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The Declining Relevance of Candidate Personal Attributes in Presidential Elections

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This article examines sixty years of data from the American National Election Studies, and finds that the electorate's focus on candidate attributes has declined substantially. Whereas 80% of respondents had mentioned personal attributes in the past, in recent elections only about 60% have done so. Furthermore, such comments are now more tied to partisan identification and have less of an independent impact on voting behavior. The chances of presidential image makers successfully making a difference by emphasizing a president's personal character are now much less than in the era of Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan.

As Abraham Lincoln famously said, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character give him power." Because the presidency is a uniquely personal and powerful office, there is ample evidence that character matters enormously in terms of governing, as Fred Greenstein (2009) has so aptly noted in *The Presidential Difference*. Furthermore, American presidential elections are inherently personal contests, as unlike in parliamentary systems, voters are able to cast a vote directly for the nation's chief executive. Recognizing how factors like personal integrity, competence, reliability and leadership skills have made a difference in past presidencies, American voters naturally take such factors into account when they cast their ballots.

Journalists are typically the most aware of the personal factor in presidential elections. It is hard not to ignore candidates' personal attributes after spending day after day riding on the same planes and buses with them, listening to their speeches, and asking questions whenever given the opportunity. In short, they are repeatedly exposed to the person as well as the message, thereby giving them the chance to evaluate how personal characteristics might affect governing. As Peter Hamby (2013) wrote in his review of Halperin and Heilemann's (2013) best-selling journalistic account of the 2012 campaign, "Candidates matter. Voters tell pollsters that they make their choices based on issues such as education, health care, taxes and the economy—and they do. But they also care about temperament, empathy, strength, reason, trust and the human side of these strange and wily people who think they're up to the task of running the country." Or, as veteran

campaign reporter Jack Germond (2002, 259) sagely put it in his memoir, "The fatal flaw in the sorting of candidates by issues is that it is almost impossible to anticipate which issues will confront a president during his four years in office. No one was thinking about Saddam Hussein when George Bush was elected or about Monica Lewinsky when Bill Clinton was elected." In sum, voters are faced with the task of hiring someone to take on a job replete with unforeseeable challenges; a president's character strengths and weaknesses are bound to affect how they approach the decisions and nondecisions they make.

Scholars of the American presidency are not only aware of how much difference character makes, but also how presidents often try to prime the public to think about them in personal rather than policy terms. The idea here is that policy decisions will inevitably have opponents as well as proponents but that if a president can be portrayed with a positive personal image there will be little down side. Druckman and Jacobs (2015) have recently shown how presidents have used polls to devise methods to focus on personality features, such as strong leadership, competence, and so on, as opposed to controversial policies. For example, they find that Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan regularly conducted polls to assess the public's assessments of their trustworthiness as well as perceptions of their competence and strength of leadership.

But how much do voters really focus on personality matters at election time, and has the importance of personal attributes increased or decreased in recent elections? Even though the classic analysis in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) identified candidate personality as one of the three major factors in voting behavior, scholarly analyses of the role of candidate attributes have been relatively rare in comparison to the other major factors of party identification and issues. (Some exceptions are Funk 1999, Kinder 1986, and Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). This article attempts to counter this imbalance a bit by examining the role of candidate attributes in presidential elections between 1952 and 2012. During this sixty-year period it will be shown that the electorate's focus on candidate attributes has declined substantially. Although candidate personality is still important in American voting behavior, it has become significantly less so in recent years—in particular during the elections of 2008 and 2012.

The Declining Mentions of Candidate Attributes to Open-Ended Questions

The analyses in this article are based on the set of open-ended questions that have been asked in the American National Election Studies (ANES) in every presidential election from 1952 to 2012. Respondents have been asked the following two questions with respect to each candidate: "Is there anything in particular about [candidate's name] that might make you want to vote for him?" followed by "Is there anything about [candidate's name] that might make you want to vote against him?" Interviewers have transcribed exactly what people have said in response to these questions, thus allowing respondents to express whatever is on their minds in their own terms. The responses to these open-

ended questions over the last sixty years provide one of the richest data sources available on the factors determining voting decisions and the popularity of presidential candidates.

The ANES has carefully coded all of the responses for the studies conducted between 1952 and 2004 using an elaborate coding system. Although such coding has not yet been done for the 2008 and 2012 studies, ANES has released an Excel spreadsheet containing all the verbatim responses to these questions, thereby enabling scholars to code the responses according to their own framework. For this article, I had my research assistant Sierra Powell use the standard ANES coding scheme to specifically code just the responses that referred to a candidate's personal attributes.[1]

There is good reason to expect that survey respondents should be less likely to mention candidate personal attributes over time as the electorate's focus has turned from performance to policy in recent years (Wattenberg and Powell 2015). Previous research on what people say about candidate attributes has found that much of what respondents say is performance relevant (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). For example, when someone says that a candidate does not have enough experience, it often means that they do not think he will be capable of doing a good job. Or, if someone says that a candidate is not a good leader, the implicit assumption is that he will not be able to rally people around him to accomplish his stated goals. Thus, personal attributes are often part and parcel of performance evaluations. However, if elections are becoming less about who should govern and more about how we should be governed, then there is less cause for voters to focus on their personal capabilities and background. For example, in 1952 Eisenhower said he would go to Korea but never said what he would do there or how he might bring the Korean War to a successful conclusion. Therefore, the focus of the electorate was naturally on his personal military experience and leadership skills. In contrast, by 2004 and 2008 the debate centered more on what should specifically be done regarding the war in Iraq. With the focus now on what the candidates are likely to do rather than how capable they are, there is less reason to expect people to be commenting on the candidate's personal attributes.

Figure 1 confirms that fewer people now comment on presidential candidate attributes than in the past. Between 1952 and 1980, the typical survey found that 80% of respondents said something about candidate attributes. After Ronald Reagan came into office, however, there was a clear drop in the salience of personality politics, as Reagan moved the Republican Party to the right and initiated the polarization of party politics that we are experiencing today. In the two Obama elections, just slightly more than 60% said something about the candidates' personal qualities when asked what they liked and disliked about them.

To better understand why candidate character is now less salient in presidential candidate evaluations, Table 1 presents a series of equations predicting how many character

1. We coded for any remark fitting into codes 200 through 497 in the 2004 ANES coding scheme. In addition, we added a few extra codes that referred specifically to new aspects of a candidate's personal attributes such as Obama being African American and Romney being a Mormon. For 2008, all interviews were coded. Only a random half-sample was coded for 2012 in order to complete the analysis quicker. My analysis of a random half-sample for 2008 revealed that the findings of this article would be virtually unchanged if just a half-sample were used.
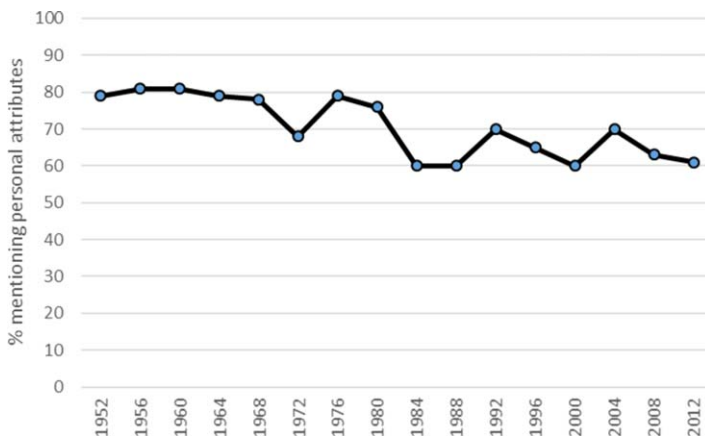
FIGURE 1. The Percentage Mentioning Personal Attributes in Presidential Elections, 1952-2012. Source: Author's analysis of 1952-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) archived data, and author's own coding of the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions from the 2008 and 2012 ANES.

comments each respondent made in the early 1960s as compared to the two recent victories of Barack Obama. Each set of elections contains the election and reelection of a Democratic president, thereby ensuring comparability. Because the dependent variable is the total number of attribute comments made, which ranges from zero to a dozen, a standard multiple regression equation is used. The results show a lot of consistency over time, with variables that tap attentiveness to politics, such as interest in the campaign and years of education typically being highly significant. African Americans were much less likely to comment about the candidates' personalities in the 1960s due to the fact that many were disenfranchised in this period, but this difference has largely subsided in the intervening years.

The most significant change is the relationship between the respondent's age and the number of candidate characteristics mentioned. In the 1960s, the age of the respondent was at best only weakly related to a focus on candidate personality. In contrast, in the Obama elections, age was a very significant predictor, with older voters being substantially more likely to make comments about candidate attributes. The coefficient of 0.15 in 2008 means that even after taking all other variables into account an eighty-year-old was likely to make 0.9 more personality comments than a twenty-year-old. This finding dovetails nicely with the results in a recent *Presidential Studies Quarterly* article I coauthored with Sierra Powell (Wattenberg and Powell 2015), which found that young people are much more likely to discuss policy matters when asked what they like and dislike about the candidates and parties. Having grown up in a much more polarized political environment (Hetherington 2009) in which policies are more clearly sorted according to party affiliation (Levendusky 2009), young voters have come to focus more on the quality of a candidate's ideas than his character. Assuming

TABLE 1
Regression Equations Predicting the Number of Attribute Comments in the Elections of 1960-1964 and 2008-2012

	2012		2008		1964		1960	
	B	Se	B	Se	B	Se	B	Se
Index of Seeing Difference between the Parties and Knowing Which Party Is More Conservative (coded 0-2)	.174*	.075	.268***	.058	.370***	.066	.219***	.006
Interest in the Campaign (1 = Not much; 2 = somewhat; 3 = very much)	.187*	.075	.438***	.059	.324***	.066	.723***	.069
Strong Partisan	-.017	.115	-.327***	.088	-.165	.100	-.047	.100
Years of Education	.056*	.022	.132***	.017	.177***	.017	.136***	.016
Age	.016***	.003	.015***	.002	.007*	.003	.006	.003
Female	.155	.102	-.099	.077	.154	.095	.123	.097
Black	-.150	.154	-.357**	.122	-.709***	.152	-1.01***	.164
Hispanic	-.583**	.176	-.036	.148	-	-	-	-
Constant	-.095	.399	-1.09***	.296	-.528	.353	.192	.363
Multiple R	.324		.371		.448		.437	
N of cases	955		2055		1376		1717	

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
Source: Author's analysis of 1952-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) archived data, and author's own coding of the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions from the 2008 and 2012 ANES.

this generational sea change continues, we can expect that the saliency of personal attributes in voters' evaluations of candidates will probably continue to decline for some time to come.

The Increase in the Polarization and Partisanship of Candidate Attribute Evaluations

In this more polarized era, there is good reason to expect that comments about the Democratic and Republican nominees' personal attributes will be more diametrically opposed than ever before. In the past, it was pretty common for respondents to say that they liked both candidates in terms of their personal characteristics, as was most evident in the 1952 contest in which Eisenhower and Stevenson were both very personally popular. Similarly, there were also cases in which many people had negative things to say about both candidates' personal suitability for the presidency, as was most evident in the 1980 contest between Reagan and Carter. But as people have come to hold more black-and-white views of the candidates, personal character is no longer likely to be judged objectively without regard to political bias. As Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph (2015) argue, any simple political evaluations are now seen through the prism of today's political polarization. They find that affective scale ratings of candidates' honesty, competence, and leadership have become increasingly polarized in recent elections. The cognitive evaluations that are offered in the open-ended questions are less *easy* for respondents because they require some ability to say something about the candidates rather than to just give an instinctive rating on a scale. Nevertheless, in a world where people are less likely to give the other side a hearing and the benefit of the doubt, more polarization should be expected on this measure as well. For example, Republican voters would probably be much less likely in 2012 to say something positive about Obama's experience than they were about Johnson in 1964. Similarly, Democratic voters would probably be much less likely to comment positively on Romney's honesty than they were about Goldwater.

In order to test this hypothesis, indices of personal character evaluations were first created for each candidate by counting the number of positive and negative comments and subtracting the number of negative remarks from the number of positive ones. This procedure yields an index that ranges from -5 to $+5$. The correlation between evaluations of the Democratic and Republican candidates provides a simple measure of polarization, with a more negative correlation indicating greater polarization. Between 1952 and 2000, this measure of polarization bounced around quite a bit, with no apparent trend. In the last three presidential elections, however, polarization has been much greater, as can be seen in Figure 2. Whereas the average correlation from 1952 to 2000 was -0.262, since then it has averaged -0.401. Such a change is highly significant, with the percentage of shared variance increasing from 6.9 to 16.1%. The magnitude of this change, as well as its timing, is right in line with what Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph (2015) found with regard to the closed-ended candidate trait items. Hence, there is little doubt
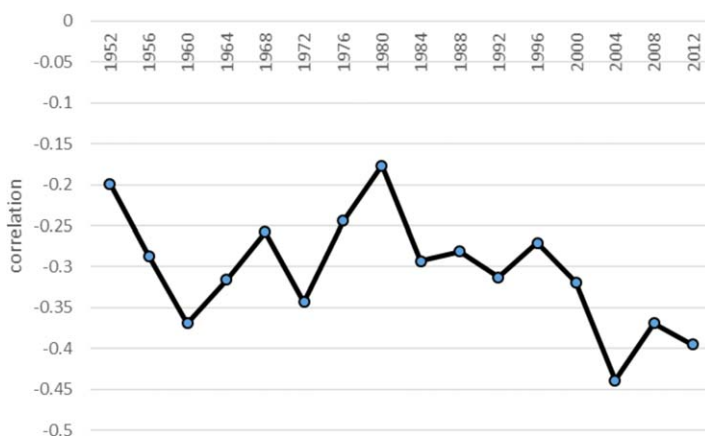
FIGURE 2. The Increase in the Polarization of Evaluations of Candidates' Personal Attributes, 1952-2012.
Source: Author's analysis of 1952-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) archived data, and author's own coding of the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions from the 2008 and 2012 ANES.

that personal evaluations of presidential candidates have become more polarized in recent elections. Although one might think that perceptions of candidates' personal qualities, such as honesty, reliability, and experience, might be immune to the pervasive pattern of polarization in today's electoral politics, such is not the case in today's highly charged political environment.

One possible explanation for why candidate character evaluations are more polarized now is that they have become more likely to be seen through the perceptual screen of partisanship. Figure 3 displays the correlation between party identification and an index measuring respondents' evaluations of the Republican nominee's personal qualities minus their evaluations of the Democratic nominee's attributes. The data show two distinct periods. Between 1952 and 1980, personal character evaluations gradually became more divorced from partisanship. Notably, this was also the period in which split-ticket voting increased markedly (Wattenberg 1998), as more people started to vote for the person without regard to party. Since Reagan assumed the presidency and moved the Republican Party substantially to the right, however, partisanship has increased. The result is that even the personal aspects of candidates are now more likely to be perceived through the ever-present lens of partisan affiliation, as shown in the post-1980 data in Figure 3. Notably, the election of 2004 displays the highest level of partisan evaluations of candidate character in the sixty-year time series, just as it also represents the high point of political polarization of character evaluations. In sum, personal character evaluations of presidential candidates have become both more polarized and more partisan since Reagan became president and accentuated the policy differences between the parties.
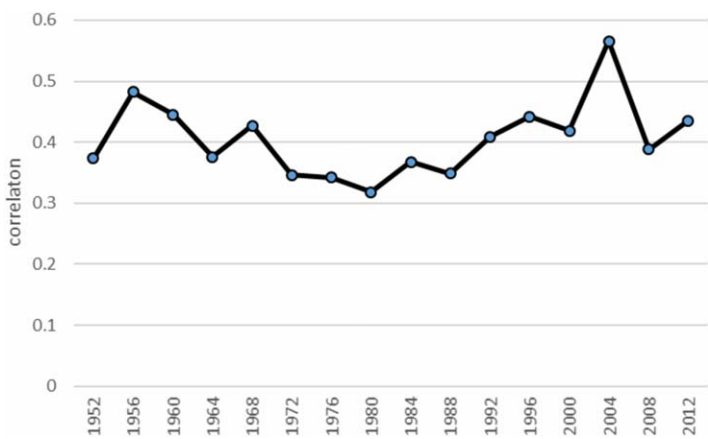
FIGURE 3. Correlation of Personal Attributes Index with Party Identification, 1952-2012.
Source: Author's analysis of 1952-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) archived data, and author's own coding of the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions from the 2008 and 2012 ANES.

The Declining Impact of Personal Character Evaluations on the Vote

With fewer people mentioning personal attributes and with those who do so filtering their comments through the perceptual screen of partisanship, there is strong reason to hypothesize that the independent impact of candidates' personal qualities will have declined over time. Figure 4 demonstrates that this has indeed been the case. The partial correlation between voting decisions and candidate attribute ratings has clearly lessened in recent presidential elections. Again, the turning point can be identified as being after the election of Ronald Reagan. In the elections between 1952 and 1980, the partial correlation averaged 0.372, with no readily discernable trend. In contrast, from 1984 to 2012, the average correlation was 0.287, with the most recent 2012 election representing the lowest figure ever in the time series.

In a now classic piece on voting behavior, Donald Stokes (1966) showed how candidate character evaluations were the factor most responsible for the substantial shifts in the partisan distribution of presidential vote between 1952 and 1964. Stokes investigated what accounted for shifts in election returns from Republican landslides in the 1950s to one of the closest elections ever in 1960 and then to a Democratic landslide in 1964. His analysis of the ANES data from these years conclusively showed that candidate attribute evaluations were the most important factor driving the sharp shifts in election results during this period. Hence, Stokes labeled candidate character evaluations as the *dynamic factor* moving presidential election returns. For example, he found that the Republican landslide in 1956 was transformed into a Republican debacle in 1964 due to the transition from the great edge that Dwight Eisenhower enjoyed on personal evaluations to the
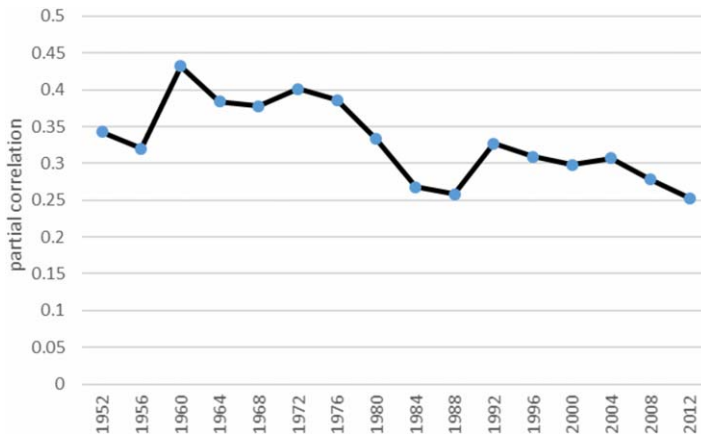
FIGURE 4. Partial Correlation of Personal Attributes with the Two-Party Vote, Controlling For Party Identification, 1952-2012.
Source: Author's analysis of 1952-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) archived data, and author's own coding of the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions from the 2008 and 2012 ANES.

great character disadvantage Barry Goldwater suffered when compared to Lyndon Johnson.

As the impact of character evaluations on the vote has declined in subsequent decades, it is unlikely that they are still a key dynamic factor in shifting election results. Table 2 presents two ways of summarizing the balance of positive versus negative comments about personal attributes, each of which supports this hypothesis.

The first two columns of Table 2 display the percentage of comments that were positive regarding each candidate from 1952 to 2012. In the eight presidential elections from 1952 to 1980, there were eight instances in which evaluations of a candidate's attributes were skewed either at least two-thirds positive or two-thirds negative. In most cases, this was due to the great personal popularity many candidates enjoyed. Dwight Eisenhower, Adlai Stevenson, Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford all enjoyed highly positive personal character evaluations either once or twice during this period. On the other side of the coin, George McGovern in 1972 was incredibly poorly regarded personally, with only 29% of the comments about his character being positive.

In contrast, in the period since Reagan became president, no candidate has been extremely popular or unpopular in terms of personal character evaluations. Whereas personal popularity ranged from a low of 29% to a high of 81% in the 1952-1980 period, in the years since, it has fluctuated in the more narrow range between 35 and 63%. Another way of summarizing this change is to examine the absolute value from 50% for each candidate's character rating. Between 1952 and 1980 the average absolute value from 50 was 13.8%, whereas in the years since this figure has declined to 8.9%.

Given that the personal attributes of so many candidates in the pre-Reagan period were viewed so highly positively, this change is most likely due to a decline in positive

TABLE 2
The Decline in the Advantage or Disadvantage Provided by Personal Attribute Comments, 1952-2012

	% Positive about the Winning Candidate	% Positive about the Losing Candidate	Mean Score for the Winning Candidate	Mean Score for the Losing Candidate	Winner's Advantage/Disadvantage
1952	73	71	+.75	+.40	+.35
1956	77	51	+.96	+.02	+.94
1960	58	81	+.26	+.70	-.54
1964	69	46	+.50	-.07	+.57
1968	59	55	+.23	+.12	+.11
1972	71	29	+.31	-.28	+.59
1976	50	67	-.01	+.37	-.38
1980	40	55	-.19	+.10	-.29
1984	61	43	+.17	-.09	+.26
1988	63	46	+.20	-.06	+.26
1992	43	56	-.15	+.11	-.26
1996	44	50	-.14	+.01	-.15
2000	49	50	-.01	.00	-.01
2004	58	35	+.15	-.27	+.42
2008	46	63	-.06	+.19	-.25
2012	57	45	+.08	-.07	+.15

Source: Author's analysis of 1952-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) archived data, and author's own coding of the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions from the 2008 and 2012 ANES.

comments. A more precise examination of the data reveals that this is indeed the case. Between 1952 and 1980, the average percentage of respondents saying something positive about a candidate's personal attributes was 40%; since then the average has been just 25%. Negative comments about candidate character have also declined, but not nearly as precipitously—from 32% before Reagan became president to just 28% since then.

These simple percentages, though quite telling, only tell part of the story. As respondents can offer up to five comments about each candidate, a fuller measure of the impact of candidate character must take into account the total number of positive versus negative comments. The third and fourth columns of Table 2 display means representing the average number of positive character comments per respondent minus the average number of negative comments. Here, one can again see a clear decline in the personal popularity of the candidates over time. Column 5 calculates the winning candidate's advantage or disadvantage on personal attributes. These data powerfully summarize the big edge that Presidents Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon enjoyed over their opponents on personal character when they sought reelection. Each of these presidents could justifiably attribute a big part of their respective landslide reelections to the factor of personal character evaluations. In addition, Richard Nixon in 1960 and Gerald Ford in 1976 were almost able to win based on the strong advantage each had over their opponent on personal attributes. In the period since Reagan became president, however, no candidate has had such a clear advantage on personal attributes. The mean advantage for the candidate

who was perceived better on personal characteristics has fallen from 0.47 comments per respondent in the 1952-1980 period to just 0.22 comments since then. The only case in the latter period where it could be argued that personal evaluations of the candidates made an important difference was in George W. Bush's 2004 reelection race. The Bush campaign's attacks against John Kerry's personal image were so successful that his overall rating on candidate character was indistinguishable from the stumbling candidacy of George McGovern in 1972.

Dimensions of Character Evaluation

One of the great strengths of the open-ended data is that they enable an in-depth investigation of what is on respondents' minds via the specific coding of each individual response. Personal popularity is a complex multifaceted phenomenon, with a candidate who does well on one dimension, such as integrity, frequently not doing so well on another dimension, such as competence. Previous research on the open-ended data has uncovered five separate dimensions of evaluations of candidates as individuals: integrity, reliability, competence, charisma, and miscellaneous personal background qualities (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). The first, integrity, deals with the candidate as trustworthy or untrustworthy and incorporates comments concerning honesty, sincerity, and any reference to corruption in government. The second, reliability, is similar to the first with some important distinctions: reliability refers to a candidate being dependable, strong, decisive, aggressive, stable, or the converse of these. That these two dimensions are separate is most evident in the 1964 evaluations of Goldwater in which he received the highest rating on integrity of any candidate except Eisenhower and the lowest reliability rating of any candidate in the sixty-year series. Reliability can be seen as a bridge between the integrity and competence attributes. Perhaps the best definition of it would be trust in the ability to steer a steady course. Competence itself refers to the candidate's past political experience, ability as a statesman, comprehension of political issues, realism, and intelligence. In contrast, charisma involves less tangible considerations such as a candidate's leadership abilities, dignity, humbleness, patriotism, and ability to get along and communicate with people. The final attribute—personal—has to do with various personal aspects of the candidate, including appearance, age, religion, race, wealth, former occupation, family, and so on.

Table 3 summarizes how each major presidential candidate from 1952 to 2012 was perceived by the public on these five personality dimensions. The trend over time clearly demonstrates a decline in positive evaluations, particularly with regard to candidate competence. Competence has traditionally been the one dimension on which American political leaders could most easily draw positive comments about their personal qualifications. If nothing else, someone who has been nominated by the Democrats or Republicans for the presidency should usually be able to count on people to say that he is experienced, knowledgeable, and capable. From 1952 to 1972 the only leaders who failed to draw more positive than negative comments regarding their competence were the hapless Barry Goldwater in 1964 and George McGovern in 1972. For the remainder of the candidates during this period the average score was +31, indicating that for every 100 respondents

TABLE 3
Personality Evaluations of Presidential Candidates, 1952-2012

	Competence	Integrity	Reliability	Charisma	Personal
Eisenhower, 1952	+15	+22	+3	+18	+14
Stevenson, 1952	+33	+6	+1	+4	+1
Eisenhower, 1956	+43	+25	0	+17	+10
Stevenson, 1956	+16	0	−1	−4	−8
Kennedy, 1960	+23	+7	+7	+1	−15
Nixon, 1960	+47	+2	+4	+5	+11
Johnson, 1964	+50	−13	+3	+8	+1
Goldwater, 1964	0	+11	−25	−1	0
Nixon, 1968	+29	−2	−8	−3	+4
Humphrey, 1968	+20	+4	−8	−4	−3
Nixon, 1972	+33	−8	+6	+1	+1
McGovern, 1972	−11	−1	−16	−1	−1
Carter, 1976	−1	0	−9	0	8
Ford, 1976	+25	+2	−7	−1	+1
Reagan, 1980	+3	−1	−3	0	−18
Carter, 1980	+13	+2	−7	−1	+1
Reagan, 1984	+12	+2	+8	+6	−7
Mondale, 1984	0	0	−5	−3	0
Bush, 1988	+28	−2	0	−2	+1
Dukakis, 1988	−5	0	+1	−2	0
Clinton, 1992	+2	−10	−3	−2	−11
Bush, 1992	+4	−4	0	+1	+4
Clinton, 1996	+14	−23	+2	+3	−10
Dole, 1996	+10	+10	+2	−1	−12
Bush, 2000	−5	+4	0	−2	+3
Gore, 2000	+16	−15	+1	−2	+5
Bush, 2004	0	+5	+7	+1	+2
Kerry, 2004	+3	−8	−13	- 5	−2
Obama, 2008	−10	0	0	+3	−1
McCain, 2008	+18	0	−1	0	0
Obama, 2012	+1	+1	+2	+3	+2
Romney, 2012	−6	−3	−6	−1	+9

Note: Means have been calculated by adding the number of positive responses and subtracting the number of negative responses for each respondent. The result is then multiplied by 100 to remove the decimal point.
Source: Author's analysis of 1952-2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) archived data, and author's own coding of the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions from the 2008 and 2012 ANES.

there were 31 more positive than negative comments that could be classified under competence. Since 1972, the average score has been a measly +4 for winning candidates and +5 for losing candidates. Several candidates have even managed to win a presidential election while receiving fewer positive than negative remarks regarding competence, including Jimmy Carter in 1976, George W. Bush in 2000, and Barack Obama in 2008. The fact that even victorious candidates are now sometimes receiving lower competence ratings than Barry Goldwater is a striking illustration of just how far regard for party leaders has fallen in the minds of American voters.

Integrity has rarely been a trait that has been commonly associated with U.S. presidential candidates, as cynicism about their honesty and motives has been a tradition ever since George Washington's retirement over two centuries ago. Among all the candidates since the beginning of the ANES, only war hero Dwight Eisenhower had a substantially positive image in terms of integrity, with ratings of +22 in 1952 and +25 in 1956. Since Eisenhower, it has been far more common for the losing candidate to be evaluated better on honesty than the winning candidate. In particular, incumbent presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Clinton all survived their reelection bids with negative scores on integrity. The only successful candidate since Eisenhower who could conceivably attribute his victory to integrity considerations was George W. Bush. It is quite likely that Gore lost the extraordinary close race in 2000 due to the instances where he appeared to be stretching the truth or fabricating events during the campaign. In this case, integrity probably really did matter.

Reliability has been even less likely to influence election outcomes, as no presidential contender has scored better than a +8 on this dimension. Being reliable is apparently not something that draws a lot of positive responses, as probably most voters think this should automatically be expected of any major presidential nominee. When candidates fail to meet this standard, though, it does draw a fair amount of negative comments concerning their indecisiveness and lack of dependability, as happened with regard to Goldwater in 1964, McGovern in 1972, and Kerry in 2004. Goldwater and McGovern were clearly doomed for many other reasons besides their perceived failings in terms of reliability. Only Kerry conceivably lost the presidency due to concerns regarding his lack of reliability (see Wattenberg 2006 for a specific discussion of this case).

It is often thought that voters cast their ballots for the candidate with the most charisma, that is, the candidate who best establishes an image of inspiring leadership. The like/dislike data provide little support for such considerations actually being something that people actually verbalize. Only Dwight Eisenhower established a notably positive image on the charisma dimension. None of the candidates since 1952 had a notably negative image on the charisma dimension. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that charismatic leadership is not a major factor in American voting behavior. It may be that many people do not feel that such considerations are socially appropriate answers in response to open-ended questions.

Finally, the personal dimension captures a variety of largely idiosyncratic background factors about the candidates that have caught the public eye in particular election years. On the positive side, Eisenhower drew favorable comments for his military background in the elections of the 1950s and Nixon received favorable comments for being a Protestant in 1960. On the negative side, Kennedy's youth and Catholicism were clearly liabilities, as was the advanced age of Ronald Reagan and Robert Dole, and the perception

of Bill Clinton's womanizing and dodging the draft. Idiosyncratic topics such as these are not the sort of matters that political scientists typically bring into their analyses of voting behavior. Yet they do sometimes receive a good deal of media attention during American campaigns, and it is to be expected that a fair number of voters will take such considerations into account when they go to the polls. Notably, the personal dimension drew more comments than other dimension for the first time ever in 2008 and again in 2012. Comments about McCain's military background and age, Obama's race and religion, and Romney's religion and business background could frequently be found in the transcripts. However, with the partial exception of Romney's successful business career, none of these factors proved to be either a substantial asset or liability.

In sum, it has become less common in recent presidential elections for a candidate to enjoy a decisive advantage on any single personal attribute. In particular, competence, which once dominated the comments and gave one or the other candidate a substantial advantage has declined in salience. Of the classifiable personal comments, 42% fit into the competence dimension between 1952 and 1988. Since then, however, only 30% have been about experience and basic ability to do the job, with an all-time low being set in 2012 of 22%.

The Future Prospects for Personal Attributes in Presidential Campaigns

The analysis in this article demonstrates that the personal attributes of the presidential candidates have become less and less relevant to the outcome of presidential elections in recent years. Substantially fewer voters are mentioning the personal characteristics of the candidates when asked what they like and dislike about them. Furthermore, rather than being an independent assessment of a candidate's character, in the current age of polarized politics, these evaluations are more tied to partisan views than ever before, and hence less consequential. All of this, however, does not necessarily imply that candidate character will never again be crucial to the outcome of presidential elections. As recently as 2004, candidate character evaluations played a major role, as the Bush campaign managed to raise the salience of reliability assessments and substantially tarnish John Kerry's image on this dimension. Any future presidential candidate who sees an opening to take advantage of a perceived edge on some personal attribute will no doubt seize on it, and voters are bound to pay at least some attention.

That much being said, the electorate is now less primed to view candidates in terms of character than ever before in the sixty-year history of the ANES. Young people today are clearly the least inclined to view candidates in terms of their personal attributes, having grown up in an era in which candidates have to make strong and distinct policy appeals to get the nomination. As the process of generational replacement plays out over the next couple of decades, it is likely that there will be ever more attention paid to what candidates for the presidency have done or promise to do rather than their personal characteristics. The chances of presidential image makers successfully making a difference by

emphasizing a president's personal character are now much less than in the era of Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan (see Druckman and Jacobs 2015).

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