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Online Tallies and the Context of Politics

How Online Tallies Make Dominant Candidates Appear Competent in Contexts of Conflict

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Article published in *American Journal of Political Science*

Please refer to the published article for the final version:
https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12490

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

In this article, we extend the classical notion of online tallies to shed light on the psychology underlying the rapid emergence of dominant political leaders. Based on two population-based panel surveys with embedded experiments, we demonstrate that (a) citizens store extremely durable tallies of candidate personalities in their long-term memory and (b) retrieve different tallies depending on the context. In particular, we predict and demonstrate that when contexts become more conflict-ridden, candidate evaluations rapidly shift from being negatively to being positively associated with online impressions of candidate dominance. While the notion of online tallies was originally proposed as an explanation of why citizens are able to vote for candidates on the basis of policy agreement, we demonstrate how the existence of context-sensitive online tallies can favor dominant candidates, even if the candidate is otherwise unappealing or does not share policy views with citizens on key issues.

The "British Bulldog," Winston Churchill, steered Britain safely through World War II and was a widely popular prime minister at the end of the war. Yet a few months later, in the summer election of 1945, Churchill and his Conservative Party suffered a surprising landslide defeat of 12 percentage points, allowing Labour to form their first-ever majority government. What had changed? Neither the fundamental political positions of the British people nor Churchill's ideological outlook had suddenly shifted (Fielding 1992). What had changed was the context. Britain—and the rest of the world—had gone from war to peace, and the Bulldog no longer seemed to be the most appropriate politician. Today, in contrast, where citizens again feel threatened by forces from the outside (Merolla and Zeichmeister 2009) and the disruptions of old hierarchies on the inside (Mutz 2018), we again see the rise of tough-minded, dominant leaders, such as Trump in the United States, Orban in Hungary, and Erdogan in Turkey.

These examples—both recent and historic—are striking, but the phenomenon is widespread: a candidate's perceived competence is not merely a function of their policy views but also of the context; that is, the issues and problems on the political agenda (Funk 1999). Disparate literatures within political science on agenda-setting, issue ownership, and priming have all established as much. Increasingly, however, studies within both social psychology and political science are providing evidence that how context matters for candidate evaluations depends specifically on the impressions that citizens form of the candidates' personalities. Social psychology studies on leadership in organizations and small groups have established—in line with the trajectory of both Churchill and Trump—that strong and dominant leaders are rated as competent in times of conflict and turmoil. When times turn more peaceful, however, warm leaders are rated as more competent than dominant ones (Laustsen and Petersen 2015; Little et al. 2007; Spisak et al. 2012; van Vugt and Spisak 2008). Studies on candidate evaluations within political science have also shown that strong leaders rise in

perceived competence after terrorist attacks and aggression from other states (Laustsen and Petersen 2017; Merolla and Zeichmeister 2009).

Evaluations of candidate competence play a crucial role in voting decisions (Kinder 1986). In order to serve as a valid foundation for the vote, however, a candidate evaluation must be "correct;" that is, it must reflect an accurate match between a citizen's preferences and the candidate's traits (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). As citizens pay scant attention to politics and tend to forget basic political information, "voting correctly" is no small feat. Still, citizens often do so (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Significant research efforts have been devoted to understanding how citizens are able to match their own ideological views with those of candidates, summarized in the canonical online model of candidate evaluation (Lodge et al. 1989; Lodge et al. 1995; Lodge and Taber 2013). This model stresses the importance of a single summary tally of positive versus negative affect, which is updated in an online manner as new information comes in. Even if this information is forgotten, the online affective tally is retained and allows citizens to consistently vote correctly. Yet outside the domain of ideological matching, we know surprisingly little about how citizens "vote correctly" and, in particular, we know next to nothing about how citizens are able to identify which candidate's personality matches the problems of the current context. In other words, how do citizens form impressions of candidate personality? How do they match them to the demands of the context? And with what consequences for current understandings of the causes and consequences of candidate evaluations? Understanding this set of questions is the aim of the present article.

To this end, we build on and significantly extend the classical notion of the online tally. Integrating research on the online tally with recent psychological research on impression formation (Fiske et al. 2007), we develop and empirically test a comprehensive model of candidate evaluations that reformulates a number of long-held assumptions about how online processes structure such evaluations. First, we argue that citizens automatically store not just a single tally but multiple online

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tallies. Second, we argue that these online tallies contain not summaries of affect but content-rich impressions of candidate personality traits, such as dominance. Finally, we argue that online tallies do not necessarily provide consistent candidate evaluations. Instead, we argue that the psychology of candidate evaluation assigns different weights to different personality traits in different contexts and, hence, facilitates rapid but predictable shifts in evaluations as a function of the context. Specifically, building on psychological studies on leadership (Laustsen and Petersen 2015; Little et al. 2007; van Vugt and Spisak 2008; Spisak et al. 2012), we predict that citizens weight impressions of dominance more positively in conflict contexts than in non-conflict contexts.

The theory and empirical tests we provide revitalize the political importance of the notion of online tallies as they demonstrate that online tallies empower citizens to make informed political decisions beyond that which has previously been recognized. Online tallies do not just allow citizens to consistently pick candidates that match their ideology, they also allow them to flexibly change their perceptions of who is right for the job when the context changes. At the same time, however, we also argue that these trait-specific tallies might occasionally lead citizens astray. When the context provides strong demands for a particular weighting of trait-specific tallies, citizens can unknowingly be induced to support candidates with whom they disagree ideologically.

From Online Tally to Online Tallies: New Challenges to a Classical Notion

Candidate evaluation refers to an individual's "summary global judgment ranging from very negative to very positive" about a political candidate (McGraw 2011, 187). According to the online, impression-based model of candidate evaluation (Lodge et al. 1989; Lodge and Stroh 1993; Lodge et al. 1995), candidate evaluations reflect continuously updated affective reactions referred to as an "online running tally." This model emerges from early psychological research on impression formation (for overviews, see Anderson 1973; Anderson 1983). From the outset, this research was

applied to the problem of candidate evaluations in the form of the effects of information on attitudes about U.S. presidents (Anderson 1973). Here, it was found that "as each piece of information is received, its information is extracted and integrated into the current attitude. The verbal stimuli function as carriers of the meaning but are no longer necessary thereafter;" consequently, "there is no definite relation (...) between attitudes and verbal memory" (Anderson 1973: 7). This finding formed the foundation of the research on the online tally in political science research.

According to the online tally model, when individuals are first presented with an item of information about a candidate, they process it in their working memory, make an immediate evaluation of it, and update their affect summary tally containing their global evaluation of the candidate. The updated summary tally is stored in long-term memory, even if the specific details of the information are forgotten. When subsequently forming an opinion about the candidate, the individuals can simply retrieve their affective summary tally and base their evaluation on it (McGraw 2003; Lodge et al. 1995). In this way, the online model of candidate evaluation provides an answer to the fundamental puzzle of how an ill-informed citizenry can form reasonable evaluations (Lodge and Taber 2013): People do not need to remember detailed items of information about a candidate— they can rely on automatically triggered affect.

The original work on the online model of candidate evaluation sparked significant discussion regarding the relative role of memory and affect in candidate evaluations. While few subsequent studies questioned the relevance of the online tally, there is now substantial evidence that memory-based processes also play important roles (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; McGraw 2011; Redlawsk 2001). The original online model of candidate evaluation focused on candidate competence evaluations, and the best evidence for the model is still for such evaluations. In contrast, when citizens are required to trade off different candidate evaluations and turn them into actual decisions in favor of one candidate rather than the other (e.g., voting decisions), memory-based considerations play a larger role.

While debates about the relative contributions of memory-based and online considerations are important, these debates have neglected the fundamental question of whether the specification of the online tally itself was correct from the outset. This is our focus in the present research. Thus, a crucial assumption of the original model was that such competence evaluations reflect simple unidimensional affective reactions, ranging from positive to negative. As emphasized by Lodge (1995, 119, italics in original): "[n]ew information is encoded in terms of a *single, bipolar like-dislike dimension.*"

Developments in the psychology of impression formation challenge this assumption. Reviewing massive amounts of social psychological evidence, Fiske and colleagues have championed a model of impression formation that identifies impressions of likeability (often referred to as warmth) as *separate* from impressions of competence (Fiske et al. 2007). Interestingly, some earlier studies on candidate evaluations in political science did produce evidence consistent with a separation of likability and competence evaluations (Kinder 1986). Using a set of items developed in the NES-sponsored pilot studies, Marcus (1982) found that "competence" and "integrity" appear to be the two dimensions upon which people assess the personal characteristics and capabilities of political candidates (Marcus 1982, 1981–2). In their seminal study, Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh (1989) similarly found two trait dimensions—competence and integrity—on which participants evaluated a candidate. However, these were reduced to one dimension because "the dimensionality of political character is not directly relevant to our concerns" (Lodge et al. 1989, 405; for a detailed description of the construction of measures of online tallies, see Redlawsk 2001).

We argue that the separation of likeability and competence is partly a reflection (1) of the existence of trait-specific online tallies beyond the valence-based global online tally and (2) that, in specific contexts, these trait-specific online tallies prompt citizens to attribute competence to a candidate toward whom they feel negative affect, hence reducing the impact of the valence-based

global tally. In the following, we will review the case for these two arguments, starting with the second.

The Context Sensitivity of Competence Evaluations

A large literature on the psychology of leader evaluations suggests that dominance is a crucial trait for leader evaluations; that is, the extent to which a leader is tough-minded, forceful, assertive, and aggressive (for an overview, see Cheng et al. 2013). For obvious reasons, people are concerned about being around dominant, potentially exploitive individuals, and they generally react with negative affect toward dominant individuals both in interpersonal interactions and as leaders (Laustsen and Petersen 2015; von Rueden et al. 2014). At the same time, studies in both psychology and political science find that these concerns impact leader evaluations less in conflict situations and, under such conditions, people view dominant leaders as more competent than non-dominant leaders (Laustsen and Petersen 2015; Little et al. 2007; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Spisak et al. 2012).

These studies argue that contexts involving social conflict are special. Thus, conflicts against other groups require greater "investments and coordination of group members than many other types of collective action;" accordingly, people "put a premium on abilities to enforce collective action in the face of social conflict" (Laustsen and Petersen 2015, 287; see also von Rueden et al. 2014). Numerous studies have therefore found that individuals tend to attribute competence to dominant leaders in conflict contexts specifically but not in situations involving other types of threats (e.g., natural disasters) (Laustsen and Petersen 2015, 2017).

The Existence of Multiple, Trait-Specific Online Tallies

In order to engage in context-sensitive leader evaluations, people are required to form impressions beyond their general liking of an individual and flexibly attribute negative and positive affect to this impression of dominance depending on the contextual level of conflict.

Importantly, social psychological research suggests that trait impressions are formed online (Anderson 1971; Anderson 1983; Uleman et al. 1996). This also applies to specific traits and, in the case of dominance, there is already research suggesting the existence of a trait-specific online tally (Cogsdill et al. 2014; Willis and Todorov 2006). It is therefore plausible that citizens are ready to form impressions of the dominance of a leader candidate from a host of different cues and store them as a trait-specific online impression, ready for use when necessary.

These recent insights into the psychology of impression formation and leader evaluation suggest that citizens' long-term memories do not just include affective tags that associate candidates with a general positive or negative affect. In long-term memory, a specific candidate is also associated with a number of trait-specific impressions such as "dominant" or "trustworthy." Just as in the traditional online tally model, these impressions are simple summary impressions, stored without the information that gave rise to them. In contrast to the traditional online tally model, however, these trait-specific tallies are not in themselves affectively charged. Instead, they are assigned an affective weight—positive or negative—when a specific evaluation is needed. Thus, in the case of leader evaluations, we propose that a central function of political psychological mechanisms is to assign different weights to dominance impressions, depending on the specifics of the problem context. In the face of conflict, a positive weight is assigned to dominance, while in most other contexts a negative weight is assigned. In many ways, this view is consistent with some of the earliest work on online impression formation, which describes this process as "a matter of integrating informational

stimuli" such that "the weight and value parameters of each stimulus would necessarily depend on the judgment in question" (Kaplan and Anderson 1973: 302, 303).

Study 1: Testing the Notion of Context-Sensitive, Trait-Specific Online Tallies

We summarize our notion of the existence of context-sensitive, trait-specific online tallies in four concrete hypotheses, which are tested in Study 1. Each of the four hypotheses relates to different parts of the underlying psychological dynamics of candidate evaluations during contextual changes. Consistent with previous studies, the first prediction, Hypothesis 1 (H1), entails that dominant individuals are generally disfavored:

H1:   In the absence of social conflict, citizens will evaluate a dominant candidate as less competent than a non-dominant candidate.

In contexts of social conflict, however, the competence that citizens attribute to dominance should increase. Specifically, citizens should flexibly adjust their preference for dominant candidates as a response to changing levels of social conflict, with dominance being valued more in times of social conflict compared to no-conflict contexts. Specifically, Hypothesis 2 (H2) states:

H2:   Contexts of social conflict increase voter preferences for dominant candidates, with citizens flexibly up- and down-regulating their preference for dominant candidates to match high and low levels of social conflict, respectively.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) focuses on the specific impressions underlying the dynamics captured in H2. Consistent with the original online tally model, we expect citizens to form an impression of the likability of candidates. In addition to this valence impression, we also expect citizens to form impressions of specific traits, such as dominance. Importantly, these impressions should be distinct and be weighted differently under different conditions. Specifically, we predict:

H3:   Voters form distinct impressions of candidates' likability and dominance, and the relative weight of these impressions changes as a function of conflict such that dominance is weighted more when conflict increases.

Finally, as is the case for general valence impressions, Hypothesis 4 (H4) entails that trait-specific impressions of dominance are stored and integrated in context-sensitive candidate evaluations in an online manner:

H4:   Voters integrate dominance impressions of candidates in relation to contextual conditions based on online rather than memory-based processing styles.

These hypotheses form the basis of our four initial empirical tests. If valid, these hypotheses provide new insights into the capacities of citizens to form their candidate preferences: Online tallies do not just allow citizens to pick the right candidate despite low levels of political engagement (e.g., Lodge et al. 1989, 1995). Online tallies also allow citizens to change their perceptions of who is right for the job when the context changes (as with Churchill). Consequently, if supported, these hypotheses will suggest that citizens hold higher degrees of sophistication in political choices than previously

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assumed. At the same time, as we return to in Study 2, the existence of trait-specific tallies can also lead citizens astray. When the context provides strong demands for a dominant candidate, citizens can be induced to support a candidate with whom they disagree politically.

Testing H1 and H2: Voter Preferences for Dominance and the Context of Politics

To test H1 and H2, we designed a multi-wave survey experiment in which we experimentally manipulate the two primary independent variables specified in these hypotheses: candidate dominance and contextual conflict.

Materials and Methods

We recruited a sample of 1,524 Danish subjects, representative with respect to age, gender, education, and regional belonging, to take part in a three-round survey experiment through the YouGov survey agency. The first round of the survey was fielded on January 14, 2015, and the last interview in Round 3 was finished on February 26, 2015 (see Appendix A.1 for time details and sample descriptives for Study 1). On average, there were seven days between subjects' participation in Rounds 1 and 2 and 27 days between participation in Rounds 1 and 3.

In Round 1, subjects were randomly assigned to read one of two personality descriptions of a fictitious male. Both conditions presented the individual with a common photo and introduced him as either dominant and assertive or as a non-dominant and agreeable person, respectively (see Appendix A.2 for materials used in the two personality conditions). Importantly, both the dominant and non-dominant conditions presented the individual without any reference to political aspirations or preferences and, thus, only presented him in terms of general personality characteristics. Manipulation checks confirm that the dominant condition was seen as more dominant than the non-dominant condition (see Appendix A.2). Next, subjects stated the overall valence towards the

individual using an 11-point scale scaled from 0 to 1, with higher values reflecting more positive affect (M=0.632, SD=0.209). After forming their impression of the candidate on this basis, subjects were asked to imagine that he was a political candidate running for a seat in parliament and asked to rate how competent they saw him as a political candidate on an 11-point scale from 0 ("not at all competent") to 1 ("very competent") (M=0.614, SD=0.207). On this basis, Round 1 enables us to test H1 by examining preferences for dominant political candidates in the absence of clear contextual information.

In Round 2, in which 1,161 of the initial subjects participated, we manipulated the level of social conflict by randomly assigning subjects to treatment and control conditions. Our focal treatment condition, the conflict condition, was designed to induce a sense of immanent intergroup conflict in participants. Specifically, subjects were prompted to imagine an intensified conflict between Denmark and Russia over natural resources in the Arctic (Appendix A.3. provides full wordings for the contextual conditions).[1] The control condition provided no contextual information. After reading the assigned context, subjects were presented with the photo of the candidate from Round 1 and evaluated him on the same competence scale used in Round 1 (M=0.540, SD=0.177). No reminders about the personality of the candidate were available in Round 2.

The purpose of Round 3, in which 993 of the original subjects participated, was to offer maximal leverage in examining the flexibility of candidate impressions to changing contextual surroundings. In this round, all of the subjects were exposed to the passive control condition and, as in Round 2, received no further information about the candidate. Consequently, Round 3 permits us

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[1] Studies 1 and 2 both also included an alternative treatment condition, the disaster condition, which provided alternative contextual information unrelated to intergroup conflict and, hence, allows us to test whether it is specifically conflict contexts that induce the view that dominant individuals are competent. Specifically, the disaster condition described how Denmark was hit by a strong hurricane and needed significant rebuilding. For reasons of space, we report the comparison between the control condition and the disaster condition only in Online Appendix A.14. Consistent with the suggestion that dominant leaders are not viewed as competent under all contexts, the control and disaster conditions are statistically indistinguishable.

to test whether subjects exposed to conflict in Round 2 return to their baseline preference for the dominant candidate when the conflict introduced in Round 2 is no longer salient. Again, subjects were simply provided with a photo of the candidate and asked to re-evaluate how competent they found him using the same 0–1, 11-point scale as in Rounds 1 and 2 (M=0.543, SD=0.182). Overall, across Rounds 1–3, subjects are exposed to varying degrees of social conflict. This constitutes the foundation for testing H2 and allows us to pinpoint how voters up- and down-regulate preferences for a dominant politician in response to contextual changes.

Results

Do voters prefer a non-dominant over a dominant candidate in the absence of social conflict (H1)? To examine this, we regress the competence ratings of the candidates on the assigned personality description obtained in Round 1 of the survey before any contextual information was provided. In support of H1, we find that subjects rate the dominant description significantly less competent compared to the non-dominant description (b=–0.042, p<0.001).

Do subjects adjust their evaluation of the assigned candidate personality to the level of contextual conflict (H2)? To test H2, we examine how competence evaluations change over the course of the survey rounds and assigned contextual conditions. In the analysis, we utilize the panel structure of the dataset and employ regression analysis with clustered standard errors at the subject level (Appendix A.4. provides the full regression model). As a first step, we test whether the candidate description interacts with the contextual condition across the three rounds of the survey. In line with H2, we find a significant three-way interaction between candidate personality, experimental condition, and survey round on perceived candidate competence (b=0.066, p=0.036). To interpret this three-way interaction effect, we calculate the marginal effects of being assigned to the dominant rather than the non-dominant personality description across the survey rounds and contextual

conditions. We begin by focusing on the subjects assigned to the control condition and their evaluation of the dominant relative to the non-dominant candidate description across the three rounds of the survey. The results are illustrated on the left side of Figure 1. Across an average timespan of 27 days, we observe a remarkably stable preference for the non-dominant over the dominant candidate description of approximately 5 percentage points across all three survey rounds (round 1: $b=-0.058$, $p=0.004$; round 2: $b=-0.044$, $p=0.007$; round 3: $b=-0.046$, $p=0.013$).

'Figure 1 about here'

A very different pattern is obtained for subjects assigned to the conflict condition: In Round 1—before the contextual condition was assigned—the dominant candidate description is also seen as less competent than the non-dominant description ($b=-0.036$, $p=0.117$). This pattern changes significantly when the conflict context is introduced in Round 2, such that the dominant description is now seen as more competent than the non-dominant description ($b=0.045$, $p=0.016$). The right panel in Figure 1 illustrates the relative competence evaluation for the dominant versus non-dominant candidate description among subjects assigned to the conflict condition. Importantly, this relative evaluation of the two candidate descriptions among subjects assigned to the conflict condition in Round 2 constitutes a significant change compared to both the relative evaluation among the same subjects in Round 1 ($b=0.081$, $p=0.001$) and to subjects assigned to the control condition in Round 2 ($b=0.089$, $p<0.001$).

Finally, the results from Round 3 for subjects in the conflict condition further underline the context-sensitivity of the candidate evaluations: When the conflict context is no longer salient, subjects adjust their relative evaluations of the dominant and non-dominant candidate descriptions in the direction of the initial situation, meaning that the two descriptions are now seen as equally

competent (b=0.000, p=0.996). This constitutes a significant difference compared to the results obtained in the presence of conflict in Round 2 (b=–0.045, p=0.037), and the relative competence perception between the two candidate descriptions is statistically indistinguishable from the starting point in Round 1 among the same subjects (b=0.036, p=0.151). These results—obtained among subjects assigned to the conflict condition—are strongly in line with the predicted integration of contextual information and the stored dominance impressions of a candidate as they show how dominance is flexibly up- and down-regulated in accordance with intergroup-conflict levels. In total, the results obtained across Rounds 1–3 support H2 based on both within- and between-subject comparisons: Candidate dominance is flexibly assigned greater priority in the presence (compared to absence) of conflict.

Testing H3: Distinct Tallies for Dominance and General Valence

H3 states that subjects hold information about candidates on separate tallies related to dominance and general valence, respectively, and that these tallies are weighted differently in overall competence evaluations of candidates depending on the degree of contextual conflict.

Materials and Methods

To test H3, we utilize different elements from Rounds 1 and 2. In Round 1, subjects were asked to rate how dominant, determined, agreeable and confidence inspiring they found the assigned candidate description using 7-point scales (from 0 "strongly disagree" to 1 "strongly agree") as well as state their overall valence toward the candidate (see also Appendix A.2). Importantly, because no additional information about the candidate is provided in Rounds 2–3, we can use subjects' ratings of valence (M=0.632, SD=0.209) and dominance (M=0.560, SD=0.316) as measures for the valence and dominance tallies, respectively. Moreover, we test how the weights assigned to these valence and

dominance tallies change as a function of the assigned contextual condition in Round 2. Specifically, H3 entails that the weight assigned to the dominance tally becomes more positive during intergroup conflict, while this is not the case for the weight assigned to the valence tally.

Results

Does conflict heighten the relative weight assigned to dominance and lower the weight assigned to valence in subjects' candidate evaluations (H3)? To test H3, we regress competence evaluations from Round 2 on two-way interactions between assigned context and subjects' dominance and valence ratings, respectively. Because dominance and valence ratings are not randomly assigned, we also control for subjects' age, gender, education, and regional location (Appendix A.5. provides the full regression model). These interaction models demonstrate that the predictive power of dominance ratings is significantly stronger in the conflict condition than in the control condition (b=0.136, p=0.001). Moreover, the predictive power of valence ratings is descriptively reduced in the conflict compared to the control condition, albeit only insignificantly (b=–0.100, p=0.111). Figure 2 illustrates the marginal effects of dominance and valence ratings on competence evaluations across the two contextual conditions.

'Figure 2 about here'

Two important results are illustrated in Figure 2. First, valence and dominance constitute significant and independent predictors of candidate competence across both conditions, underlining the distinctiveness of dominance from general valence and supporting H3. Second, valence significantly outperforms dominance ratings in the predictive power of perceived competence in the control condition ($F_{(1, 378)}=51.15$, $p<0.001$). In the conflict condition, however, valence and dominance are

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equally strong predictors of competence (F(1, 363)=0.52, p=0.472). Hence, these results further support H2 and stress the importance of candidate dominance in conflict-ridden contexts: The dominance tally rises in explanatory power to match the level of the valence tally.

Testing H4: Online Impressions of Specific Traits

H4 states that trait-specific impressions of dominance are formed in an online manner: People store the overall trait impression in their long-term memory, even if they forget the information that gave rise to the impression. Given the stability of online impressions (Lodge et al. 1989), this would explain how our subjects are able to form stable and predictable competence evaluations of a fictitious candidate over approximately 30 days (from Round 1 through Round 3). To provide a direct test of H4, we employ a range of measures to assess processing style and demonstrate that contextual adjustments of dominance preferences in candidates are specifically enhanced among subjects who engage in online processing.

Materials and Methods

To measure individual differences in online processing, we follow a range of political science studies (e.g., Druckman et al. 2010; Federico and Schneider 2007) and utilize the "Need to Evaluate" (NtE) personality construct. This construct captures stable individual differences "in the chronic tendency to engage in evaluative responding" (Jarvis and Petty 1996: 172) and "extend to the domain of automatic evaluative responding" (Tormala and Petty 2001: 1600). Thus, individual differences in NtE reliably capture the extent to which individuals engage in online processing (Cronley et al. 2010; McGraw and Dolan 2007; Tormala and Petty 2001; for further discussion and analysis, see Online Appendix A.6). NtE was measured using six items ahead of assignment of any contextual conditions

at the end of Round 1 and forms a reliable scale, ranged from 0 (low online processing) to 1 (high online processing) (M=0.587; SD=0.167; α=0.796).

To adequately differentiate between memory-based and online processing, we also include a number of measures directly related to memory. Existing research thus suggests that it is most accurate to conceptualize online and memory-based processing as separate dimensions (McGraw and Dolan 2007; Redlawsk 2006; Tormala and Petty 2001; see Online Appendix A.6). Specifically, high-NtE individuals will also rely on memory-based considerations, and low-NtE individuals are not necessarily better equipped to rely on such considerations. Empirically, low-NtE individuals possibly engage in memory-based processing more often than high-NtE individuals simply because they have no alternative way to reach an evaluation. Thus, to directly capture the availability of memory-based considerations, we measured subjects' actual memory about the candidate by including a recall task in Round 2 with 16 statements related to the assigned personality description in Round 1. From this we counted the number of correct answers for use as a measure of recall (M=6.54; SD=4.45). We also utilized two additional indirect measures of recall about the candidate: i) time between subject's participation in survey Rounds 1 and 2 (in days: M=7.43; SD=1.78), and ii) subject's time spent reading the personality description in Round 1 (in seconds: M=75.47; SD=283.4) (Appendix A.7 provides details of these memory-related measures).

Results

Do subjects' integration of dominance impressions and contextual information in competence evaluations increase with the degree to which they engage in online processing (H4)? To test H4, we investigate whether any of the four processing measures significantly interact with the assigned personality description and contextual condition. Parallel to the tests of H3, we examine the competence evaluations from Round 2, which allow us to investigate the integration of stored

impressions of candidate dominance with new contextual information. Specifically, we regress competence evaluations in Round 2 on three-way interactions between assigned personality description, contextual condition, and each of the four processing measures, also controlling for subjects' age, gender, education, and regional belonging (Appendix A.8 provides the full regression models).

In support of H4, we find a significant three-way interaction between the assigned personality description, the contextual condition—comparing the conflict and the control conditions—and subjects' Need to Evaluate (NtE) when predicting the competence evaluations of the candidate (b=0.326, p=0.030).

'Figure 3 about here'

Figure 3 illustrates the marginal effect of assignment to the dominant personality description. If online-based processing drives the integration of dominance impressions and contextual information, the negative marginal effect of being assigned to the dominant candidate description should increase with NtE in the control condition. Likewise, the positive marginal effect of the dominant candidate description should increase with NtE in the conflict condition. This is exactly what Figure 3 shows. In the control condition (left side), we see a negative effect of the dominant candidate description that grows with NtE. In contrast, in the conflict condition (right side) we see a positive effect of the dominant candidate description that grows with NtE. Hence, high-NtE subjects—those relying on online processing most strongly—are found to integrate dominance impressions most strongly with contextual information about intergroup conflict and, thus, drive the results presented for H2 and H3.[2]

2 Appendix A.9 displays Figure 3 while adding the distribution of the NtE scale. This demonstrates that the wide confidence intervals around the endpoints of the scale reflect a low number of data points.

In further support of H4, we find no significant three-way interactions between any of the memory-based processing measures, candidate descriptions, and context (recall: b=0.003, p=0.659; time between Rounds 1 and 2: b=0.010, p=0.485; time reading candidate description: b=0.000, p=0.986). Hence, online processing (not memory-based considerations) underlies the context-sensitive nature of voters' candidate evaluations.

Study 2: Can Context-Sensitive Trait-Specific Online Tallies Lead Citizens Astray?

The original research on the online tally primarily focused on fictitious candidates' policy positions. To examine the interplay between the context-sensitive nature of trait-specific tallies and information about candidates' policies, we conducted Study 2.

In Study 2, we test whether the context sensitivity of trait-based tallies possibly leads voters to align themselves more with candidates with whom they disagree politically when contexts of intergroup conflict are present. This ironic implication of the existence of context-sensitive, trait-specific online impressions is made plausible from a consistent finding in the literature on partisan stereotypes: people link certain traits and personalities to certain party affiliations and policy positions when thinking about political candidates such that rightwing or conservative candidates are associated with being dominant, masculine, and tough-minded (Eriksson 2018; Eriksson and Funcke 2015; Hayes 2005; Winter 2010). Hypothesis 5 (H5) captures this link between policy positions and inferred traits:

H5:   Rightwing and conservative candidates are associated with being more dominant than leftwing and liberal candidates.

If H5 is supported, any voter—liberal or conservative—who is confronted with a conservative candidate will generate an online trait-specific impression of the candidate as dominant. This impression will be retained, even if the details of the candidate's policy position fade from memory. If the context subsequently changes to one of conflict, this invites the possibility that a liberal voter lacking memory-based considerations about a conservative candidate might come to view this candidate as competent due to the online dominance impression. The strength of this effect is obviously limited. A liberal voter should also have stored a general negative valence tally in their long-term memory given the mismatch between the voter's and candidate's respective policy positions (following the classical work on the online tally). In this sense, the voter is required to trade off the trait-specific and general online tallies when contexts marked by conflict emerge. In sum, these considerations lead to Hypothesis 6:

H6: Voters lacking memory-based considerations about a candidate's policy position will evaluate the competence of candidates in a less ideologically consistent manner during conflict compared to no-conflict contexts.

Testing H5 and H6: Trait-Specific Online Tallies and Ideological Consistency

Materials and Methods

Study 2 resembles Study 1 in many respects. Through the YouGov survey agency, we recruited a sample of 1,510 Danish subjects representative of the general population with respect to age, gender, education, and regional belonging to participate in a two-round survey experiment (excluding subjects from Study 1). Round 1 was fielded on April 7, 2015, and the last interview in Round 2 was finished on April 30, 2015 (Appendix A.10 reports time details and sample descriptives for Study 2). In Round 1, subjects were randomly assigned to one of two descriptions of a fictitious male politician running

for office in the Danish parliament. In one description, the candidate was depicted as a left-wing politician advocating that criminals be re-socialized rather than severely punished, that people on unemployment benefits be treated respectfully, and that Danish society meet immigrants with open arms. In contrast, the other description presented the candidate as a right-wing politician favoring stricter prison sentences, increasing the demands regarding job-seeking activities for those receiving unemployment insurance, and protecting Denmark against threats related to increased immigration (Appendix A.11 presents full wordings of the two conditions). Besides the common introduction, the descriptions contained no other personality-related information than these policy positions. After reading the assigned policy platform, subjects evaluated how dominant, determined, agreeable and confidence inspiring they found the candidate using 7-point scales (from 0 "strongly disagree" to 1 "strongly agree"). This enables us to test H5 and if subjects infer the candidate's personality from his policy positions. Finally, using the same 11-point scales as in Study 1, subjects rated the candidate's general valence (M=0.520, SD=0.251) and competence (M=0.514, SD=0.230).

Round 2 took place on average 9 days after Round 1, and 1,194 subjects participated in both rounds. Following the same procedure as for Study 1 and re-using the contextual stimuli materials, subjects were randomly assigned to distinct contexts. After reading the assigned contextual condition, subjects re-evaluated the candidate with respect to perceived competence (M=0.454, SD=0.190).

To examine the ideological consistency of subjects' candidate evaluations, we measured subjects' policy positions on ten items answered on 5-point scales related to the topics used to characterize the candidate's policy positions in Round 1. The items form a reliable scale to measure the subjects' political orientations from 0 (most left-wing) to 1 (most right-wing) (M=0.553; SD=0.144; α=0.689) (see Appendix A.11 for item wordings).

To examine how the ideological consistency of subjects' candidate evaluations are influenced by the availability of memory-based considerations about the candidate, subjects were asked to recall

the candidate's policy positions: right-wing, middle-of-the-road, left-wing, or don't recall. Based on their answers, we split subjects into the categories of memorizers (n=640) and non-memorizers (n=554), respectively, reflecting if subjects report that they remember the candidate's policy positions. As discussed in relation to H4, the utilization of online and memory-based considerations constitutes separate dimensions and, hence, this measure is the most direct way to differentiate between those who are able to utilize memory-based considerations and those who are not (we did not obtain measures of Need to Evaluate in Study 2, as even high-NtE individuals could still be relying on memory-based considerations).[3]

All dependent measures—subjects' ratings of competence and character traits—are recoded to 0–1 scales, and the results are based on OLS regression. To avoid omitted variables bias when conducting analyses based on subjects' political orientations, we control for subjects' sex, age, education, and regional location.

Results

Do subjects infer candidate personality based on candidates' described policy positions (H5)? Comparing the right-wing and left-wing candidate descriptions on key character traits, we find that subjects perceive the right-wing candidate as significantly more dominant (t=-14.24, p<0.001) and more determined (t=-13.60, p<0.001) than the left-wing candidate. In contrast, the left-wing candidate description is seen as more agreeable (t=14.06, p<0.001) and slightly more confidence inspiring (t=2.31, p=0.021). That is, in support of H5 and in accordance with prior research on political stereotypes, our subjects tie their impression of the right-wing candidate description to dominance-oriented character traits.

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[3] Appendix A.12 investigates the associations between our variables and whether or not the participant recalls the candidate's policy positions (that is, if they self-report as memorizers).

Does contextual information reduce the tendency for subjects to evaluate candidate competence based on issue agreement (H6)? First, we establish that subjects' competence evaluations of the candidate in Round 1 (i.e., in the absence of contextual information) is shaped by the match (i.e., the two-way interaction) between the assigned candidate description and the individual subject's own political orientations (b=1.361, p<0.001). Unsurprisingly, left-wing subjects view the left-wing candidate as more competent than the right-wing candidate, whereas the opposite holds true for right-wing subjects (Appendix A.13 reports the full model). Second, we examine how this changes as a function of assigned context in Round 2 and the availability of memory-based considerations about the candidate. Specifically, we test the four-way interaction between assigned candidate description (measured in Round 1), contextual condition (Round 2), subjects' political orientations (Round 2), and whether the subject is a memorizer or non-memorizer (Round 2). This interaction is significant (b=0.774, p=0.045). H6 furthermore entails that, among non-memorizers, candidate evaluation is a function of the three-way interaction between candidate description, context, and subjects' political orientations. This interaction only approaches significance (b=–0.587, p=0.054; among memorizers, the interaction equals b=0.187, p=0.429) (the full regression model is reported in Appendix A.13). To provide a more detailed picture of these results, Figure 4 illustrates the marginal effect of candidate description on competence evaluations across policy orientation for subjects assigned to the control (left side) or the conflict condition (right side) and for memorizers (dashed lines and light-grey shades) and non-memorizers (solid lines and dark-grey shades), respectively.

'Figure 4 about here'

Figure 4 shows that the results in the control condition (left side) resemble what was found for the competence evaluations in Round 1: Regardless of whether subjects recall the candidate's policy

positions, they evaluate him based on policy agreement, such that the more right-wing the subject, the more competent the relative evaluation of the right-wing description compared to the left-wing description (and vice versa the more left-wing the subject). This is shown by significant two-way interactions between assigned candidate description and subjects' policy orientations for memorizers and non-memorizers alike (memorizers: $b=0.589$, $p=0.001$; non-memorizers: $b=0.476$, $p=0.026$). Consistent with H6, this pattern does not replicate for subjects assigned to the conflict condition (right side). Here, memorizers follow the pattern presented above and evaluate the candidate based on issue agreement, as illustrated by a significant two-way interaction between candidate description and issue agreement ($b=0.776$, $p<0.001$). For non-memorizers, however, this interaction is insignificant ($b=-0.111$, $p=0.610$): When non-memorizers are exposed to a context marked by conflict, they no longer evaluate the candidate on the basis of policy agreement. Thus, H6 is partially supported and the results provide suggestive evidence that the context-sensitivity of candidate evaluations can crowd out the policy-agreement effects. Hence, when the context triggers a need for a particular kind of political leader, those who cannot rely on memory-based considerations about policy positions might become more favorable toward candidates with opposing political views.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that citizens do not merely form online summary impressions of political candidates based on issue agreement; they also form distinct online impressions of the candidates' specific personality traits, such as dominance. These distinct impressions allow citizens to make flexible, context-sensitive evaluations of candidate competence as opposed to forming a single "context-general" candidate impression that fits all possible situations. Specifically, we have demonstrated that when conflict and strife put a premium on having a tough-minded leader, citizens retrieve fine-grained online impressions of dominance and evaluate dominant candidates as more

competent—despite having previously formed negative views of those very same candidates. Thus, these findings show that online tallies lend coherence and structure to citizens' political choices in even more sophisticated ways than previously understood.

We view these findings as initial rather than final words on the political implications of the existence of multiple trait-specific online tallies. First, one immediate question for future research relates to the number of such traits. How many trait-specific tallies exist? According to findings in the psychological literature on impressions, we should expect at least two sets of tallies (Fiske et al. 2007). For example, Todorov et al. (2008) refer to these dimensions as dominance and trustworthiness and, with significant conceptual overlap, Eriksson (2018) refers to "the Big 2" of agency and communion. Our focus has been on dominance, but future research should consider both the other dimension of trustworthiness (see Laustsen and Bor 2017) and explore the potential sub-facets of each dimension.

Second, the exact relationship between the general valence tally and the trait-specific tallies has yet to be specified. The model we propose entails that trait-specific tallies first become affectively charged when used for evaluation and that their weight depends on the specific evaluation task (e.g., is the individual evaluating leader competences in conflict or peacetime?). But what does that exactly mean? Does the affective tag on the trait tally enter evaluations alongside a general valence tally? Or is it rather the valence tally itself that is updated as available contextual information and trait-specific tallies merge in the evaluative process? The general answer is currently unclear. For dominance impressions specifically, however, the evidence suggests that these exist independently of impressions of valence. Specifically, one study showed that people prefer dominant persons as leaders but not as friends in conflict-ridden contexts, suggesting that people differentiate between dominance impressions and general valence (Laustsen and Petersen 2015). Similarly, Figure 2 above documents independent effects of valence impressions and dominance impressions. The weight attributed to

valence is relatively constant across contexts but, during conflict, the dominance trait is specifically attributed greater weight. Nonetheless, more work—both theoretical and empirical—is clearly required to specify the relationships between trait-specific and general valence tallies, both in memory and in evaluation. One radical possibility is that trait-specific tallies have primacy and that substantial portions of the affect examined in the classical online tally are a reflection of a particular set of trait-specific tallies. In many ways, this is the implication of the Fiske et al. (2007) model of impression formation. In this model, the basic valence of an impression regarding another person reflects trait-inferences about whether they are friend or foe. If such inferences are influenced by the degree of agreement on important political issues, this could underlie the findings in the classical model of the online tally.

Third, we have focused on providing evidence for the online nature of trait-specific impressions as they enter political evaluations. At the same time, existing studies provide clear evidence of the role of memory-based processes in political evaluations (Redlawsk 2001), and our intention is not to distract from their importance. More generally, political scientists should expect both online and memory-based processes to be important because they each serve specific cognitive functions (Klein et al. 2009). Online processes allow for stable and efficient impressions, whereas memory-based processes allow for rapid reorientation. The model we propose thus entails that evaluations are "hybrid processes" (Redlawsk 2006: 89) involving interactions between the dual processes of online and memory-based processing: political evaluations emerge in an interplay between trait-specific tallies and considerations about problem-specific contexts that are at the "top of the head" (Zaller and Feldman 1992).

Fourth, the dual existence of memory-based considerations and trait-specific online tallies implies that they might compete in judgmental processes. Prior studies indicate that memory-based considerations are especially likely to compete with the effects of online tallies when making

decisions (e.g., voting) rather than merely making evaluations (Lau and Redlawsk 2006: 181; McGraw 2011; Redlawsk 2001). Following the studies on the classical online tally, our focus has been on competence evaluations. Yet to examine potential differences, the participants in both Studies 1 and 2 were also asked about the likelihood of their voting for the candidate if an election was held. We report the analyses of this measure in Online Appendix A.15. Consistent with the findings presented above, subjects are significantly less likely to vote for the dominant individual in the absence of contextual information, and they are significantly more likely to vote for the dominant candidate in the face of conflict than in its absence. This is in line with a prior study analyzing actual election results, which found that a candidate's appearance in terms of dominance was associated with the number of votes they actually received (Laustsen and Petersen 2016). At the same time, and consistent with existing evidence, the analysis of the present data shows that the effects are weaker for vote choice compared to evaluations. Thus, while online tallies—capturing general valence or specific trait-impressions alike—are key for competence evaluations, they are less important for vote choice. Consequently, it is particularly important for future research to examine for whom and under what conditions competence evaluations are weighted more heavily in voting decisions. This, in turn, would illuminate when online tallies come to dominate vote choice.

Finally, we have downplayed one feature of the classical model of the online tally: the updating process. In the experimental setup used in our studies, participants formed an impression on a single occasion, which guided evaluations over a period of approximately 30 days. A key feature of the classical model is that tallies are updated as new information is encountered, although findings show that the initial affect is very difficult, but not impossible, to overwrite (Redlawsk et al. 2010). In contrast, the psychological literature on impression formation suggests that, contrary to common wisdom, trait-specific first impressions are quite malleable in the face of new information (Klein et al. 2009; Ybarra 2001). Potentially, this reflects their descriptive, accuracy-oriented nature compared

to the affective nature of the valence tally. Accordingly, trait-specific impressions should be less likely to trigger motivated reasoning. Future research should investigate the updating of trait-specific impressions in the context of the evaluation of political candidates. This is particularly important in the context of the current media focus on the private lives of political candidates, which implies that citizens are continuously exposed to new information about candidates and their personalities (e.g., Boukes and Boomgarden, 2016).

These open questions notwithstanding, we believe that the present findings shed important light on recent political developments regarding the emergence of dominant leaders, such as Trump in the United States, Erdogan in Turkey, and Putin in Russia. In line with numerous other studies (e.g., Laustsen and Petersen 2017; Merolla and Zeichmeister 2009), the present finding suggests that the key to understanding the emergence of dominant leaders is perceived or real conflict, such as aggressive actions from neighboring societies, terrorist attacks, or because politicians and news media depict the world as "a dangerous place." The present findings also invite a novel explanation for a puzzling observation: How negative media stories about dominant leaders co-occur with widespread popular support for them. In light of the present findings, stories about misogyny, aggression, and other forms of negative behavior could likely buttress impressions of a leader as being dominant. As our results indicate, such dominance impressions increase in importance in candidate evaluations and come to rival the importance of general valence when citizens feel threatened (see Figure 2). Thus, while most voters would respond adversely to such negative stories under normal circumstances, the existence of perceived or real conflict prompts them to place a premium on dominance impressions, even if such impressions are based on negative stories and, especially so, if they failed to recall the details of the stories. The present findings essentially suggest that for leaders who cultivate a sense of conflict, negative portrayals of their personalities as dominant could become an asset rather than a liability.

At the most general level, our findings thus emphasize the need to understand the psychology of candidate evaluations in a dual-process framework. Political scientists usually have only appreciated one type of reasoning process, relating to the fact that voters want to align themselves with the candidate with whom they agree the most. In this article, we have emphasized that another type of reasoning process is important in candidate evaluations: A central reason to follow a leader is because the leader is seen as competent in solving a specific problem, such as conflict with another group. To engage in such problem-specific evaluations of leader competence, citizens utilize multiple tallies to store distinct trait impressions of potential leaders in long-term memory. These tallies are then activated and guide evaluations when confronted with a given problem, as when confronted with an aggressive foreign country in our studies. Recognizing that both of these dual processes operate—and sometimes compete—in candidate evaluations sheds light on how citizens can be tempted to vote for dominant candidates even if the candidate is otherwise unappealing, lacks a clear ideological platform, or does not share policy views with a voter on key issues.

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Figure 1: Marginal effect of personality description (non-dominant (0) and dominant (1)) on competence evaluations across assigned contextual condition and survey rounds (Study 1).
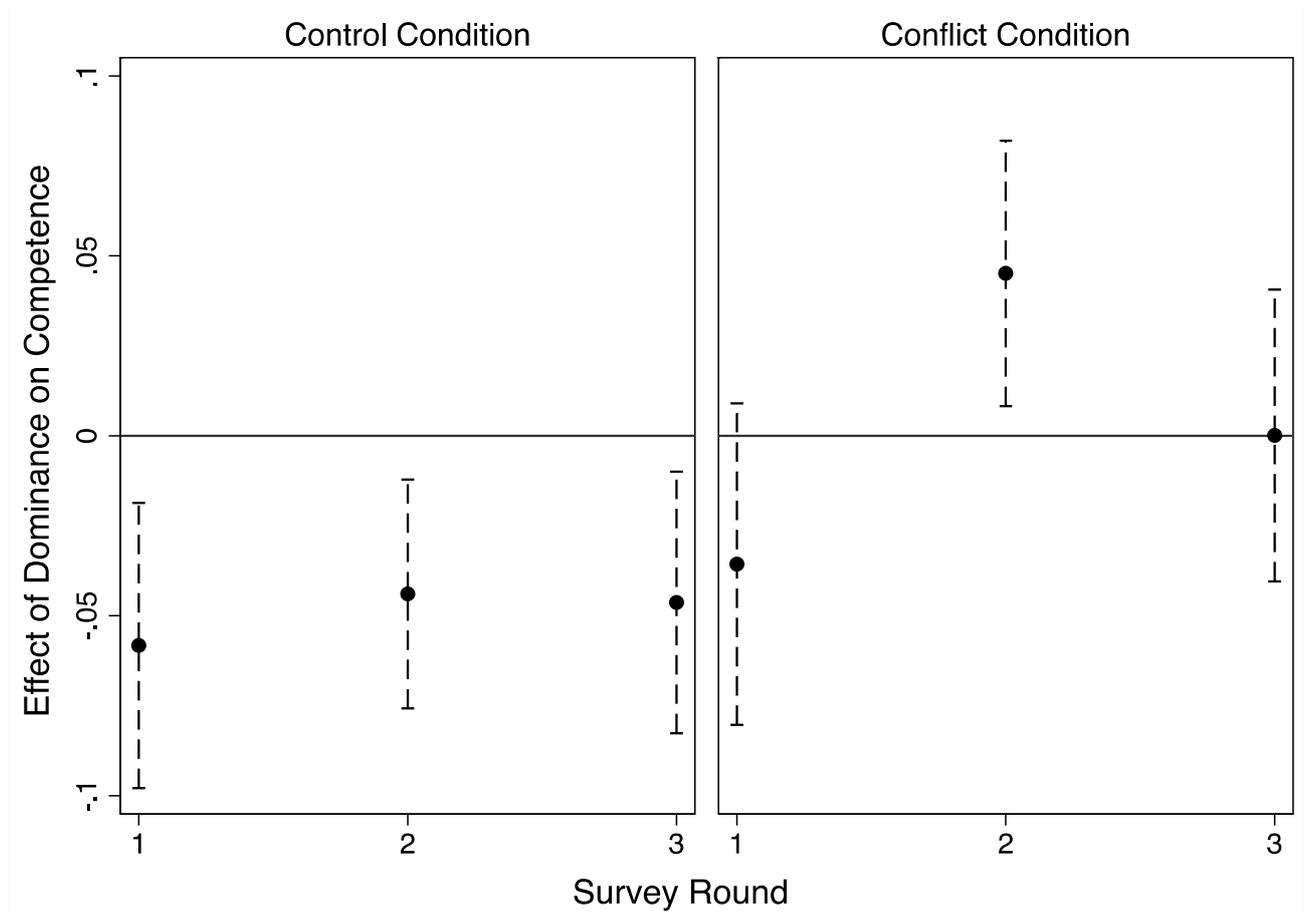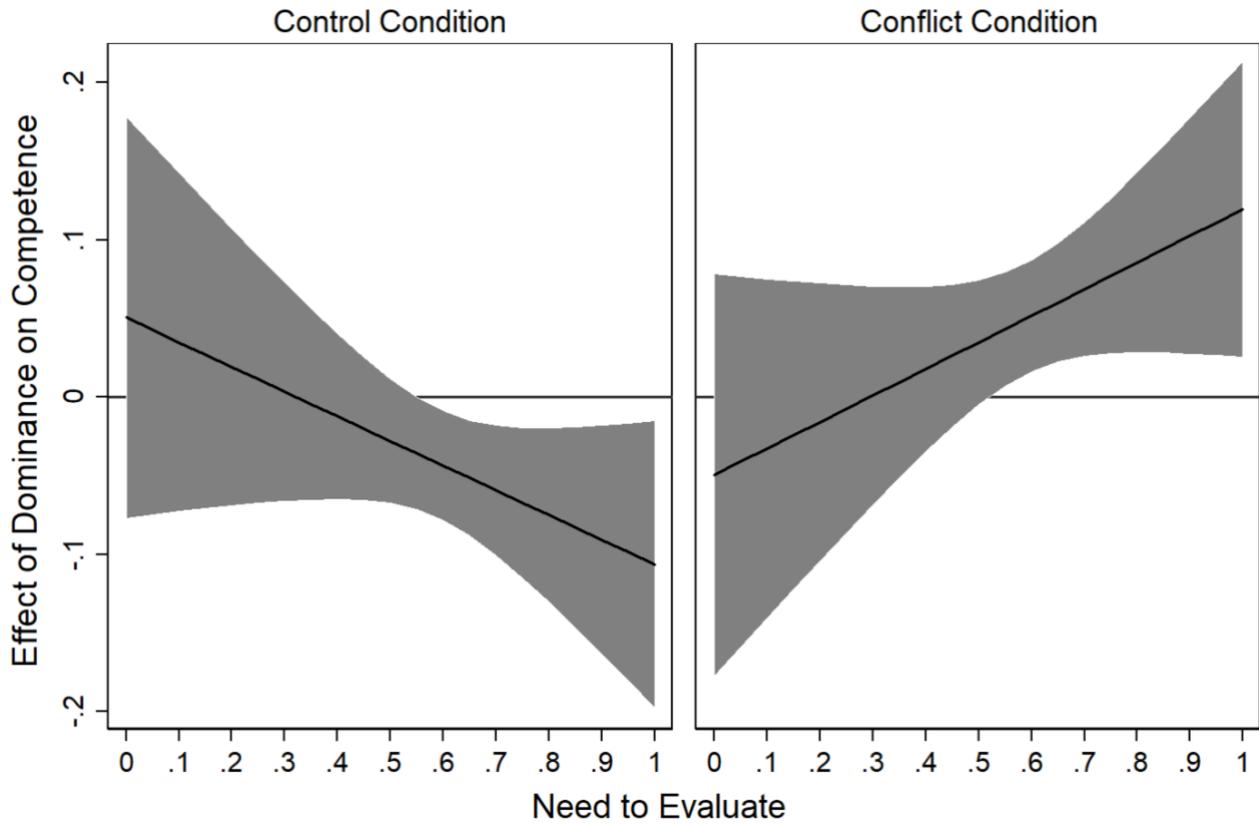

Note: Estimates are marginal effects of personality descriptions, and dashed lines are 95% confidence intervals. Subjects were randomly assigned to candidate description (Round 1) and contextual condition (Round 2).

Figure 2: Marginal effects of valence (left side) and dominance (right side) on competence evaluations (Study 1).
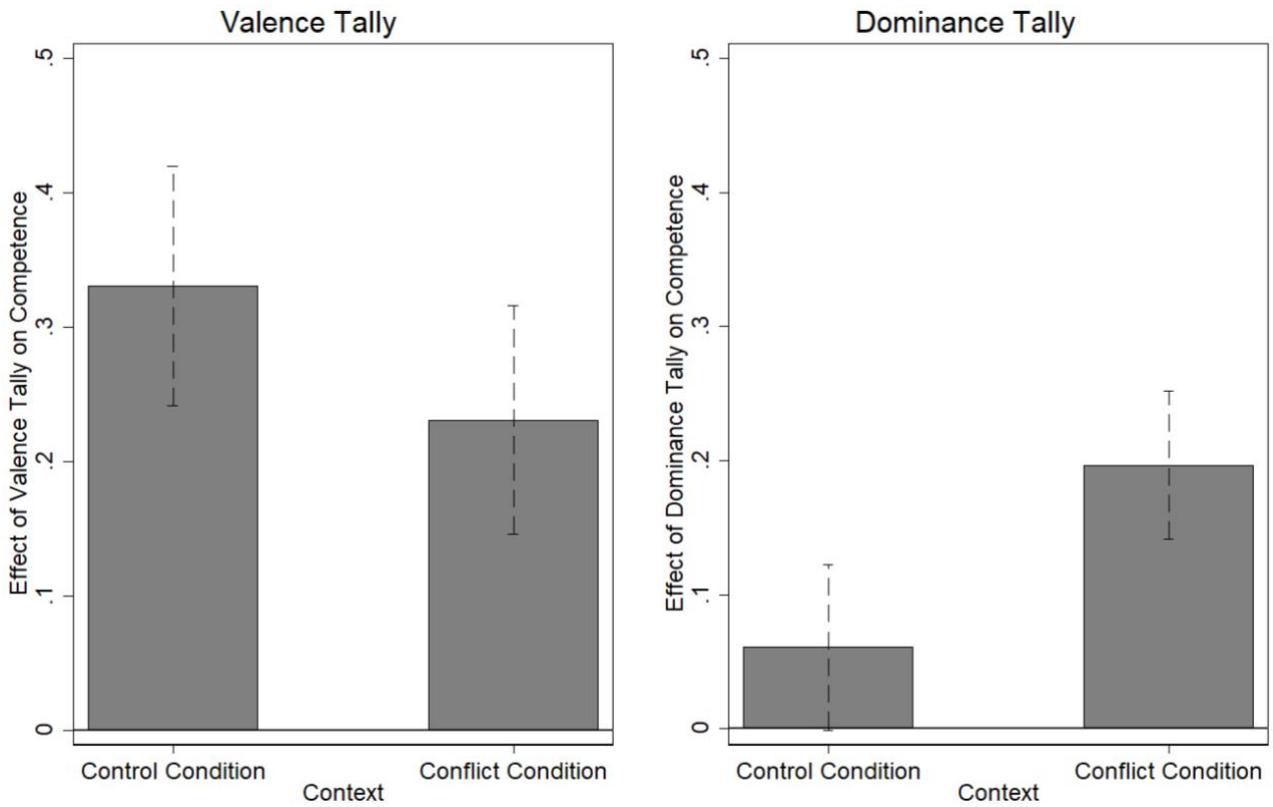

Note: Bars show marginal effects within each of the contextual conditions. Dashed lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3: Marginal effect of personality description (non-dominant (0) and dominant (1)) on competence evaluations across subject Need to Evaluate and contextual conditions (Study 1).

Note: Full lines are estimated marginal effects of personality description, grey areas are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4: Marginal effect of candidate description (left-wing (0) and right-wing (1)) on competence evaluations across subject policy orientations (Left–Right) and contextual conditions and for subjects categorized as non-memorizers (solid lines) and memorizers (dashed lines), respectively (Study 2).
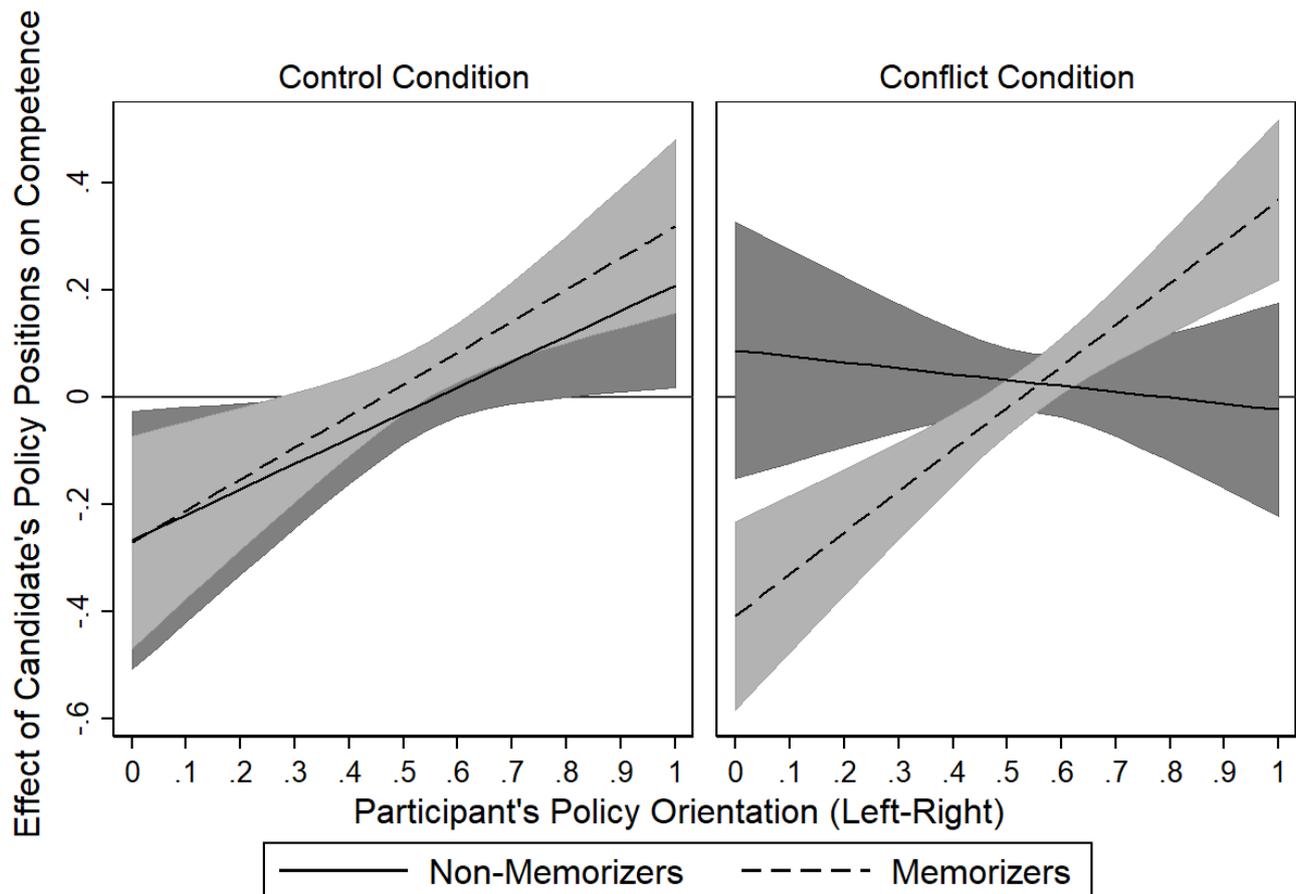
Note: Lines are estimated marginal effects of description; dark and light grey shades represent 95% confidence intervals.