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Abstract

This paper describes the development and testing of a number of survey instruments designed to assess the public's perception of its national political leaders. The five measures examined by Kinder et al. and the authors' findings, based on an analysis of the 1979 Pilot Study, are as follows: (1) Trait based evaluation of leaders. The authors find that positive traits typically have a larger impact than negative traits on evaluations of candidates. In addition, trait evaluations appear to be somewhat candidate specific; a factor analysis of trait ratings uncovers both an underlying generic structure to those ratings and a dimension unique to each particular candidate. (2) Affective response to leaders. Affect scores are useful predictors of thermometer and preference ratings. These measures are not redundant with either trait and behavioral scores or with party identification categories. (3) Behavior-based evaluation of leaders. Respondents disclose predictions of candidate conduct, but these behavior-based measures are redundant with the trait inventory measures. (4) Conceptions of an ideal President. In theory this measure would provide a normative standard for comparisons among candidates, but in practice the measure does not behave this way. Attributes deemed important for an ideal President by the 1979 Pilot Study sample did not figure more heavily into respondents' evaluation of, or preferences for, specific candidates. (5) Spontaneous images of leaders. The standard open-ended candidate evaluation questions yield a wider range of responses than the experimental questions. Affect questions, however, appear to be a more effective way to elicit qualitative candidate impressions than the standard questions because the affect measures curtail the respondents' impulse to rationalize their responses.