4. Traits are useful because they provide a predictive value for future behavior.

1-3: The Predicative Value of Traits in Assessing Presidential Candidates

The predictive value of traits can be extended to voters' assessments of presidential candidates because they foretell future behavior if elected (see Barber, 1972). Political scientist Benjamin Page wrote, "in an age of nuclear weapons, no aspect of electoral outcomes is more important than the personality of the president, which might well determine how the United States would react in an international confrontation" (Page, 1978, pp. 232-233). Consider the 2000 contest between George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore. This election focused mainly on domestic issues such as Social Security, Medicare, health insurance, and taxes. Nothing about the policy issues that commanded the center stage during this election would forecast how the candidates may respond to the terrorist attacks a year later.

Understanding traits allows one to "reasonably expect this individual to continue acting in these ways in the future" (Carr & Kingsbury, 1938, p. 498) meaning projective evaluations of future job performance of a candidate will be easier for citizens to make. Candidate character traits play an important role in vote decision because they hold predictive value:

1. Traits are used to capsule trends in behavior of the presidential candidates into descriptive attributes.
2. Traits are then used in the prediction of future behavior of the candidate if elected.
3. These predictions of future behavior are then calculated into voters' decision making processes.

1-4: Lexical Approaches to Identifying “Proto-Type” Presidential Candidate Traits and Higher Order Constructs

In past research, presidential candidate traits have been operationalized as “proto-types” consisting of only the traits that are most relevant to voters. For example, in an influential study by Kinder et al. (1980) participants responded to open-ended questions asking them to describe an “ideal” and an “anti-ideal” president. From the responses, two lists of traits, each containing sixteen items, were compiled and respondents then selected the six most important ones from each list to compile a “profile of an ideal president” (Kinder et al, 1980, 319).¹ From these results, Kinder (1986) identified four second-order content dimensions of presidential traits that he labeled competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy. Employing a confirmatory factor analysis, Funk (1996) grouped these components into two higher-order factors: competence and integrity and argued that these are universally relevant in the evaluation of presidential candidates. Work by John Geer shows that most attack advertising on candidates from opposing camps focus on these two dimensions (Geer, 2006, chapter 4).

Consistent with the Kinder et al (1980) approach, Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk (1986) wrote that voters’ general “schema” of a presidential candidate “will be evoked during the actual campaign period when people receive the appropriate stimuli to trigger these pre-existing cognitions” (p.523). This view is consistent with past

¹ This approach in finding important candidate traits follows work in personality trait that focuses on “The Big Five” trait domains: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Costa and McCrae, 1992a; 1992b). Each domain contains “trait facets” or individual traits and the selection of individual traits used to make up the five factors were initially selected by a lexical approach to find clusters of personality descriptors in language (De Raad, 2000). The rationale behind lexical studies of personality traits is based on the assumption that the most meaningful traits are encoded in language as single word descriptors (Carr & Kingsbury, 1938; Saucier & Goldberg, 2001).

research that has shown that people organize their past experiences into cognitive structures known as schemas that are structured sets of expectations and rules that help make sense out of seemingly pattern-less life experiences (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). “Candidate schemas thus reduce the complexity of our impressions by enabling us to categorize and label an individual politician according to certain abstract or representative feature” (Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986, p. 524). Examining responses to open-ended questions on the ANES from 1952 to 1984 these researchers found that perceptions of candidates were mostly focused on personality characteristics and, following Kinder and his colleagues, they constructed general categories that voters use in the evaluation of a candidate: competence, integrity, reliability, charisma, and personal.²

The focus on “proto-typical” character traits and related higher order factors is useful in categorizing the most common traits that come into play in voters’ decision making. However, such categorization can obscure two important points: 1) the meaning of relevant traits may be context dependent; and 2) the mediated campaign can prime which traits matter most and which candidates are seen to have these relevant traits.

1-5: Candidate Traits as Decision-Making Short-Cuts

Voters rely on information shortcuts and heuristics in making political decisions (Lodge & Stroh 1993, Popkin, 1994, Lupia & McCubbins 1998). Candidate traits are particularly useful in this regard since they are relatively easy to assess compared to intricate policy positions (Kinder, 1986). Candidate traits “offer an appealing shortcut for

² The ‘personal’ category refers to background factors such as military experience, religion, wealth, age, health, previous occupation and so on (Miller Wattenberg, & Malachuk, 1986, p. 528).

citizens to evaluate candidates on their performances without having to invest considerable time and energy into following public affairs or uncovering candidate issues” (Funk, 1996, p. 97-97). Voters attend to candidate traits for a relatively inexpensive way to gain information about the candidates and simplify vote decisions (Funk, 1999; Kinder et al, 1983; Miller, Wattenberg, & Melanchuk, 1986; Popkin, 1994; Rahn, Aldrich, Sullivan & Borgida, 1990).

This type of evaluation is easy and people do it all the time. Political scientist Wendy Rahn and her colleagues (1990) suggested that voters’ assessments of candidates’ traits mirror their assessment of people they meet in their everyday lives. The evaluation of candidate traits is also an important part of public discussions on presidential elections. Political scientist Anthony King wrote, “Almost every casual conversation during a national election campaign contains reference to the personal characteristics of major party leaders and candidates” (King, 2002, p. 1). When pressed for the reason one cast a ballot for a candidate or another, many citizens often offer up traits. ““It’s sad to say that my vote has come down to this... I just want to see an honest candidate,” admits Mike Bodnia of Edina, Minnesota. That’s why he’s choosing Sen. John McCain in his state’s upcoming primary, though he doesn’t agree with McCain on every issue,” reported CNN after the Senator from Arizona won the Florida primary. When CNN.com asked its readers to speculate why McCain won, Geno Galindo of Santa Barbara, CA posted, “Like myself, I think many feel character counts and McCain gets big points for character”. In

fact, nearly every response posted on CNN.com by its readers pointed to McCain's character and personal qualities to explain his victory in New Hampshire.³

More systematic data confirms that candidate traits matter. According to the 2008 National Annenberg Election Study, 38 percent pointed to personal qualities of the candidates as the most important factor in vote decision in response to this question, while 46.2 percent cited issues and 12 percent gave both equal weight.⁴

Of course, very few eligible voters have the opportunity to meet or personally listen to candidates, let alone have any form of direct or intimate relationships that would provide the most valuable information for making trait judgments. The vast majority of voters are dependent on mediated representations of the candidates that are now ubiquitous during US presidential elections. Past research on news coverage of campaigns has found more of a focus on "horserace" and candidate personality than on substantive issues (Cappella & Jamieson 1996; 1997; Keeter, 1987; Jamieson, 1992; McLeod, Glynn, & McDonald, 1983; Patterson, 1993; 2002; Pfau, Houston & Semmler, 2007). Research has also shown that post-presidential-debate news coverage devotes most of its time to discussion on candidate traits, leaving little room for coverage on the content of the policy debate (Sears & Chaffee, 1979). In an experiment that exposed participants to the 1988 presidential debates, Pfau and Kang (1991) found that vote intention was influenced by candidates' communication that was considered friendly, sincere and honest and not on policy stands.

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/30/mccain.appeal.irpt/index.html>

⁴ Exact question wording: "Which is more important to you in choosing a candidate for president: their personal qualities such as experience and judgment or their positions on specific issues, such as energy policy and Iraq?"

Some of this emphasis on candidate personality has been traced to campaign strategies that responded to the mass adoption of television in the 1950s.

[In 1952] “Robert Humphreys, public relations director of the Republican National Committee, presented a formal ‘Campaign Plan’ which one writer described: ‘Prepared in standard advertising agency format, the plan outlined basic strategy, organization, appeals, types of speeches, literature, advertising, television and radio programs, the relative weight to be given to the various media, the kinds, places and times of campaign trips and rallies, and the areas in which efforts were to be concentrated.’ It was the first time such a detailed marketing strategy had ever been drawn up for a presidential campaign” (Salmore & Salmore, 1985 p. 41).

The media’s emphasis on candidate traits is magnified by the rise of independent political consultants and the trend toward campaigns disassociation from the political parties (Wattenberg, 1991). Miller and Shanks (1996) noted a “development of a ‘campaign and election’ industry” and that “those who profit from the belief that presidential politics is candidate centered have taken advantage of their visibility and have promoted the thesis (or the mystique) of candidate-centered politics into a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 415). Research has suggested that candidates are more salient to voters than political parties (Miller, Miller, & Malanchuk, 1986; see also Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1979, chapter 4). In his book, *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics*, political scientist Martin P. Wattenberg (1991) contends that candidates are the centerpiece of the campaign.

A recent trend for candidates to bypass professional mainstream journalists by appearing on more entertainment-oriented programming (and more recently still, through use of the internet) has magnified the focus on personality, character and traits. The public watches the candidates giving interviews, giving speeches on the stump,

representing themselves through paid advertising or on their websites, even playing musical instruments on entertainment talk shows (see Baum, 2005). What all of this suggests is that candidates themselves are a central and arguably increasing focus of presidential campaigns (Salmore & Salmore, 1985; Wattenberg, 1991), providing the public with a large pool of mediated information about the personality traits of candidates.

1-6: Do Campaigns Matter?

The combination of voters' dependence on information shortcuts, a self-reported importance of candidate traits in their decision making, and the wave of mediated information about these traits suggests that which traits are primed in a campaign and how they are framed should play a role in electoral outcomes. But a discussion of the importance of candidate character traits needs to be grounded in the past research that has questioned the utility and impact of presidential campaigns on electoral outcomes. Much of the published political science research suggests that presidential campaigns play a limited role. In this view, individual vote choice and electoral outcomes are dependent primarily on structural factors such as economic growth, incumbent popularity, and the partisan makeup of the electorate (Kramer, 1971; Lewis-Beck & Rice, 1992). These "fundamental" variables have been employed to accurately predict election outcomes for decades. Although these predictions have been less reliable when the fundamentals do not dramatically tilt in one direction or the other (Holbrook, 1996) or when the country is at war, in most years the electoral forecasts made months before Election Day by political scientists have been accurate within a percent or two (Gelman & King, 1993). A faltering

economy and an unpopular incumbent usually predicts a win for the party trying get the key to the Oval Office while a thriving economy and high incumbent ratings usually means retention.

According to this tradition of research, campaigns do not seem to hold influence on election outcomes and, at best, highlight to voters their own already formed preferences. Political scientists Andrew Gelman and Gary King (1993) asserted that campaigns serve an informing function that fosters “enlightened preferences” because the importance of fundamentals increase as a campaign progressed, Their study was an attempt to explain why early “trial-heat” poll results appear to be all over the map when forecasting models accurately predict the final outcomes.

Situated within this research that presents negligible campaign effects are important studies have found minimal direct effects of candidate traits on vote choice. In a series of articles that cumulated into *The New American Voter*, Miller and Shanks (Miller & Shanks, 1982; 1996; Shanks & Miller, 1990, 1991) refined the “funnel of causality” model that first appeared in *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) and, like their predecessors, placed voter’s perception of candidate traits at the tip of the funnel. Relying on the 1992 American National Election Study (ANES), these researchers analyzed the impact of traits in a series of steps. First, they analyzed comparative trait evaluations and vote choice and found strong bivariate relationships. However, as they incrementally entered in antecedent variables in their model the influence of traits reduced substantially, suggesting much of the apparent influence of traits was due to exogenous factors. In their final model, however, the influence of traits

never disappeared and ultimately produced “limited – but visible” effects (Miller and Shanks, 1996, p. 421). Following the same logic of a multi-step vote model, Bartels (2002) produced similar results with the ANES data from 1980 to 2000 and found small but detectable effects of candidate traits. Like Miller and Shanks summary, Bartels concluded that traits do have an influence on individual vote choice though this influence is not generally at play in election outcomes.

Similar results were produced more recently by Kesnki, Hardy, and Jamieson (2010), analyzing the 2008 NAES post-election telephone panel, where they found that party identification, ideological placement, incumbent approval rating and economic perceptions (the key variables in forecasting models) explained about 75 percent of the variance⁵ in a Barack Obama two-party vote variable.⁶ These researchers also found that the percent of variance in vote preference that was explained by campaign communication messages was 14.2 percent during the 2008 general election.⁷ This is a conservative estimate of campaign message impact because the variance of a dependent variable can be “unique” and “shared” among predictor variables. Many campaign messages play into one another and are not mutually exclusive, and also interact with more “fundamental” variables when influencing vote preferences. This research suggests that while pre-campaign fundamentals of the sort emphasized by political scientists are

⁵ These researchers use McKelvey and Zavoina R^2 to estimate the variance in their dichotomous two-party vote variable. Simulation studies have found that this statistic is superior to other pseudo R^2 statistics as an analogy to OLS R^2 (see McKelvey & Zavoina, 1975 and DeMaris, 2002).

⁶ The notion of “explained variance” represents the percentage of variability in a dependent variable that can be statistically attributed to independent variables. This approach does not allow for a definitive conclusion on the exact percentage of votes attributable to these fundamentals in a particular election outcome but provides a measure of the average relative impact that these measures had on an individuals’ probability for casting an Obama vote.

⁷ This does not mean that campaign messages can be attributed to 14.2 percent of votes but 14.2 percent of an individual’s vote intention.

robust predictors of vote, campaign messages can also have a detectable and potentially important impact. This means that candidate traits and how they are primed and framed in mediated representations can, in theory, play a limited yet still important role in shaping voters' assessments of candidates, their vote preference, and even the outcome of an election. But do they, and if so, under what circumstances? These are the central research questions of this dissertation.

One shortcoming of extant research in providing guidance for answering these questions is that it is not particularly nuanced methodologically or conceptually. Methodological advances in election survey designs provide opportunities to examine unique influences of campaign communication on trait perceptions and their influences on vote intention. The advent of the rolling cross sectional (RCS) survey enables researchers to closely examine shifts in public opinion during the election cycle (Johnston & Brady, 2001; Romer et al. 2004) which allows for the examination of shifts in specific traits as a campaign progresses as opposed to studying the net effects of traits through one-shot cross sections. As outlined in following chapters, the RCS design can look at the impact of campaign communication on perceptions of candidate traits and allows for a more nuanced examination of the relationship among media use, candidate character traits and vote preference.

There are also theoretical considerations that have not been fully addressed in the examination of the influence of character traits. Political scientist Carolyn Funk (1999) first promoted the notion that the impact of different traits perceptions may vary by candidate and/or across different elections. Concerning her results Funk stated, "The

pattern of coefficients reported here suggests that specific trait dimensions have greater and lesser influence on candidate evaluations depending on the candidate and the campaign context” (Funk, 1999, p. 714). This line of thinking provides a cornerstone for the theoretical argument that is advanced in the following section.

1-7: A Communication Model of the Impact of Candidate Character Traits on Vote Preference

The agenda-setting hypothesis (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) provides the foundation for the theoretical argument of this dissertation. The agenda setting function of the press “is the inadvertent outcome of the necessity of the news media, with their limited capacity, to select a few topics for attention each day” (McCombs, 2005, p. 156). Basing their initial study on Bernard C. Cohen’s well-known quote that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13), McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a very strong correlation between the emphasis that newspapers placed on issues and the importance citizens attributed to them and reported a “near perfect correspondence between the ranking of major issues on the press and public agendas” (McCombs, 2005, 157). Further work, employing cross-lagged correlations, supported the notion that media coverage sets the public agenda by making certain issues and not others salient (see McCombs, 2005; McCombs and Shaw, 1993 for a discussion of the evolution of this theory). Since these seminal studies, empirical support for the agenda-setting hypothesis has been generated through the triangulation of research methods (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder, 1987) and in a variety of contexts. For example, in their book *News That Matters*, Iyengar and Kinder, (1987), found that participants who viewed newscasts

that described inadequacy in US defense capabilities rated the importance of the problem of defense much higher post-experiment (post-exposure) than pre-experiment (pre-exposure). These authors test the agenda-setting function a variety of different ways and most results support the agenda-setting hypothesis.

In political communication research, two other media effects, priming and framing, have been conceptually tied to agenda-setting, leading McCombs to incorporate both into a multi-level agenda-setting model (see McCombs, 2005, for review). Agenda-setting and priming are inherently related because the theoretical basis for both is *salience*. Much like agenda-setting, the priming hypothesis states that mass media make some issues more salient than others and that this heightened issue salience influences the judgments of public policy, public officials, and candidates for public office (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Work by Iyengar and his associates (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 1982) found that salience of certain issues primed by mass media influenced evaluations of presidents. According to Iyengar and Kinder (1987) priming refers to “changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations” (p. 63). The news suggests to audiences which issues are important and should be used as benchmarks in the assessment of political leaders and government.

According to the agenda setting and priming hypotheses, individuals make evaluations and judgments based on information that is the most easily accessible. Priming is the “inherently individual psychological outcome of agenda-setting” (Scheufele, 2000, p. 302) and both models can be viewed as memory- or accessibility-based models. “The idea of accessibility is the foundation of a memory-based model of

information processing, which assumes that individuals make judgments about other people or issues based on information easily available and retrievable from memory” (Scheufele, 2000, p. 299; see also, Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

Although, much of the research on agenda-setting and priming has conceptualized them as inadvertent effects produced by journalistic norms and limits in the capacity of the press combined with limitations of human cognition, agenda-setting and priming can be somewhat directed through the use of agenda building, i.e. trying to influence the press agenda (Cobb & Elder, 1971) and communication campaigns. During presidential elections, campaigns attempt to keep certain issues on the news agenda while trying to keep others off. In the 2004 election, the Republicans maintained a link between terrorism, the War on Iraq, and George W. Bush through the use of political advertisements. A recent study showed that terrorism was the number one topic presented in the Republican advertisements (Kaid & Dimitrova, 2005). In 2000, concerned it would connect him with President Clinton and possibly the Lewinsky scandal, Vice President Al Gore, the Democratic front-runner, hardly mentioned the thriving economy. As some observers have noted (Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson, 2004), Gore’s failure to prime the economy may have cost him the White House because the economy was not salient during the campaign and therefore voters were not using it as the benchmark for evaluating the candidates.

Framing, on the other hand, is the notion that the way an issue is presented or characterized in the news will have a noticeable influence on how the issue is understood by audiences. The way an issue is framed activates certain schemas in an individual.

According to Iyengar in his book *Is Anyone Responsible* (1991) “the concept of framing refers to subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems, and the term “framing effects” refers to changes in decisions outcomes resulting from these alterations” (p. 11). A frame is a contextual cue that activates pre-existing schema that is used by individuals to make meaning of the message. Framing is not, in a strict sense, a salience-based model like priming and agenda setting. Instead it refers to the process in which a message structure and points of emphasis influences the applicability and activation of particular pre-held thoughts (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

Some scholars have suggested that to frame something is to make aspects of a message more salient than others. Consider Robert Entman’s (1993) definition: “To frame is *to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such ways as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described*” (p. 52, original emphasis). Entman uses the term salience to refer to emphasis. Along the same lines of reasoning, McCombs and his colleagues (see McCombs, 2005, for review) incorporated framing into a two-level agenda-setting framework calling it “attribute agenda setting.” McCombs explained:

The distinction between agenda objects, the first level of agenda-setting, and agendas as attributes, the second level of agenda-setting effects is intuitively clear in an elections setting. The candidates seeking an office are the agenda objects. The descriptions of each candidate in the press and the image of these candidates in the voters’ mind the agenda of attributes. Attribute agenda setting is the influence of the descriptions of the press on the public’s image of the candidate. (McCombs, 2005, p. 161)

While this quote will be discussed in greater detail below, there is an important content-based distinction between framing, on one hand, and priming and agenda-setting, on the other. Price and Tewksbury (1997) explain, “Agenda setting looks on story selection as a determinant of public perception of issue importance and, indirectly through priming, evaluation of political leaders. Framing focuses not on which topics or issues are selected for coverage by the news media, but instead on the particular ways those issues are presented.” (p.184). This is true with McCombs’ attribute agenda setting in that certain characteristics are granted more importance than others by the media yet this conceptualization does not take into account the ways those attributes are presented.

To illustrate this point, I employ the online application *www.wordle.net* which generates “word clouds” from provided text. As the website describes, “The clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text.” Figure 1.1 shows the word cloud from a general list of possible issues that I created for this example. I did not scientifically construct the list, but simply included whatever I thought of at the time. Any error of omission is purely accidental and is not intended to minimize the importance of an issue that may have been excluded. In this figure, each word is included in the analyzed text only once giving them all equal weight. If the question, “Which word is important in this image?” was posed to a group of viewers, each individual may have a different answer. While position on the image, i.e. top, bottom, left or right, and individual’s predispositions might have subtle influence there is no clear indicator of importance. Figure 1.2 shows a *www.wordle.net* cloud in which certain terms were entered multiple times giving them more weight. If the same question above was

posed regarding this image one could safely assume that the word “economy” and “taxes” would be offered more often than not. This is parallel to agenda setting and priming in that sense that salient agenda items will be deemed more important.

Figure 1.1: *Wordle.net Representation of a Hypothetical Universe of Issues in which Each Word was Entered into the Program Once*



Figure 1.2: *Wordle.net Representation of a Hypothetical Universe of Issues in which Some Words were Entered into the Program Multiple Times Giving them More Prominence*



Even though “economy” is the most prominent word in the figure 1.2, there is little to go on in terms of what “economy” means. Is the economy thriving, stalling, faltering, or crashing? The meaning of “economy” is ambiguous in the image. The agenda setting and priming hypotheses do not speak to the meaning of a message, just the prominence.

The same type of example can be used with McCombs’ attribute agenda setting model. Figure 1.3 shows a word cloud of attributes of Senator John McCain as a 2008 presidential candidate. These words were only entered into the program once and like before the list was created off the top of my head for this example and is not meant to represent reality. There are fewer words in this example than above which makes it a bit easier to focus on one word but in figure 1.3 there is clearly not a definitive salient word. Figure 1.4 produces an obvious effect. Yet, the meaning of “72-years-old” is still missing. Does it mean wise or senile? How “72-years-old” is framed will provide meaning.

Figure 1.3: *Wordle.net Representation of a Hypothetical Universe of Personal Attributes of John McCain in which Each Word was Entered into the Program Once*



Figure 1.4: *Wordle.net Representation of a Hypothetical Universe of Personal Attributes of John McCain in which Some Words are Entered into the Program Multiple Times Giving them More Prominence*



The few studies that have examined attribute agenda setting focus on the salience of attributes and not necessarily the meaning attributed to them. For example, Weaver et al. observed in 1981 that, attributes stressed in the *Chicago Tribune* ran in “parallel lines”

with Illinois voters' descriptions of leading candidates (Weaver et al. 1981, 201). These authors concluded:

By concentrating on certain attributes of a candidate and downplaying or ignoring other attributes, the mass media play an important agenda-setting role with regard to that's candidate's image. In other words, the media provide an agenda of attributes from which voters' images of the candidates are formed (Weaver, et al. 1981, 162).

Likewise, Becker and McCombs (1978) found a correspondence between attributes found in *Newsweek* and the agenda of attributes in upstate New York Democrats' descriptions of their party's candidates during the 1976 presidential primaries and noted “candidate attributes may be ordered from most to least prominent” (Becker and McCombs, 1978, 302).

In McCombs' description of the two-level agenda-setting model that is cited above, he states that the first level is the candidate and the second level are their attributes. This conceptualization is somewhat different from McCombs and Shaw's original hypothesis and Iyengar's thinking on media priming in which the first level is an agenda of issues and those issues are used in the evaluation of the candidates.

Connecting these two agendas is paramount in understanding how certain character traits become salient during a campaign. While priming asserts that salient issues are used as benchmarks for evaluation of candidates, I theorize that these salient issues also influence the selection of attributes of the candidates by the media and provide the context in which these attributes can be framed. For example, during a time of war, leadership attributes of the candidates may be most salient, while during a period of high-profile corruption honesty may take center stage. The narrative of the candidates, and

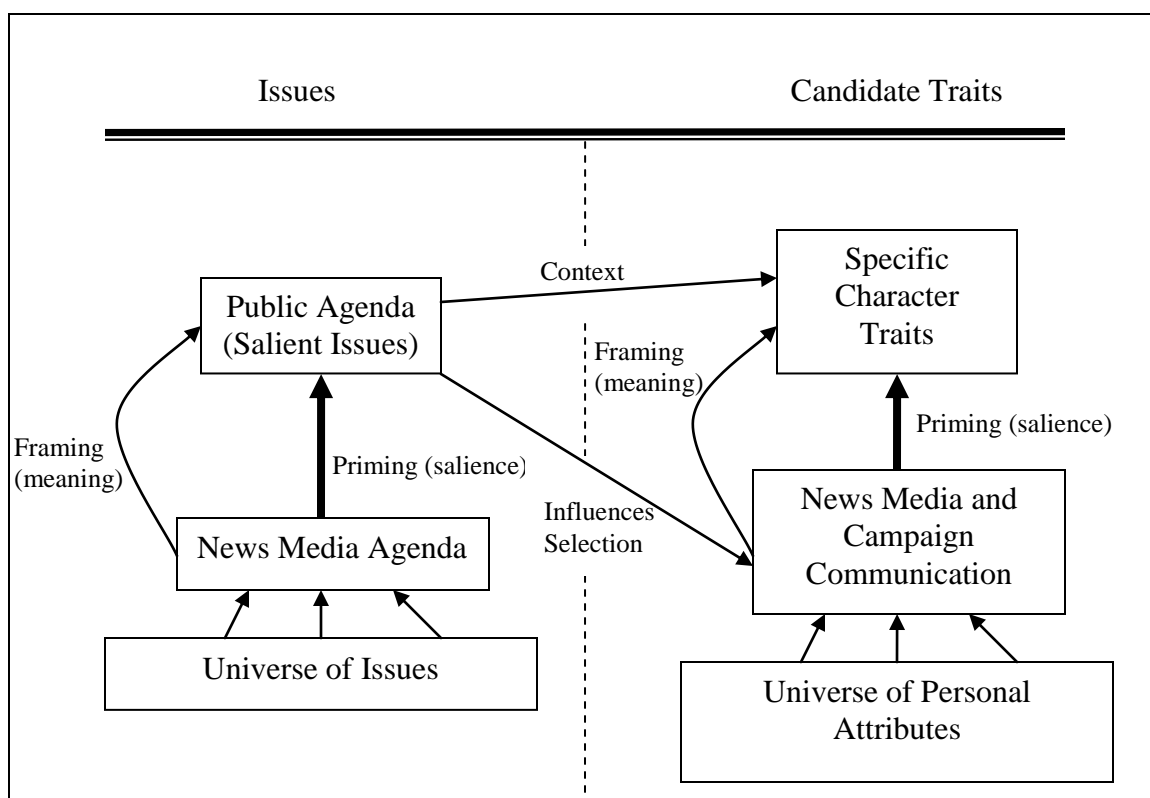
how their attributes and image are framed, are dependent on how the issues are framed in the public agenda as it provides the larger context supplying meaning.

Although, it is necessary to separate agenda setting, priming, and framing to facilitate theoretical clarity (as I do in the model presented below), in the “real world” these media effects happen simultaneously. Figure 1.5 illustrates the theoretical model connecting issue priming and framing and the priming and framing of candidate traits. The bottom blocks in both models represent a universe of objects that could be primed by mass media. For a variety of reasons (most likely environmental changes, but there are ancillary motives as well) mainstream news media select a few issues to which to devote coverage which then in turns increases the salience of these issues. The same is true with the selection of candidate attributes in that the media and campaigns can only focus on a select few. This is represented by the second block in the model. Notice that campaign communication is included with news media in the trait agenda setting model. Campaigns have more control over the traits ascribed to candidates than they do salient issues – even though in that arena the campaigns can have a small but detectable impact. Campaign advertisements, press opportunities, debates, speeches and other forms of communication give the candidates a loud enough voice to prime and frame their traits and those of their competitors. Finally, the top blocks represent the issues and trait that were made salient and framed by campaign communication.

The model also represents how salient issues 1) influence the selection of the traits by the media and the campaigns and 2) provide a context in which meaningful frames can be applied. As shown in chapter 2 and chapter 3, the saliences of the War in

Iraq/War on Terrorism influenced the selection of attributes and provide the context for the framing of those attributes in 2004, while in 2008 the economic meltdown played this role.

Figure 1.5: *Theoretical Representation of a Communication Model of the Impact of Candidate Character Traits on Vote Preference*



In addition to heavy media use being related to individual perceptions of candidate traits, I theorize that news use will also have a moderating role on the impact of a candidate trait on vote decision. Candidate traits will have a greater impact on vote preference for high consumers of news media because the specific trait and the way in which it is framed will be more accessible. Therefore the interaction between news use

and trait ratings will be significantly related to vote preference, as shown in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

1-8: Overview of Research

This dissertation presents a communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference. In this chapter I provided a definition of “character traits” and describe the ways in which traits can be used to predict future behavior. I discussed in theory how the use of traits is valuable in assessing presidential candidates, albeit indirectly through mediated representations of the candidates. Relevant literature was reviewed which suggests a limited but detectable role for candidate trait perceptions on vote choice based on research that is somewhat methodologically limited and conceptually underdeveloped. Advancing this past research, a communication-based framework, built upon agenda-setting, priming and framing theories, for conceptualizing the processes through which mediated representations of candidate traits can lead to specific candidate trait perceptions among voters, and how, in turn, these perceptions can influence vote preference was presented.

This model serves as the basis for the empirical research to follow which analyzes data from the 2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Surveys and an October 2008 Pew survey. As I will show, in 2004, the salience of war made “leadership” the central trait of relevance to voter. Leading up to the Democratic convention Senator John Kerry was running on his status as a war hero, arguing that he could handle the war in Iraq better than incumbent George W. Bush. Directly after the Democratic convention, the 527 group, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT) aired advertisements that questioned

his actions in Vietnam and attacked his leadership credentials. Chapter 2 shows how the SBVT campaign against Kerry was picked up by news media and influenced perceptions of Kerry on the trait “strong leader.” It also demonstrates that the relationship between this trait and vote preference was moderated by news media use.

The 2008 general election was marked by the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression. The media attention on Wall Street’s troubles influenced the traits that were ascribed to the candidates. Even though Republican Senator John McCain was a war hero and had a history of bipartisan policy making and standing up against his own party, a media focus on his age pervaded. During the financial crisis in September 2008, the Democrats used the trait “erratic” to capsule McCain’s age and his behavior. Chapter 3 reports how this trait was introduced and adopted by media, how this coverage influenced voters’ perceptions of the candidates’ ability to handle the economy if elected, and the differential impact of the perception of John McCain as erratic on vote preference.

According to 2008 NAES data, John McCain scored higher than Senator Barack Obama on a variety of leadership trait measures, such as “strong leader,” “patriotic,” and “experience.” However these trait advantages did not translate into electoral victory for McCain. A possible explanation for this is that these specific traits were not central in 2008. The analyses reported in chapter 3 rely on a Pew dataset where perceptions of the candidates on the trait “inspiring” were collected from likely voters. That inspiring reflects the Obama campaign’s message of “change we need” in the troubled economic times. Although the Pew survey did not include media use measures, the proxy measure

“closely following the election” is used and shows a direct impact on perceptions of Obama as “inspiring.” The impact of this trait on vote choice is moderated by how closely respondents were following the election.

Taken together, the three case studies presented in the following chapters produce consistent results that demonstrate the process from issue salience to trait salience, as well as the differential impact of salient traits on vote preference by media use. These results support the theoretical model developed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 2:
How the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth Campaign Shot Down
John Kerry's Leadership Credentials

The 2004 presidential campaign was entrenched in three wars: the War on Terrorism, the Iraq War and the Vietnam War. These wars were interconnected less because of their strategic similarities than for their strategic rhetorical value in framing the presidential candidates' character and priming "leadership" as a central personality trait upon which voters should base their decision. Both the Republican candidate, incumbent president George W. Bush, and Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry campaigned on their leadership credentials. President Bush exploited the recent memory of his speaking to the nation through a megaphone atop of the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center days after the September 11 terrorist attacks through campaign's advertising. Senator Kerry campaigned on his biography of being a decorated Vietnam War hero and a tested leader; opening his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention with a salute and firmly stating "I am John Kerry, and I am reporting for duty." Within a week of the Democratic Convention, however, Kerry's status as a heroic swift boat commander in Vietnam came under attack by the 527 organization, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, prompting voters to question his ability to lead nation.

In this chapter, I document both the ways in which "leadership" was primed and framed by campaign communications during the 2004 presidential election and how this strategy led to different assessments of the leadership strengths of the candidates and ultimately these inferences affected citizens' vote preference. The results empirically

support the communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference.

2-1: The 2004 Election, War, and Leadership

When the polls closed on November 2, 2004, the results showed that George W. Bush had captured approximately 51 percent of the two-party vote.⁸ Before ballots were cast, however, conventional wisdom suggested that Kerry had a real chance at winning. As noted in chapter 1, political sciences forecasts rely on pre-campaign economic indicators to predict presidential election outcomes. On this score, President Bush looked vulnerable. The deficit was at a record high, net job losses were at 2 percent, the stock market had declined over the past four years, and Bush's overall approval rating had dropped to about 50 percent. In fact, the 2004 election was too close to call for presidential forecasters Michael Lewis-Beck and Charles Tien (2004).

Forecasting models also suggest that "war" can sometimes rival and even trump the economy in relative importance to vote choice. But even here Bush appeared vulnerable. The War in Iraq was not going as planned and support for it and Bush's handling of it were declining. According to the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) only 44 percent approved of Bush's handling of Iraq.⁹ This war was high in cost and casualties with no clear end in sight, becoming more reminiscent of Vietnam than the brief and successful Desert Storm of George H.W. Bush. And the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq had undermined President Bush's primary justification for the pre-emptive engagement and made him potentially vulnerable on

⁸ http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/2004/election_results.html.

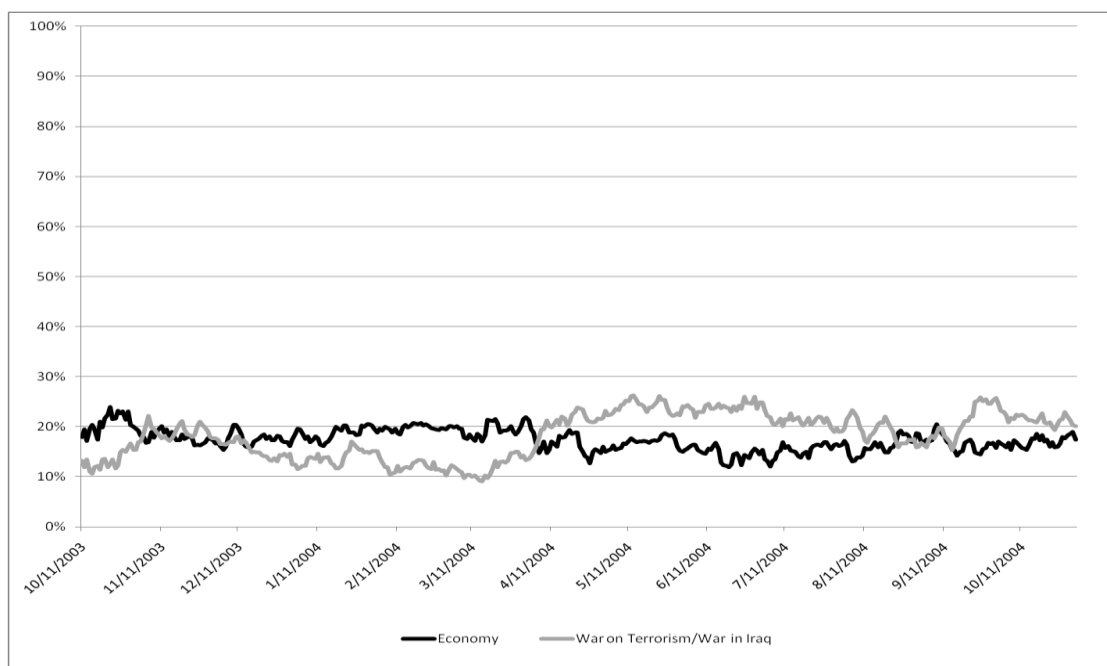
⁹ 7/01/04 to Election Day, 2004 NAES ($N = 36,912$). Exact question wording: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is currently handling the situation in Iraq?"

what was once his strongest issue, the War on Terror. “For many opponents of the Iraq War, the victory of George W. Bush nonetheless was not only maddening but incomprehensible” noted political scientists Helmut Norpoth and Andrew Sidman (2007, p. 175).

All these issues were salient during the 2004 presidential election. According to the 2004 NAES, similar percentages were reported for the economy and the War on Iraq/War on Terrorism when respondents were asked “what is the most important problem facing our country today?” (figure 2.1). Looking across the 2004 NAES data that spans the entire election, these two issues ranked number one (War on Iraq/War on Terror - 25.6%) and number two (the economy - 17.3%) as the most important problem. Runners-up were: 3) Unemployment/job security/layoff (8.2%), 4) health care (6.1%) and 5) lack of moral issues/family values (5.5%).

As detailed in chapter 1, presidential election scholars have known for some time that the salient issues at the time of a presidential campaign influence the ways in which voters evaluate candidates. The news (and other campaign communication) suggests which issues are important and should be used as benchmarks in the evaluation of political leaders and incumbent government. Given the salience of war, the victory of George W. Bush may have, in part, been the outcome of the perceived leadership attributes of the candidates.

Figure 2.1: *The Percent of Respondents who Said the Economy Versus the Percent who Said the War on Terrorism/War on Iraq Were the “Most Important Problem Facing our Country Today?” (5-Day Prior Moving Average)*



According to the communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference, the salience of war should have influenced which traits were primed and then framed by the media. In 2004 the capacity to lead was the trait that became prominent. Campaign managers believed so. During the Annenberg Public Policy Center Election Debriefing on December 3, 2004, the center’s director, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, asked Tucker Eskew, president of Eskew Strategy Group, LLC, and senior advisor to Bush-Cheney 2004, “what was the most important thing you thought that the public should have learned from [the Republican Campaign]?” He simply replied “strong leader” (Jamieson, 2006, pp 167-168). According to this campaign strategist, a single presidential character trait outweighed all other information that the campaign was trying to convey to

the public. Bush campaign media consultant, Mark McKinnon, explained their advertising strategy for the 2004 election:

Very quickly, we determined the idea of steady leadership still held a powerful message for us, certainly on our side, but ‘steady’ in terms of John Kerry is much different than it was for Howard Dean. For Howard Dean it was sort of ‘steady’ versus ‘crazy.’ With John Kerry we were going to argue ‘unsteady’ as in ‘not consistent, politically.’ Steady meant steady convictions or principals, which we knew was something people believed about the president. We wanted to articulate the idea that even if you didn’t like this guy you know where he stands, you know what he believes, you know where he’s headed (Jamieson, 2006, pp 39-40).

The centrality of leadership to the 2004 Republican campaign was illustrated in Bush’s acceptance speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention which he began by priming the September 11 attack and then focused on his leadership.

- “Two months from today, voters will make a choice based on the records we have built, the convictions we hold, and the vision that guides us forward. A presidential election is a contest for the future. Tonight I will tell you where I stand, what I believe, and where I will lead this country in the next four years.”
- “I believe this Nation wants steady, consistent, principled leadership, and that is why, with your help, we will win this election.”
- “This election will also determine how America responds to the continuing danger of terrorism -- and you know where I stand”¹⁰

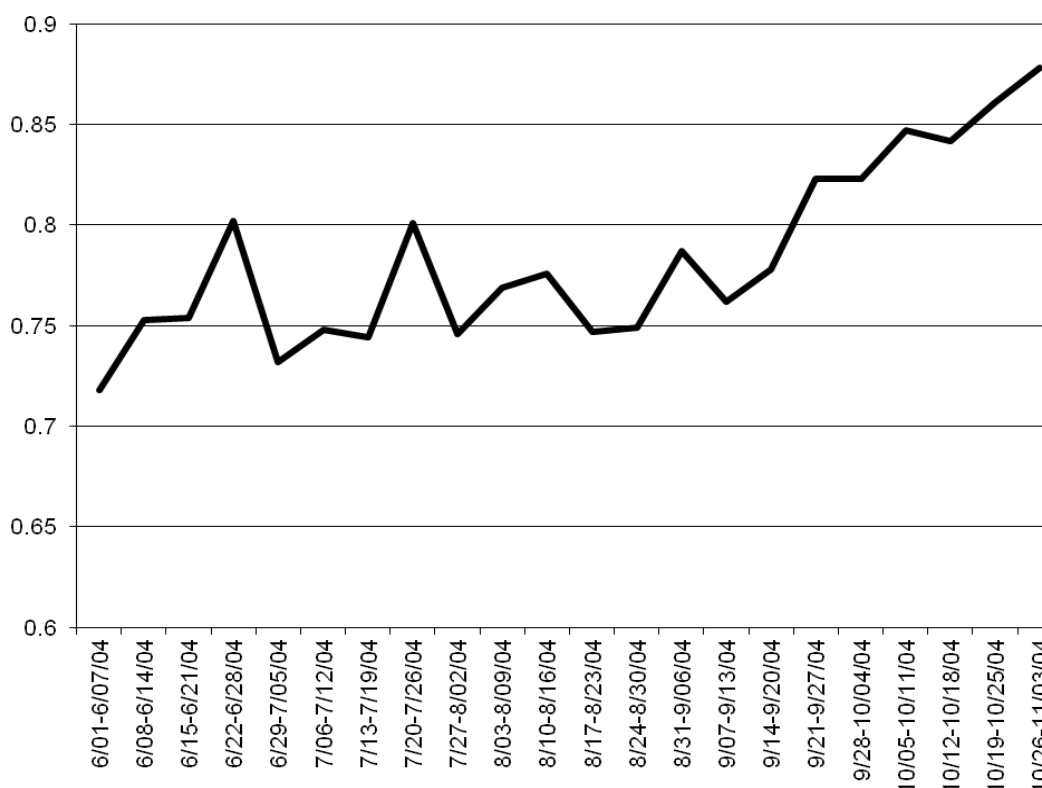
The Republican campaign conflated the War on Terror and the Iraq War, making it a single issue in the public mind, especially late in the campaign. Even though the War in Iraq was becoming increasingly unpopular¹¹ the tie to terrorism and national security was used to justify the message of “staying the course.” According to the 2004 National

¹⁰ Transcript is available online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/09/20040902-2.html>

¹¹ A report by Pew, “Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008” released on March 19, 2008 showed that in March 2003 72 percent of the public believed the decision to use military force in Iraq was the right decision which dropped to 55 percent in March 2004 and then 47 percent by February 2005. Report available online: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/770/iraq-war-five-year-anniversary>

Annenberg Election Survey, approval of Bush's handling of the War in Iraq and the War on Terror was highly correlated throughout the general election. Importantly, the correlation increased as Election Day neared (figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: *The Correlation between Bush's Approval Ratings of Handling the War in Iraq and the War on Terror*



Throughout the campaign the GOP insinuated ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Public opinion polls showed that most Americans believed that Saddam Hussein had a hand in the September 11th attacks. The 2004 NAES asked 3,955 respondents polled from 6-17-2004 to 7-13-2004, “Based on what you've heard or read, do you believe that Saddam Hussein's government helped the Al Qaeda terrorists in the

September 11th attacks, or don't you think Saddam Hussein was involved?" Fifty-two percent of respondents said "yes," 38 percent said "no," and 10 percent "did not know."

By keeping terrorism salient and linking it to the Iraq War, the Republican campaign made voters "extremely risk adverse," according to Kerry strategist Mary Beth Cahill (Jamieson, 2006, p. 34), which gave them the control the agenda of the election. Bush's campaign communication was centered on his image as a strong and steady leader who was able to stay the course both in Iraq and the inter-linked fight against terrorism. The goal was to raise concerns about changing leaders during a time when threat and security were prominent in voters' minds. Bush consistently scored higher than Kerry on this key trait as can be seen in table 2.1, which reports the results of Gallup polls conducted during the 2004 campaign that ask respondents if the term "strong leader" applied more to John Kerry or to George W. Bush.

Table 2.1: Results from Gallop Polls that Asked if the Term "Strong Leader" Applied More to John Kerry or George W. Bush

	<i>Gallup 1/29- 2/01/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 7/19- 7/21/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 7/30- 7/31/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 7/30- 8/01/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 8/23- 8/25/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 9/3- 9/05/04 (%)</i>
John Kerry	39	37	42	42	34	32
George W. Bush	53	54	51	52	54	60
Both (vol.)	3	3	3	2	2	4
Neither (vol.)	1	3	2	2	5	3
No Opinion	4	2	2	2	5	1
<i>N</i>	<i>1,001</i>	<i>1,005</i>	<i>1,011</i>	<i>1,518</i>	<i>1,004</i>	<i>1,018</i>
	<i>Gallup 10/1- 10/03/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 10/9- 10/10/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 10/14- 10/16/04 (%)</i>	<i>Gallup 10/22- 10/24/04 (%)</i>		
John Kerry	37	38	37	38		
George W. Bush	56	56	57	57		
Both (vol.)	2	2	2	2		
Neither (vol.)	2	2	2	2		
No Opinion	3	2	2	1		
<i>N</i>	<i>1,016</i>	<i>1,015</i>	<i>1,013</i>	<i>1,538</i>		

Since he had supported the War in Afghanistan and the ongoing War on Terrorism, the Kerry campaign could not directly attack Bush on foreign policy. He also stated early in the general election that he would have still authorized the President's actions in Iraq even if he knew at that time that the country did not have any weapons of mass destruction, a statement that many pundits featured when tying the term "flip-flopper" to the Democrat. The Massachusetts Senator also did not support pulling our troops out of Iraq, instead arguing that "I can fight and I will fight a smarter, more effective War on Terror than George Bush has, and I will make Americans safer than George Bush has."¹² In turn Republican advertisements used visuals of Kerry wind-surfing randomly in different direction, suggesting that his stance had changed with the wind, reinforcing his "flip-flopper" identity, and raising doubts about both his foreign policy stances and, more central to this dissertation, his leadership ability.

The Democrat's response aimed at bolstering Kerry's image as a strong leader by running on his biography as a Vietnam War hero. In a 2005 interview on PBS's *Frontline*, Bush's campaign strategists, Mark McKinnon, stated "You ask anybody about the Kerry convention two weeks later, what they remember about it -- nothing except Vietnam."¹³ Communication scholar, G. Mitchell Reyes, summarized the Democrats' strategy:

In the months leading up to the Democratic National Convention (DNC), Kerry continued to foreground his war hero status as a presidential asset. The hope was that the Democrats might cut into the traditional advantage Republicans enjoy

¹² US News and World Report (September 5, 2004) "Whenever necessary 'I will make America safer than George Bush has'" <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/040913/13convention.b2.htm>

¹³ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/architect/interviews/mckinnon.html>

with veterans and their families (recent history shows a 40/60 split with this demographic). On July 29, 2004 Kerry flaunted his veteran credentials by “reporting for duty” during his acceptance speech at the DNC, ratcheting one notch further the emphasis on his Vietnam service. Kerry’s play on words marked the culmination of a theme that dominated the convention: his standing as a war hero and his military record. Apparently the Democratic National Committee thought it was wise to trumpet Kerry’s veteran status and place “military veterans front and center throughout their convention” (Halbfinger, 2004). His three Purple Hearts could quiet those who labeled him a “flip-flopper”; his Silver Star could quell criticism of his national security record. At the July convention the Democratic Party seemed to inoculate itself against criticism by detailing Kerry’s veteran past (Reyes, 2006, p. 572).

The strategy of the Democrats seemed to initially pay off. As shown below, in the days leading up to the Democratic National Convention, Kerry made gained ground on the trait “strong leader.” Touting himself as a Vietnam War hero also gave Kerry the credentials to frame Iraq as similar to the war in which he served while simultaneously reinforcing the argument that he could fight a “smarter war.” However, Kerry dropped dramatically below Bush on this trait in early August, a trend that continued throughout the election. As I show below, this is a direct outcome of the campaign communication during this time.

2-2: The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth

In April 2004, a group of Vietnam veterans formed the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” (SBVT) in response to the Kerry campaign. As reported in the *New York Times* the group got together after writer Douglas Brinkley released the authorized biography of Senator John Kerry. While the book highlighted Senator Kerry’s hero status it vilified his

former commanders, Roy F. Hoffmann and Adrian L. Lonsdale as “war criminals.”¹⁴

These two ex-commanders teamed up with Vietnam veteran and Texas lawyer, John O’Neill and a handful of other Vietnam veterans to form the SBVT. O’Neill, a former Swift Boat commander himself, had once debated Kerry on the Dick Cavett show in 1971 over Kerry’s congressional testimony that American soldiers in Vietnam committed war crimes and “atrocities.” At the time of the exchange, O’Neill was a member of the group “Veterans for a Just Peace,” which supported the Nixon administration’s “Vietnamization” strategy – a plan to encourage South Vietnam to take over the war. Kerry, on the other hand, was a member of the group “Vietnam Veterans Against the War,” which called for an immediate withdrawal of American soldiers from Vietnam.

With John Kerry running on his biography as a Vietnam War hero, “veterans with longstanding anger about Mr. Kerry’s antiwar statements in the early 1970’s allied themselves with Texas Republicans.”¹⁵ As communication scholar, G. Mitchell Reyes (2006) tells:

In sharing their stories, the group confirmed each others’ previously loose impressions: Not only did Kerry betray his fellow soldiers and his country by testifying to Congress against American involvement in Vietnam, not only did he detail atrocities that he claimed American soldiers commonly committed in Vietnam, but now he meant to run for the office of commander in chief on the merits of his Vietnam service, as illustrated in Kerry’s ads during the spring primaries. In their view, Kerry’s opportunism and hypocrisy were simply too much to bear (p. 572).

¹⁴ Kate Zernike and Jim Rutenberg (August 20, 2004) “The 2004 campaign: Advertising; Friendly Fire: The Birth of an Attack on Kerry,” *The New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/20/us/the-2004-campaign-advertising-friendly-fire-the-birth-of-an-attack-on-kerry.html>

¹⁵ Kate Zernike and Jim Rutenberg (August 20, 2004) “The 2004 campaign: Advertising; Friendly Fire: The Birth of an Attack on Kerry,” *The New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/20/us/the-2004-campaign-advertising-friendly-fire-the-birth-of-an-attack-on-kerry.html>

Although, SBVT is considered a 527 organization – an organization independent from the political parties, but one whose purpose was to influence the election – there has been speculation concerning its ties with the Bush campaign. In addition, many of their factual claims have been since discounted or challenged (for an excellent review see May, 2005). Nonetheless, the SBVT were influential in defining the leadership qualities of Senator Kerry. On August 5, 2004, the group released its first advertisement titled “Any Question” that explicitly attacked Kerry’s leadership ability and his honesty:

John Edwards: "If you have any questions about what John Kerry is made of, just spend 3 minutes with the men who served with him."

(On screen: Here's what those men think of John Kerry)

Al French: I served with John Kerry.

Bob Elder: I served with John Kerry.

George Elliott: John Kerry has not been honest about what happened in Vietnam.

Al French: He is lying about his record.

Louis Letson: I know John Kerry is lying about his first Purple Heart because I treated him for that injury.

Van O'Dell: John Kerry lied to get his bronze star...I know, I was there, I saw what happened.

Jack Chenoweth: His account of what happened and what actually happened are the difference between night and day.

Admiral Hoffman: John Kerry has not been honest.

Adrian Lonsdale: And he lacks the capacity to lead.

Larry Thurlow: When the chips were down, you could not count on John Kerry.

Bob Elder: John Kerry is no war hero.

Grant Hibbard: He betrayed all his shipmates...he lied before the Senate.

Shelton White: John Kerry betrayed the men and women he served with in Vietnam.

Joe Ponder: He dishonored his country...he most certainly did.

Bob Hildreth: I served with John Kerry...

Bob Hildreth (off camera): John Kerry cannot be trusted.

This advertisement was only aired in a small handful battleground markets such as Charleston, West Virginia; Green Bay, Wisconsin; Toledo, and Youngstown, Ohio. The Kerry campaign did not respond to the initial attack (a decision many pundits point to as a major mistake during his run for presidency).¹⁶ The SVBT produced three more advertisements (released on August 20th, August 26th, and August 30th) that continued to argue that John Kerry did not earn his medals and lacked the capacity to lead.¹⁷

These new ads, and the SVBT more generally, garnered significant national media attention. A recent review by Albert May (2005) found that national broadcast news attention to the SBVT jumped from two news stories during May through July 2004 to 39 stories in August. The jump was much higher for cable news: 11 stories featuring the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth during May through July 2004 to 262 stories in August 2004. Chief strategist for the SBVT Chris LaCivita said at The Annenberg Public Policy Center debriefing “I can’t even quantify for you the amount of times the ad was actually run on cable talk shows...it was a truly phenomenal experience” (Jamieson, 2006, pp.

¹⁶ Nina J. Easton, Michael Kranish, Patrick Healy, Glen Johnson, Anne E. Kornblut, and Brian Mooney of the Globe staff. November 14, 2004. *The Boston Globe*. On the trail of Kerry's failed dream: Pair of wars dominated strategy before election.

http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2004/11/14/on_the_trail_of_kerrys_failed_dream/

¹⁷ In addition to these advertisements the group released more advertisements in September and October through their website.

185-186). Democrat consultant, Bill Knapp stated the SBVT was “the most cost-efficient million bucks every spent in the history of presidential politics short of the Daisy ad” (Jamieson, 2006, 69).

Figures 2.3 and 2.4 independently confirm that the news media picked up the story. Figure 2.3 shows the numbers of article hits by day in the Lexis Nexis database searching publications (i.e. U.S. newspapers and magazines). The two lines in the figure represent two different search terms. The black line tracks the search term “swift boat” and is included to show a peak of this term during the Democratic National Convention at the end of July, where Senator Kerry promoted his leadership abilities as a swift boat captain during the Vietnam War. The grey line represents the number of article hits by day for the search term “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” – the group attacking Kerry. As figure 2.3 shows, the term “swift boat” produced a short peak in publications during the Democratic National Convention when John Kerry was promoting his leadership credentials. At this time the term “swift boat” held positive connotations for the Kerry campaign. However, after August 5th, when the SBVT released their first ad we see that the search terms “swift boat” and “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” become almost synonymous and take on a negative meaning for the Kerry campaign. Obviously, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth search term includes “swift boat” but the lack of convergence between these two terms before the first ad is released (August 5th) and their seemingly parallel lines after suggest that the term “swift boat” was consumed by the 527 organization’s attacks. The figure shows a slight uptick of news media attention to the SBVT attack immediately after the first advertisement was released (August 5th) but

shows a much larger media interest in the story after the subsequent ads were aired during the end of August. Magnifying attention to the charges, on August 24th Kerry appeared on *The Daily Show with John Stewart* giving his first response to the SBVT attacks – nineteen days after the first ad was aired. Figure 2.4 shows similar trends as figure 2.3 but details the number of article hits found on Lexis Nexis for television and radio transcripts.

Figure 2.3: *Number of Article Hits from Print Publication is Lexis Nexis Database*

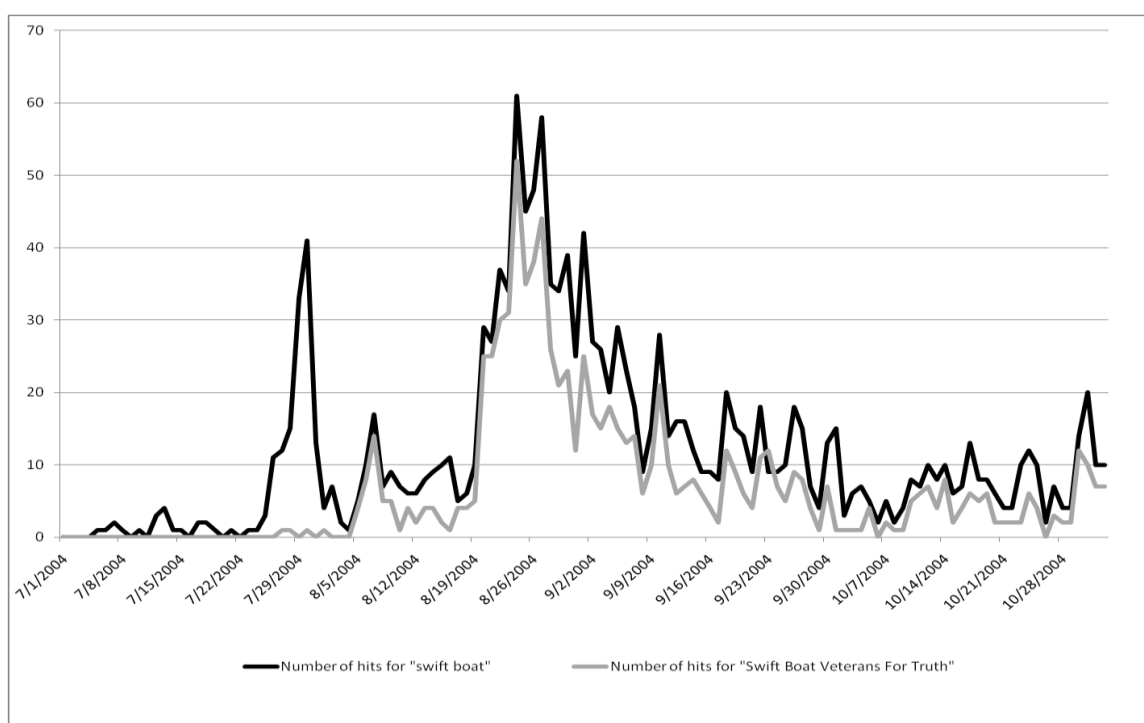
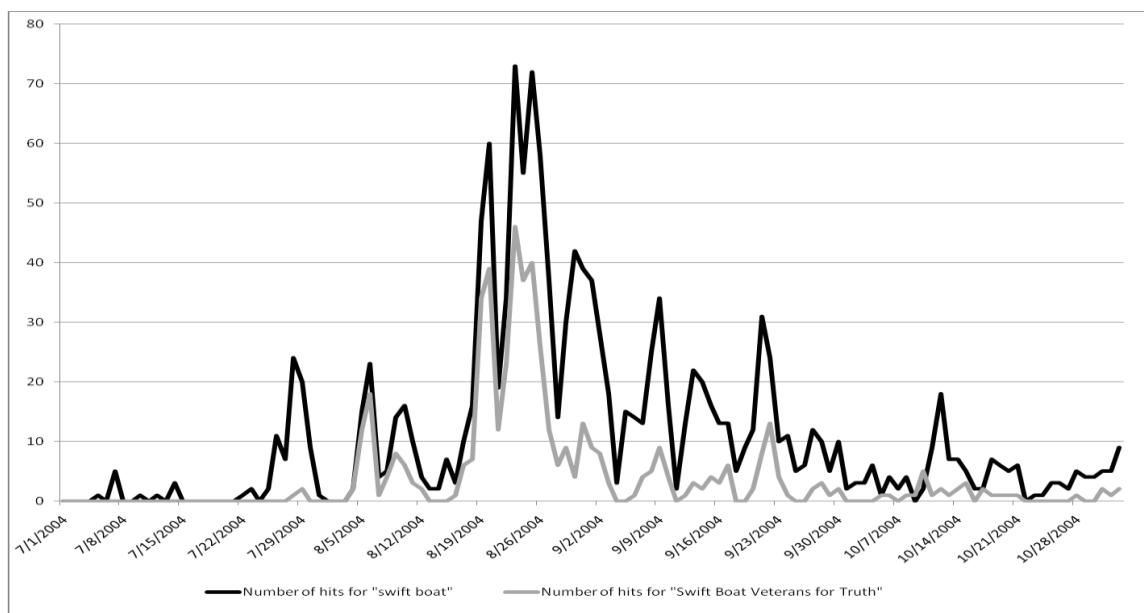


Figure 2.4: *Number of Article Hits from Television and Radio Transcripts in Lexis Nexis Database*



Did the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth advertisements and the subsequent media coverage affect voters' perceptions of the candidates' leadership abilities? My theoretical argument lends me to expect a direct impact of the SBVT campaign on voters' ratings of the candidates on the trait strong leader. I also expect both the relative rating of this trait to influence which candidate citizens intended to vote for and that this relationship to be strongest for those who followed the campaign in the media most closely. In a contest in which the Iraq War/ War on Terror already salient, the SBVT campaign was able to help frame and prime the already salient candidate trait strong leader in a way that bolstered the prospects for George W. Bush and undercut the candidacy of John Kerry.

Of course the SBVT campaign was not the only campaign communication that may have primed and framed leadership as an important factor in voters' decision

making. The 2004 Republican Convention, which took place from August 30 to September 2, 2004 directly after the SBVT campaign hit full force, also focused on Bush's leadership. Additionally, while the SBVT advertisements were getting free airtime in news media, another advertisement was getting paid airtime in battleground markets; one that touted George W. Bush's leadership abilities. During the SVBT media frenzy, the Bush campaign released an advertisement titled "Solemn Duty" that aired August 11, 2004 to August 20, 2004 in battleground markets from Manchester, New Hampshire, to Albuquerque New Mexico. The advertisement shows George W. Bush sitting next to First Lady, Laura Bush in a living room setting. Bush states:

My solemn duty is to lead our nation, to protect ourselves. You can't imagine the great agony of a mom or a dad having to make the decision about which child to pick up first on September the 11th. We cannot hesitate; we cannot yield; we must do everything in our power to bring an enemy to justice before they hurt us again.

By stating that leading the nation is his solemn, the first sentence of the Bush advertisement primes the trait strong leader. This is then followed by a reflection of September 11, therefore, priming terrorism.

Additionally, on August 1, 2004, the Department of Homeland Security raised the color of threat of the Homeland Security Advisory System from "yellow" to "orange." Secretary of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, held a press conference on August 1st, 2004 in which he started off with: "Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. President Bush has told you, and I have reiterated the promise, that when we have specific credible information, that we will share it. Now this afternoon, we do have new and unusually specific information about where al-Qaeda would like to attack. And as a result, today,

the United States Government is raising the threat level to Code Orange for the financial services sector in New York City, Northern New Jersey and Washington, DC.”

Undoubtedly these other communication events are likely to reinforced the impact of the SBVT campaign. War was the salient issue during the 2004 election, influencing the selection of traits that the campaigns and news media focused on. Leadership became the salient trait and the attack on Kerry from the SBVT. The impact of the Republican Convention, the Bush advertisement, and the increased terror threat level likely made the SBVT campaign all the more effective. Unfortunately, these are hypotheses I cannot test since the 2004 NAES does not contain questions that capture exposure to these messages.

2-3: Examining the Impact of SBVT

To test the impact of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth campaign, I rely on three related analyses. First and most simply, I compare trends in media coverage and trends in candidate ratings on the trait “strong leader” to check for correspondence. This approach is, of course, coincidental in nature and lacks statistical rigor. However, it lets us see if there is any reason to believe that the communication surrounding SBVT had any observable impact on public perceptions of the candidates’ leadership trait, a crucial first step in my argument. The second analysis relies on a self-reported measure of exposure to the SBVT campaign on the 2004 NAES. I develop a regression path analysis detailing the steps from self-reported exposure to communication surrounding the SBVT to vote intention. The third analysis examines the interactive impact of the trait strong leader with news media use before and after the SBVT campaign became a prominent news story. The combination of these three approaches provides suggestive evidence to

support the arguments that traits play a role in vote preference and the media is central in determining which traits matter and how they do so.

2-4: SBVT Attacks: Leadership or Trustworthiness or Both

So far the argument I have laid out has focused exclusively on leadership - the SBVT campaign was clearly an attack on Kerry's ability to lead. But it is also an attack on another potentially important trait – his “trustworthiness” or “honesty” – as the ads explicitly state that Kerry lied to get his medals. Trustworthiness and leadership are not mutually exclusive in that deeming a candidate untrustworthy likely means that voters will also find this candidate unable to lead. However it is not necessarily the case that seeing someone as a weak leader automatically leads to the conclusion that he or she is not trustworthy. Therefore, in the analyses below trustworthiness ratings of the candidates are included the statistical models.

2-5: The 2004 National Annenberg Election Study

For this chapter, I analyze data from the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES), which contain responses from 81,422 adults interviewed by phone from October 7, 2003 through November 16, 2004. The 2004 NAES was conducted on a daily schedule with an average of 207.2 completed interviews per day. It is important to note that with the rolling cross-sectional survey design, the day that the respondent happens to be interviewed is a product of random selection exactly like the random selection of the respondent to be included in the sample. Therefore, “overtime comparison is possible with few or no controls, and the sample can be partitioned pretty much at will” (Johnston, Hagen, & Jamieson, 2004, 16).

A main advantage of the rolling cross-sectional design is that it provides researchers the opportunity to examine variations in public opinion over time. To evaluate respondents' identification of the candidates as "strong leader," and how it changes over time, I first aggregate the data by calculating the mean of the individual responses of each day (Kenski, 2004). This allows for the creation of a single data-point for each day and graphical visualization across time. The segment of the NAES that I am analyzing does include July 4, 2004 and no interviews were conducted on this national holiday. Following Kenski's (2004) advice, the missing data were imputed by taking the average of the days surrounding the missing date. Daily cross-sections are subject to random sampling variation and, therefore, real shifts are "scarcely detectable through the uninteresting day-to-day fluctuations induced by sampling error" (Johnston et al. 1992, 26). I therefore pooled the data across days to "smooth" out the random variation. Throughout this study, I employ a 5-day prior moving average, i.e., any particular day's value is an averaged of values of that day and the preceding four days.

In the analyses below, I focus on the segment of the 2004 NAES that spans July 1, 2004 through November 1, 2004 and includes 36,912 respondents. This period starts when Kerry announced Senator John Edwards as his running mate in early July (July 6, 2004) and ends a day before Election Day (November 2, 2004).

2-6: Method 1:

Visualizing the Correspondence between Media Coverage of the SBVT and Candidate Ratings on Strong Leader and Trustworthiness.

Respondents were asked: "I am going to read you some phrases. For each one, please tell me how well that phrase applies to [candidate name – for this study George W.

Bush and John Kerry]. Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all and 10 means it applies extremely well... “Strong Leader.” Respondents that did not provide an answer or “did not know” were coded as missing data¹⁸ (George W. Bush: $N = 24,081$; $M = 6.10$; $SD = 3.41$; John Kerry: $N = 22,638$; $M = 5.31$; $SD = 3.21$).¹⁹ These two variables are negatively correlated ($r = -.566$). Respondents were also asked about the trait “trustworthy” (George W. Bush: $N = 23,969$; $M = 5.42$; $SD = 3.62$; John Kerry: $N = 22,501$; $M = 5.11$; $SD = 3.27$). These variables also were negatively correlated ($r = -.571$). The correlation between the individual candidate’s ratings for strong leader and trustworthy were strongly related (Kerry: $r = .814$; Bush: $r = .801$).

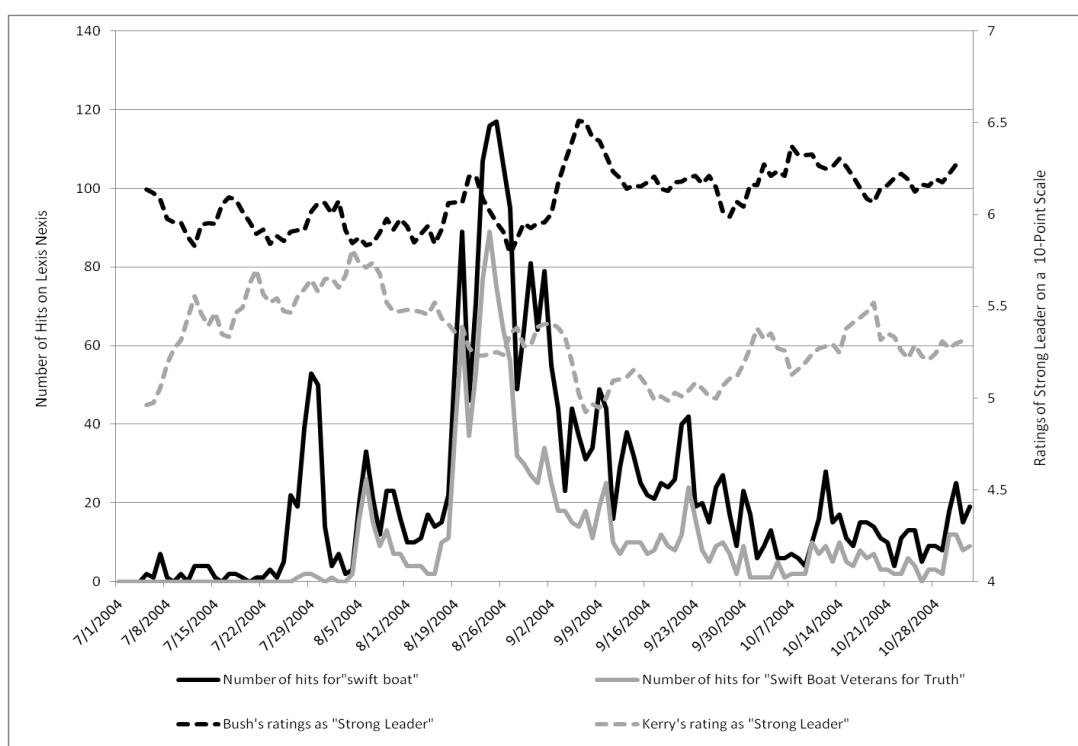
Figures 2.5 and 2.6 overlap the trait ratings of the candidates on the combined number of article hits for publications and transcripts in the Lexis Nexis database (see figures 2.3 and 2.4). The left X-axis shows the number of Lexis Nexis article hits while the right X-axis is the candidate ratings on a zero-to-ten point scale. As the figures illustrate, leading up to the Democratic convention through a few days after his acceptance speech on July 29, Kerry gains on the trait strong leader. This gain is short lived, however, and starts a downward spiral after the first Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ad is released. Senator Kerry continues to lag behind Bush during the rest of August and gap between the two candidates substantially expands after the media focuses on the SBVT messages and the Republican National Convention that was held from August 30th to September 2nd. Consistent with the notion that the communication environment surrounding this time was focused on the candidate’s leadership abilities, in figure 2.6 we

¹⁸ The “don’t knows” are examined separately in later pages.

¹⁹ Due to a split questionnaire design used to maximize the number of questions asked on the survey, this particular question was asked to two-thirds of all respondents.

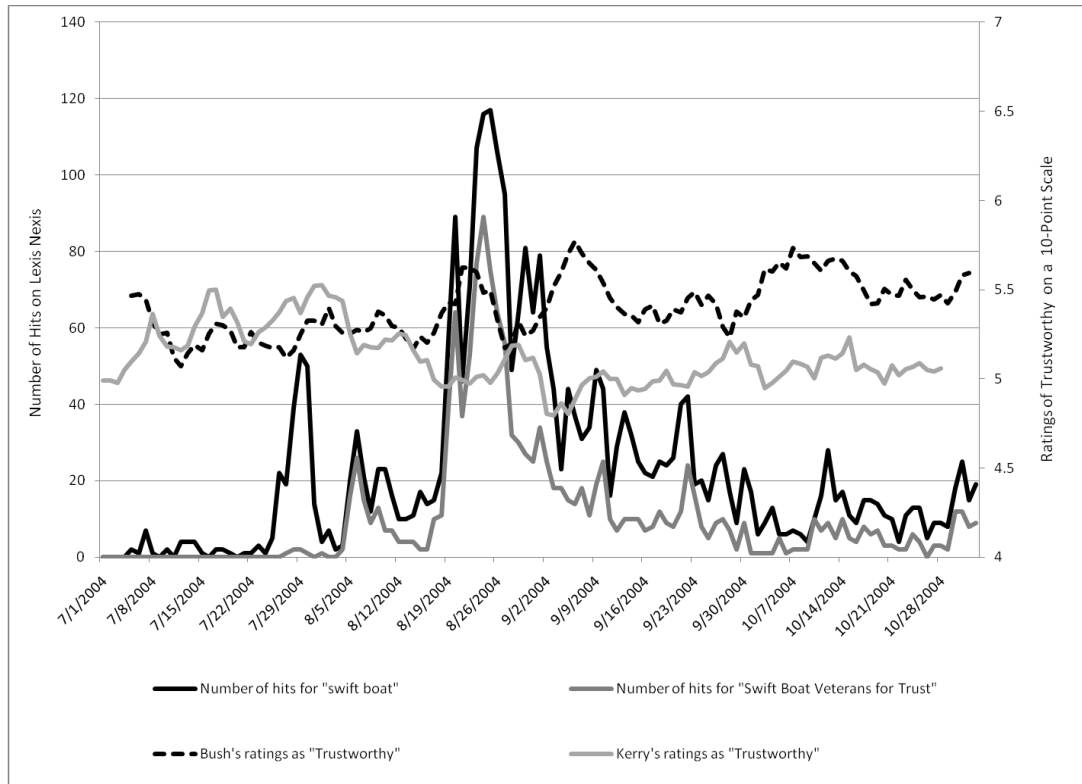
do not see a similar rise in Kerry's rating of trustworthiness leading into the Democratic National Convention as it was not the focus of his campaign at that time. However, after the SBVT attacks there is a similar divergence – though not as pronounced – in the trait trustworthy between the two candidates.²⁰

Figure 2.5: *The Number of Article Hits from Publications and Television and Radio Transcripts with the Ratings of the Trait “Strong Leader” (5-Day PMA)*



²⁰ Even though there was no a priori expectations for significant results using trend analyses as the focus here is on specified events and not cyclical patterns an Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) analysis was conducted, post hoc, to see if the increase in SBVT coverage was significantly related to shifts in the candidates' trait ratings a few days later. When the analyses were conducted on the sample from July 1 to Election Day no significant lags appeared. When the analyses increased their focus, from July 15 to September 15, an ARIMA (5,1,5) model presented marginally significant relationship ($p = .077$) with a 5-day-lag suggesting a that when media coverage of SBVT increased a drop in Kerry's rating as strong leader and an increase in Bush's ratings on this trait appeared five days later. These results should be taken lightly as they are not a stringent test in the causal relationship between advertising and media coverage surrounding the SBVT. The fact that a theoretical relationship is slightly borne out of these aggregate level analyses suggest that a closer look into the relationship is warranted.

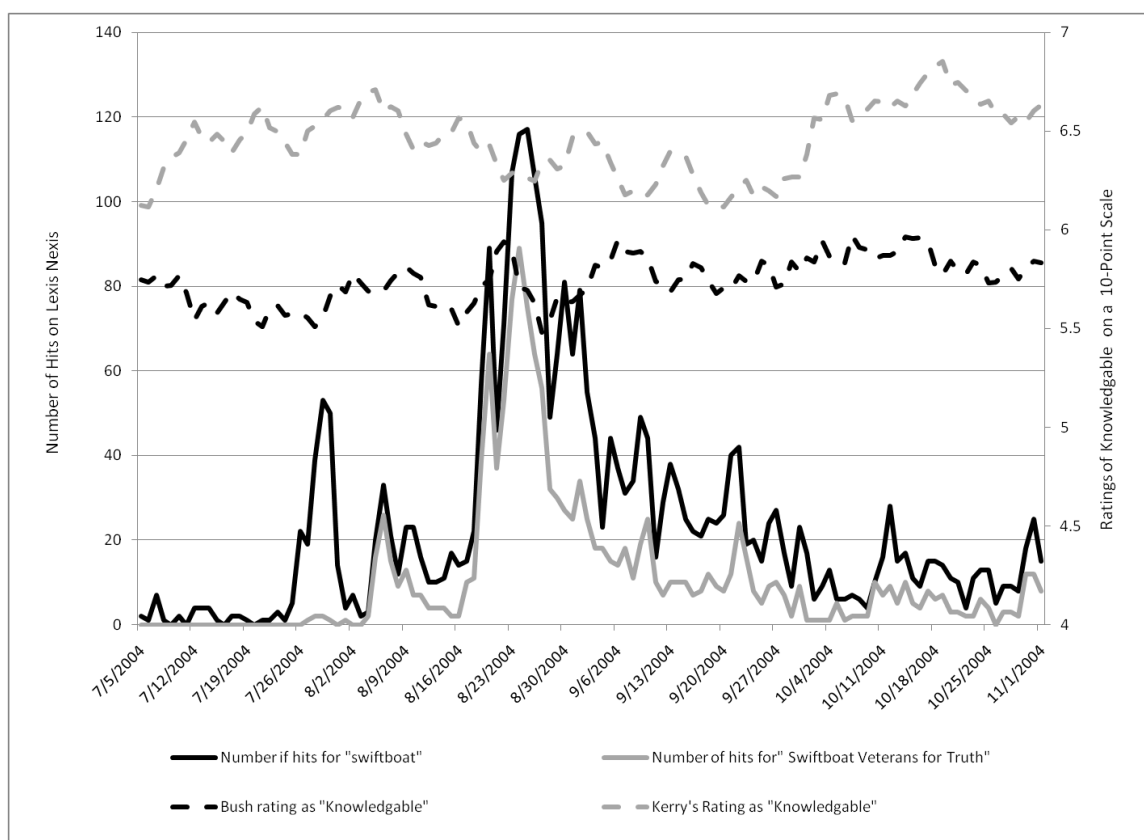
Figure 2.6: *The Number of Article Hits from Publications and Television and Radio Transcripts with the Ratings of the Trait “Trustworthy” (5-Day PMA)*



The apparent success of the SBVT campaign is also rooted in the notion of “canalization” put forth by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948). Canalization suggests that persuasion is most effective when it builds on pre-existing attitudes instead of trying to creating entirely new ones. The term “canalization” comes from canals in that water flowing downstream can be re-directed as long as the water is still going downstream, but it can not be re-directed to flow upstream. Similar notions apply to human behavior, attitudes and persuasion. The SBVT campaigns capitalized on the salience of war in the 2004 campaign and Bush’s inherent advantage on leadership. Let’s say, for example, the SBVT came out with advertisements attacking Kerry’s intelligence. This ad would not

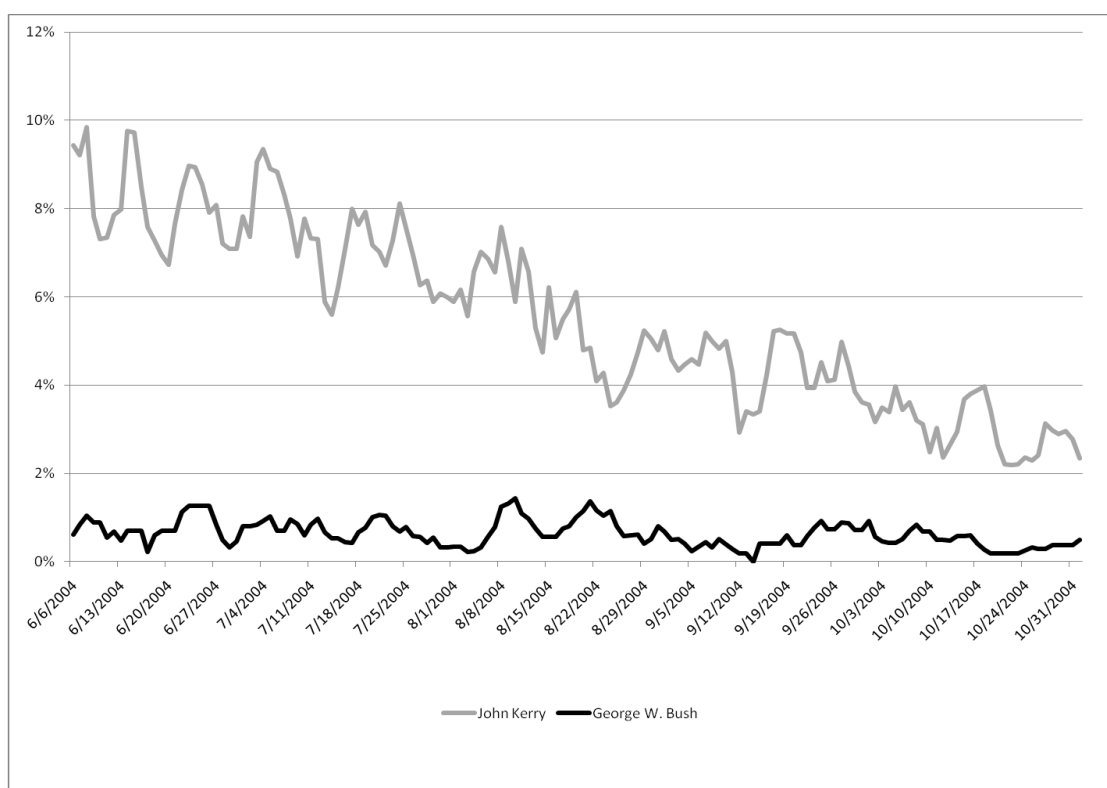
have same effect because the 2004 campaign was entrenched in war and leadership and not a deep discussion about the intelligence of the candidates. Kerry was consistently deemed more “knowledgeable” than Bush. When examining shifts in the trait “knowledgeable” we only find negligible shifts when mapping it against the media’s focus on the Swift Boat story (figure 2.7). Consistent with the theorizing of this dissertation, an effective attack on a candidate trait should focus on one that is already salient in the communication environment of a campaign. In 2004 the most effective attack was aimed at leadership.

Figure 2.6: *The Number of Article Hits from Publications and Television and Radio Transcripts with the Ratings of the Trait “Knowledgeable” (5-Day PMA)*



Thus far, the “don’t know” responses to the trait ratings have been coded as missing. The SBVT campaign may have also produced a pronounced impact on the percent of respondents that provided a numeric answer to the question as compared to those who could not; meaning that the percent of “don’t knows” may have substantially dropped during this time. Figure 2.7 outlines the percent of respondents that said “don’t know” to the Bush and Kerry “strong leader” question on the 2004 NAES. While the percent that did not know if this trait applied to the incumbent president was extremely low, the percent that said “don’t know” for Senator Kerry steadily dropped as Election Day neared. However, a dramatic decrease does not corresponding with the SBWT campaign and the subsequent media coverage that it garnered in August.

Figure 2.7: *Percent of Respondents Who Said “Don’t Know” if the Trait “Strong Leader” Applies to John Kerry or George W. Bush (5-Day PMA)*



*2-7: Method 2:
Examining the Paths from Self-Report Exposure to SBVT to Vote Choice*

From August 9th to August 16th 2004 respondents (N=2,210) were asked “Have you seen or heard about a television ad from some Vietnam veterans that says John Kerry did not earn his medals in the Vietnam War but lied about his war record?” A solid majority either saw or heard about the advertisement (60.5 percent – see table 2.2 for distribution). Prior to being asked about exposure during the interview, respondents were asked: “During the Vietnam War, John Kerry was awarded 3 purple hearts, a bronze star and a silver star. Do you believe that Kerry earned all of these medals or do you think he did not earn all of them?” Over fifty-seven percent believe he did (table 2.3).

For the following analyses these questions were re-coded into dichotomous variables. Those who said that they either saw or heard about the SBVT were coded as 1. Consistent with the message of the SBVT advertisements, those who said that they did not believe that John Kerry earned his medals were also coded as 1. The trait variables in the model are the difference in the ratings of the candidates (Bush – Kerry) on the traits “strong leader” ($M = .3316$, $SD = 5.705$) and “trustworthy” ($M = .0001$, $SD = 5.897$).

The final dependent variable in these analyses is vote preference measured by a question that asked “If the 2004 presidential election were being held today, would you vote for George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, the Republicans, John Kerry and John Edwards, the Democrats, or Ralph Nader and Peter Camejo (Ca-May-Ho) of the Reform Party?” (names were rotated). I coded those who said the Republicans as “1” (48%) and

those who said the Democrats as “0” (52%) all other responses were treated as system missing.²¹

The news media variable ($M=2.213$; $SD = 1.355$) used in this study is an index of the average score that respondents gave to the following questions. “Now I would like to ask about where you got your news during the past week. Please tell me how many days in the past week you [watch/read] each of the following:” Broadcast national television news ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 2.63$); 24-hour cable news ($M = 2.99$; $SD = 2.84$); newspaper ($M = 3.70$; $SD = 2.91$); campaign information on the internet ($M = 0.38$; $SD = 1.29$); and talk radio ($M = 1.027$; $SD = 2.014$).

Table 2.2: *Have You Seen or Heard About a Television Ad From Some Vietnam Veterans that Say John Kerry did not EARN His Medals in the Vietnam War but Lied about his War Record? (Asked 8/9/2006 to 8/16/2004, N= 2,210)*

Yes – seen the ad	35.9%
Yes – but only heard about the ad	24.6%
No - have not seen or heard about ad	37.1%
Don't Know	2.1%
Refused	0.3%

Table 2.3: *During the Vietnam War, John Kerry was Awarded Three Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and a Silver Star. Do you Believe that Kerry Earned all of These Medals or do You Think He did not EARN All of Them? (Asked 8/9/2006 to 8/16/2004, N= 2,210)*

Yes – earned all medals	58.9%
No – Did not earn all medals	21.7%
Don't Know	18.9%
Refused	0.5%

²¹ Notice that during this week (August 9 to August 14, 2004) the Democrats held the lead in vote intention.

A relatively standard battery of socio-political demographic variables was used as a set of controls. Table 2.4 outlines the descriptive statistics of these variables.

Table 2.4: *Descriptive Statistics of Control Variables (8/9/2006 to 8/16/2004, N= 2,210)*

Variable	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>
Gender (Dummy Variable for Female)	54.4%	--
Age (In Years)	48.17	16.64
Education (In Highest Year Completed)	14.3	2.5
Race (Dummy Variable for Black)	9.5%	--
Hispanic (Dummy Variable)	6.8%	--
Ideology (5-point scale: Conservative Coded High)	3.2	1.0
Party ID (Republican)	33.3%	--
Party ID (Democrat)	33.1%	--

The SBVT released the ad “Any Question” on August 5, 2004. The data for these analyses comes from August 9th through August 16th 2004. Because the ad was replayed on the news and “circulating on the internet like wildfire” noted chief strategist for the SBVT, Chris LaCivita, at The Annenberg Public Policy Center debriefing (Jamieson 2006, 186), the first analyses predicts exposure. A logistic regression was modeled predicting the dichotomous variable “having seen or heard about” the SBVT advertisements. The first column of coefficients in table 2.5 outlines the results from this model and it shows that news media use is positively and significantly related to seeing or hearing the advertisement ($B = 1.076, p < .001$).

Certain demographic variable were also significantly related to have seen or heard about the SBVT advertisement. Education ($B = .081, p < .001$) and age ($B = .020, p <$

.001) produced positive and significant coefficients while being female ($B = -.325, p < .001$) and being Black ($B = -.448, p < .01$) produced negative relationships. The political orientation control variables were not related to this dependent variable.

The second step in the analyses tests whether the advertisement's claims were adopted. One of the central assertions in SBVT ads was that Senator Kerry lied to get his medals. In fact, this is explicitly stated in the first advertisement when former Swift Boat gunner, Van O'Dell, states that "John Kerry lied to get his bronze star...I know, I was there, I saw what happened."

The second column of coefficients in table 2.5 outlines the results of a logistic regression model predicting the belief that Senator Kerry did not earn his medals. Seeing or hearing about the SBVT advertisement was significantly related to this belief ($B = 1.098, p < .001$) above and beyond the influence of controls.

The model also displays the influence of partisan cues on the belief that Senator Kerry did not earn his medals. Conservatives ($B = 0.382, p < .001$) and Republicans ($B = .688, p < .001$) were significantly more likely to believe that Senator Kerry did do so while being a Democrat ($B = -1.291, p < .001$) produced the opposite relationship.

Next, two OLS regressions were modeled predicting the difference in ratings (Bush minus Kerry) on the two traits strong leader and trustworthy. The third and fourth columns of table 2.5 detail these results. Believing that Senator Kerry did not earn his medals was positively related to higher score for Bush on the traits "strong leader" ($B = 3.401, p < .001$) and "trustworthy" ($B = 3.608, p < .001$).

In order to connect these trait ratings to vote choice, I conducted a logistic regression predicting two-party vote intention for Bush “if the election were held today” (sixth column in table 2.5). Believing that Kerry did not earn his medals predicted a Bush vote preference ($B = 1.251, p < .01$). Both trait variables were positively and significantly related to the dependent variable with the difference rating of strong leader producing a larger coefficient ($B = 0.527, p < .001$) than the difference rating in trustworthy ($B = 0.367$). However, the 95 percent confidence intervals of these two coefficients overlap meaning that they are not significantly different.

These findings, while suggestive, are limited since the main thrust of the SBVT campaign began in late August, which was after the data used here was collected. In addition these analyses relied on self-reported exposure, which may exacerbate measurement error. Therefore, I turn to a third method to examine the impact of SBVT campaign.

Table 2.5: Path Model Linking Self-Reported Exposure to the SBVT Campaign to Vote Preference through Trait Assessments

	Seen or heard Swift Boat Ad	Kerry did not earn his medals	Difference in ratings of the trait Strong Leader (Bush minus Kerry)	Difference in ratings of the trait Trust - worthy (Bush minus Kerry)	Vote Bush if election were held today
	Logistic Coefficient (B)	Logistic Coefficient (B)	OLS Regression (B)	OLS Regression (B)	Logistic Coefficient (B)
Female	-0.325**	-0.192	0.239	0.300	-0.007
Age (in years)	0.020***	-0.002	-0.007	-0.009	0.009
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.488**	-0.096	-1.238**	-1.814***	-1.256*
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	0.390	-0.333	0.587	0.511	-0.017
Education (in years)	0.081***	-0.080**	-0.077	-0.018	-0.007
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.094	0.688***	3.452***	3.509***	0.334
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.132	-1.291***	-2.515***	-2.318***	-1.737***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	0.010	0.383***	1.237***	1.427***	0.449**
News Media	1.076***	-0.013	-0.179	-0.190	-0.111
Seen or heard Swift Boat Ad	--	1.098***	-0.066	-0.406	-0.112
Kerry did not earned medals	--	--	3.401***	3.608***	1.251**
Strong Leader	--	--	--	--	0.527***
Trustworthy	--	--	--	--	0.367***
R^2	--	--	0.486	0.490	--
Nagelkerke R^2	0.167	0.239	--		0.889
*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$,					

*2-8: Method 3:
The Interactive Impact of the Traits Strong Leader and Trustworthy with News Media
Use and the Initial SBVT Campaign Attack.*

For my third and final analysis I focus on the general election segment of the 2004 NAES that spans July 1, 2004 through November 1, 2004. In the model below, a two-party Bush vote intention is the dependent variable of interest (50.4 %). The independent variables of interest include news media use ($M = 2.311$, $SD = 1.141$) and the differences in the candidates' (Bush minus Kerry) ratings on the traits strong leader ($M = .789$, $SD = 5.87$) and trustworthy ($M = 0.310$, $SD = 6.12$). A new dichotomous variable identifying interviews that were conducted before August 5th (coded as -1) and August 5th or after (coded as +1) is included to detect the effects of the SVBT attack (54 % of respondents were interviewed after August 4th). The same set of control variables are included and are outlined in table 2.6.

Table 2.6: *Descriptive Statistics of Control Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>
Gender (Dummy Variable for Female)	55.8%	--
Age (In Years)	48.25	16.50
Education (In Highest Year Completed)	14.3	2.5
Race (Dummy Variable for Black)	8.1%	--
Hispanic (Dummy Variable)	7.8%	--
Ideology (5-point scale: Conservative Coded High)	3.1	1.0
Party ID (Republican)	33.7%	--
Party ID (Democrat)	32.3%	--

This third analysis is designed to examine interactive relationships among the trait variables, news media use, and the dichotomous before/after variable. Four interaction terms were constructed: 1) Difference in ratings of strong leader, by news media use; 2) difference in ratings of trustworthy by news media use; 3) difference in ratings of strong leader by the before/after date of first SVBT advertisement; and 4) difference in ratings of trustworthy by the before/after date of first SVBT advertisement. The main effect variables were standardized by transforming them into z-scores before the interaction term was created in order to avoid multicollinearity problems between the interaction term and its components (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

As reported in table 2.7, the direct effects of the trait variables in the model are significant and positive (strong leader: $B = 0.485$, $p < .001$; trustworthy: $B = 0.400$, $p < .001$). Consistent with the model developed in this dissertation, the difference in ratings for strong leader had a greater impact for those who reported higher levels of news use, as outlined by the interaction between this trait and the news media variable ($B = 0.222$, $p < .05$). The interaction between difference in ratings on the trait trustworthy and news use was not significantly related.

The dichotomous variable indicating those who were interviewed before the airing of the first SBVT advertisement and after produce a significant relationship suggesting that those interviewed August 5 or after had greater intentions of casting a vote for Bush. The interaction term between this variable and the difference in the ratings of the trait strong leader was positive and significant ($B = 0.269$, $p < .05$) meaning the impact of the trait strong leader on vote intention was stronger after the first airing of the

SBVT advertisement. The interaction with the trait trustworthy was not significantly related.²²

Table 2.7: *Logistic Regression Model Predicting Bush Vote if “Election was Held Today” (7-1-2004 to 11-1-2004, N = 17,219)*

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratios
Female (1=yes, 0=no)	0.018	0.080	1.018
Age (in years)	-0.002	0.003	0.998
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	-1.487	0.183	0.226***
*Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.537	0.134	0.584***
Education (in years)	0.002	0.017	1.002
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	1.427	0.103	4.166***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	-1.176	0.094	0.309***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	0.454	0.049	1.574***
News Media	-0.025	0.033	0.975
Date of first SVBT advertisement (August 5 and after = 1; Before August 5 = -1)	0.103	0.050	1.109*
Difference in ratings of strong leader (Bush minus Kerry)	0.485	0.022	1.625***
Difference in rating of trustworthy (Bush minus Kerry)	0.400	0.019	1.491***
News Media × Difference in ratings of strong leader	0.222	0.103	1.249*
News Media × Difference in ratings of trustworthy	0.094	0.093	1.099
Date of first SVBT advertisement × Difference in ratings of strong leader	0.269	0.120	1.309*
Date of first SVBT advertisement × Difference in ratings of trustworthy	0.078	0.111	1.081
<i>Nagelkerke R²</i>			0.904
*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$,			

Due to the range of the difference in the strong leader variable (21-point scale) and the lack of message susceptibility of respondents at the extremes, the impact of the interaction occurs mostly mid-scale. Therefore, instead of graphing interactions with the

²² The “before/after” SBVT dichotomous variable is conservative in that the time frames for each value inherently includes a interview dates when the media was not focusing on the Sift Boat Veterans for Truth campaign.

customary straight line, figure 2.8 graphs the predicted probabilities from the model above by news media use. Figure 2.9, follows the same procedure with the date of the first SBVT ad being the split variable. In order to illustrate the impact of the interaction figure 2.10 shows the difference between the black line and grey line in the two preceding figures.

Figure 2.8: *The Interaction between News Use and Difference in “Strong Leader” on the Predicted Probabilities that a Respondent would Vote For Bush “if the Election were Held Today”*

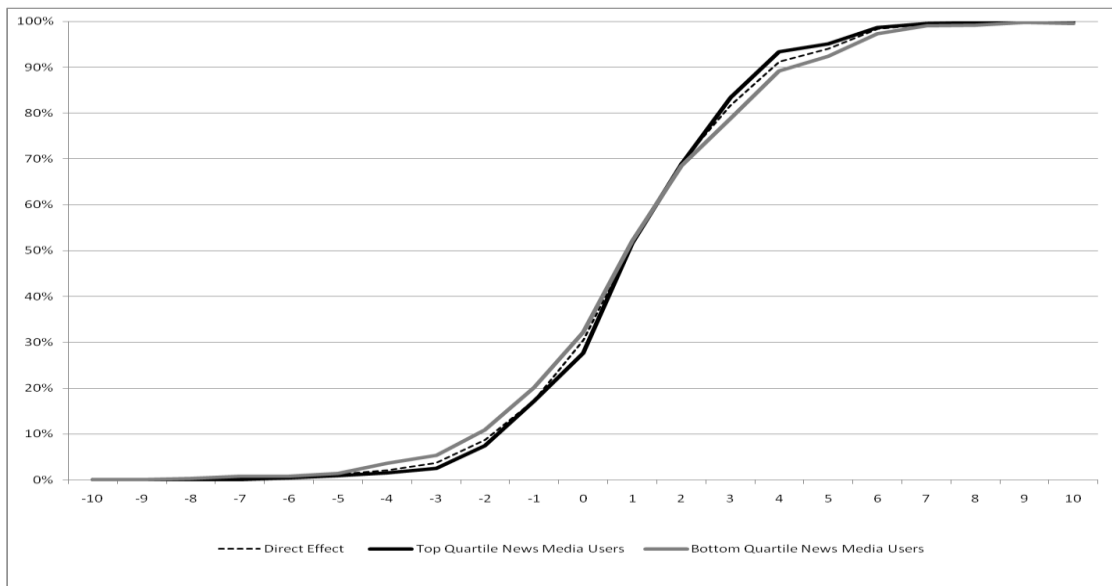


Figure 2.8: *The Interaction between the Date of the First SBVT Advertisement and Difference in “Strong Leader” on the Predicted Probabilities that a Respondent would Vote For Bush “if the Election were Held Today”*

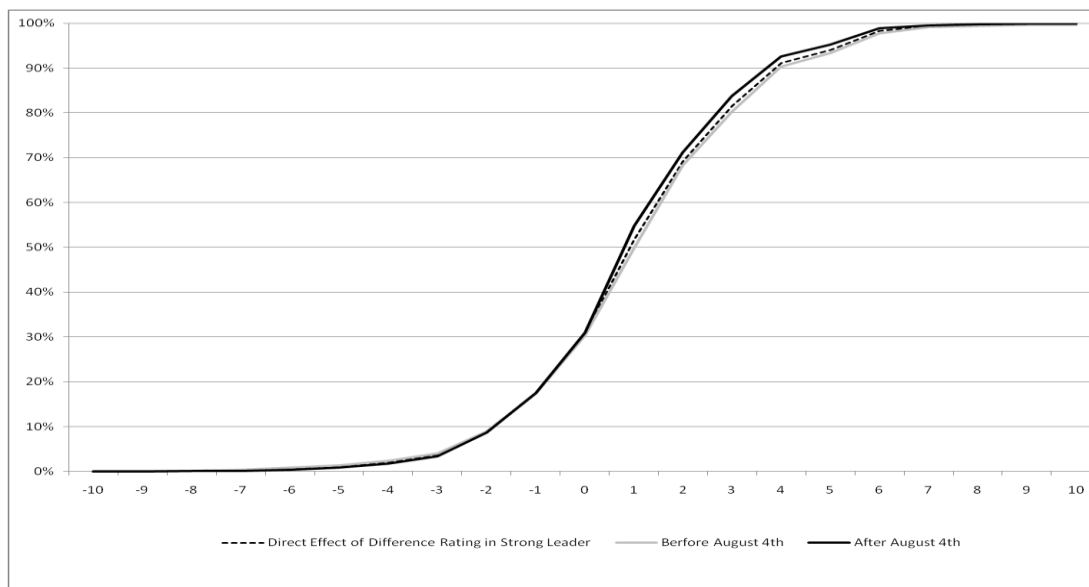
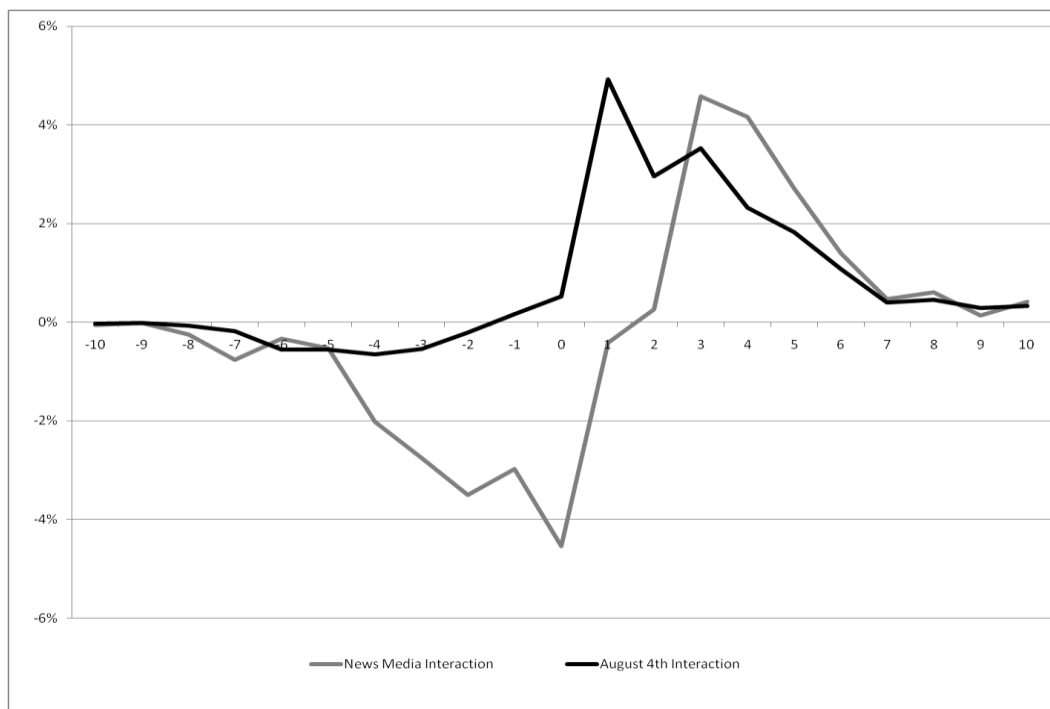


Figure 2.10: *Estimated Impact of Interactions on the Predicted Probabilities that a Respondent would Vote For Bush “if the Election were Held Today”*



A three-way interaction among the difference ratings in the trait strong leader, news media use, and the dichotomous before/after the first SBVT ad was tested in the model outlined in table 2.7. This three-way interaction was not significant in this model. However, this non-finding may have resulted from having four interaction terms already included in the model meaning each of the main-effect variables are already included the model three times. Thus any additional interactive effect may have gone undetected because it was over specified (i.e., controlled out). To explore this possibility a separate model was analyzed that included the three key variables and a three-way interaction term, but not the two-way interactions (table 2.8). In this model the three-way interaction is marginally significant ($B = 0.178$; $p < .10$), suggesting that the interaction between news media use and the relative ratings on the trait of strong leader may have had an increased effect on vote intention after the date of the first Swift Boat Veterans for Truth advertisement was aired. Since three-way interactions are notoriously difficult to interpret this marginally significant relationship should be viewed with caution. Nonetheless, the finding is consistent with news media impact on the importance of the trait strong leader after the SBVT released their first advertisement.

Table 2.8: *Logistic Regression Model Predicting Bush Vote if “Election were Held Today” with Three-Way Interaction (7-1-2004 to 11-1-2004, N = 17,219)*

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratios
Female (1=yes, 0=no)	0.018	0.080	1.016
Age (in years)	-0.002	0.003	0.998
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	-1.475	0.181	0.229***
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.542	0.135	0.582***
Education (in years)	0.002	0.017	1.003
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	1.428	0.103	4.172***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	-1.172	0.094	0.310***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	0.453	0.049	1.573
News Media	-0.025	0.032	0.975
Date of first SVBT advertisement (August 5 and after = 1; Before August 5 = -1)	0.103	0.052	1.109*
Difference in ratings of strong leader (Bush minus Kerry)	0.513	0.018	1.670***
Difference in rating of trustworthy (Bush minus Kerry)	0.407	0.016	1.503***
Date of first SVBT advertisement × Difference in ratings of strong leader × News media	0.178	0.098	1.193#
<i>Nagelkerke R²</i>			0.904
*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$			

2-9: Conclusion and the Legacy of the Swift Boat for Truth Campaign

In an interview on PBS’s *Frontline*, Bush campaign strategist, Mark McKinnon commented that “As you rewind the campaign, one of the things that's gotten a lot of analysis was a [Kerry] failure to respond quickly and aggressively” [to the SBVT attack].²³ Indeed, the term “swiftboating” now has its own Wikipedia.com page where it is defined as “American political jargon that is used as a strong pejorative description of

²³ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/architect/interviews/mckinnon.html>

some kind of attack that the speaker considers unfair or untrue”²⁴ Political Scientist John Geer noted:

The term “Swift Boat” has become part of the American political vocabulary, arising from the controversial negative ads aired by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT) against John Kerry during the 2004 presidential campaign. These attacks became so well known that political commentators now refer to nasty allegations during a campaign as being “Swift Boated.” The general awareness of these ads is probably the single best example of the news media’s role in negativity. The facts are that very few Americans actually saw the attacks aired on TV (Geer, 2010, 5).

Despite the large amount of “Monday morning quarterbacking” and speculation, to my knowledge this is the only empirical analysis detailing the effects of the ads and subsequent news coverage on vote intention at this level of empirical and statistical rigor. These analyses suggest that the SBVT campaign had a statistically detectable impact on vote choice in the 2004 campaign. In and of themselves, these findings are important for understanding the 2004 presidential election. More broadly they provide evidence that the communication environment can influence the importance of specific traits on vote intention. Taken as a whole, the findings from these analyses demonstrate that the communication environment in 2004 contributed to making leadership a salient candidate trait and framed this trait in a way that weakened Senator’s Kerry’s credentials relative to President Bush’s, especially for those who attended more closely to news media. Furthermore, these findings suggest that these media-influenced trait perceptions can influence vote intention.

The results presented in this chapter shows how a salient issues (war), coupled with an effective campaign strategy (SBVT ads) can influence specific and relevant candidate trait perceptions (e.g., Kerry as a weak leader relative to Bush), and link these

²⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swiftboating>

traits voter preference. In sum, this case study offers solid empirical evidence in support of the theoretical model underlying this dissertation

CHAPTER 3: The Economic Meltdown, John McCain's Age, His "Erratic" Behavior, and the 2008 General Election

While in 2004, national security and the Iraq War concerned voters, in 2008 the economy took center stage. In the fall of 2007 the Dow was setting records peaking on October 9th at 14,164.11. Yet only a year later, right during the general election, the Dow had lost over 4,000 points to close at 9,447 on October 7, 2008. Other economic indicators told a similar story. The fourth quarter of 2008, saw a 23.6 percent drop in homebuilding, 20 percent fall in exports growth²⁵ and the biggest drop (3.8 percent) in GDP since 1982.²⁶ An account in the *Wall Street Journal* characterized the U.S. economy's performance in the closing months of 2008 as "its worst . . . in a quarter-century . . ."²⁷ Sales and consumer spending showed "the worst back-to-back declines since quarterly records began in 1947."²⁸ During the final weeks of the 2008 presidential election the chorus of economic indicators was signaling a potential disaster.

After a summer of record high gas prices and rising foreclosure rates, the economic news only worsened during the general election. The day after the Republican Convention (September 5) news reported a 6.1 percent increase in the jobless rate meaning that over nine million people were out of work. A few days later (September 8-14) the federal government took over mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, only to be directly followed by news of the collapse of Lehman Brothers on September 15.

²⁵ Sue Kirchoff, "GDP Down 3.8% in Q4, Biggest Drop Since '82," *USA Today*, http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2009-01-30-gdp-q4_N.htm

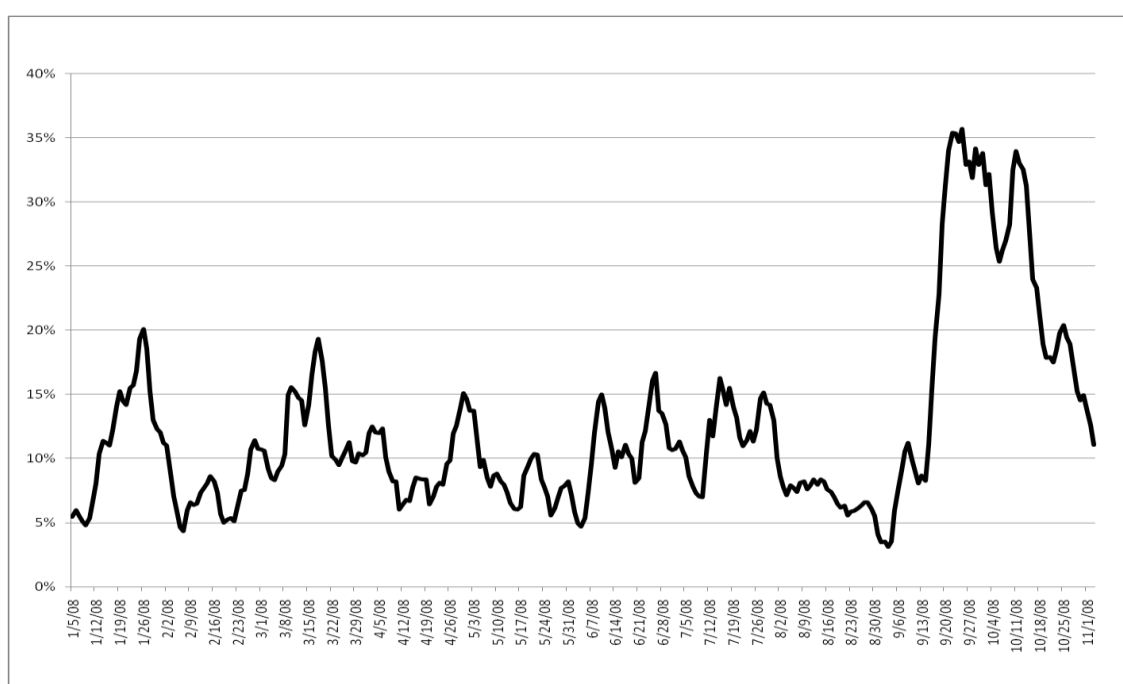
²⁶ Fourth-Quarter U.S. GDP Registers Minus-3.8 Percent," *Kansas City Business Journal*, January 30, 2009,

²⁷ Kelly Evans, "Economy Dives as Goods Pile Up," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31–February 1, 2009: 1.

²⁸ Sue Kirchoff, "GDP Down 3.8% in Q4, Biggest Drop Since '82," *USA Today*,

From September 14 through October 12, the economic collapse dominated news coverage. Data from the Project for Excellence in Journalism's (PEJ) 2008 News Coverage Index (NCI) shows that the amount of news devoted to the economy skyrocketed during this time (figure 3.1).²⁹

Figure 3.1: *Percent of News Story Devoted to the Economy by Day (Source: PEJ: NCI – Raw Dataset)*



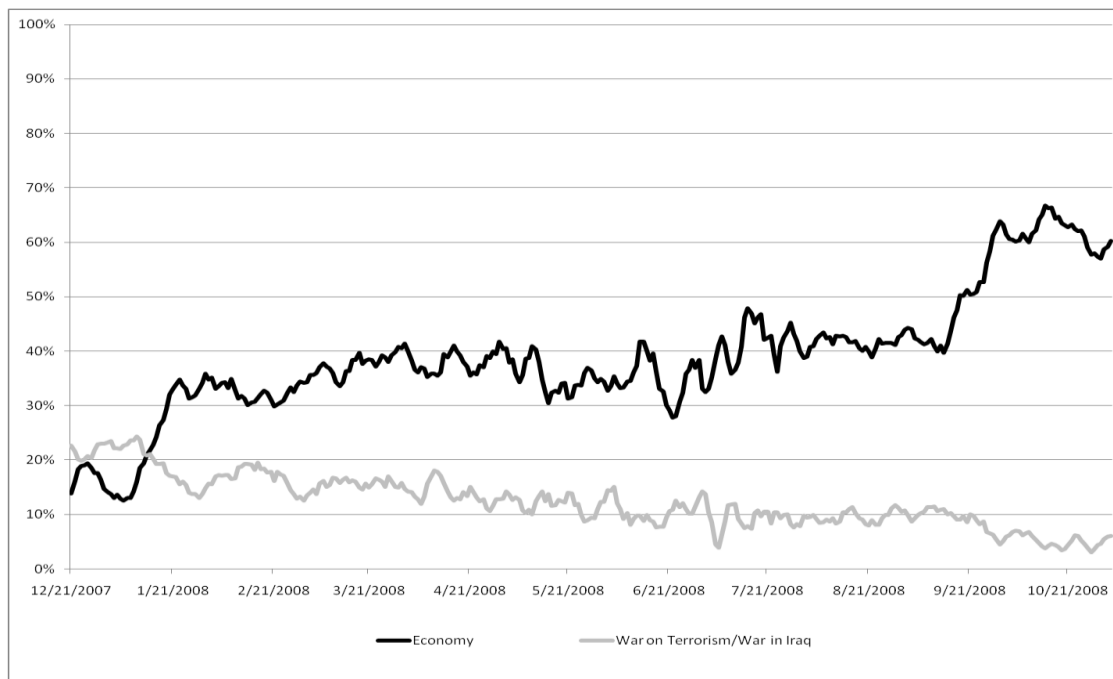
The economic crisis “had other real consequences,” recalled McCain’s pollster Bill McInturff during the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s 2008 election debriefing. “We stopped having a campaign. The daily press report wasn’t reporting, ‘He said, he said, back, forth, this story, this story.’ It was instead, ‘Today America’s economy is

²⁹ The 2008 NCI reports the top stories across a wide sample of news media by day in order to track shifts in the news agenda. The 2008 data come from a content analysis of 69,942 stories from newspaper, online sources, network television, cable news, and radio. The dataset and full details on methodology are readily available on their website: http://www.journalism.org/by_the_numbers/datasets.

falling apart. Here's how awful everything is. Here's the candidates' reaction to it. . . ' It was a huge story. It was the most important story. And it's an important story that blew us off the front pages." (Jamieson 2009, 89)

Consistent with the agenda-setting hypothesis (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), coinciding with the increased news coverage during this time was the number of respondents who said the economy was the most important problem facing the nation, according to the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) (figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: *Percent of Respondents who said that the Economy was the "Most important Problem Facing the Nation" (5-Day PMA)*



While the economy was the focal point for most of 2008, a year before when candidacies were being announced from both sides of the aisle the Iraq war and War on Terrorism commanded the nation's attention. As shown in figure 3.2, the wars were

more salient than the economy around the beginning of the year. If the general election had occurred with war as the most pressing problem there might have been a different election outcome, given that the major party candidates were a 72-year-old Vietnam War hero and the 47-year-old junior senator whose main credential was opposition to the War in Iraq but became senator too recently to have voted for or against it. Unfortunately for the Republicans, this election occurred in the middle of the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression and as a result, most Americans, fearing for their economic future, looked for a candidate that was deemed best able to handle the economy. Competence and understanding of the working and middle class economic conditions became the main concerns of voters.

In this chapter, I outline how the Democrats attacked McCain's competence and character by implying that he was too old and "erratic" to serve as president in these troubled economic times, and how this strategy influenced vote preference.

3-1: McCain is too Old to be President

During unforeseen and threatening moments such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the financial meltdown of fall 2008, or more recently the Gulf oil spill, the traits of a presidential candidate provide valuable references for future performance, as explained in chapter 1. In an effort to convince voters that that McCain would not be up to the task of fixing the economy, Democrats painted him as both out of touch with the seriousness of the crisis and "erratic" in his response to it. Underlying this strategy was an effort to imply that McCain was too old to be president, especially during such trying

times. Even for those who had long admired McCain, this inference raised the possibility that the Republican had once been, but is no longer, suited for the presidency.

At age 47, Obama would have been one of the youngest president ever elected and put him in the company of several who have been well regarded by history: Teddy Roosevelt (42 years old when first elected), John F. Kennedy (43), and Bill Clinton (46). At 72 years old, however, McCain would have been the oldest person ever inaugurated to a first term. While comparisons to Roosevelt, JFK, and Clinton benefited Obama, the Arizonian had little to gain on this score. But it was not an issue McCain could easily avoid. “People knew he was 72-years old,” reported Obama pollster Joel Benenson of McCain during the APPC election debriefing. “That was coming back loud and clear.” When a May Democratic poll tested perceptions of whether each candidate had “the energy and the vigor to meet the demands of presidency,” the Obama campaign found “a big difference” between perceptions of the two (Jamison, 2009, 106).

The news media played a major role in linking McCain’s age to questions over his ability to be president. For example “How Old is Too Old?” asked the headline on Anna Quindlen’s February 4, 2008 column in *Newsweek*. “It’s significant that while the old mandatory retirement age of 65 has been largely junked, there are still age limits for jobs like airline pilot or police officer, the kinds of jobs that require some of the same skills as the presidency—unwavering mental acuity and physical energy.”³⁰

³⁰ Anna Quindlen, “How Old Is Too Old?” *Newsweek*, February 4, 2008, 84.

Where Obama was shown shooting hoops, injuries McCain sustained as a prisoner of war in Vietnam meant he could not raise his arms above his shoulders. “Mr. McCain’s difficulty raising his arms and his sometimes awkward gait are remnants of severe, untreated injuries he suffered in Vietnam,” reported the *New York Times* on October 20th.³¹ In a different election with war salient McCain’s awkward gait might have evoked memories of his heroism. However in this election, focused as it was on the economy, his uncomfortable movements could be interpreted as a liability.

During the campaign McCain made several missteps that played into this “too old to lead” narrative. First, on September 15 in Jacksonville Florida, just as the economic crisis was unfolding, McCain said, “You know, there's been tremendous turmoil in our financial markets and Wall Street and it is - people are frightened by these events. Our economy, I think, still the fundamentals of our economy are strong. But these are very, very difficult times. And I promise you, we will never put America in this position again. We will clean up Wall Street. We will reform government.”³² While the message was one a reassurance, the sound bite “the fundamentals of our economy are strong” haunted the Republican, serving as evidence that McCain was out of touch with what voters were going through.

A second gaffe that played into this narrative occurred when McCain was asked how many houses he owned. His response: “I think I will have my staff get to you”³³ became the topic of a Democrat ad entitled “Out of Touch” that said:

³¹ Lawrence K. Altman, “Many Holes in Disclosure of the Nominees’ Health,” *New York Times*, October 20, 2008, A20.

³² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/15/mccain-fundamentals-of-th_n_126445.html

³³ Audio replayed on *CNN Election Center*, 8 p.m. (EST), CNN, August 21, 2008.

ANNOUNCER: Call it country club economics. How many houses does he own? John McCain says he can't even remember anymore. Well, it's seven. No wonder McCain just said the fundamentals of our economy are strong.

A third mistake came when McCain, on September 24, announced he was suspending his campaign in order help broker a bi-partisan deal, only to fail in developing a better rescue plan. In doing so, the Republican cancelled a scheduled appearance on with the David Letterman Show at the last minute. "You don't suspend your campaign," Letterman said that night. Then, taking a direct shot at McCain's age, he added, "This doesn't smell right. This isn't the way a tested hero behaves. I think someone's putting something in his Metamucil."³⁴

Repeatedly, in late-night comedy, the Republican's age became a signal of physical decline and imminent death. Jay Leno joked, "And do you know John McCain does not use the Secret Service protection? Yes. Yes. He hasn't been using them. He has his own team. It's like, you know, what you call those six guys who surround John McCain all the time? Pallbearers."³⁵ Leno also jabbed, "John McCain got some good news today: *The Charleston Daily Mail* endorsed him, saying that since he will only be a one-term president, he can do the right thing to make tough decisions. When they told him the endorsement was for only four years, McCain said, "Four years—that's great. My doctor only gave me two."³⁶ Jimmy Kimmel jested, "Truth be told: John McCain is doing darn well for a guy who passed away 20 years ago."³⁷ Late night hosts also insinuated the Republican candidate's body was failing. "Colin Powell is in the news

³⁴ *Late Show with David Letterman*, CBS, September 24, 2008.

³⁵ *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, NBC, April 10, 2008.

³⁶ *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, NBC, October 17, 2008.

³⁷ *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, ABC, October 23, 2008.

because he endorsed Barack Obama,” monologued Craig Ferguson. “I wonder how John McCain feels about Colin Powell endorsing Obama. He’s probably all right with it. Men his age are used to having colon problems.”³⁸ From August 23 through November 3, the Center for Media and Public Affairs reported that Jay Leno and David Letterman told 658 jokes about McCain and only 243 about Obama. The report stated, “McCain was most often joked about because of his age.”³⁹

McCain’s performance during the town hall debate (October 7) where, at times, he seemed to plod aimlessly around the stage, only added more fodder for jokes about his age. On Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart replayed video from that debate while overlaying a fake audio-track supposedly from McCain’s lapel mic where the Senator is muttering absentmindedly searching for his lost dog “Puddles.”⁴⁰

In line with the theoretical basis of this dissertation, priming a particular trait during a campaign is easier when reinforcing an assumption that the audience is disposed to instead of forging a new one. And framing a trait inference is more readily elicited when other forces in the communication environment, such as news reports, opinion columns, and comedy, are all making the same point. The Obama campaign took advantage of this and injected ads into the communication stream that reinforced concerns over McCain’s age without explicitly stating so. Visuals within the Democratic ads strengthen the message. For example, they produced an ad that replayed a video that slowed the images and muted the conversation from an Oval Office “press opportunity”

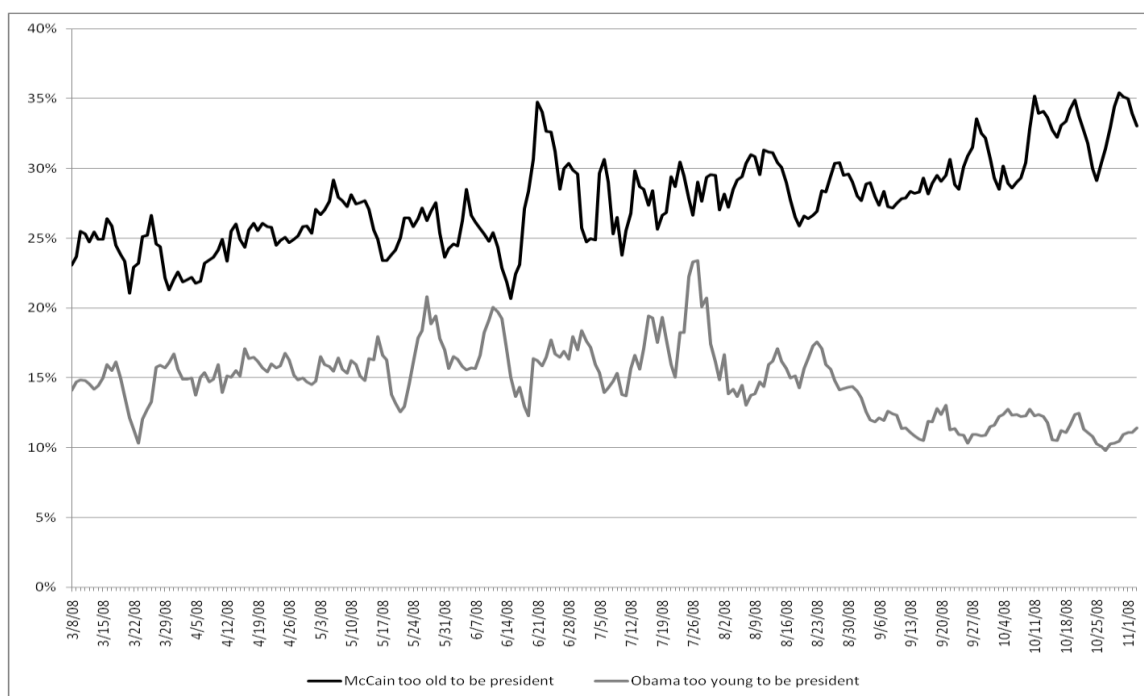
³⁸ *Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, CBS, October 21, 2008.

³⁹ “The Comedy Campaign: The Role of Late-Night TV Shows on the Campaign,” *Media Monitors*, XXII, 3, (Winter 2008): 4, <http://www.cmpa.com/pdf/08winter.pdf>

⁴⁰ *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Comedy Central, October 8, 2008.

involving George W. Bush and McCain. Had the actual audio of the meeting been played, viewers would have heard them embracing the ban on torture that McCain had pushed through Congress in the face of opposition from the White House. A moment which could have portrayed McCain in a positive light with many independents and Democrats by highlighting his willingness to oppose his own party was transformed into a confirmation of McCain's age-related frailty by slowing the silenced footage to half-speed producing awkward movements, prolonged blinks, and distorted facial movements.⁴¹

Figure 3.3 *Percent of Respondents who said that McCain was Too Old to be President Compared to Percent of Respondent who said Obama was Too Young to be President*⁴² (5-Day PMA)



⁴¹ Obama for America, "Social Security," September 16, 2008; Obama for America, "Out of Touch"; Obama for America, "Risk," September 30, 2008.

⁴² Exact question wording: "Do you feel John McCain is too to be president, or not?" and "Do you feel Barack Obama is too young to be president, or not?"

As the campaign progressed, the percent of people that believed that McCain was too old to be president increased (figure 3.3). Comparatively, the percent of respondents who believed Obama was too young to be president slightly decreased as Election Day neared.⁴³

3-2: *The Democrats Label McCain as Erratic*

With the “suspension” of the Republican campaign in September, the status of the first presidential debate (September 26, 2008) was in limbo for a few days as the media questioned whether McCain would show up or not - though he ultimately did. The day he suspended his campaign the Democrats introduced a new character trait to the communication environment. On September 25, Democratic communication advisor Robert Gibbs asserted that Obama had been steady and even-keeled while Senator McCain delivered a “very uneven and quite honestly an *erratic* performance” in response to the unfolding fiscal crisis.⁴⁴ A few days later Gibbs added reinforced meaning of the trait: “Look, just yesterday, John McCain said we shouldn’t fix blame, took a breath and then fixed blame. He said the fundamentals of our economy are strong and he flip-flopped. He opposed the bailout of AIG and then he supported it. This guy zig-zags. If he’s driving a car, get off the sidewalk.” The Democrats then released an ad with the not-so-subtle title “Erratic” which states “[I]n this economic crisis, its McCain who’s careened from stance to stance, been erratic. . . . Yes, McCain’s been erratic. What he

⁴³ Exact question wording: 1) “Do you feel John McCain is too to be president, or not?” (28.2% said “yes,” 69.2 % said “no,” N = 40,704; Dates asked: 3/04 – 11/03/2008) and 2) Do you feel Barack Obama is too young to be president, or not? (13.9% said “yes,” 83.6 % said “no,” N = 40,704; Dates asked: 3/04 – 11/03/2008).

⁴⁴ <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/25/obama-adviser-predicts-mccain-will-show-up/>

hasn't been is on your side."⁴⁵ During the APPC election debriefing, the Democrats' chief campaign strategist David Axelrod commented:

Obviously [the McCain campaign] required a course correct for "the fundamentals of the economy are strong." When Senator McCain moved from that position to one of crisis pretty quickly, it created a sense of inconsistency. We used the word "erratic" a lot during that period. Then [Republicans] suspended [their] campaign. Our feeling was that there was a herky-jerky nature to what was going on in the [Republican] campaign at the time and it played well against our solidity. And I think that was reflected in the numbers. (Jamieson, 2009, 75)

The Democratic campaign's success in injecting erratic into the media's lexicon is evident in the rapid rise in that word being tied to McCain, as reflected in searches in Lexis Nexis⁴⁶ and the Stony Brook database (figure3.4).⁴⁷ The first peak in the chart

⁴⁵ Obama for America, "Erratic," October 20 2008.

⁴⁶ The Lexis Nexis data was collected by searching television news transcripts by day for the number of sentences that contained the word "McCain" and "erratic."

⁴⁷ The Stony Brook database was collected by Dr. Steven Skiena and his associates at Stony Brook University for the Annenberg Public Policy Center. The data that they provided us are based on their Lydia system that identifies the occurrences of predefined "entities" in online newspaper texts, blogs, and television news show transcripts and analyzes these occurrences temporally, spatially, and linguistically. The Lydia system uses "web spiders" that identify the predefined entities that then archives the article, page, blog, or transcript. Once archived they are "then run through a pipeline that performs part-of-speech tagging, named entity identification and categorization, geographic normalization, intra-document co-reference resolution, extraction of entity descriptions and relations between entities, and per-occurrence sentiment score calculation" (Mikhail Bautin, Akshay Patil, and Steven Skiena, News/Media Analysis for National Annenberg Election Survey, p. 1). For the Annenberg Public Policy Center, Dr. Skiena and his team collected data from October 2007 to January 2009 based on a custom list of entities specific to the 2008 election that the 2008 NAES team provided the Stony Brook team. For data, they relied on 1000–2000 daily U.S. online newspapers that were crawled, or spidered, daily, around 45 political blogs, and 13 political television shows. The Stony Brook team took the list of 626 entities and manually grouped our entities with "synonym sets"—for example, the synonym set for "Barack Obama" includes synonyms such as "Obama," "Barack," "Barack Hussein Obama," "Senator Obama," "Senator Barack Obama," and all similar entities and all entities with various capitalizations. In these analyses I look at co-occurrences between different entities and or "synonym sets" by date. A co-occurrence is the number of times that two entities (or a single member from a synonym set) appear within a sentence in the overall sample of online newspapers, blogs, and TV transcripts. Although the Lydia system is not designed to give an complete count on the number of times that two entities appear in the same sentence in the universe of news media—mainly because it is based on "crawling" the Internet and even within that domain it has a limited and non-random sample—it does provide a barometer measuring the agenda-setting function of news because it can track these co-occurrences by date allowing us to see relative shifts. The actual numbers reported in the graph are, in reality, quite meaningless but are still useful as they indicate relative shifts to actually events

coincides with the first time Robert Gibbs uses this trait to define McCain. The tallest peak corresponds with McCain's "erratic" behavior during the town-hall debate. What is interesting in this figure is that in the beginning of September there is virtually no connection between McCain and erratic, yet after Gibbs introduces this character trait as a tag for the Republican the press quickly adopted it.⁴⁸

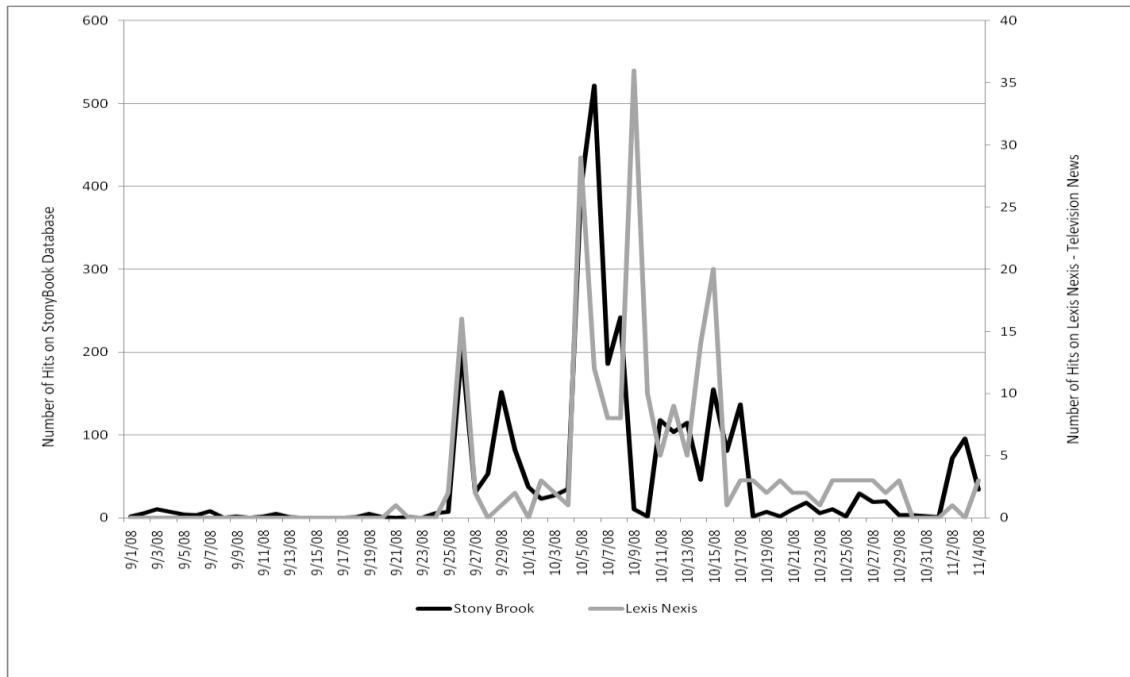
Following the approach used in chapter 2, the following analyses examines the impact of news use in priming McCain's age, the attribution of the trait erratic to McCain, and how adoption of this trait influenced vote preference to ultimately test the communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference.

The first analysis shows that news media use is related to respondents' belief that McCain was too old to be president and shows how the perception of the trait erratic is directly tied to this. As an intermediary step, perceptions of McCain as erratic led respondents' to believe that Obama could handle the economy better which, in turn, directly influenced their vote preference. The direct impact of perception of McCain as erratic on vote is dependent on respondents' level of media use.

in time during the 2008 campaign. The data in this graph represents the co-occurrence the synonym-set for "McCain" and the word "erratic."

⁴⁸ In chapter 2, I was able to overlay rolling averages of trait ratings on these types of graphs. Unfortunately, the question that taps perception of McCain as erratic was not added the 2008 NAES instrument until October 22 which only provides data for the last few weeks of the campaign and such overlapping is not very informative here.

Figure 3.4: *Number of Times the Word Erratic and McCain Appear in the Same Sentence*



3-3: Methodology

For this chapter, I analyze data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES) which contains responses from 57,967 adults interviewed by phone from December 17, 2008 through November 3, 2008. Like the 2004 NAES analyzed in chapter 2, the 2008 NAES follows a rolling cross-sectional design.

Respondents were asked: “I am going to read you some phrases. For each one, please tell me how well that phrase applies to the following candidates. Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all and 10 means it applies extremely well. Of course you can use any number in between. How well does the phrase ‘erratic’ apply to John McCain” ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 3.167$, $N = 1,527$, Dates asked: 10/22 – 11/03/2008).

To tap perceptions that McCain's age disqualified him from the presidency, respondents were asked: "Do you feel John McCain is too to be president, or not?" (28.2% said "yes," 69.2 % said "no," $N = 40,704$; Dates asked: 3/04 – 11/03/2008).

Because this election was so deeply rooted in economic concerns and the ascription of erratic to John McCain is directly tied to his response to the faltering economy, one of the main variables in the statistical models of this chapter comes from a question that asked respondents: "Now I'm going to mention a few items and for each one, please tell me if you think (ROTATE) Barack Obama or John McCain would better handle that issue if they were elected president in 2008. Here's the first: 'The economy.'" (37.2% said "John McCain," 50.7% said "Barack Obama," 4.9% said 'neither' and 6.5% said "Don't Know" $N = 17,177$, Dates asked: 8/27-11/3/2008).

Favorability ratings and vote preference are important dependent variables in the analyses. A single item tapping difference in favorability rating was constructed by subtracting McCain's favorability⁴⁹ from Obama's⁵⁰ resulting in a 21-point scale representing an Obama favorability advantage ($M = 0.1648$, $SD = 4.665$). Vote preference is tapped by a single item that asked, "Thinking about the general election for president in November, 2008, if that election were held today, and the candidates were (ROTATE NAMES)[John McCain and Sarah Palin the Republicans], [Barack Obama and Joe Biden, the Democrats], [Ralph Nader and Matt Gonzalez, the Independent candidates], [Bob Barr and Wayne Allyn Root, the Libertarians and [Cynthia McKinney and Rosa Clemente the Green Party candidates] for whom would you vote?" this question

⁴⁹ John McCain's favorability, 10-point scale, $M = 5.489$; $SD = 2.637$

⁵⁰ Barack Obama's favorability, 10-point scale, $M = 5.606$; $SD = 3.11$

was coded into a two-party vote intention variable with a Democratic vote (51.8 %) equaling one and a Republican vote (48.2 percent) equaling zero.

A news media index ($M = 3.542$, $SD = 1.904$) was constructed by taking the average scores from three questions: 1) “Thinking now about the past week how many days did you see information on broadcast or cable television about the 2008 presidential campaign? This includes seeing programs on television, on the internet, your cellphone, iPod, or PDA.” ($M = 5.474$, $SD = 2.465$); 2) Still thinking about the past week, how many days did you read a newspaper for information about the 2008 presidential campaign? This includes reading a paper copy of the newspaper, an online copy, or a newspaper item downloaded on your cell phone, iPod, or PDA?.” ($M = 2.916$, $SD = 3.020$); and 3) “How many days in the past week did you see or hear information about the 2008 presidential campaign on the Internet, this may include accessing the Internet through your cell phone, iPod, or PDA ?” ($M = 2.273$, $SD = 2.936$). The same set of controls found in the analyses in chapter 2 analyses is included in the models and their descriptive statistics are reported in table 3.1.

Table 3.1: *Descriptive Statistics of Control Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>
Gender (Dummy Variable for Female)	57.2%	--
Age (In Years)	53.3	16.0
Education (In Highest Year Completed)	14.4	2.5
Race (Dummy Variable for Black)	7.8%	--
Hispanic (Dummy Variable)	6.4%	--
Ideology (5-point scale: Conservative Coded High)	3.2	1.1
Party ID (Republican)	28.5%	--
Party ID (Democrat)	35.0%	--

3-4: Results

The first step of the analyses outlines the priming of Senator McCain's age by news media and framing it as an attribute that should disqualify him for the presidency. Table 3.2 reports a logistic regression model predicting the belief that John McCain is too old to be president. All of the socio-demographic variables and political orientation variables produce significant relationships in a somewhat predictable fashion. Above and beyond these control measures, the model shows that news media use was significantly and positively related to believing that the Senator from Arizona was too old to be president ($B = 0.071, p < .001$).

Table 3.2: *Logistic Regression Predicting Ratings of McCain as “Too Old to Be President”*

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratio
Female	0.265	0.025	1.304***
Age (in years)	0.004	0.001	1.004***
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	0.644	0.042	1.905***
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	0.257	0.049	1.293***
Education (in years)	-0.050	0.005	0.951***
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.867	0.038	0.420***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	0.592	0.028	1.808***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	-0.240	0.012	0.787***
News Media Use	0.071	0.007	1.074***
<i>Nagelkerke R²</i>			<i>0.163</i>
<i>N</i>			37,243
Note: 2008 NAES, 3/04 – 11/03/2008; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$			

The next step tests the impact of media use and the belief that McCain is too old to be president on respondents’ perceptions that the trait “erratic” applies to him. Table 3.3 reports the results from an OLS regression predicting respondents’ rating of McCain on this trait. The belief that McCain is too old to be president ($\beta = .100$, $p < .001$) and news media use ($\beta = .082$, $p < .01$) produced significant and positive relationships. The interaction between these two variables also produced a significant and positive relationship ($\beta = .087$, $p < .01$). The impact of thinking that McCain is too old to be president on the perception that he is “erratic” increased in strength with higher levels of media use.

Table 3.3 *OLS Regression Predicting Ratings of McCain as “Erratic”*

	B	S.E.	Standardized Beta
Female	-0.393	0.160	-0.062*
Age (in years)	-0.006	0.005	-0.028
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.008	0.319	-0.001
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	0.517	0.325	0.041
Education (in years)	0.050	0.034	0.039
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.695	0.209	-0.100***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	0.695	0.199	0.104***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	-0.247	0.081	-0.092**
News media use	0.145	0.047	0.082**
McCain “too old to be president”	0.677	0.194	0.100***
McCain “too old to be president” X News media use	0.265	0.160	0.087***
R^2			0.122
N			1,427
Note: 2008 NAES, 10-22-08 to 11-3-08; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$			

As outlined in the first chapter, the value of traits lies in their predictive value for a candidate’s future behavior. Therefore, the next model (table 3.4) outlines a logistic regression predicting the belief that Barack Obama could handle the economy better than John McCain - a question tapping respondents’ evaluation of future job performance. In the presence of controls, ratings of McCain as erratic produced a positive relationship ($B = .235, p < .001$). News use was marginally significant ($B = .073, p < .10$). The interaction between erratic and news media use, however, produced a significant and positive relationship ($B = .179, p < .05$) meaning the effect of this trait on the belief that Obama could better handle the economy is stronger for high news media consumers compared to those who attend to news media less often.

Table 3.4: *Logistic Regression Predicting the Belief that Obama Could Better Handle the Economy than McCain*

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratios
Female	0.053	0.146	1.055
Age (in years)	-0.006	0.005	0.994
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	2.176	0.418	8.811***
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	0.500	0.282	1.649#
Education (in years)	-0.034	0.031	0.967
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-1.182	0.186	0.307***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	1.358	0.178	3.890***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	-0.781	0.076	0.458***
News media use	0.073	0.043	1.076#
McCain rating as erratic	0.235	0.026	1.265***
McCain rating as erratic X News media use	0.179	0.086	1.196*
<i>Nagelkerke R²</i>			0.563
<i>N</i>			1,443
Note: 2008 NAES, 10-22-08 to 11-3-08; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$			

Table 3.5 reports an OLS regression model predicting a Barack Obama advantage in favorability ratings (Obama minus McCain). In the presence of controls, news media use was not related to favorability ratings. In fact, the coefficient representing this relationship is close to zero.⁵¹ Believing that Obama could handle the economy better than McCain produced the largest standardized beta coefficient in the model ($\beta = .519$, $p < .001$). The perception of McCain as erratic had a direct effect on the candidates favorability promoting an Obama advantage ($\beta = .083$, $p < .001$) with the strength of this effect being dependent by news media use ($\beta = .034$, $p < .005$).

⁵¹ Such finding should be a relief to many in that news use should not be directly related to vote preference because of journalistic norms that focus on fair and balanced reporting and objectivity.

Table 3.5: *OLS Regression Predicting Obama's Advantage in Favorability Rating*

	B	S.E.	Standardized Beta
Female	0.315	0.181	0.027#
Age (in years)	-0.007	0.006	-0.017
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	1.528	0.359	0.068***
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	0.057	0.371	0.002
Education (in years)	0.087	0.039	0.037*
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-1.811	0.242	-0.141***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	1.232	0.229	0.101***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	-0.733	0.094	-0.148***
News media use	0.002	0.053	0.001
McCain rating as erratic	0.151	0.032	0.083***
Obama can handle the economy better than McCain	5.997	0.236	0.519***
McCain rating as "erratic" X News media use	0.198	0.096	0.034*
R^2			0.665
N			1,436
Note: 2008 NAES, 10-22-08 to 11-3-08; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$			

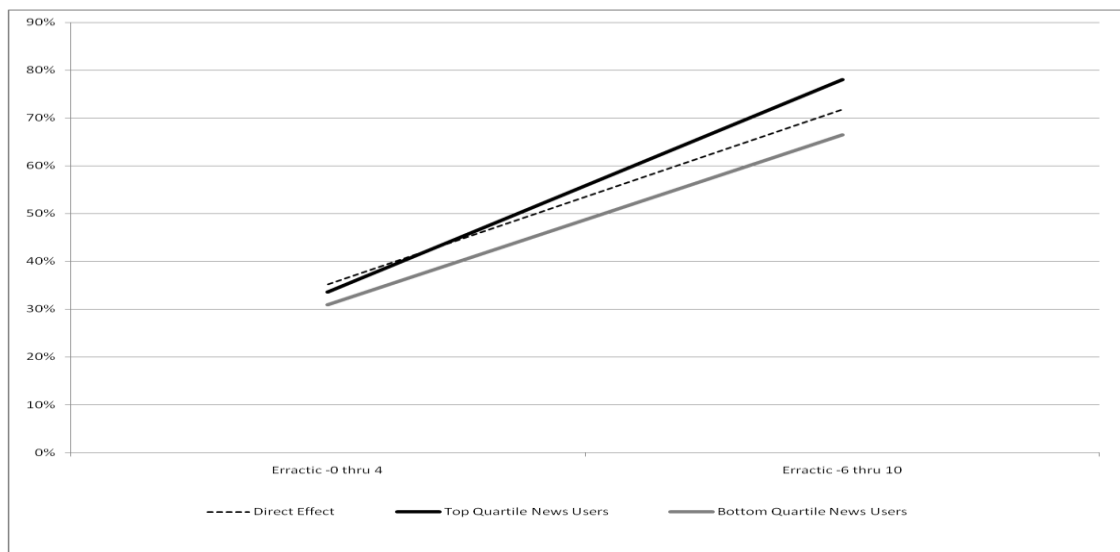
The final model in this chapter is a logistic regression predicting a two-party vote if the "election were held today." The numbers for the "Obama could better handle the economy" variable ($B = 5.997$, $O.R. = 135.572$, $p < .001$) pops out as an almost nonsensical finding. This dichotomous variable is highly related to the dichotomous vote preference dependent variable as the tetrachoric correlation between the two is 0.871 and a cross-tab analysis between them shows that 94 percent of the sample is contained in the diagonal of the matrix. This relationship also explains the large Nagelkerke R^2 (0.887). Even with this variable in the model the rating of McCain as erratic produced a significant direct effect ($B = .181$, $p < .001$) and the interaction between it and media use is also significant ($B = .351$, $p < .001$) meaning that relationship between erratic and an

Obama two-party vote preference becomes stronger as news media use increases. This interaction is illustrated in figure 3.5.

Table 3.6 *Logistic Regression Predicting an Obama Two-Party Vote Preference if the “Election Were Held Today”*

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratios
Female	-0.121	0.285	0.886
Age (in years)	-0.004	0.009	0.996
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	3.493	0.889	32.888***
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	0.457	0.485	1.580
Education (in years)	0.176	0.061	1.193**
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-2.251	0.385	0.105***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	1.190	0.348	3.286***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	-0.942	0.157	0.390***
News media use	0.083	0.082	1.086
McCain rating as erratic	0.181	0.055	1.198***
Obama can handle the economy better than McCain	4.909	0.326	135.572***
McCain rating as erratic X News media use	0.351	0.179	1.420*
<i>Nagelkerke R²</i>			0.887
<i>N</i>			1,274
Note: 2008 NAES, 10-22-08 to 11-3-08; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$			

Figure 3.5: *The Interaction between News Use and Erratic on the Predicted Probabilities that a Respondent would Vote For Obama “if the Election were Held Today”*



3-5: Conclusion

Unlike 2004, where some campaign strategists and scholars pointed to the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth campaign as the turning point in the election, the historic victory of Barack Obama did not ride solely on the perception of McCain’s age and the related trait perception of being erratic. The Republicans had a clear disadvantage because of the economy, a very unpopular incumbent president, and the fact that their party had been losing identifiers since 2004 (Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010). They also had substantially less money than the Democrats to run their campaign (Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010). Republican pollster, Bill McInturff reflected:

John's 72.... We were leaking water in ten different valves, and you're trying to shut the first seven valves that are the most rational to get that water to stop, before you can get to the last. All day long you're trying to fix the water leaks. You run out of time and money. In the scheme of what we had to fix, being too close to Bush, and the economy and all the rest, we had [a great deal] to get fixed way before we worried about John's age. (Jamieson 2009, p. 107).

Nonetheless, the results reported in this chapter suggest that framing McCain as erratic did play a small but measurable role in the Democrats' win as part of the larger communication environment that was heavily focus on the economy. The economy provided the context in which McCain's age was framed ("too old" as opposed to "wise") and influenced the ascription of erratic to the Republican. This trait influenced respondents' prediction of which candidate could better handle the economy, their favorability ratings, and ultimately their vote preference. The strength of these relationships is dependent on news media use. The communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference is supported.

Furthermore, the relationships reported in this chapter are residual effects from the initial labeling of Senator John McCain as erratic. The size of the coefficients may actually be attenuated because the question asking if erratic applied to John McCain was added to the 2008 NAES almost a month after Democratic communication advisor Robert Gibbs introduced the term as an identifier for the Republican candidate. If this question was asked at that time, the results may very well have been more strongly supportive of the communication model presented in this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4: The “Change We Need” and “Inspiring” Leadership

As the 2008 presidential general election was unfolding the country experienced the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression, a tumultuous second term was ending for an unpopular president whose political party faced substantial blame for the financial crisis, and a solid majority of Americans believed that the country was on the wrong track. Instead of the “strong and steady” leadership that George W. Bush successfully campaigned on four years earlier when the Iraq War and War on Terror were salient to voters (see chapter 2), leadership in 2008 was framed in terms of transforming Washington, ending partisan politics, and most importantly, presenting a clear divergence from the incumbent president and his administration. While Senator John McCain unsuccessfully ran as a “maverick” reformer, Senator Barack Obama’s victorious campaign did not stray from its central message of “the change we need.” During the Annenberg Election Debriefing chief Democratic strategist David Axelrod explained why this message resonated with voters:

We felt strongly that Obama's opportunity was that he represented the sharpest departure from George W. Bush, and the perceptions of George W. Bush. He [Senator Obama] was a healing and uniting figure at a time when people felt the country was too polarized. He was someone who was not particularly partisan at a time when people felt that there was too much partisanship in Washington. He was someone who had a history of advocacy for people and a big interest in fighting special interest influence at a time when the special interests were something that the public perceived as a major impediment to progress in Washington. We felt as we looked at the field that no one running represented a sharper break from Bush. It was very clear when you looked at the drift of things. And it certainly turned out that way. This was going to be an election about change. The people wanted a profound change. In fact, through the two years of the campaign, each time we polled, and there are a number of pollsters in the

room who probably had the same experience, and we posited the choice between a candidate who had years of Washington experience and a candidate who would bring fundamental change to Washington, the change candidate won (Jamieson, 2008, p.68).

The presidential candidates in the 2008 race for the Oval Office were not centrally evaluated in terms of who was better prepared to be Commander-in-Chief (i.e., the stronger leader) or who had the most experience, but who could change the nation's course in these troubled times.

The analyses presented in the last two chapters relied on the National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES). Unfortunately, the 2008 NAES does not contain questions that explicitly tap candidate traits that reflect the message of change. Therefore, for the main analyses reported in this chapter, I rely on a dataset from the Pew Research Center where perceptions of the candidates on the trait “inspiring” were collected from registered voters in mid-October 2008 to test the theoretical model driving this dissertation. This data comes from a cross-sectional survey with a much smaller sample size than the 2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Surveys. While the main analyses supporting the theoretical argument are consistent with the past chapters, this chapter does not have the supporting graphical data as found in the others.

In the last two chapters the operationalization of the specific trait and the exact word used in the survey question could be explicitly tied to campaign messages. In chapter 2 strong leader was clearly linked to the Swift Boat Veterans Truth message as their ads stated that Senator Kerry “lacks the capacity to lead.” In chapter 3, I outlined how the Democrats used the term erratic to frame Senator McCain's behavior after the

economic meltdown in which is tied to a survey question that directly asked respondents how well that term applied the Republican candidate. The link between Senator Obama's central message, "change we need," and the trait inspiring is not as apparent; especially since the campaign did not overtly and consistently use the term inspiring to define their candidate. The only clear-cut example comes from a 60-second spot titled "Inspiring" aired during the primaries that features Harvard Law Professor Laurence Tribe proclaiming, "It was inspiring, absolutely inspiring to see someone as brilliant as Barack Obama... take all of the talent and devote it to... making people's lives better"⁵² The video clip of Professor Tribe was reused in a general election advertisement titled "Choices." Many of their paid spots, however, strongly suggested it visually - most notably through the images of "inspired" crowds. Additionally, ascription of the trait inspiring to the Illinois Senator was clearly primed by the news media, which I show later in this chapter.

Beyond simple priming, the framing of Obama as inspiring resonated with voters because it reflected his main message of "change we need;" a belief many Americans held. The word inspiring literally means to breath into or blow upon and is the basis for the idiom "breath new life into" which means to refresh, rejuvenate, renew, revive and so on. All these terms infer a fresh start, a change. Furthermore, according to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (11th edition) inspiring means "to influence, move, or guide by divine or supernatural inspiration; to exert an animating enlivening influence on; to spur on, impel, motivate." There are other terms and phrases such as "transformative" and "agent of change" that may have measured the adoption of the message, but these are not traits. Because traits are used to frame an individual's observed behavior, they

⁵² "Inspiring in 60" Obama for President, aired 4/29/2008

inherently imply valance. “Change” and “transformative” on their own lack meaning because they are neutral words that could be framed positively or negatively. Inspiring, on the other hand, hold a positive connotation.

The conceptualization of traits outlined in chapter 1, provides the theoretical framework for how this trait is ascribed to Obama to categorize trends in his observed behavior. Through the lens of media, Americans are exposed to his speeches, the large crowds that he attracts, and analysts and pundits commentary. As Obama’s character is framed by this trait, projection of future behavior when in office can be made. These projections could be along the lines that he will be able to foster change in Washington by building consensus, bring together public support, and inspire legislators to work across party lines. This is illuminated by speech Senator Obama delivered one week before Election Day on October 27, 2008 in Canton Ohio where he opened with:

After decades of broken politics in Washington, eight years of failed policies from George Bush, and twenty-one months of a campaign that has taken us from the rocky coast of Maine to the sunshine of California, we are one week away from *change in America*.

In one week, *you can turn the page* on policies that have put the greed and irresponsibility of Wall Street before the hard work and sacrifice of folks on Main Street.

In one week, *you can choose* policies that invest in our middle-class, create new jobs, and grow this economy from the bottom-up so that everyone has a chance to succeed; from the CEO to the secretary and the janitor; from the factory owner to the men and women who work on its floor.

In one week, *you can put an end* to the politics that would divide a nation just to win an election; that tries to pit region against region, city against town, Republican against Democrat; that asks us to fear at a time when we need hope.

In one week, at this defining moment in history, *you can give this country the change we need.*⁵³

In this speech, he presents the need for change, declares that is coming, and that “you” are the one that can “turn the page,” “choose,” “put an end,” and most importantly, “can give this country the change we need.”

4-1: Why Traditional Leadership Measures Failed to Predict the 2008 Election

If bets were made on the 2008 election outcome based solely on information from the measures from the 2008 NAES that tracked perceptions of candidate leadership and experience, a lot of money would have been lost on November 4th. In the aggregate, the Arizonian war-hero consistently received higher scores than his junior counterpart when respondents were asked if the candidates were “ready to be Commander-in-Chief” (figure 4.1). Senator McCain was also seen as a stronger leader than Obama for most of the general election (figure 4.2). Even though he lost some of his advantage during the financial crisis in September, he never substantially drops below Obama’s rating for any length of time on this trait. When it came to which candidate had the experience needed to be president, the senior senator consistently trumped his junior counterpart from Illinois (figure 4.3).⁵⁴

⁵³ October 27, 2008. Emphasis added. Full transcript available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/27/us/politics/27text-obama.html>

⁵⁴ Ready to be Commander-in-Chief and experience are not direct traits measures but are used here as proxy measure for leadership.

Figure 4.1: Ratings of the Candidates on “Ready to be Commander-in-Chief”

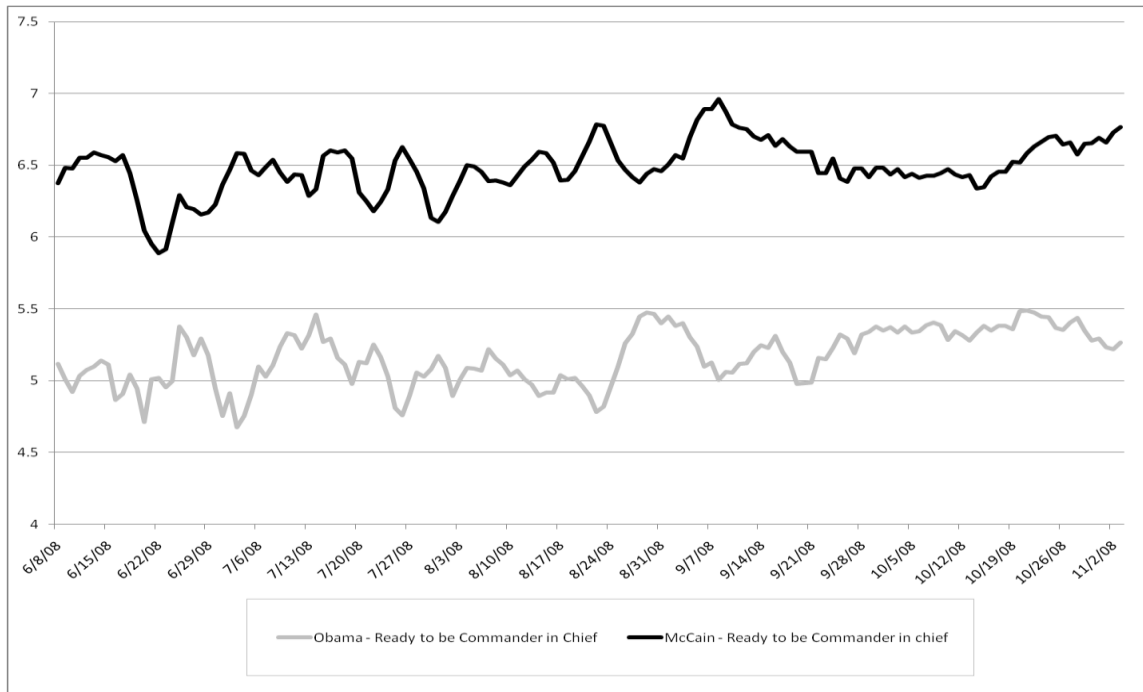


Figure 4.2: Ratings of the Candidates on “Strong Leader”

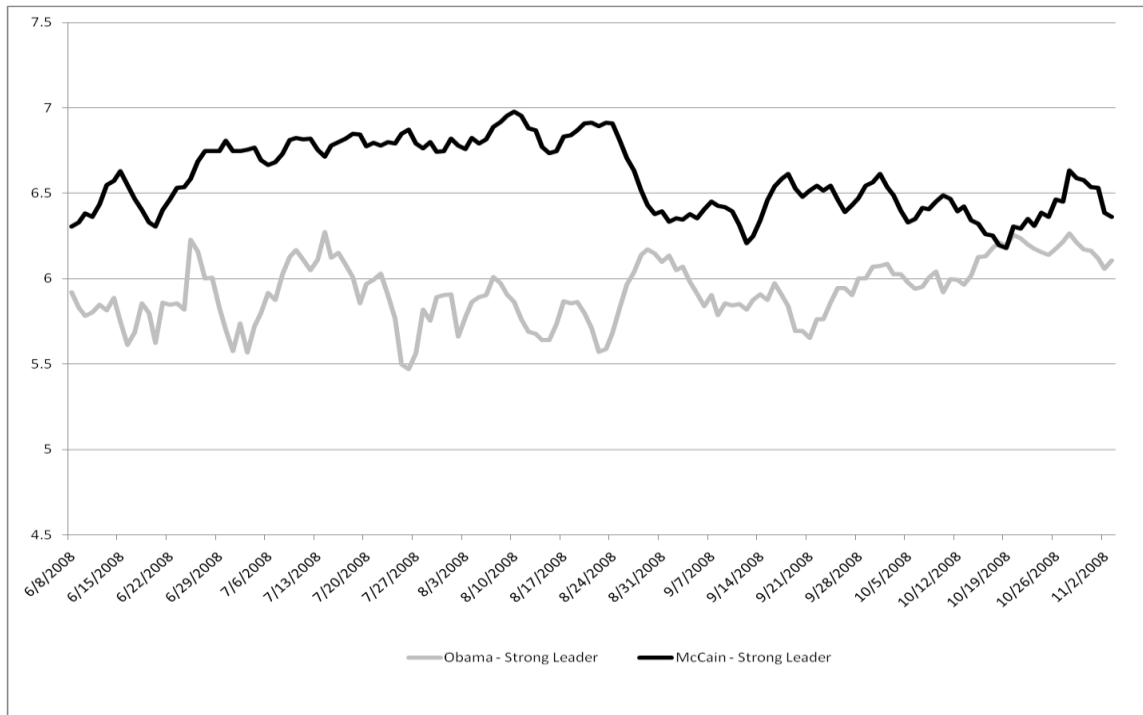
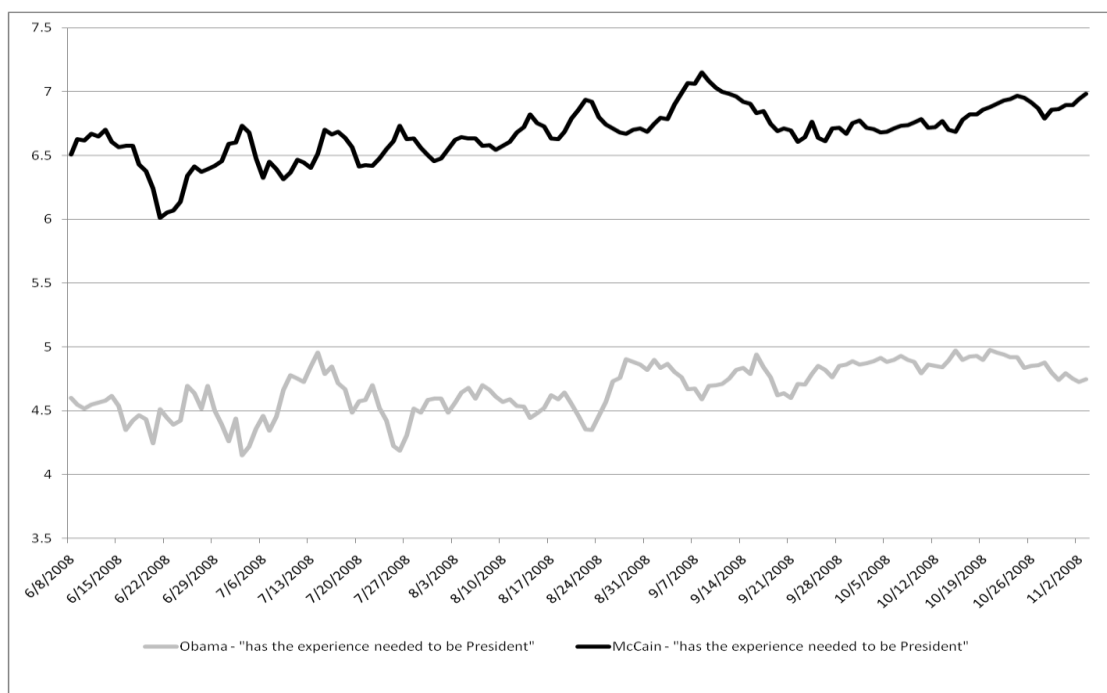


Figure 4.3: Ratings of the Candidates on the Trait “Has the Experience Needed to be President”



These results are consistent with other surveys during this time. For example, a *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* poll conducted by pollsters Peter Hart and Neil Newhouse in mid-October found that McCain was seen as “better” than Obama by registered voters when it came to 1) being Commander-in-Chief, 2) having the strong leadership qualities needed to be president and 3) being knowledgeable and experienced enough to handle the presidency⁵⁵

One possible explanation for why these measures do not conform to the election outcome is that leadership qualities and experience do not have any impact on vote

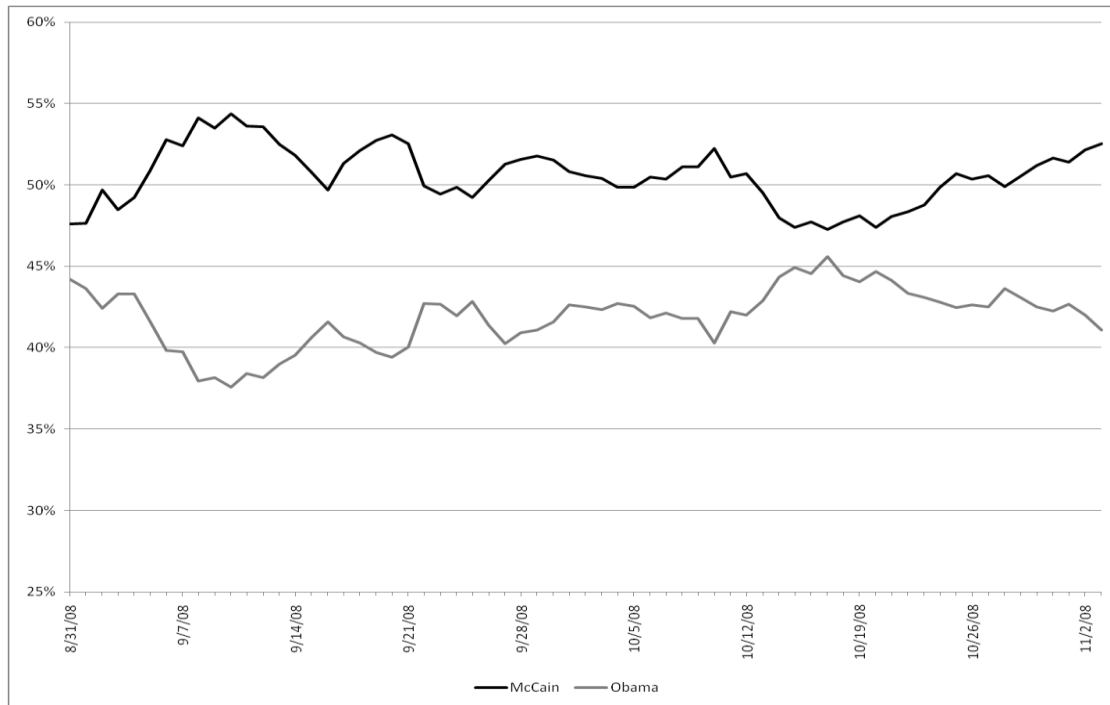
⁵⁵ NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll # 2008-6089: Late October, 2008—2008 Presidential Election. Field dates: October 17- 20, 2008; Sample: National registered voters including an oversample of voters including an oversample of voters who only use a cellular phone, $N = 1,159$. Data and documentation are available through the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Survey ID # USNBCWSJ2008-6089

choice. A broad generalization of this conclusion to all candidates and elections would be misguided, however, particularly since chapter 2 presents evidence that strong leadership was directly related to vote choice in 2004 when the Iraq War and War on Terror were salient. But, consistent with the theoretical model of this dissertation, in 2008 the context had changed and “leadership” was grounded less in notions of a strong Commander-in-Chief and more in those of inspiration and change. One can see how this plays out when we compare how 2008 NAES respondents’ rated which candidate “would better handle the economy” (figure 4.4) to which candidate “would better handle the Iraq War” (figure 4.5).

Figure 4.4: *Perceptions of Which Candidate Would Better Handle the Economy*



Figure 4.5: *Perceptions of Which Candidate Would Better Iraq War*



On handling the economy, Obama held a substantial advantage as respondents believed that he would do a better job. Concerning the Iraq War, McCain held the advantage. It is not hard to imagine a McCain victory if the economy were strong and the Iraq War the most important issue facing the country. This evidence, while only suggestive, is consistent with the central thesis of this dissertation: that which traits matter in vote decisions are contextual and determined by the intersection of actual conditions, campaign strategies, and media.

4-2: An Unpopular Incumbent and the Country on the Wrong Track

In addition to its relevance to the economy, Obama's message of "change" resonated because incumbent President George W. Bush was extremely unpopular. At no point in 2008 did a major public opinion poll find a majority approval of his presidency.

For example, from mid-December 2007 to Election Day, the 2008 NAES found public approval of the President's performance hovering around 30 percent. Similarly, on average from mid-December 2007 through Election Day 2008, Bush scored 3.8 on a 10-point favorability scale. As the election was drawing to a close, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that "just 11% said Bush will be remembered as an outstanding or above average president—by far the lowest positive end-of-term rating for any of the past four presidents."⁵⁶ The 25 percent at which his approval ratings landed on October 5, was "only 1-percentage point higher than President Nixon's low of 24 percent, reached shortly before he resigned, and 3 points above President Truman's low of 22 percent," noted an article in the *National Journal*.⁵⁷

The fact that a solid majority disapproved of Bush's presidency was a major problem for the McCain campaign and clearly an advantage that the Democrats capitalized on. McCain's effort to sever his attachment with the incumbent was halted by the Democrats, even as he adopted the nickname "Maverick." Obama adviser David Axelrod reported that, "Throughout the primary campaign, he [McCain] was forced at times to defend his fealty to George Bush." "As you know," Axelrod recalled, "there was a lot of tape of him talking about how he voted with Bush 90 percent of the time and [saying] he couldn't think of a major issue on which he had a disagreement with Bush, and so on. We made good use of that tape throughout the campaign" (Jamieson, 2009, 70).

⁵⁶ "Bush and Public Opinion: Reviewing the Bush Years and the Public's Final Verdict," *The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, December 18, 2008, <http://people-press.org/report/478/bush-legacy-public-opinion>

⁵⁷ John Maggs, "Despite Crisis, Bush's Legacy Isn't Written Yet: The Financial Meltdown Has Sent Bush's Approval Ratings Near Truman's Record Low," *National Journal Magazine*, October 18, 2008.

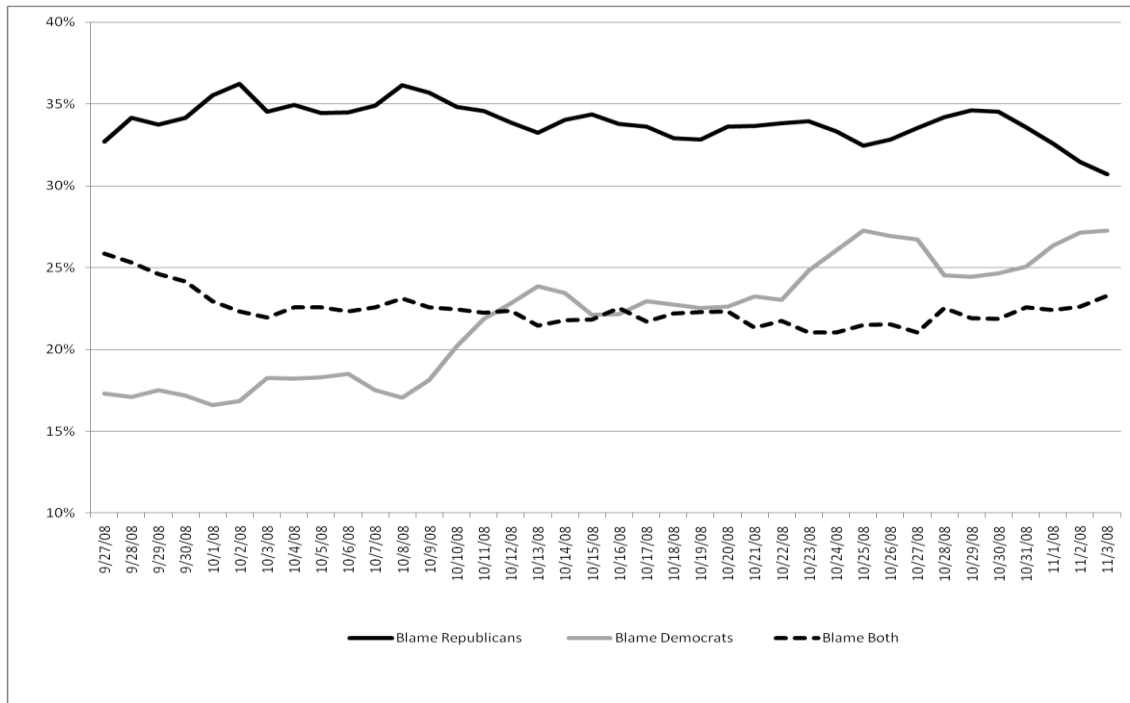
Over the course of the campaign, the Democrats broadcast ads reinforcing McCain's link to the unpopular Republican president. Past statements made by McCain provided ammunition for Obama's advertising team: "I voted with the president over 90% of the time. Higher than, uh, a lot of my, uh, even Republican colleagues."⁵⁸ This statement became a centerpiece of the Obama advertisement campaign. Their spots featured pictures of Bush and McCain as the words THE SAME were overlaid on the screen with the announcer saying, "They share the same out-of-touch attitude. The same failure to understand the economy. The same tax cuts for huge corporations and the wealthiest one percent. The same questionable ties to lobbyists. The same plan to spend ten billion a month in Iraq when we should be rebuilding America." McCain is then shown declaring, "I voted with the president over 90% of the time. Higher than, uh, a lot of my, uh, even Republican colleagues." The announcer closed, "We just can't afford more of the same" as the tag on the screen set the Obama-Biden ticket as the remedy to the Bush-McCain years with the tag, "Obama Biden: For the Change We Need."⁵⁹

The connection that the Obama campaign drew between McCain and Bush partly explains why the Democrat could run on "change we need." Analyzing the 2008 NAES, Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson (2010) found that respondents who said that voting for McCain was like voting for a "Bush third term" were significantly more likely to favor Obama. Additionally, the Republican received the blunt of blame for the "current financial crisis facing the United States" (figure 4.5).

⁵⁸ John McCain on *Your World with Neil Cavuto*, Fox News Network, May 22, 2003.

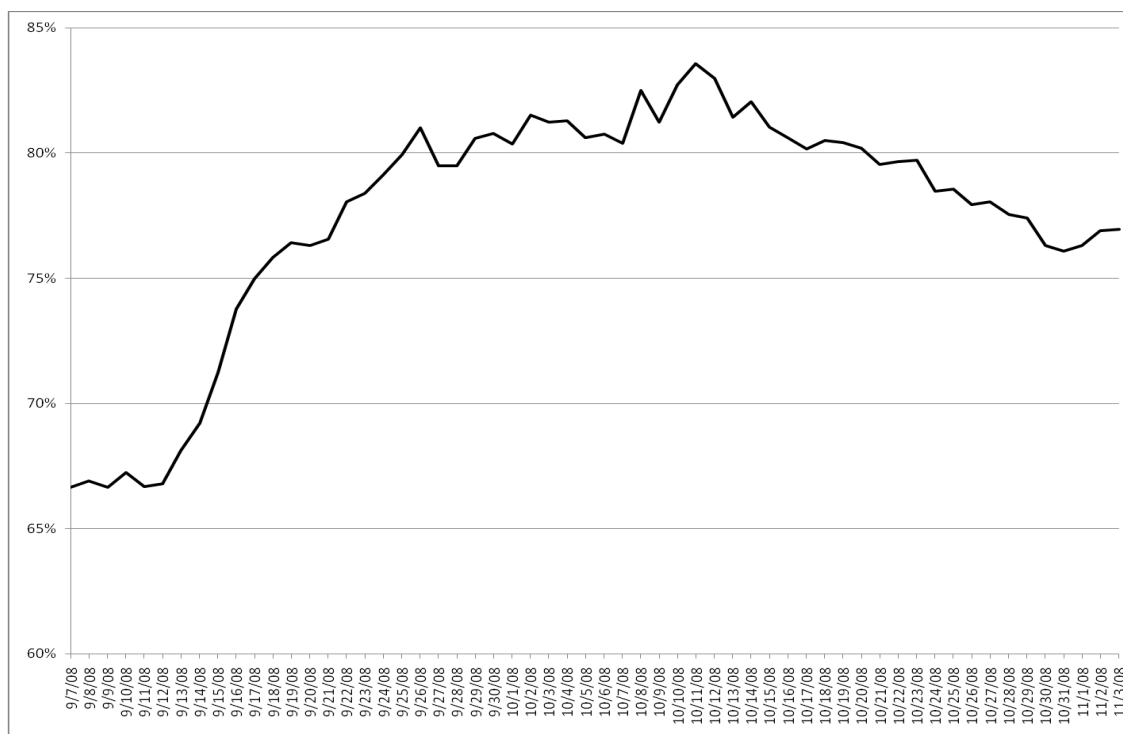
⁵⁹ Obama for America, "Same" August 31, 2008.

Figure 4.5: *Attribution of Blame for “Current Financial Crisis Facing the United States”*



What all of this added up to was a solid majority of Americans believing that the country was on the wrong track. In the end of September and early October over 80 percent held this view (figure 4.6). The context of the 2008 general election called for candidates to frame themselves in terms of change: Obama’s “change we need” and McCain’s “maverick.” As the impact of the Obama attacks took hold, voters increasingly viewed McCain not as a maverick but as “McSame” (Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010).

Figure 4.6: *Percent of 2008 Respondents who Believe the “Country is on the Wrong Track” (5-Day PMA)*

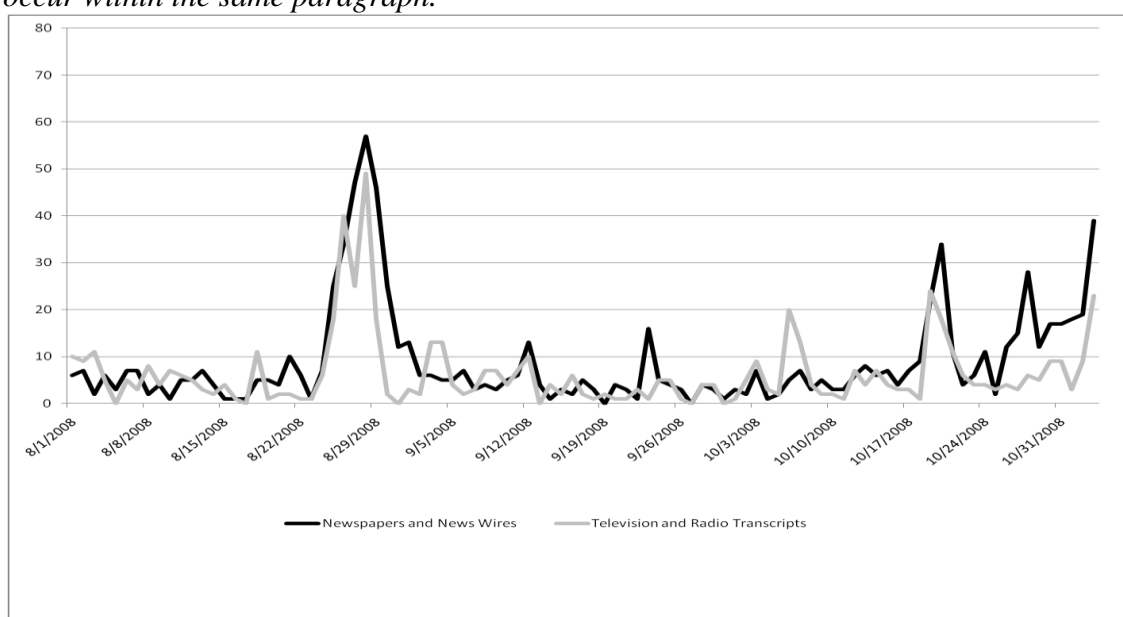


During the 2008 Annenberg Election Debriefing, campaign manager David Plouffe reflected that Obama’s message of “change” was their main focus.⁶⁰ “From a message standpoint, first, we wanted to be consistent. The consistency of our message: “change we can believe in” for 16 months in the primary, “change we need” for about four months in the general. Didn’t deviate. It drove the press crazy. [They thought it] was boring [and] were annoyed by it. We think that constancy served us well, particularly for someone like the president elect, who was new to Washington” (Jamieson, 2009, p. 36).

⁶⁰ In chapter 3, I outlined how news media use was related to thinking that McCain was too old to be president and how the Obama campaign framed him as “erratic.” This is not mutually exclusive to the analyses here as there are probably tangential relationships among thinking McCain is too old and erratic and that Obama is the candidate of change as these messages are intertwined in many of the Democrat’s spots.

While the Democratic campaign seldom explicitly used the word inspiring in their messages, the news media linked the trait to the Illinois Senator. Figure 4.7 shows the number of hits found in ‘newspapers and newswires’ and ‘television and radio transcripts’ in Lexis Nexis using the search terms “Obama” and “inspire or inspiring or inspirational” within a single paragraph.⁶¹

Figure 4.7: *Number of hits for the search terms “Obama” and the root “Inspir” that occur within the same paragraph.*



The first and highest peak occurs during the Democratic convention at the end of August. During President Clinton’s convention speech on August 27, he proclaimed, “Now, he [Barack Obama] has a remarkable ability to inspire people, to raise our hopes and rally us to high purpose.” Senator Obama closed the convention with a well delivered

⁶¹ looking at the dates between August 1, 2008 and November 3, 2008, a search on Lexis Nexis for “McCain” and “inspire or inspiring or inspirational” within paragraphs that did not include Obama only produced 9 hit for those three plus months. The same search strategy produced 89 hit for Obama and not McCain suggesting that McCain was not being framed in terms of being inspiring.

and received acceptance speech. According to reporter Jeff Brady of *NPR*, attendees in the 80,000 plus said the speech was “passionate, inspiring, and feisty”⁶²

As the election was coming to a close, the media increasingly linked “inspiring” to the Democrat. The peak at October 19th is noteworthy in that it corresponds with General Colin Powell’s endorsement. On *Meet the Press*, the Retired four-star general, former Secretary of State, and lifelong moderate Republican proclaimed:

So, when I look at all of this and I think back to my Army career, we've got two individuals, either one of them could be a good president. But which is the president that we need now? Which is the individual that serves the needs of the nation for the next period of time? And I come to the conclusion that because of his ability to inspire, because of the inclusive nature of his campaign, because he is reaching out all across America, because of who he is and his rhetorical abilities--and we have to take that into account--as well as his substance--he has both style and substance--he has met the standard of being a successful president, being an exceptional president. I think he is a transformational figure. He is a new generation coming into the world--onto the world stage, onto the American stage, and for that reason I'll be voting for Senator Barack Obama.

General Powell’s was not the only major endorsement granted to Senator Obama during this time that pointed out his ability to inspire. Two day before the General’s appearance on *Meet the Press*, the *Washington Post* released their endorsement:

Mr. Obama is a man of supple intelligence, with a nuanced grasp of complex issues and evident skill at conciliation and consensus-building...Mr. Obama's temperament is unlike anything we've seen on the national stage in many years. He is deliberate but not indecisive; eloquent but a master of substance and detail; preternaturally confident but eager to hear opposing points of view. He has inspired millions of voters of diverse ages and races, no small thing in our often divided and cynical country. We think he is the right man for a perilous moment.

These endorsements further illustrate the connection between the trait inspiring, the central Obama message, and the general sense that the nation needed substantial change.

⁶² <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94095344>

4-3: The Relationship among Media Use, Inspiring and Vote Preference

To examine the relationship among media use, Obama as inspiring and vote preference, I analyze a survey of likely voters conducted by Pew Research Center that collected 3,016 interviews from October 16th thru the 19th.⁶³ The poll was in the field when the *Washington Post* and General Powell publicly endorsed Senator Obama. Due to the split design of the survey, the trait battery was only asked to half of the respondents and only to those who said that they were registered to vote. The following analyses are based on this sub-sample ($n = 1,300$).

Perceptions of how inspirational the candidates are the were measured by two questions: “As I name some traits, please tell me whether you think each one describes (John McCain/Barack Obama). Do you think of (John McCain/Barack Obama) as ‘inspiring’ or not?” Seventy-one percent ascribed this trait to Obama compared to 37 percent for McCain. Given McCain’s war hero status, his behavior as a prisoner of war, etc..., it’s easy to imagine a scenario in which he would be viewed as very inspirational. Yet, consistent with the theoretical argument, however, since war was not the primary issue and media took a different slant, this was not the case.

Table 4.1 details the cross-tabulation of these two variables. The respondents I am interested in are those who think of Obama as inspiring and do not think this trait applies to McCain. These 615 individuals (47.3 percent of the total sample) were coded as 1 while all others were coded as zero to construct a dichotomous variable.

⁶³ For complete details on the survey see: <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1408>

Table 4.1: *Cross-Tabulation between the Two “Inspiring” Measures*

	Do you think of Barack Obama as “inspiring” or not?				
Do you think of John McCain as Inspiring or not?		Yes	No	Don’t know/refused	Total
	Yes	285 (21.9%)	197 (15.2%)	6 (0.5%)	488 (37.5%)
	No	615 (47.3%)	134 (10.3%)	16 (1.2%)	765 (58.8 %)
	Don’t know/Refused	25 (1.9%)	8 (0.6%)	14 (1.1%)	47 (3.6%)
	Total	925 (71.2%)	339 (26.1%)	36 (2.8%)	1,300 (100%)

Unfortunately since the Pew survey did not include a news media battery, the models reported in the previous chapters cannot be directly replicated here. However, the survey did ask, “How closely have you been following news about candidates for the 2008 presidential election ... very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely?” (48% - very closely, 35% - fairly closely, 10% - not too closely, and 7% - not closely at all). This measure will be used as a proxy for news media use.

The final dependent variable is captured by a single question that asks: “If the presidential election were being held today, would you vote [for the Republican ticket of John McCain and Sarah Palin] OR [for the Democratic ticket of Barack Obama and Joe Biden]?” (options rotated). Thirty-eight percent said the Republicans, 52 percent reported the Democrats, and ten percent said they “did not know.” This measure was coded into a two-party-vote-for-Obama dichotomous measure. As in previous chapters, socio-

demographic and political orientation variables are included in the models as controls.

The descriptive statistics of these measures are outlined in table 4.2.

Table 4.2: *Descriptive Statistics of Control Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>
Gender (Dummy Variable for Female)	50.9%	--
Age (In Years)	50.6	17.3
Education (In Highest Year Completed)	13.9	2.2
Race (Dummy Variable for Black)	10.5%	--
Hispanic (Dummy Variable)	6.0%	--
Ideology (5-point scale: Conservative Coded High)	3.3	1.0
Party ID (Republican)	28.9%	--
Party ID (Democrat)	34.8%	--

4-4: Results

The first step of the analyses examines the impact of attention to news media to the attribution of the trait inspiring to Senator Obama and not Senator McCain. As reported in table 4.3, in the presence of controls, the more that respondents followed the news the more they thought that Obama was inspiring and McCain was not ($B = .256, p < .01$).

Thinking that Obama is inspiring and McCain is not is significantly related to an Obama two-party vote “if the election were held today ($B = 1.177, p < .001$). Table 4.4 reports that the impact of this trait on vote preference is dependent on the level of respondents’ attention to news as the interaction term is positive and statistically significant ($B = .514, p < .001$). As respondents paid more attention to the news, the

relationship between thinking Obama is inspiring and McCain not and vote preference gets stronger. This interaction is illustrated in figure 4.8.

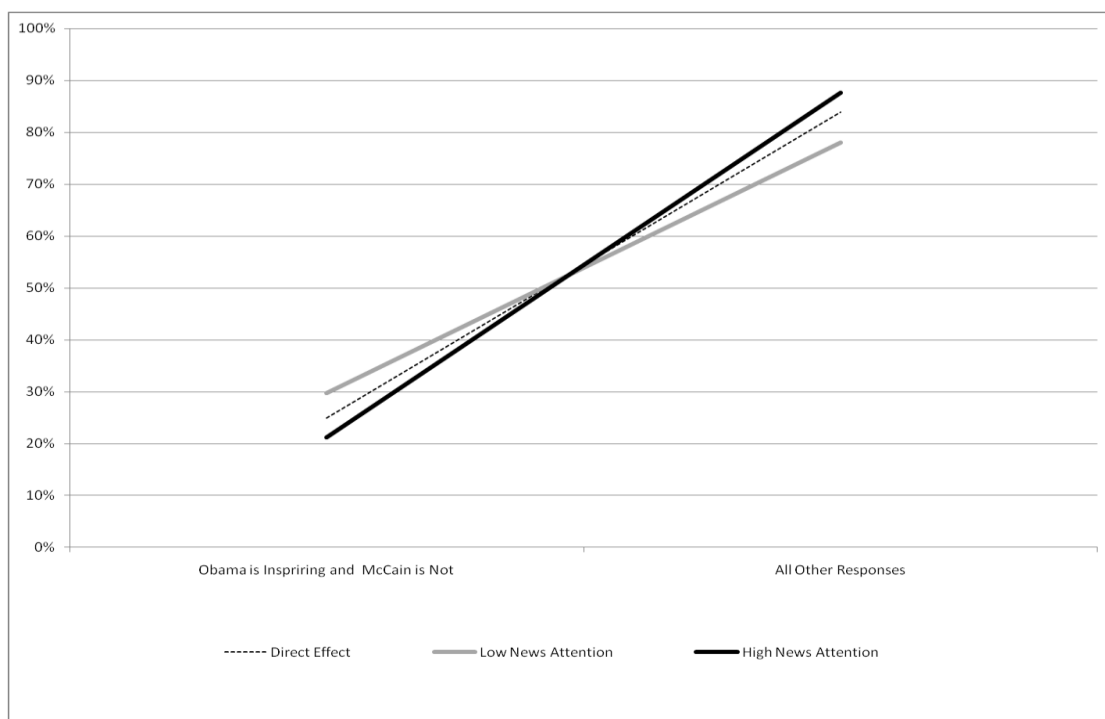
Table 4.3: *Logistic Regression Model Predicting Obama is Inspiring and McCain is Not*

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratios
Female (1=yes, 0=no)	0.017	0.134	1.017
Age (in years)	-0.009	0.004	0.991*
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	0.798	0.249	2.220**
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.214	0.306	0.807
Education (in years)	0.058	0.032	1.059
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-1.036	0.178	0.355***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	1.088	0.158	2.967***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	-0.422	0.081	0.655***
Closely Following the news	0.256	0.097	1.292**
Nagelkerke R ²			0.331
Note: Pew, 10-16-2008 to 10-19-2008; *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05			

Table 4.4: *Logistic Regression Model Predicting an Obama Vote if the “Election Were Held Today”*

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratios
Female (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.313	0.240	0.731
Age (in years)	-0.014	0.008	0.986
Black (1=yes, 0=no)	3.141	0.788	23.127***
Hispanic (1=yes, 0=no)	0.410	0.541	1.507
Education (in years)	-0.040	0.059	0.961
Republican (1=yes, 0=no)	-2.619	0.319	0.073***
Democrat (1=yes, 0=no)	1.971	0.291	7.176***
Ideology (1=very liberal to 5=very conservative)	-0.941	0.152	0.390***
Closely following the news	0.268	0.166	1.307
Obama Inspiring/McCain Not	1.177	0.123	3.243***
Closely Following the News X Obama Inspiring/McCain Not	0.514	0.139	1.672***
Nagelkerke R ²			0.802
Note: Pew, 10-16-2008 to 10-19-2008; *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05			

Figure 4.8: *The Interaction between News Use and Inspiring on the Predicted Probabilities that a Respondent would Vote For Obama “if the Election were Held Today”*



4-5: Conclusion

Because of the sinking economy, an unpopular incumbent, and the fact that over three-fourths of American's believed the country was on the wrong track, the 2008 election was one of "change." Leadership was not framed by the media in terms of Commander-in-Chief, where McCain held the advantage, but in terms of a president's ability to inspire change. The Arizonian's maverick credentials were undercut by the Democratic ads that highlighted his statement that he voted more with President Bush

than the other candidates seeking the GOP's nomination. The Obama message of "change we need" however, resonated with voters.

The findings reported in this chapter support my communication model of the impact of candidate traits on vote preference. The news media emphasized Obama's ability to inspire, and news media use was positively and significantly related to thinking that Senator Obama was inspiring and Senator McCain was not. Holding this view was significantly related to Obama vote preference. This relationship was stronger for those with higher levels of attention to news.

In chapters 2 and 3, I was able to directly connect the trait perception to a specific message stream. Senator John Kerry's leadership credentials were explicitly under attack by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth campaign. The Obama campaign directly framed McCain's behavior as "erratic" during the economic collapse in September 2008. In this chapter, I do not delineate such an explicit link. At first, this may present itself as a limitation. Alternatively, the fact that significant results are found as predicted lends credence to the theoretical model driving this dissertation. The communication model of candidate traits I propose assumes that the media environment primes voters to focus on certain traits and frames these traits in ways that can advantage one candidate over another. Often the media's agenda is shaped directly by the campaigns themselves, as was the case with the trait of leadership in 2004 and erratic in 2008. But this need not always be the case. The Obama campaign arguably did indirectly influence the news media to focus on "inspiring" through its emphasis on change and its visual presentations. But whether or not this was the case, it is clear that the news media did emphasize this

trait, and consistently applied it to Obama. And in turn voters, especially those attending closely to the campaign, responded by seeing Obama as inspiring and used this trait in their calculation of whom to vote for.

CHAPTER 5:

Conclusion:

Direct effects of Specific Traits, Limitations, and Future Considerations for the Communication Model of the Impact of Candidate Character Traits on Vote Preference

In the era marked by an expanding media environment, astronomical campaign spending, and candidate-centered campaigns, it seems certain that candidate traits will continue to be emphasized in future presidential races. The communication model presented in this dissertation provides a theoretical template for understanding how certain traits become salient, how they are framed, what impact they may potentially have on vote preference and how the magnitude of their impact is dependent on news media use.

In the preceding chapters, three cases studies offer empirical support for the theoretical model outlined in the first chapter. The processes from issue salience to trait salience and the differential impact of salient traits on vote preference by media use were consistently supported across the two elections studied and the three datasets analyzed: the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study, the 2008 National Annenberg Election Study, and an October 2008 Pew dataset. The congruence of the findings across different elections and multiple data sources contributes to the robustness and validity of my communication model of the impact of candidate character traits on vote preference.

In all of the analyses presented, the specific traits of interest produced direct effects on vote preference. In this chapter the magnitude of this impact is assessed. I then provide a summary of my findings, address possible concerns over causality and other limitations of this study, offer suggestions for future research, and provide concluding thoughts.

5-1: The Impact of Traits on Vote Preference

When statistically significant relationships predicting vote preference are reported, the first question that comes to mind is: “What is the impact on the electoral outcome?” Given the nature of the data and the analyses used here, the calculation of the actual vote margin produced by an individual trait is not possible. However, an estimation of the impact of a trait on the probability that a respondent would vote for a candidate “if the election were held today” can be calculated. In the three chapters that report empirical analyses, logistic regressions are modeled predicting vote preferences. The interpretation of these models requires a little math and the awareness that the impact of traits will be less for those already likely to vote one way or another. It is important to note that these estimations are based solely on the coefficients presented in the analyses in previous chapters and hold constant the other variables in those models. The estimations below only illustrate the impact of the candidate trait variable on the probability of vote preference and should not be interpreted to mean actual vote decision or electoral outcome.

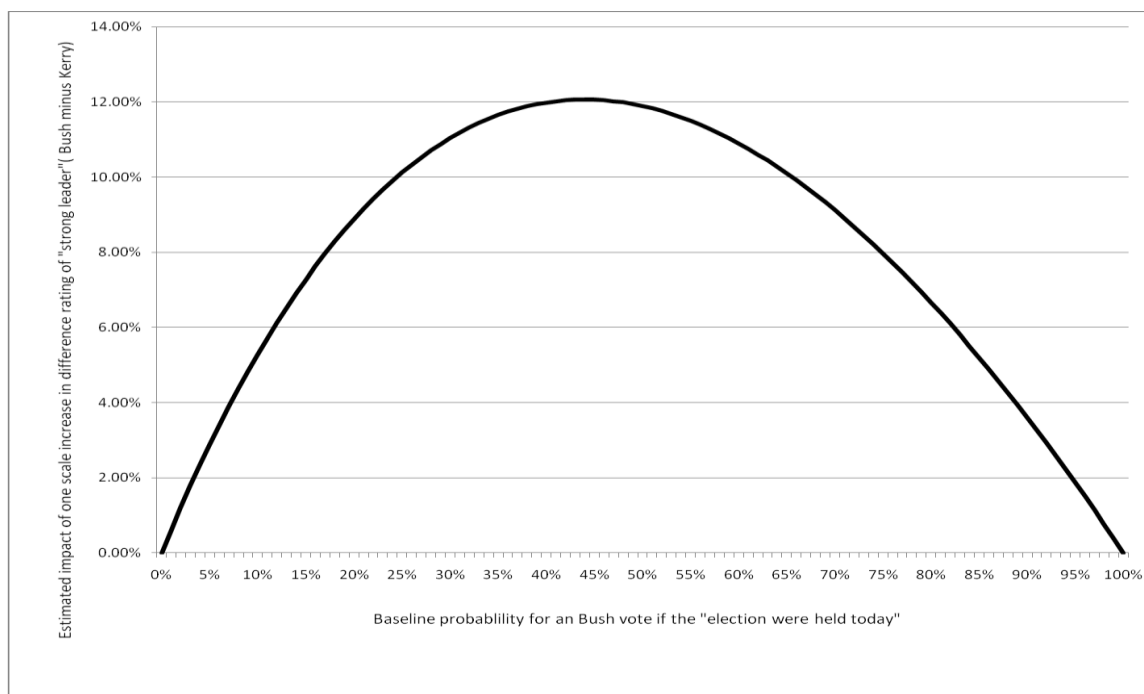
First, let’s examine the impact of “strong leader” on a two party-vote preference for incumbent President George W. Bush during the 2004 general election. In chapter 2, table 2.7, the logistic regression coefficient (B) for the difference in ratings of strong leader (Bush minus Kerry) is 0.485. This difference rating is a 21-point scale ranging from negative ten to positive ten and the coefficient represents the impact of a one-point increase. To understand the impact of this one-point increase on vote preference let’s start with a person whose baseline probability to cast a Bush vote is 50 percent. Turning this

baseline probability into logodds, adding the coefficient (0.485) to the logodds and then turning this number back to a probability⁶⁴ gives us a new probability for this person of 61.9 percent. This suggests that a one-point increase in the scale has an impact around 11.9 percent on someone who is completely undecided and does not lean one way or another. The impact of this trait is strongest for a person with a 45 percent baseline probability of casting a Bush vote “if the election were held today,” for whom a 12.1 percent impact is estimated.⁶⁵ By contrast, the same one-point increase will produce a 10.1 percent increased likelihood of voting for the Republican if the person has a 25 percent baseline probability of voting for him in the first place. An 8 percent increase would occur were our hypothetical individual on the other end of the spectrum with a baseline probability to cast a Bush vote of 75 percent. Figure 5.1 shows the influence of a one-point scale increase on “strong leader” in the probability for a Bush two-party vote if “the election were held today.”

⁶⁴ The formula for turning logodds to probability is $1/(1+\exp(-\text{logodds}))$

⁶⁵ As the logistic regression coefficient gets larger the baseline probability of the apex of impact decreases.

Figure 5.1: *The Impact of a One-Point Increase in the Difference Rating of “Strong Leader” (Bush Minus Kerry) on a Vote for Bush “if the Election Were Held Today”*

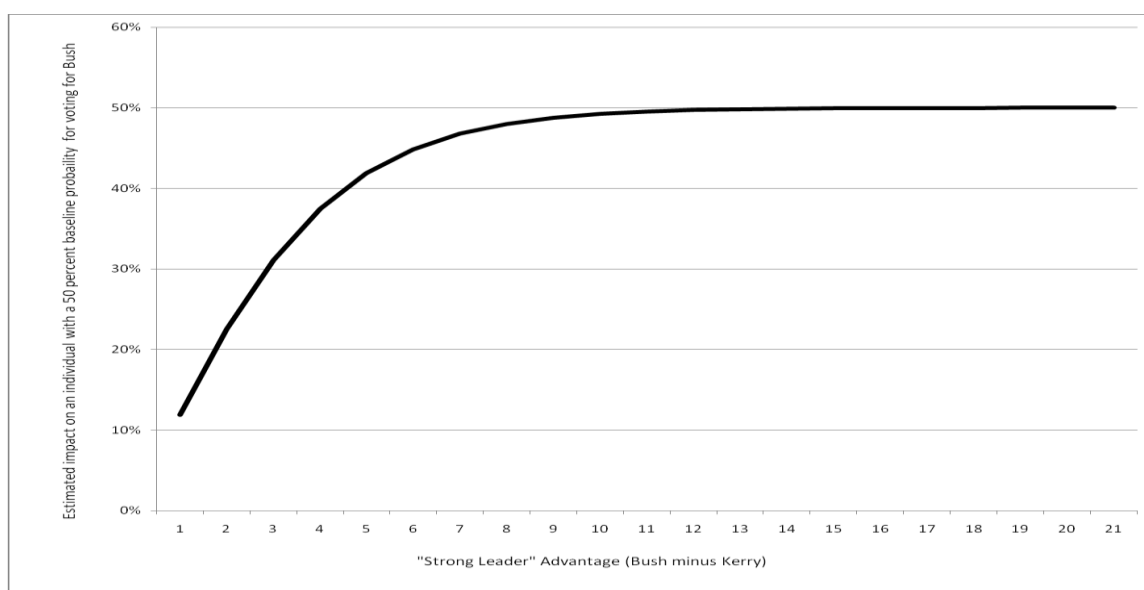


The probabilities detailed in figure 5.1 are based on a one-point scale increase in the difference in ratings on the trait strong leader and its impact on a voter who has a fifty percent baseline probability to vote for Bush is almost 12 percent. Because the outcome variable – “vote for Bush if election were held today” – is dichotomous and the results are in the form of probabilities and are not linear relationships, one cannot double or triple the estimated impact if one is interested in a two- or three-point change. Therefore, the relationship between additional point increases and estimated impact on an individual with a 50 percent baseline probability is outlined in figure 5.2.⁶⁶ The beginning data point of the curve is the 11.9 percent impact outlined above. The curve asymptotically

⁶⁶ This estimation is calculated by $\exp(b)^x$ where x is number of increments in the base unit of the independent variable. The natural log of this number is then used in the calculation of a new logit coefficient that is used to estimate the greater impact.

approaches 50 percent because greater increases in the difference in ratings of trait strong leader show diminishing returns for larger increases and the overall increase cannot go beyond 50 percent for a person with a 50 percent baseline probability. What this shows is that it takes a ten-point increase in this trait to push someone on the fence to “complete” support.

Figure 5.2: *The Estimated Impact of Addition Point Increases in the Difference in Ratings of the Trait “Strong Leader”*



Although, it is impossible to directly calculate an overall impact of the trait strong leader on the 2004 election outcome because the dependent variable captures vote intention (i.e. respondents’ votes “if the election were held today”), the reported magnitude of impact suggests that perceptions of the candidates as a strong leader played a sizable role in vote preferences.

These estimations support the argument that the SBVT attacks and this trait may have been pivotal in this particular presidential election. The figures presented here are based on direct effects only. The analyses in chapter 2 showed that the impact of this trait

was greater for heavy news media users. The total estimated impact of strong leader on the probability of a Bush-vote intention is likely to have been even greater than 11.9 percent for those who highly attend to the news.

The same type of interpretation can be applied to the results outlined in chapters 3 and 4. Figure 5.3 shows the impact of a one-point (on a ten point scale) increase in thinking the trait erratic applies to Senator John McCain on a two-party vote for Senator Obama “if the election were held today.” The impact of this trait is not as pronounced as strong leader in 2004 in that a one-point increase in erratic produced a 4.5 percent impact on an individual with a 50 percent baseline probability to cast an Obama vote.

Figure 5.4 shows the estimated impact of each additional point increase. Although it appears to be linear, the point of interest from this figure is the absolute shift from thinking that erratic does not apply at all to McCain to thinking it completely applies does not turn a individual with a 50 percent baseline probability to cast a two-party Obama into someone that will vote for Democratic candidate with 100 percent certainty.

As outlined in chapter 3 and supported in these figures, the labeling of McCain in terms of this trait was not the deciding factor in the 2008 election. The faltering economy presupposed a Democratic win. Yet in the presence of controls, the rating of McCain on this trait did produce a statistically significant relationship with vote preference, a finding that provides empirical support for the theoretical foundation of the dissertation. The influence of media on this perception was documented and the relationship between this trait and vote preference was significantly dependent on respondents’ level of media

consumption. However, the conclusion that Democrats framing of the Arizonian as erratic sealed their victory would be a great overstatement.

Figure 5.3: *The Impact of a One-Point Increase in the Rating of McCain as “Erratic” on a Vote for Obama “if the Election Were Held Today”*

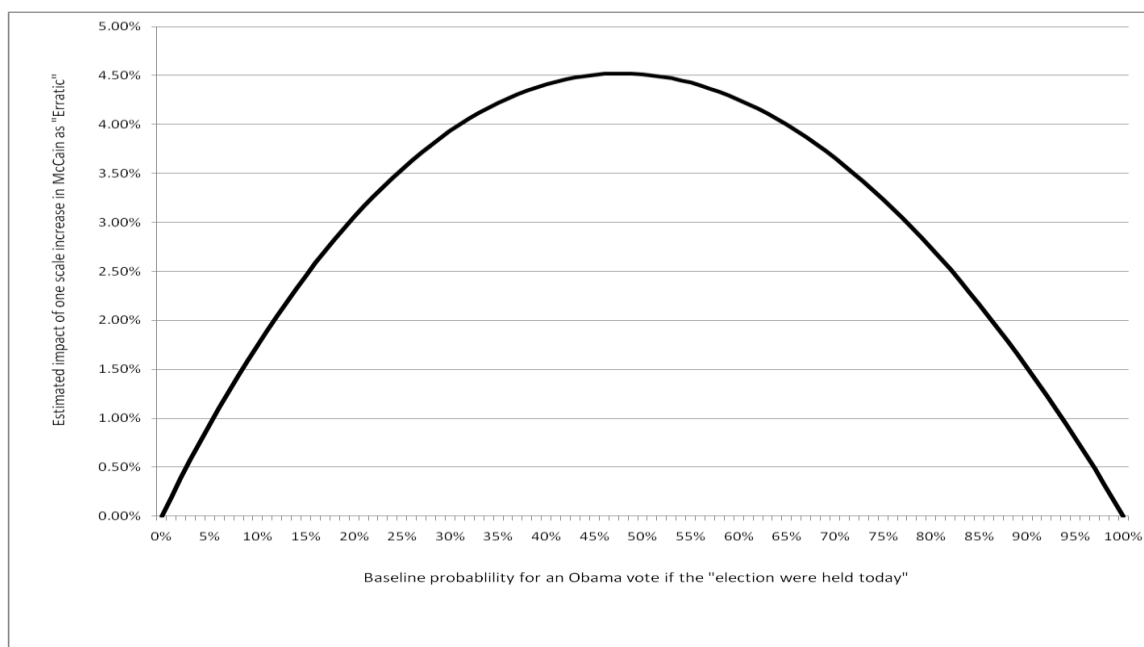
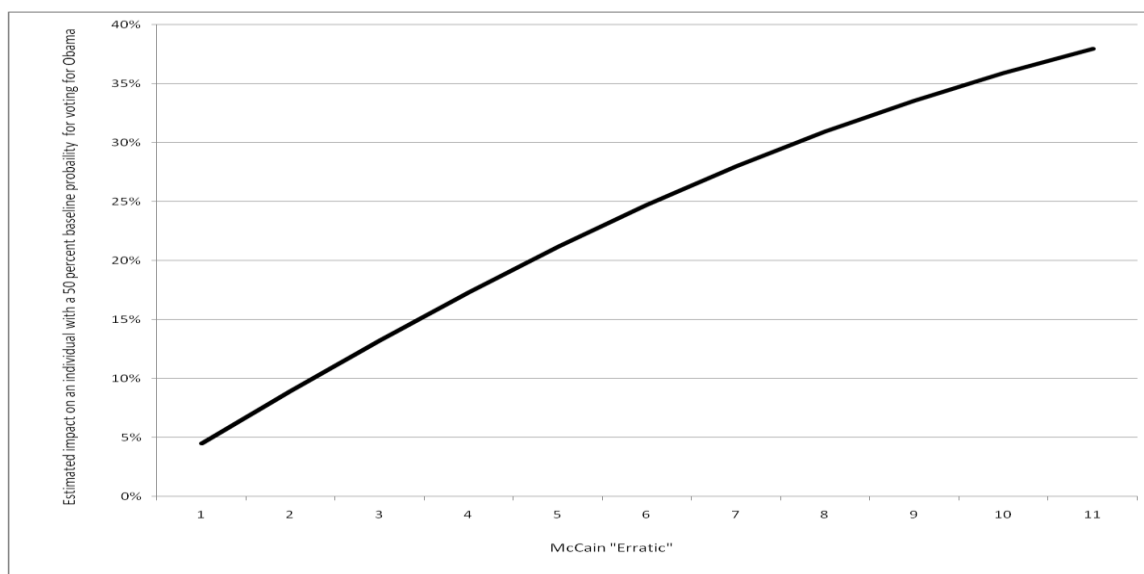
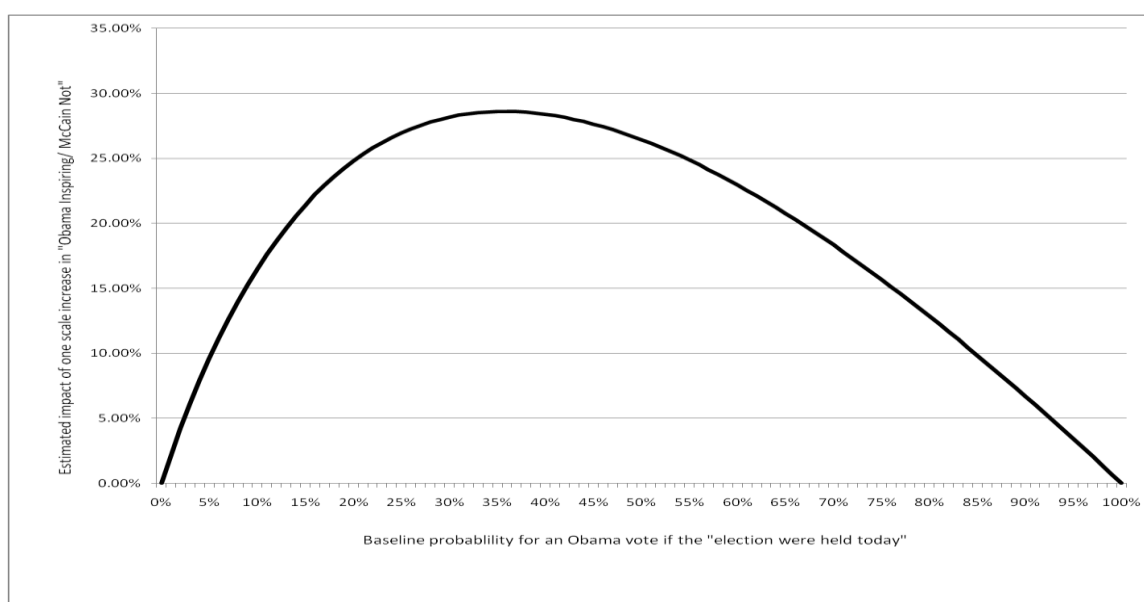


Figure 5.4: *The Estimated Impact of Addition Point Increases in the Trait “Erratic”*



Finally, the belief that the junior senator from Illinois was inspiring and McCain was not also produced a sizable effect on vote preference. Figure 5.5 reports an impact that reaches above 25 percent, meaning that a person with a baseline probability of 50 percent for an Obama vote would increase to over 75 percent if he or she ascribes to the notion that Obama is inspiring – the trait embedded in the Democrat’s core message of “change we can believe in” – and McCain is not.⁶⁷

Figure 5.5: *The Impact of Believing that Obama is Inspiring and McCain is not on a Vote for Obama “if the Election Were Held Today”*



⁶⁷ Unlike the other trait measures, this variable is dichotomous and direct comparison in effect size is unattainable. While the measures for strong leader and erratic are scales this is a “yes/no” question and there is no way to directly map a “yes” or “no” to such a scale. Intuitively the number “five” may seem to represent this distinction but without any empirical evidence I am hesitant to base a comparative argument.

5-2: Summary of Findings: The Communication Model of Candidate Traits

Determining the impact of traits on the actual outcomes of specific elections is ultimately beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nonetheless the analyses above, when combined with the analyses presented in chapters 2 through 4, suggest two conclusions: First and most specifically, the specific traits examined in this dissertation – strong leader, erratic, and inspiring – played a measurable, and for some voters even substantial, role in intended vote.

In 2004, the salience of war made leadership a focal trait in voters' assessment of the candidates. Democratic Senator John Kerry was running on his status as a war hero and arguing that he could fight a smarter war in Iraq than incumbent George W. Bush. His leadership credentials, however, were undercut by the 527 group Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT) who aired advertisements that questioned his heroism in Vietnam. Chapter 2 reported that the SBVT campaign against Kerry was picked up by mainstream news and negatively influenced perceptions of Kerry on the trait strong leader. The impact of this trait on vote preference was moderated by media use.

The worst economic meltdown since the great depression marked the 2008 presidential election. Even though Republican Senator John McCain was a war hero and had a history of bipartisan policy making, a media focus on the fact that he was 72-years old pervaded. The Democrats ascribed the trait erratic to capsule McCain's age and his behavior during the economic crisis in September 2008. Chapter 3 outlined how this trait was introduced and adopted by media, how this influenced the projection over the

candidates' ability to handle the economy if elected, and the differential impact of perception of John McCain as erratic on vote preference.

According to the 2008 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES), John McCain scored higher than Senator Barack Obama on a variety of trait measures, such as strong leader, ready to be Commander-in-Chief, and has the experience needed to be president. These measures are clearly not indicators for the 2008 election outcome. The analyses reported in chapter 4 rely on a Pew dataset from mid-October 2008 where perceptions of the candidates on the trait inspiring were collected from registered voters. The trait inspiring reflects the Obama campaign's message of "change we need" in the troubled economic times. Although, the Pew survey did not include media use measures, the proxy measure "How closely have you been following news about candidates for the 2008 presidential election" shows a direct impact on the perception that Obama is inspiring and McCain is not. The impact of this trait on vote choice is moderated by how closely respondents were following election.

The second broader and more important conclusion suggested by this research is that the communication environment, shaped by both the campaigns and the news media and coupled with "real world" concerns and conditions, is central to which traits are primed in voters' minds, how they are used to frame the candidates, and ultimately which candidate voters support. In this dissertation, I presented a communication-based framework for conceptualizing the process through which the communication environment surrounding a presidential campaign influences perceptions of specific candidate trait among voters, and how, in turn, these perceptions can influence vote

preference. Examining the last two presidential races, I present consistent empirical support for the communication theory of the impact of candidate traits.

5-3: Concerns over Reverse Causality

Perhaps the greatest threat to these conclusions is one that all research based on cross-sectional surveys face - the issue of causal direction. It remains possible that vote preference leads to rationalized trait evaluation; that a respondent prefers one candidate and therefore will rate this candidate favorably on any trait, whether if it is primed by media or not.

Providing conclusive empirical support for the causal relationships suggested in this research would be extremely difficult. One could use an experimental design but given that the context of a presidential election and the flood of communication surrounding it true replication could not be attained in a lab setting and, therefore, this approach would come at great expense to the validity of the findings. Alternatively researchers could examine the impact of traits in less-complex and media saturated elections (e.g., elections within organizations, local elections, off-year elections, etc.) but generalizations from such low information elections to high information elections like those for U.S. president would be tenuous at best.

While the rolling cross-sectional design used for most of the analyses presented in this dissertation provides some advantages in addressing issue of causality, it is not a panacea. For example, the daily sample of the rolling cross-sectional design allows for trend analyses of cyclical patterns using statistical techniques such as Autoregressive Regressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) models. However, post hoc analyses

did not produce significant daily lags between trait assessments and vote preference.

While this might suggest that the causal argument implied by the communication model presented here is wrong, it is also possible that the shift in an assessment of a candidate trait and one's vote preference could occur simultaneously, or at least faster than could be detected by the survey design (i.e., in a time-frame shorter than one day).

Nonetheless the analyses presented provide suggestive evidence in favor of the communication model and against the notion that voters simply rationalize their perceptions of candidate traits on the basis of their established preference. A simple form of such evidence is presented in chapter 4 where I found that Senator John McCain received higher scores than Senator Obama on a variety of trait measures. If these measures represent rationalized vote preference than either Obama should have scored higher or McCain should have won the election, since substantial portions of Obama voters placed McCain higher on these trait scales.

5-4: Concluding Thoughts: Establishing the Importance of Campaign Communication and Considerations for Future Research

Political communication scholars are concerned with mediated and interpersonal communication effects, campaign dynamics and understanding the design and impact campaigns' communication strategies - processes that are important even if they do not always ultimately affect who wins and who losses. Even shifts at the margin are interesting if we can show that these shifts were produced by the communication environment. How might we conduct this research more effectively? One suggestion is to work more closely with campaigns and those who work in the media in designing our

research. For example, this dissertation relied heavily on the input of campaign operatives (given at the Annenberg Election Debriefings) in determining the communication messages that were promoted during the 2004 and 2008 elections. Some scholars believe that such after-the-fact accounts by campaign strategists and journalists are not reliable. Consider the following argument made by political scientist Larry Bartels. First published in 1993 and reprised in 2006:

[M]uch less is known in general about the impact of modern election campaigns on voters than one might gather from a superficial reading of the literature. Breathless accounts of brilliant campaign operatives manipulating the electorate are often based upon no better evidence than the claims of the operatives themselves... When more substantial evidence is offered for the effectiveness of a particular campaign strategy, it is usually evidence of the simplest and least trustworthy sort. Campaign A did X and won (Bartels, 2006, p.101 - cites Bartels, 1992, p. 263 for this quote).

It should not be surprising that political journalists are susceptible to the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo proper hoc*. Their primary aim is to construct a compelling narrative account of the election outcome, and their primary sources are often the winning campaign operative whose enthusiastic (and self-interested) claims are most likely to give that account the flavor of the “just so” story. What is more surprising is that political scientists have done relatively little to improve upon journalists accounts of how campaigns matter. Doing so will require much more systematic, comparative, and theoretically grounded analysis of campaign effects. The result will probably be less dramatic than the journalists’ account but truer to the realities of contemporary electoral politics (Bartels, 2006, p. 101, original emphasis).

I would suggest that instead of dismissing campaign operatives and political journalists as offering “breathless accounts,” political communication scholars should work with the campaigns to understand message strategy. Admittedly, even though the amount of money that presidential campaigns spend rivals the national budget of some small countries, they cannot control external factors such as the economy, war, and so forth, that heavily shape both the media and the voters’ agendas. But within these

boundaries, campaigns can have a significant influence on how these issues are framed, the public's perception of which traits are most relevant to addressing these issues, and their perceptions of which candidate possess these relevant traits.

At a minimum, researchers interested in the impact of the candidates' traits need to hold their ears to the ground to make sure that they include questions on survey instruments that reflect campaign messages. Otherwise the researcher will be left with measures that do not capture the salient traits, leading to misguided conclusions. A more promising research design would be one in which researchers had knowledge of the campaign messages as they are being implemented. Such a design may find that within the boundaries of salient issues, campaign messages prove to be effective in shifting public opinion and corresponding votes. Only a more sophisticated research agenda with a finger on the pulse of the campaigns will be able to test such hypotheses.

Taking media and campaign strategists seriously should not come at the expense of theory, however. In this regard the immediate challenge for political communication scholars studying presidential elections is the refinement of theory and the explication of the contextual boundaries that foster or hinder specific communication processes. Theories that enjoyed empirical support during the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's, when a majority of citizens got their news from print and broadcast television, require fine-tuning as the communication environment surrounding presidential changes. The information tide has grown into a tsunami and the number of channels in which campaigns and other motivated groups and individuals can connect to citizens will continue to increase as more mobile devices are adopted and micro-targeting advertising techniques are

developed. Each of these channels presents research opportunities that could yield a refined model.

If the 2008 election is any indication, an additional and significant change in campaign dynamics that requires new theorizing and conceptualization is the growing diversity of the candidates, a topic understudied in regards to candidate character traits. Are there traits that can be more easily attributed to specific ethnicities or genders? Do these traits or their salience differ when different issues are salient? Such questions will be difficult to answer empirically (for example, because they require three-way interactions) but will provide a more nuanced understanding of traits, the role played by the media in how they are framed, and how these interactions affect vote preference.

Another important but under-theorized and studied phenomenon is the increasing competitiveness and visibility of presidential primaries. Primaries provide a potentially fruitful setting for trait research since arguably they may be more focused on character than the general election because candidates from the same party share similar issue stands and voters are unable to rely on party cues to help form opinions of the candidates.

In addition, the 2008 Democratic race may be an indication that primaries may become contentious for increasingly long time spans. While extensive research conducted during the 1980's on presidential primaries (e.g. Bartels, 1988; Orren & Polsby, 1987) focused on notions of momentum - defined as the effect of news coverage of vital primary victories (Bartels, 1988) - the 2008 Democratic primaries had two candidates with momentum. Recall that commentators at one point were asking if the Puerto Rican,

June 1st, 2008 primary, would decide the Democratic race.⁶⁸ Therefore, the notion of momentum was effectively neutralized in this contest, perhaps allowing traits to play a larger role in vote decisions.

Another possible avenue for future research is a closer examination of the types of voters that may treat candidate traits as a prominent factor in their vote calculation. This dissertation hints at this by showing that the relationship between a specific candidate trait and vote preference is more pronounced for high media consumers. But voters can be categorized into many other sub-types (e.g., by party, political sophistication, demographic characteristics, etc.), all of which might add to our understanding of how, when and for whom traits matter.

More generally, future research needs to be more sensitive to the context-dependent nature of presidential (and perhaps other) elections. The possible impact of traits can only be understood if the communication environment surrounding a presidential election is also taken into account. Certain traits matter when the communication environment makes them matter. Salient issues influence the media's selection of salient traits and how they are framed which in turn influences vote preference, especially of those who attend more regularly to the media. But this general process of which traits are highlighted will vary by elections and the conditions in which they occur.

More than ever, political communication researchers must avoid seeing all presidential elections as one and the same. At the cost of losing the some ability to track consistent measures for aggregate trend analyses across years, research designs may want

⁶⁸ http://blog.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2008/02/will_puerto_rico_decide_everyt.html

to become more election specific than they have in the past. While aggregate level trends of socio-demographic and political orientation measures are vital to our understanding of the changing nature of the electorate, tracking consistent measures tied to communication processes such as traits across election years may not be the best approach.

Finally, political communication researchers might consider the implications of their findings for assessing and perhaps improving the quality of the elections. The theoretical argument and the empirical analyses presented in this dissertation speak to the mediated representations of the candidates' traits, but are largely silent on the underlying normative issue of how well these representations reflect reality. Shown throughout this dissertation is the press's adoption of ascribing the candidate in terms of the traits injected into the election narrative by campaigns and 527 groups. This priming and framing of candidate traits is certainly not immune to distortion and mischaracterization, with implications for how well they in fact can serve as predictors of the future behavior of the candidates. Assessing the accuracy of such representations is, of course, difficult; certainly more difficult than vetting claims about candidates' voting records or policy stances. Nonetheless, the press, as the polity's watchdog, should develop a way to test mediated representations of the candidate traits. Political communication scholars can play an important role in accomplishing this.

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