

## Reassessing the Structure of Presidential Character

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**Abstract.** Perceptions of politicians' character traits have played a central role in models of candidate evaluation, yet existing work lacks a clear theoretical framework for the structure of trait perceptions. In this paper, I argue that, while competence looms large in the mind of voters, the public cares deeply about moral character (e.g., compassion). Just as people vary in their beliefs about right and wrong, however, they also vary in their views on the traits that make a good person. Across two studies, I show evidence of five dimensions of moral character that are linked to the public's moral foundations. Next, I show that moral character helps explain candidate favorability and perceptions of issue competence. Yet, unlike non-moral traits, the effects of moral character are politically divisive. Overall, my findings lend new insight into the structure of trait perceptions and how they are used by the public.

### Highlights:

- Two studies support a five factor structure of moral character
- Desirability of traits is a function of individuals' moral foundations
- Moral traits help explain candidate favorability and issue competence
- Sociability traits (e.g., charismatic) provide little explanatory power

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## **1. Introduction**

Trait perceptions are a fundamental form of social evaluation (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007) and play a central role in evaluating politicians (e.g., Bittner, 2011; Greene, 2001; Hayes, 2005). When asked to evaluate presidential candidates, mentions of character dominate both policy and group mentions, and do so across levels of respondent education and engagement (Miller et al., 1986). Trait perceptions serve as the critical link between information and candidate evaluations (Druckman and Parkin, 2005; Rahn et al., 1990). Accordingly, conveying character is the primary theme of Senate campaigns (Kahn and Kenney, 1999) and presidential campaigns attempt to strategically prime trait dimensions (Druckman et al., 2011).

There are multiple dimensions of character relevant to political evaluations, each of which contributes to our understanding of public opinion and campaign strategy. For example, there are robust partisan stereotypes – Democratic politicians tend to be seen as more compassionate, while Republicans tend to be seen as stronger leaders and as having greater integrity (Goggin and Theodoridis, n.d.; Hayes, 2005). Accordingly, politicians emphasize the particular trait dimensions they have an advantage on (Benoit, 2009; Benoit and McHale, 2003; Druckman et al., 2011). Yet, political context can also affect the demand for specific character traits. For example, when citizens feel threatened by terror attacks, they are more likely to vote for politicians who are perceived as strong leaders (Merolla and Zechmeister, 2009). Evidence for the dimensionality of trait dimensions also comes from their antecedents. The issue positions politicians take influence perceptions of their character, but different positions affect different trait dimensions (Clifford 2014). In short, embracing the dimensionality of trait perceptions has enriched our understanding of campaigns and voter behavior.

While trait perceptions are important to our understanding of candidate evaluations and political campaigns, we know much less about the number and structure of relevant trait dimensions. Extant work examines two (e.g., Greene 2001), three (e.g., Funk 1999), four (e.g., Kinder 1986), or five (e.g., Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986) trait dimensions (for a review, see Bittner, 2011). There is also a proliferation of trait concepts. Existing work includes warmth, charisma, morality, integrity, honesty, empathy, compassion, leadership, competence, reliability, openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Disagreement over the structure and content of traits relevant to evaluating politicians makes it difficult to connect various strands of research and develop a cumulative literature on the topic. Additionally, existing work has done little to reconcile character trait frameworks with what the public actually wants from politicians, leading to the possibility that we are focusing our attention in the wrong places.

In this paper, I introduce a revised theoretical framework for understanding trait perceptions in politics. Drawing on recent work in moral psychology, I provide evidence for five dimensions of moral character. Yet, people differ in their notions of morality. I demonstrate that individuals who place greater weight on a particular moral foundation are more likely to desire corresponding moral traits from politicians. Finally, I demonstrate the utility of this new structure of trait dimensions by examining the predictive power of trait perceptions on candidate favorability and issue handling. My findings cast new light on past findings on trait perceptions and provide insights for future research.

## **2. The Psychology of Trait Perceptions**

Psychologists have widely adopted a stereotype content model that captures two distinct trait dimensions: warmth and competence (e.g., Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007; Fiske, Cuddy,

and Glick 2007; Fiske et al. 2002). Warmth captures perceptions of another's social intentions (e.g., friendly, honest), while competence represents their ability to bring about those intentions (e.g., skillful, intelligent). On this view, warmth dominates in person perception because it indicates whether someone is likely to have good or bad intentions. This stereotype content model has been highly influential and inspired Kinder's (1986) framework for presidential character (discussed further below).

While competence has played an important role in the presidential character literature, some have concluded that warmth is not a relevant characteristic for selecting a president (e.g., Fiorina 1981). This view conflicts with more general psychological models of trait perceptions, but may reflect the particular demands of the job. Supporting this view, warmth traits are rarely mentioned in open-ended comments (Miller et al., 1986). Similarly, experimental manipulation of candidate traits finds that competence has a larger effect than warmth on candidate favorability, though this effect occurs primarily among the politically informed (Funk, 1997, 1996). Competence (often combined with leadership) typically exerts the largest effect in models of presidential vote choice (e.g., Funk 1999). However, other trait dimensions that are treated as components of warmth, such as integrity and empathy, often have sizable effects on candidate favorability as well (e.g., Barker, Lawrence, and Tavits 2006; Hayes 2005).

These conflicting findings might be resolved by recent work in psychology arguing that the concept of warmth in the stereotype content model conflates sociability and morality – two distinct trait dimensions that provide different information about a person (Goodwin 2015; Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin 2014). Traits like friendly, extraverted, and funny capture sociability, but not morality. Traits like honesty, tolerance, and trustworthiness capture morality, but not sociability. This line of research finds that morality is not only a distinct dimension of

character, but that it yields new insights into social cognition. Moral character is a stronger predictor of overall evaluations than sociability or competence (Brambilla et al., 2012; Brambilla and Leach, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2014) and is perceived as central to personal identity (Strohming and Nichols, 2015, 2014). Moral character is similarly powerful in determining group evaluations and behavior (e.g., Brambilla et al. 2013; Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto 2007; Pagliaro, Ellemers, and Barreto 2011). Thus, if we want to identify the aspects of character that are most predictive of political evaluations, we ought to focus on moral character instead of sociability.

### *2.1 Unpacking Moral Character*

While recent evidence consistently supports the dominance of moral character in person perception, we know less about what constitutes moral character. A recent review of the topic states that moral character is multi-faceted, but that there are competing views and little direct evidence (Goodwin, 2015). One promising framework for the structure of moral character is moral foundations theory (MFT). MFT is a descriptive theory of the structure of moral judgment that has been well validated and holds up across cultures (Davies et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2011; Nilsson and Erlandsson, 2015; Yilmaz et al., 2016). The initial theory was grounded in cross-cultural perceptions of moral virtues and vices (Haidt and Joseph, 2004), making it apt for describing notions of moral character. MFT has also been integrated with political science research (e.g., Federico et al. 2013; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Kertzer et al. 2014; Weber and Federico 2013), making it a useful framework for theorizing about the role of different aspects of moral character in politics.

The first two foundations focus on the individual as the victim. The Care/harm foundation, which drives concerns about minimizing harm and suffering, and corresponds with

traits like caring, compassionate, and empathetic. The second foundation is Fairness/cheating, which recent work conceptualizes in terms of reciprocity (Haidt, 2013). Fairness traits include honesty and impartiality. The remaining three foundations are more group oriented. The Authority/subversion foundation represents intuitions about hierarchy and order. Authority virtues consist of aspects of both leadership and followership. Leadership, which is most relevant to evaluating politicians, involves character traits that facilitate the maintenance of order and hierarchy, like strong and commanding.<sup>1</sup> Next is the Loyalty/betrayal foundation, which concerns the formation of strong group attachments and upholding the reputation and interests of the group. Virtues include loyalty, devotion, and self-sacrifice. Of course, one can be loyal to various groups. I focus here on one specific form of loyalty – patriotism – as it is the most widely shared and politically relevant group membership. The last foundation is Sanctity/degradation, which represents concerns about physical and spiritual purity. Corresponding character traits include wholesome, self-restrained, and modest.

While MFT offers a new theoretical perspective on the structure of moral character, it does significantly overlap with Kinder's (1986) popular typology. Kinder's work began with the two-dimensional structure popular in psychology that focused on competence and warmth. Kinder expanded on this approach by also investigating leadership and separating warmth into integrity and empathy. The similarities between Kinder's framework and MFT (detailed below) are reassuring because much research has benefited from this framework – indeed, any theory that outright rejects the utility of this framework would go against a large body of empirical

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<sup>1</sup> Virtues related to followership include respect and obedience.

evidence. Yet, MFT refines the existing typology, introduces a new trait dimension, and offers new insight into how trait perceptions function.

Table 1 displays the relationship between the concepts and measures used by Kinder (1986) and those used in the studies discussed below. The left-hand column displays the MFT approach, while the right-hand column reproduces the influential framework from Kinder (1986). To facilitate comparison between the two frameworks, similar concepts are shown in the same rows. Starting at the top, Authority and leadership overlap considerably – both represent the agency of a leader and the ability to command respect and obedience from followers. Moving downwards, Kinder’s concept of integrity overlaps with two moral foundations. Integrity includes notions of morality and decency, which relate to Sanctity, as well as dishonesty, which overlaps with Fairness. According to MFT, Sanctity traits should represent an individual’s self-control and their ability to resist carnal temptations (e.g., sex, drugs, food). Fairness, on the other hand, is about honesty, impartiality, and the equal application of rules. Thus, the two acts of having an affair and lying about it might have different effects on public perceptions (e.g., Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011), though Kinder’s framework would combine these two effects into the trait concept of integrity. Next, Kinder’s empathy dimension overlaps with Care (compassionate, kind), but also includes elements of Fairness (unfair). However, honesty and the equal application of rules might not always be compassionate (e.g., Batson et al. 1995). The last MFT dimension is Loyalty, instantiated here as Patriotism, which has no counterpart in Kinder’s typology. Lastly, Kinder’s typology includes competence. While MFT certainly does not deny the relevance of competence, it does not include it as a *moral* trait dimension. Overall, MFT adds to and clarifies the most popular typology for understanding trait perceptions in political science.

Table 1. Comparing Moral Foundations Theory and Kinder's Typology

Current Study		Kinder (1986)	
Concept	Measures	Concept	Measures
<b>Authority</b>	Strong leader Commands respect Tough Assertive Traditional	<b>Leadership</b>	Strong Commands respect Inspiring Weak (R) No direction (R) Easily influenced (R)
<b>Sanctity</b>	Wholesome Pure Religious Self-restrained Modest	<b>Integrity</b>	Decent Moral Good example Power-hungry (R)
<b>Fairness</b>	Honest Impartial Unbiased Fair-minded		Dishonest (R) Lies to public (R)
<b>Care</b>	Empathetic Compassionate Caring Sympathetic	<b>Empathy</b>	Unfair (R) Out of touch (R) Can't understand us (R) Compassionate Kind Really cares
<b>Loyalty</b>	Patriotic Loyal Loves America American		
<b>Competence</b>	Educated Intelligent Knowledgeable Experienced	<b>Competence</b>	Hard-working Intelligent Knowledgeable Little experience (R) Lots of mistakes (R) Not qualified (R)

Note: Traits sharing a row represent overlapping concepts. Reversed items are denoted with (R).

By relying on MFT, I am now advocating six trait dimensions (the five foundations and competence),<sup>2</sup> but there may be reason to doubt that trait perceptions are so highly dimensional. In Kinder's analysis, integrity and empathy were so highly correlated ( $r = .95$ ) that he saw little reason to make a distinction between the two. Competence and leadership were also highly

<sup>2</sup> For now I set aside sociability as it seems to exert little independent impact on candidate evaluation after accounting for morality.



correlated ( $r = .88$ ) and some have argued for collapsing these dimensions as well (Bittner, 2011; Funk, 1999). However, Kinder's assessment was limited by the measures used, the specified factor structure, and a small sample. Yet, this study has formed the foundation for much of the literature on trait perceptions and subsequent research investigating the structure of trait perceptions typically relies on a subset of the trait items originally investigated by Kinder (e.g., Funk 1999). The utility of modifying or adding dimensions to the structure of the public's trait perceptions is an empirical question, and one that is in need of re-examination.

## *2.2. How Citizens Use Moral Character*

In addition to refining the structure of trait perceptions, MFT contributes insight into how trait perceptions are used by the public. Building on trait ownership theory, scholars have uncovered evidence that voters place more weight on the opposition candidate's character weakness (Goren, 2006, 2002). More generally, voters tend to place greater weight on their party's owned trait dimensions when evaluating politicians, even when comparing candidates within their own party (Barker et al., 2006). Perceptions of empathy tend to be a stronger predictor of overall evaluations among Democrats relative to Republicans, while perceptions of integrity tend to be a stronger predictor among Republicans than among Democrats. These findings suggest that trait ownership may be rooted in deeper value differences between the parties, which also drive differences in the emphasis placed on each trait dimension when evaluating politicians.

MFT helps advance this line of research by providing a clear framework for connecting the public's values to the character traits they seek from politicians. Individuals scoring high in a given moral foundation (e.g., Care) should place greater importance on the traits that correspond with that foundation (e.g., compassion) when evaluating politicians. In other words, citizens

want politicians who are perceived as dispositionally motivated to uphold their own moral values. As discussed above, liberals primarily endorse the Care and Fairness foundations, while conservatives also endorse the Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity foundations. As a result, liberals should place primary emphasis on politicians' Care and Fairness traits, while conservatives should place more emphasis on politicians' Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity traits. These predictions fit well with past research, but provide new predictions regarding Fairness and Loyalty traits.

Partisan ownership of particular trait dimensions has also been linked to their ownership of political issues (Hayes, 2005). Democrats are perceived as more able to handle issues related to poverty, health care, and the environment, while Republicans own issues like national security, terrorism, and crime (Egan, 2013; Petrocik, 1996). Perceptions of issue ownership seem to be driven by greater prioritization of the issues by the parties (Egan, 2013). Character traits are seen as the fundamental causes of behavior (Kressel and Uleman, 2015, 2010) and thus should facilitate issue ownership by signaling what a politician will prioritize. For example, the issue of poverty is fundamentally about human suffering due to poor financial conditions. Politicians who are perceived as particularly compassionate should be seen as more motivated to reduce suffering and thus better able to handle the issue. Republican-owned issues (e.g., terrorism, crime) tend to involve defending the interests of the United States and maintaining law and order. As a result, politicians who are perceived as more patriotic and more authoritative should be seen as better able to handle these issues. Admittedly, the relationship between issue stances and trait perceptions is likely endogenous (e.g., Rapoport, Metcalf, and Hartman 1989). Nonetheless, there should be a clear link between issues and traits owned by Democrats and between issues and traits owned by Republicans.

### *2.3 Overview*

To summarize, moral character is distinct from sociability and should play an important role in candidate evaluation. Sociability, on the other hand, should be largely irrelevant to evaluations after taking morality into account. Morality can be divided into five components that correspond with the five moral foundations (Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity). Liberals and conservatives differ in the importance they place on these five moral traits, with liberals placing relatively more importance on the Care and Fairness dimensions. These five dimensions should not only help explain candidate favorability, but perceptions of issue handling as well. Perceptions of Care and Fairness traits should predict better handling of Democratic-owned issues. Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity, on the other hand, should predict better handling of Republican-owned issues.

### **3. Study 1**

As an initial test of my theory, I examined the traits that respondents report wanting from a president. This allows a test of the types of traits that are deemed most important, the factorial structure of these traits, and an analysis of the antecedents of trait importance. For this study, I recruited a sample of 500 respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in August 2016. Workers were invited to participate in a "Short survey about character, morality, and politics" and were paid \$1.00 for completing the survey. Workers were restricted to those living in the United States and with an approval rating of at least 95%. While MTurk does not provide a representative sample, it provides high quality data, and consistently replicates experimental (Berinsky et al., 2012; Mullinix et al., 2016; Weinberg et al., 2014) and observational studies (Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner 2015; Levay, Freese, and Druckman 2016) conducted on national samples. Nonetheless, MTurk samples tend to be skewed young, liberal, and non-

religious (Berinsky et al., 2012), and these differences are important to consider when interpreting the results below. In particular, the *levels* of importance of character traits related to the binding foundations (Patriotism, Authority, Sanctity) may be underestimated.

Respondents were asked to rate how important it is for a president to have each of 32 different character traits.<sup>3</sup> Following the trait batteries, respondents filled out the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ30), an extensively validated scale measuring respondents' moral foundations (Graham et al., 2011). Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about their political attitudes, identities, and their demographics. Full question wording is shown in the Appendix.

The moral traits used in this study are shown in Table 1 above. Traits were selected in part from the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham et al., 2009) and other previous work on the topic (Clifford 2014). In addition to the moral traits, I included four competence traits: educated, experience, intelligent, and knowledgeable. I specifically selected traits that convey ability, as opposed to more general terms, such as “not qualified” or “lots of mistakes” (Kinder, 1986), which might tap into multiple aspects of character. I also included five sociability traits: warm, funny, sociable, talkative, and charismatic.

### *3.1 The Relative Importance of Character*

Unsurprisingly, competence received the highest importance rating ( $M = 8.8$ ), but four of the moral trait dimensions followed close behind, with means ranging from 7.3 to 8.3. The exception to this pattern is Sanctity ( $M = 5.9$ ). However, higher importance ratings for Sanctity

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<sup>3</sup> Respondents also rated the morality of each character trait. These findings are not reported here for brevity, but closely correspond with the findings here.

are positively associated with conservatism ( $r = .32$ ) and religiosity ( $r = .39$ ), both of which are quite low in this sample. Finally, consistent with expectations, Sociability traits ranked as one of the least important ( $M = 6.0$ ) of all the trait dimensions. Overall, this supports the contention that moral character plays an important role in the evaluation of politicians.

### *3.2 The Structure of Moral Character*

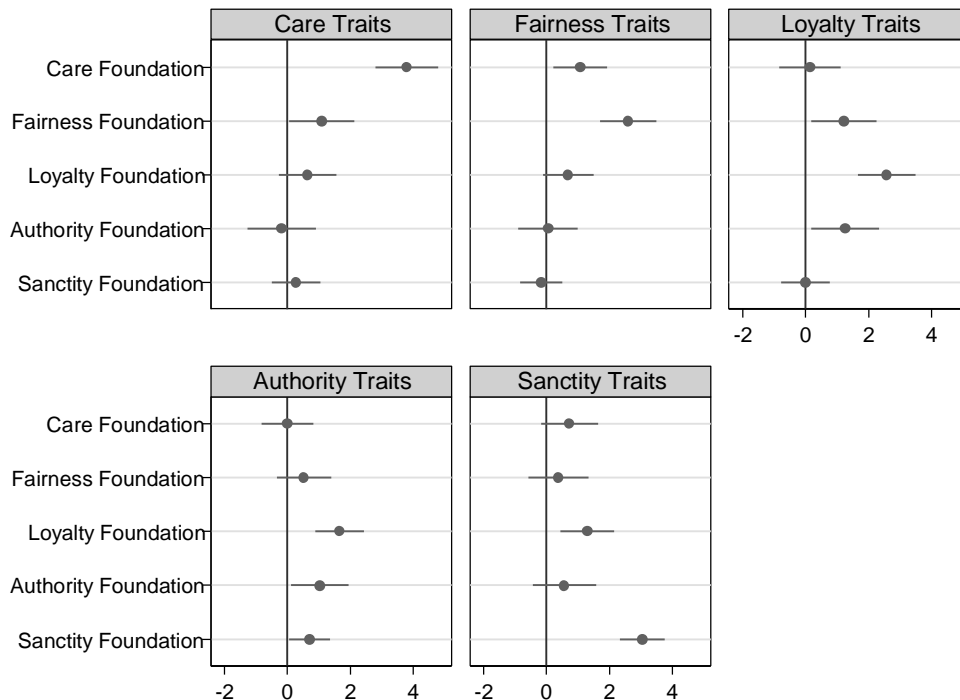
MFT suggests a five-factor structure to moral character. I test this expectation using an exploratory factor analysis of respondents' ratings of trait importance (excluding competence and sociability traits). I constrain the model to fit five factors, which provides a better fit to the data than simpler models according to the AIC and BIC. The full results are shown in the Appendix, but the results correspond closely to expectations. The first factor consists of the four Care items, though there is evidence that honesty weakly crossloads onto this factor. The second factor clearly captures Patriotism, though the more general term "loyal" does not load on this factor. The third factor captures Authority, though interestingly "strong leader" loads on both Authority and Patriotism. The fourth factor captures Sanctity, with "pure" and "wholesome" being the clearest indicators. And finally, the last factor represents Fairness, with strong loadings for all four items except "honesty." Each factor also seems to capture unique variance in trait importance. The average correlation between the additive scales is  $r = .37$  and correlations range from  $r = .11$  (Care and Authority) to  $r = .68$  (Loyalty and Authority). Overall, the structure of presidential character conforms well to the predictions of MFT.

### *3.3. The Antecedents of Trait Importance*

Variation in the importance placed on each moral trait dimension should stem from the moral foundations themselves. To test this hypothesis, I used a series of OLS regression models to predict each trait importance index as a function of respondents' moral foundations scores

from the MFQ30 and included controls for political ideology, partisanship, church attendance, education, gender, age, and race. The coefficients for the moral foundations are plotted in Figure 1 (full model results are shown in the Appendix). For all five moral trait dimensions, the corresponding moral foundation is statistically significant, and in four cases, the strongest predictor in the model. The Loyalty foundation also predicts a desire for Authority traits, though the effect is not distinguishable from the effect of the Authority foundation. This may be because individuals high in the Loyalty foundation desire a strong leader who is more assertive in defending American interests. Overall, however, the morality trait ratings correspond well with respondents' moral foundations, suggesting that citizens seek out politicians who are dispositionally motivated to uphold their own moral values. This provides both a validity check on the measures and provides some insight into the sources of disagreement about what makes a good president.

Figure 1. Moral Foundations Predict Importance of Presidential Character



Note: Plots show coefficients from OLS models predicting trait importance while controlling for partisanship, ideology, and demographics.

#### 4. Study 2

Study 1 provided evidence that moral character is viewed as important for presidential candidates. The analyses also showed support for five dimensions of moral character that correspond with the moral foundations. However, this evidence was based on respondents' ratings of the importance of each trait. It may be that the public has nuanced opinions about the trait dimensions that are important, but these may not map onto what they actually use to evaluate politicians. To provide an alternative test, I now examine the structure of respondents' perceptions of politicians.

For this study, I recruited students from required introductory political science courses at a large public university in the south during September 2016. A total of 1,303 students completed the survey and are retained for analysis. The sample is clearly not nationally representative, however, it provides a large, diverse sample and allows more detailed measures than would be possible in a national survey (see Appendix for sample characteristics). Moreover, the proposed structure of moral character is rooted in MFT, the structure of which has been replicated in many different cultures and samples (Davies et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2011; Nilsson and Erlandsson, 2015; Yilmaz et al., 2016). This gives some reason to expect that the *structure* of trait perceptions in a student sample is similar to that of the broader population.

Respondents first answered questions about policy proposals, then were randomly assigned to evaluate two of the following politicians: Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and Ted Cruz. For each politician assigned, respondents rated the candidates on 22 character traits selected from Study 1. Then respondents rated how well the candidate would handle each of twelve issues, their ideology, favorability, and how well they would perform as

president. Following this section, respondents filled out a variety of questions about their political attitudes and demographic background. Question wording is shown in the Appendix.

#### *4.1 The Structure of Trait Perceptions*

To test the structure of trait perceptions, I turn to comparative model fitting using structural equation modeling. Each of the four politicians evaluated provides a separate test of the factor structure. I first estimated the hypothesized model composed of seven correlated factors organizing the 22 traits: Care (compassionate, caring, empathetic), Fairness (impartial, unbiased, fair-minded, honest), Authority (tough, assertive, commands respect), Patriotism (American, patriotic, loves America), Sanctity (wholesome, traditional, pure), Competence (knowledgeable, intelligent, educated), and Sociability (talkative, sociable, charismatic).

Several common model fit statistics are shown in the Appendix. For each of the four candidates, the proposed seven factor model displays adequate fit (e.g., RMSEAs range .051-.070). Most importantly, however, the hypothesized seven factor model provides a better fit to the data than several simpler alternative models. Whether collapsing the Authority and Patriotism dimensions, Authority and Competence, Care and Fairness, or the individualizing and binding foundations, the hypothesized model provided a better fit for all four candidates across nearly every fit statistic. Thus, confirmatory factor analysis provides support for the moral foundations approach to presidential character. Moreover, while the trait dimensions are correlated as one would expect, they are not redundant. The average correlation between trait dimensions (based on additive scales) ranges from .53 for Cruz and to .61 for Clinton (full statistics are shown in the Appendix). The maximum correlation between traits for any candidate is .76, which is well below the correlations found by Kinder (1986).

#### *4.2 The Predictive Validity of Moral Character*



It is not enough to show that these seven traits are separable – they must also show predictive validity in helping explain common outcomes. As a first test, I examine candidate favorability. For this analysis and the ones below, I take advantage of the fact that each respondent rated two candidates by taking a repeated measures approach. Specifically, I pool ratings of all four candidates into a single analysis with each respondent contributing up to two observations. I predict favorability of the candidates as a function of perceptions of their character on the seven trait dimensions described above. Because each respondent contributes multiple data points, I include a random effect for the respondent. And to adjust for the fact that four candidates are included, I include dummy variables for each, with Clinton serving as the excluded candidate. Additionally, I control for respondent partisanship and include interactions between partisanship and each candidate dummy, allowing partisanship to have different effects on each candidate.

Democrats and Republicans should give different weights to the trait dimensions due to their differential reliance on the moral foundations, so I estimate separate models for Democrats and Republicans (including leaners; full sample results are shown in the Appendix). The top two panels of Figure 2 plot the coefficients for each trait dimension separately for Democrats (left) and Republicans (right; full model results shown in the Appendix).

Starting with Democratic respondents (top left), Care and Fairness traits are both strong predictors of candidate favorability, but the three binding foundations have null effects. Competence predicts more favorable ratings, but notably this effect is smaller than Care or Fairness. Finally, Sociability has a null effect. Turning to Republican respondents (top right), Care does not significantly predict favorability, but Fairness has a large effect. All three binding traits are significant predictors, though smaller in magnitude than Fairness. Competence is again

a significant predictor, while Sociability has a null effect. These findings are consistent with expectations. Moral character is divisive across the political spectrum, competence is valued by both sides, and sociability seems to be irrelevant.<sup>4</sup>

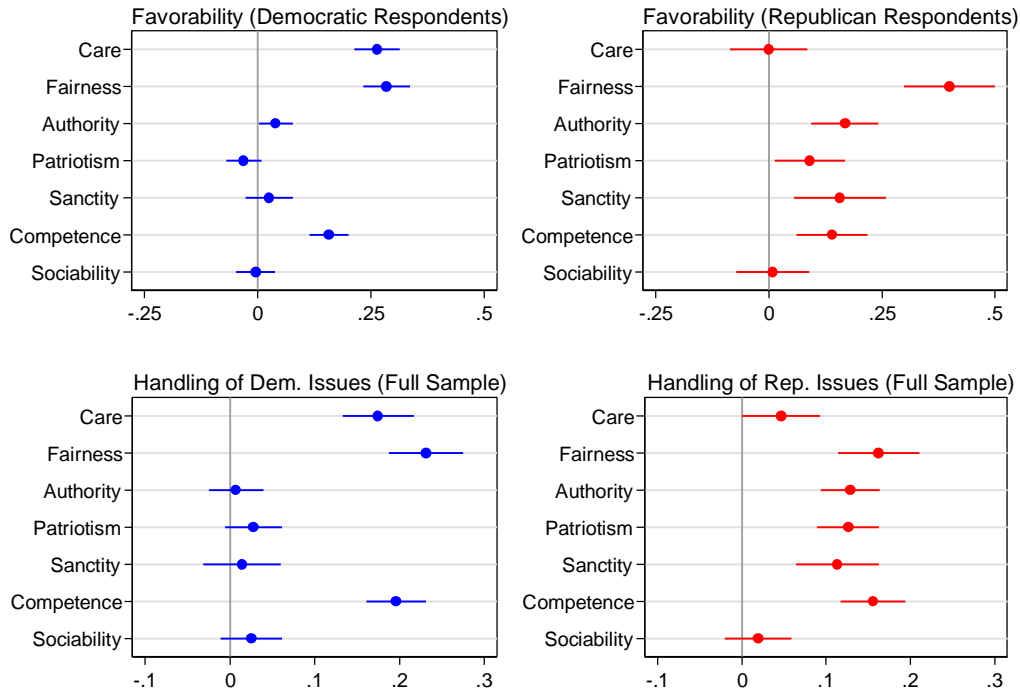
Trait impressions should also be linked to perceptions of issue competence. To simplify analysis, I constructed two measures: an index of Democratic-owned issues (environment, poverty, health care, Social Security;  $\alpha = .89$ ) and an index of Republican-owned issues (national security, terrorism, crime;  $\alpha = .86$ ). I model each index separately using the same modeling approach described above while utilizing the full sample for both models. However, to ensure that results are not simply driven by candidate ideology, I also control for perceived candidate ideology. The coefficients for each trait dimension are plotted in the bottom panels of Figure 2 (full models results are shown in the Appendix).

Starting with the Democratic-owned issues (bottom left), Care, Fairness, and Competence all have large, statistically significant effects on perceived issue handling. None of the remaining traits have significant effects. Turning to Republican-owned issues (bottom right), Care has a small but significant effect while Fairness strongly predicts issue handling. However, in contrast to Democratic-owned issues, Authority, Patriotism, and Sanctity are all significant predictors of issue handling. Thus, the trait dimensions that partisans own are clearly linked to the issues that they own. The story is different for non-moral traits, however. Competence is a significant predictor of handling both Democratic and Republican owned issues and Sociability does not significantly predict handling of either set of issues. Again, moral character is politically divisive, while Competence is not. And Sociability contributes little to candidate evaluations.

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<sup>4</sup> Sociability exerts a null effect on favorability of each candidate, including Hillary Clinton.

Figure 2. The Effects of Trait Perceptions on Candidate Favorability



Note: Estimates for Democrats are shown in blue. Estimates for Republicans are shown in red.

## 5. Conclusion

Decades of research have documented the importance of trait perceptions in candidate evaluation. Yet, there is little consensus on the dimensions of character that we ought to be studying. Across two studies, my results suggest that moral foundations theory is a useful framework for understanding how citizens evaluate the character of politicians. The proposed five-factor structure of moral character was supported through factor analysis of explicit importance ratings, as well as tests of convergent and predictive validity.

While moral character is clearly important, there is substantial variation in the traits people seek out from a president. As shown in Study 1, individuals' moral foundations are strong predictors of the importance that they place on each trait dimension. In this sense, citizens seek out politicians who seem dispositionally motivated to uphold their own moral views. These

patterns also helps explain how citizens *use* trait perceptions. Among Democrats, Care and Fairness traits were the strongest predictors of candidate favorability. For Republicans, on the other hand, all of the moral trait dimensions contributed to favorability, with the exception of Care. And a similar pattern played out in predicting perceptions of politicians' abilities to handle Democratic and Republican-owned issues.

In this way, moral character operates differently from Competence and Sociability. While the effects of moral character varied across partisan groups and issues, this was not the case for Competence and Sociability. Competence was rated as highly important and consistently predicted favorability and issue handling for both partisan groups. Sociability, on the other hand, was rated as relatively unimportant and had consistently null effects on candidate evaluations among Democrats and Republicans. This suggests that, after properly accounting for moral character, Sociability is largely irrelevant to political evaluations.

Both studies also yield support for a trait dimension that has seen little attention in past research – Patriotism. Here, Patriotism is conceptualized as a particular form of group loyalty, which many people see as a moral good. In spite of its absence in past literature, Patriotism explained unique variance in candidate favorability (though only among Republicans), as well as handling of Republican-owned (but not Democratic-owned) issues. Measuring perceptions of patriotism in future research may yield new insights into a variety of topics. For example, widespread misperceptions that Obama is a Muslim (Layman et al., 2014), or that he was not born in America, may be rooted in part in misgivings about his patriotism.

While trait perceptions are often treated as causally prior to global candidate evaluations, there is good reason to think that trait perceptions are endogenous to many of the outcomes we use them to predict. This is, of course, a major obstacle to drawing causal inferences from the

observational data presented here. Nonetheless, the findings here provide an improved framework for thinking about which character traits matter and how, which is a crucial first step in determining the causal effects of trait perceptions.

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