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Title: Need for Cognition and Need to Evaluate in the 1998 National Election Survey Pilot Study

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Abstract

Social psychologists have identified two general dispositions of people that may be of interest to political scientists because they predict the extent to which people think about and evaluate information. The first, “need for cognition,” represents the extent to which people engage in and enjoy a wide variety of effortful cognitive activities (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). People high in this trait tend to think carefully and extensively about information they encounter and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors, whereas people low in this trait tend to avoid such endeavors, thinking only superficially about information they encounter. The second, “need to evaluate,” represents the extent to which people spontaneously evaluate objects or experiences as either good or bad (Jarvis & Petty, 1996). People high in this trait have many evaluative thoughts and hold opinions toward a wide variety of objects, whereas people low in this trait engage in less evaluation and are less opinionated.

In this report, we will first provide more detailed definitions of need for cognition and need to evaluate, explain how they have been measured in psychological research, offer theoretical reasons and evidence regarding why these two constructs are different, and identify potential origins of each. Then, using data from the 1998 NES pilot study, we will demonstrate that these two constructs explain variance in important political reasoning strategies and behavior beyond -- and in some cases better than -- traditional predictors. In short, we show that these personality constructs provide interesting new information to researchers interesting in understanding campaigns and elections.