

Polls and Elections

Public Perceptions Regarding the Authenticity of the 2012 Presidential Candidates

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Public perceptions of candidates' personality traits play important roles in shaping vote choice. Previous accounts point to authenticity as one key trait, but little research has systematically investigated perceptions regarding candidate authenticity. This study uses data from a telephone survey to show that political predispositions (trust, external efficacy, interest, partisanship, and ideology), and television news use (broadcast and cable) predicted perceptions of candidate authenticity in the context of the 2012 presidential campaign. A question-wording experiment also showed that perceptions regarding the authenticity of political messages varied across source (Obama or Romney), substance (working for "the middle class" or "job creators"), and the receiver's partisanship.

Today, it seems, politics is all about seeming authentic.

—Paul Krugman (2007)

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Public perceptions regarding presidential candidates' personality traits play important roles in shaping vote choice (Markus 1982; Popkin 1991; Rahn et al., 1990). Though a range of traits can matter, some popular accounts (e.g., Daum 2011; Goldberg 2008) and scholarly works (Edwards 2009; Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Liebes 2001; Louden and McCauliff 2004; Parry-Giles 2001) point to *authenticity*—or the lack thereof—as a key trait by which citizens judge political candidates. For example, commentators have speculated that President Ronald Reagan's perceived authenticity helped him gain votes from citizens who disagreed with him ideologically (Rosenbloom 2011). On the opposite side of the coin, observers have suggested that an “authenticity gap” damaged 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's campaign (e.g., Balz 2012; Cillizza and Blake 2011; Fields 2012; Gerson 2012). Conventional wisdom also holds that candidates should strive to present authentic messages that resonate with their own political image (e.g., Beinart 2012; Kaplan 2012; Louden and McCauliff 2004).

Thus, understanding when and why citizens perceive presidential candidates and their messages as (in)authentic may help explain voter decisions. Yet little research has systematically investigated such perceptions (Louden and McCauliff 2004). This article draws on several new data sources specifically designed to do so. First, it uses data from a pilot Internet survey to develop the first direct survey measures for perceptions of candidate authenticity. Second, it uses data from a telephone survey conducted in May–June 2012 to analyze the role of political predispositions (political trust, external political efficacy, political interest, partisanship, and ideology) and media use (particularly television news use) in predicting respondents' perceptions of authenticity regarding three targets: political candidates in general, Barack Obama (who was running for reelection as president at the time of the survey), and Romney (who had effectively secured the Republican nomination at that point). Finally, it uses data from a question-wording experiment embedded in the same telephone survey to test how perceptions regarding the authenticity of a presidential candidate's message varied across its source (Obama or Romney) and substance (working for “the middle class” or “job creators”). Taken collectively, the findings shed new light on the nature and origins of perceptions regarding authenticity in the 2012 presidential campaign. Furthermore, they provide an empirical foundation for future research on the ways in which information about candidates may influence such perceptions as well as the potential role of authenticity perceptions in shaping how voters respond to campaign communication and, ultimately, make vote choices.

Authenticity and Political Campaigns

Many journalists, pundits, and even politicians argue that authenticity plays an important role in presidential campaigns, but they do not always agree among themselves on what the concept means. Some suggest that it has become “a code word for chimerical perceptions of simple American values and a simple, even rural middle-class American life,” conveyed through signifiers such as casual attire, plain language, and even bowling prowess (Daum 2011). Others argue that it is “really just a label put on self-validation,”

under which “[p]rinciples and policy details take a back seat to the need to say ‘there, there—I understand’ to the voters” (Goldberg 2008). Still others suggest that the term has gradually lost any meaning through its frequent and varied use (Rosenbloom 2011).

Scholarly efforts to develop a clearer theoretical definition of authenticity in the context of political campaigns have focused on how candidates present themselves to the public as well as the processes by which they work to construct perceptions of authenticity. Louden and McCauliff (2004, 93) define authenticity as “a correspondence between what is shared and one’s actual positions, actual responsibilities, and, most importantly, actual self . . . In other words, the authentic candidates are those who know who they are and behave consistently with themselves.” In regard to the construction of authenticity, Parry-Giles (2001, 212) writes that it “represents a symbolic, mediated, interactional, and highly contested process by which political candidates attempt to ‘make real’ a vision of their selves and political characters within the public sphere.” Liebes (2001, 499) emphasizes how candidates convey authenticity by playing “the role of someone who really cares—genuine, sincere, spontaneous.” Likewise, Jamieson and Waldman (2003) draw on Goffman’s (1967) framework of the “front stage” and “back stage” to conceptualize authenticity as a quality that candidates perform through their campaigns. Louden and McCauliff (2004) furthermore argue that authenticity is conceptually distinct from, if related to, other candidate traits—such as honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity—that political scientists have studied in greater depth. “Honesty and related terms are part of what we mean by authentic,” they write, “*but only part*” (Louden and McCauliff 2004, 90; emphasis in original).

A key theme in all of these accounts is that citizens’ *perceptions* regarding candidate authenticity, rather than candidates’ inherent qualities of authenticity, are ultimately what may matter in political campaigns. Such a perspective dovetails with research indicating that voters use an array of information shortcuts, including impressions of character, to draw inferences about how candidates will perform if elected (e.g., Popkin 1991). If perceptions of authenticity provide voters with potential shortcuts for evaluating candidates, then it is important to consider what factors shape these perceptions, both in general terms and for specific candidates. Thus far, however, no research has explicitly assessed authenticity perceptions or examined their antecedents, let alone tested their effects. To provide critical first steps in this endeavor, the present study follows Louden and McCauliff’s (2004, 98) call to conduct “a direct solicitation of voters’ assessments of candidate authenticity” and then explores the foundations of these assessments.

Explaining Perceptions Regarding Candidate Authenticity

In part, voters’ broader beliefs about politicians and the political system may shape their perceptions of candidate authenticity. Previous accounts link public concerns with authenticity to a historical rise in political cynicism; for example, Parry-Giles (2001, 214) suggests that the “anxiety produced by the Vietnam War, Watergate, Iran-contra, and the Clinton impeachment helped create a political quest for the authentic candidate.” Along the same lines, Louden and McCauliff (2004, 92) trace voters’ concern about

authenticity to their perceptions that “politicians as a class are . . . self-serving.” Thus, citizens with relatively high levels of political trust (i.e., generalized faith in government; Miller 1974; Hetherington 1998) and external political efficacy (i.e., belief that government authorities are responsive to citizens’ demands; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991) may be more likely than other citizens to perceive both candidates in general and specific politicians as authentic.

Similarly, one might expect two hallmarks of political engagement—political interest and partisanship (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995)—to be associated with perceptions of candidate authenticity. When citizens invest themselves in the political process by paying attention to it and by identifying with a major party, they may tend to perceive candidates in ways that justify this investment: if all politicians are fakes, then there should be little material or psychological reward for following them. In light of the role that partisanship plays in shaping perceptions of candidate images (e.g., Bartels 2002) one would also expect Democratic partisans to be more likely than Republican partisans to perceive Democratic candidates as authentic, just as one would expect Republican partisans to be more likely to perceive Republican candidates as authentic. By a parallel logic, one would expect political ideology to predict perceptions of specific politicians as authentic, with liberals viewing Democratic candidates as more authentic and conservatives viewing Republican candidates as more authentic.

Along with citizens’ political predispositions, their media use may play a role in shaping their perceptions of authenticity. As Jamieson and Waldman (2003, 29; see also Edwards, 2009; Loudon and McCauliff 2004) observe,

The idea of a performance assumes an audience. In politics there are two relevant audiences. One audience is, of course, the voting public. The other—the press—is both an audience and a participant in the performance. They simultaneously enact their own role, edit the politicians’ roles, and instruct the public on how the performance should be interpreted and judged. In this context, authenticity . . . becomes one of the primary measures of value journalists assign to candidates.

Parry-Giles (2001, 214) identifies the news media as “authenticating agents,” arguing that the visual techniques of television news give it an especially important role in the contest to construct (and deconstruct) authentic candidate images (see also Liebes 2001). Thus, the following account tests how broadcast television news use, cable television news use, newspaper use, and Internet news use are related to perceptions of candidate authenticity. In doing so, it builds on previous research finding that media messages can shape public perceptions of candidate traits and that television news can exert particularly large effects on such perceptions (e.g., Bartels 1993; Popkin 1991).

Message Authenticity and Partisan Groups

Just as political candidates strive to construct perceptions of their authenticity, so do they seek to construct messages that voters will perceive as authentic. Previous accounts suggest that one potentially important strategy in doing so is to take issue stands that are consistent with the candidate’s established personal image (Louden and

McCauliff 2004; Parry-Giles 2001). For example, one commentary on Romney's selection of Paul Ryan as his running mate speculated that the latter's small-town roots would make his advocacy of limited government, self-reliance, and gun rights "an authentic message" (Kaplan 2012). Conversely, another piece suggested that Ryan's message of sacrifice and deficit slashing, while authentic for him, was not authentic for Romney "because it's not the message that flows naturally from [his] own experience in life and politics" (Beinart 2012).

Furthermore, theories of party identification emphasize that voters' perceptions of candidates are frequently shaped by the social groups they associate with the political parties (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Voters hold durable partisan images that link parties with groups that form their coalitions. For example, voters associate the group "evangelicals" with the Republican Party, leading them to assume that an otherwise unidentified evangelical candidate is a Republican (Campbell, Green, and Layman 2011). Building on this logic, we hypothesize that voters will deem candidates as more authentic when they address a group that is associated with their party than one associated with the opposing party.¹

In examining perceptions of authenticity regarding candidates' messages in the context of the 2012 presidential campaign, this study focused on Obama and Romney as the messengers. In terms of partisan groups, it focused on helping one of two groups: "job creators" or the "middle class." The first group is one traditionally associated with the Republican Party. Bastedo and Lodge (1980, 301) show that survey respondents used images of the groups "large corporations" and "the rich" to differentiate Republicans from other candidates. More recently, Campbell, Green, and Layman (2011, 46) show that respondents frequently mention social groups such as "big business," "corporations," and "the rich" when asked to discuss their attitudes toward the Republican Party, whereas they draw associations between "working class" or "blue collar" groups and the Democratic Party.

The same patterns manifested during the 2012 campaign, where much was made of the differences between the candidates in their support for these different economic groups. Polls conducted at around the time of the study suggested that respondents saw Obama as a better champion for the middle class.² For example, an April 29-May 3, 2012, George Washington University/Politico poll gave Obama a 58% to 35% advantage over Romney on who would better handle "standing up for the middle class," and a May 17-20, 2012, ABC News/*Washington Post* poll gave Obama a 51% to 42% edge on "who would do more to advance the interests of middle class Americans." In contrast, a June 3-5, 2012, Fox News poll found that Romney scored higher relative to Obama on "encouraging job creation" (46% to 39%) than on any other issue included in the survey.

1. By a parallel logic, the theory of issue ownership implies that candidates can benefit by emphasizing issues their party "owns" (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003). This theory posits that on some issues, one party or the other has tended to hold an advantage in terms of citizens' perceptions regarding which party can handle the issue better. For example, the Democratic Party has typically held an advantage on voters' perceptions about which party does better at advocating for the middle class (Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003).

2. The poll results discussed here were retrieved from <http://www.pollingreport.com/wh12d.htm> (accessed July 15, 2014).

Along with the parties' traditional reputations, the candidates' personal histories may have reinforced voter associations between them and the social groups in question. Certainly, Obama's relatively modest upbringing and Romney's career as a successful businessman did nothing to dissociate the parties from these groups.

In light of Obama's association with the middle class and apparent edge on helping them, one might expect that voters would perceive a message from him on this theme as more authentic than a message from him about helping job creators. Similarly, voters might perceive a Romney message about helping job creators as more authentic than a message from him about helping the middle class. Research on how citizens respond to political information (e.g., Zaller 1992) suggests the additional possibility that party identification will condition these effects, with citizens evaluating the messages through their own partisan filters.

Study 1: Pilot Internet Survey

Given the absence of previous survey measures for perceptions of candidate authenticity, a pilot Internet survey ($N = 169$ university students), conducted from April 17-23, 2012, was used to develop new measures for such perceptions. This survey included three sets of items designed to measure perceptions of candidate authenticity. One set of items focused on "political candidates in general," another on Obama, and the third on Romney. Respondents were asked how well six words—"authentic," "real," "genuine," "fake," "phony," and "bogus"—described each target. Almost all respondents were able to rate each target on each item (valid $N \geq 164$ for each item). Furthermore, the items yielded highly reliable measures for each construct, as assessed using Cronbach's alpha: $\alpha = .82$ for perceptions of political candidates in general as authentic; $\alpha = .87$ for perceptions of Obama as authentic; and $\alpha = .83$ for perceptions of Romney as authentic. Two items for each target were selected for inclusion in the main study (see below): a positively worded item ("authentic") and a negatively worded one ("phony").

To provide a more in-depth look how respondents themselves conceptualized authenticity, the pilot survey also included an open-ended question: "When you think about whether a political candidate is authentic or not, what words or phrases come to mind?" Responses such as "trustworthy/trustworthiness," "honest/honesty," and (in negative form) "liar(s)" were common, but so were comments about whether candidates were "down-to-earth," "caring," and "true to themselves" as well as whether candidates presented their "genuine" or "real" self to the public versus being "fake," "pandering," and "telling people what they want to hear." Thus, respondents' conceptualizations of authenticity overlapped with well-studied traits such as honesty and trustworthiness but also included distinct elements, consistent with Loudon and McCauliff's (2004) argument.

Study 2: Telephone Survey

The data for the second study came from a telephone survey of 918 adult Delaware residents who were recruited for a research panel. The survey was conducted from May 21

to June 10, 2012. All respondents included in the survey were Internet users (as identified through a filter question asking, “Do you use the Internet at least occasionally?”).³ The sample was not selected through true probability sampling; thus, caution should be used in generalizing from the results. However, the goal of the study was not to assess population levels of perceptions regarding candidate authenticity; rather, it was to examine what factors shape such perceptions. Measures for key variables were as follows:

Perceptions of Candidate Authenticity

Respondents were asked how well two words, “authentic” and “phony,” described “political candidates in general,” as well as Obama and Romney specifically: not well at all (coded as 0) not too well, (1) somewhat well, (2) or very well (3). For each target, responses were averaged across the two items (after reverse-coding the “phony” item) to create an index, also ranging from 0 to 3, where higher values indicated greater perceived authenticity. For political candidates, the correlation between items (r) was .26, and the mean (M) for the index was 1.19, with a standard deviation (SD) of .67; for Obama, $r = .60$; $M = 1.76$; $SD = .99$; for Romney, $r = .56$; $M = 1.40$; $SD = .92$. Respondents tended to perceive Obama as more authentic than Romney ($t = 6.41$; $p \leq .01$), which is not surprising given the partisan composition of the sample (see below). Respondents also tended to perceive both Obama ($t = 16.58$; $p \leq .01$) and Romney ($t = 5.96$; $p \leq .01$) as more authentic than political candidates in general.

Political Predispositions

Political trust, external political efficacy, and political interest were measured using standard items. The item for political trust ($M = .14$; $SD = .36$) asked, “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” Response options included just about always (2), most of the time (1), or only some of the time (0). The item for external political efficacy ($M = 1.40$; $SD = 1.23$) asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think.” Responses ranged from strongly agree (0) to strongly disagree (4). The item for political interest ($M = 2.41$; $SD = .70$) asked whether respondents were very (3), somewhat (2), not too (1), or not at all interested (0) in politics.

To measure partisanship, respondents were asked for their current party registration (42% identified as Democrats and 29% as Republicans).⁴ Those not identifying as Democrats or Republicans were asked whether they leaned more toward the Democratic Party or Republican Party, yielding a five-category measure of party identification (Republican = 0; leans Republican = 1; independent = 2; leans Democrat = 3;

3. The sample was restricted to Internet users because the recruitment process was part of a broader project to create a sample for subsequent Internet-based studies.

4. For the purpose at hand, a true measure of party identification rather than of party registration would have been ideal (the use of the latter reflected the broader goals of the sample recruitment process; see note 2). However, it seems reasonable to assume that the two are strongly related.

Democrat = 4; $M = 2.26$; $SD = 1.70$). Respondents were also asked to place themselves on a five-category scale for political ideology ($M = 1.40$; $SD = 1.23$) ranging from very liberal (coded as 0) to very conservative (coded as 4).

Media Use

Respondents were asked how many days in the past week (0-7) they had watched television news on a broadcast network such as ABC, NBC, or CBS ($M = 3.93$; $SD = 2.87$), watched television news on a cable channel such as Fox, CNN, or MSNBC ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 2.90$), read a print newspaper ($M = 3.48$; $SD = 2.98$), and viewed news on a news organization's Internet site ($M = 3.05$; $SD = 2.94$).

Demographics

Demographic controls included gender (53% were women, 47% were men), self-identification as African American (13% of respondents), self-identification as Hispanic (3% of respondents), age (median age = 60), and education (as captured by a six-category scale; $M = 2.90$, where 3 = college graduate; $SD = 1.53$).

Message Authenticity Experiment

The survey included a question-wording experiment designed to capture how the source and substance of a presidential candidate's message shaped perceptions of its authenticity. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four versions of a question (2 sources \times 2 messages): "Suppose that [Barack Obama/Mitt Romney] said . . . 'This election is about restoring our nation's economy, and that's only going to happen if we have a strong champion for America's [middle class/job creators] in the White House.' How authentic or genuine would you think this message is?"⁵ Response options included not at all (coded as 0), not very (1), somewhat (2), and very (3).

Results

A set of regression analyses tested the extent to which political predispositions, media use, and demographics predicted authenticity perceptions for candidates in general, Obama, and Romney (see Table 1). First, consider the results for the political predispositions. Political trust was positively related to perceptions of candidates in general as authentic ($p \leq .01$) but was not significantly related to perceptions of either Obama or Romney as such. In contrast, external political efficacy was positively related not only to perceptions of candidates in general as authentic ($p \leq .01$) but also to perceptions of both Obama ($p \leq .05$) and Romney as authentic ($p \leq .01$). Like political

5. In an additional manipulation, respondents were told that the message was "in an e-mail sent to you" or "on his [the candidate's] website." This manipulation did not influence responses; thus, conditions were collapsed along it.

TABLE 1
Predicting Perceptions of Candidate Authenticity

| | <i>Candidates in General</i> | <i>Obama</i> | <i>Romney</i> |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Political trust | .41** (.07) | .06 (.10) | .09 (.08) |
| External efficacy | .11** (.02) | .10* (.02) | .11** (.03) |
| Political interest | .17** (.04) | -.09 (.05) | -.01 (.05) |
| Democrat | .13* (.06) | .36** (.07) | -.15* (.08) |
| Republican | .13* (.06) | -.19** (.08) | .33** (.08) |
| Ideology | -.03 (.03) | -.36** (.03) | .33** (.03) |
| Broadcast TV news | .02* (.01) | .03** (.01) | -.02 (.01) |
| Cable TV news | .00 (.01) | -.02 (.01) | .02* (.01) |
| Newspaper | .00 (.01) | .00 (.01) | -.01 (.01) |
| Internet news | .00 (.01) | .00 (.01) | -.01 (.01) |
| Female | .08 (.05) | .06 (.06) | -.06 (.06) |
| African American | .06 (.08) | .53** (.10) | .00 (.10) |
| Hispanic | .04 (.15) | -.05 (.18) | .03 (.19) |
| Age (years/100) | .18 (.19) | .28 (.23) | .69** (.23) |
| Education | .00 (.02) | .06* (.02) | -.01 (.02) |
| Constant | .36 (.15) | 2.01 (.19) | .23 (.20) |
| R^2 | .16 | .39 | .29 |
| N | 735 | 741 | 727 |

Notes: Table entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Each of the dependent variables (perceptions of authenticity for candidates in general, Barack Obama, and Mitt Romney) was measured by a two-item index coded to range from 0 to 3.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

trust, political interest was positively related to seeing candidates in general as authentic ($p \leq .01$) but not significantly related to seeing Obama or Romney as authentic.

Partisanship mattered for all three targets, but in different ways depending on the target. Both Democratic identifiers ($p \leq .05$) and Republican identifiers ($p \leq .05$) were more likely than independents to perceive candidates in general as authentic. When it came to specific candidates, however, the results fell along the expected party lines.

Democrats were particularly likely to see Obama as authentic ($p \leq .01$) and particularly unlikely to see Romney as such ($p \leq .05$), whereas Republicans were especially unlikely to see Obama as authentic ($p \leq .01$) and especially likely to see Romney as such ($p \leq .01$). Political ideology was not significantly related to perceptions of candidates in general but did predict candidate-specific perceptions: compared to liberals, conservatives were less likely to see Obama as authentic ($p \leq .01$) and more likely to see Romney as authentic ($p \leq .01$).

Media use—specifically, television news use—also predicted perceptions of authenticity. Broadcast television news use was positively related to seeing both candidates in general ($p \leq .05$) and Obama ($p \leq .05$) as authentic but was not significantly related to perceptions of Romney. Meanwhile, cable television news use was positively related to seeing Romney as authentic ($p \leq .05$) but not significantly related to perceptions of candidates in general or Obama. Neither newspaper use nor Internet news use was significantly related to perceptions regarding any of the three targets.

In regard to demographics, African American respondents were more likely than others to see Obama as authentic ($p \leq .01$). It may be that African Americans were particularly likely to view him as authentic because of a shared racial identity; indeed, Obama's first presidential campaign undertook substantial efforts to reinforce perceptions among the African American community that he was "authentically black" (Sinclair-Chapman and Price 2008; Walters 2007). Compared to younger respondents, older ones were more likely to see Romney as authentic ($p \leq .01$); this pattern reflects a broader "generation gap" in perceptions of the 2012 presidential candidates (e.g., Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2012). In addition, education was positively related to perceptions of Obama as authentic ($p \leq .05$). No other significant relationships between demographics and authenticity perceptions emerged.

Turning to the question-wording experiment, a comparison of means across conditions suggests that the perceived authenticity of a message from Obama about championing "the middle class" ($M = 1.65$; $SD = 1.14$) was marginally greater ($t = 1.87$; $p = .06$) than the perceived authenticity of a message from Romney on the same theme ($M = 1.44$; $SD = 1.16$). On the other hand, the perceived authenticity of a message from Romney about championing "job creators" ($M = 1.56$; $SD = 1.09$) did not differ significantly ($t = .48$) from the perceived authenticity of a message from Obama on this theme ($M = 1.51$; $SD = 1.09$). Perceived authenticity for a message from Obama did not differ significantly depending on whether it mentioned the middle class or job creators ($t = 1.32$); neither did perceived authenticity for a message from Romney ($t = 1.09$).

A pair of regression models tested in greater depth the effects of the experimental manipulations on perceived message authenticity. The first model included dichotomous independent variables for the source (Obama = 1, Romney = 0) and substance (middle class = 1, job creators = 0) of the message as well as a multiplicative term to capture whether the impact of the source depended on the substance. The results for this model (see Table 2, Model 1) reveal a marginally significant interaction between source and substance ($p = .09$) in the expected direction, so that a "match" between source and substance (Obama/middle class or Romney/job creators) led to greater perceived authenticity of the message.

TABLE 2
Predicting Perceived Authenticity of Message from a Presidential Candidate

| | <i>Model 1</i> | <i>Model 2</i> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Obama (vs. Romney) | -.049 (.104) | -1.274** (.149) |
| Middle Class (vs. Job Creators) | -.115 (.105) | .077 (.154) |
| Obama x Middle Class | .254† (.149) | -.179 (.215) |
| Party ID | — | -.303** (.037) |
| Obama x Party ID | — | .548** (.053) |
| Middle Class x Party ID | — | -.066 (.054) |
| Obama x Middle Class x Party ID | — | .181* (.076) |
| Constant | 1.555 (.074) | 2.239 (.105) |
| R^2 | .004 | .248 |
| N | 902 | 902 |

Notes: Table entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable (perceptions of the authenticity of a message from one of the candidates) was measured by a single item coded to range from 0 to 3.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

The second model tested whether respondents' partisan loyalties moderated the effects of the source and substance manipulations. This model added the five-category partisanship measure as well as partisanship \times source, partisanship \times substance, and partisanship \times source \times substance (see Table 2, Model 2). Not surprisingly, partisanship moderated the impact of source ($p \leq .01$), so that partisan respondents perceived a message as being more authentic when it came from the candidate of their own party. More interestingly, a positive and significant ($p \leq .01$) three-way interaction also emerged between the respondent's partisanship, the source of the message, and the substance of the message.

Figure 1 illustrates this relationship by plotting the predicted level of perceived authenticity across conditions and respondent partisanship. Among Republicans, perceived authenticity of a message from Obama varied relatively little depending on whether it addressed the middle class (1.04 on the 0-3 scale, where higher values indicate greater perceived authenticity of the message) or job creators (.96). Likewise, these Republican respondents differed relatively little in how they perceived a message from Romney about the middle class (2.32) and how they perceived a message from him about job creators (2.24). As for Democrats, they rated a Romney message about job creators as somewhat more authentic (1.03) than a Romney message about the middle class (.84). At the same time, they rated an Obama message about the middle class as considerably more authentic (2.48) than an Obama message about job creators (1.94); here, the difference was more than half a point on a four-point scale.

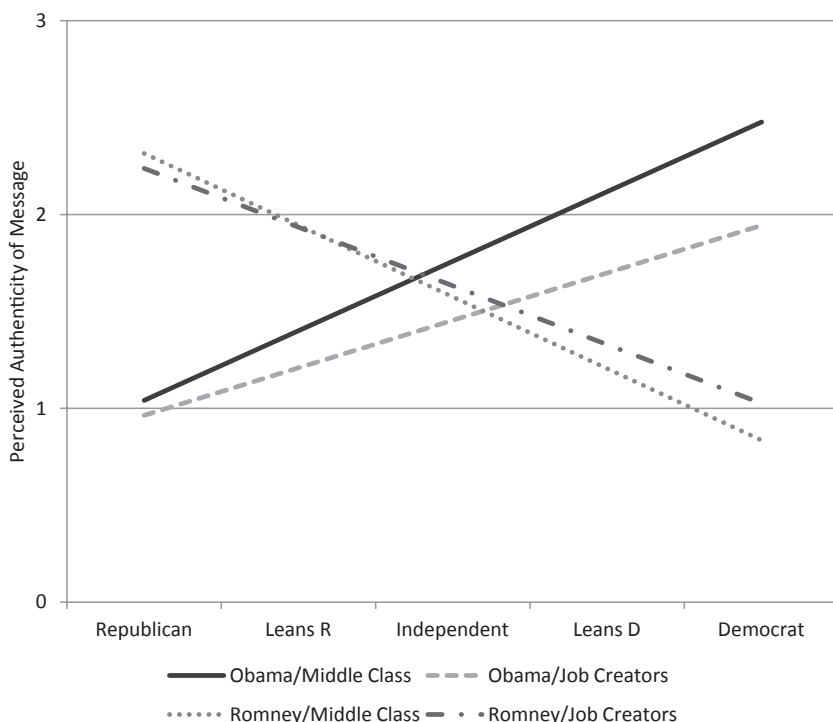


FIGURE 1. Perceived Authenticity of Message, by Source, Substance, and Receiver Party Identification.

Conclusion

The findings presented here provide the first systematic look at how citizens perceive the authenticity of candidates and their messages in the context of a presidential campaign. In doing so, they speak to previous theoretical arguments about political authenticity. To begin with, the results reinforce arguments that perceptions of such authenticity are partly rooted in broader attitudes about the political system (Louden and McCauliff 2004; Parry-Giles 2001). As anticipated, political trust predicted perceptions of candidates in general as authentic. More strikingly, external political efficacy predicted not only general perceptions of candidate authenticity but also perceptions of both Obama and Romney as authentic.

The results are also consistent with previous arguments that the news media—particularly television news outlets—play key roles in constructing perceptions of candidates as (in)authentic (Liebes 2001; Louden and McCauliff 2004; Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Parry-Giles 2001). Broadcast television news use was positively related to seeing candidates in general as authentic, suggesting that campaigns may successfully exploit this medium to build an aura of authenticity. Broadcast news use also predicted perceptions of Obama—but not Romney—as authentic, whereas cable television news

use predicted perceptions of Romney—but not Obama—as authentic. All of this suggests that the ways in which television news constructs public impressions of authenticity may differ depending on both the candidate and the outlet in question. In the cases at hand, traditional “objective” broadcast news appeared to exert different effects than cable news, which is often more opinionated (Jamieson and Cappella 2008).

As for the question-wording experiment, results showed that perceptions regarding the authenticity of a presidential candidate’s message can depend on its source, its substance, and the partisan loyalties of audience members. Perceived message authenticity can depend on whether there is a “match” between the social group being invoked and the presidential candidate invoking it as well as on whether the candidate and the receiver belong to the same political party. Yet such relationships can also depend on the interplay between source, substance, and partisanship. Here, it did not matter so much to Republicans whether Romney championed the middle class or job creators, whereas Democrats perceived a message from Obama about the former group as substantially more authentic than a message from him about the latter group.

In sum, the findings of this study provide a first step toward illuminating the nature and foundations of public perceptions regarding the authenticity of presidential candidates and their messages. At the most basic level, the results show that voters hold internally coherent perceptions about candidate authenticity that follow theoretically predictable patterns. Specifically, the results reveal that citizens’ political beliefs and partisan identities matter for such perceptions, as do the type(s) of news they consume. Thus, perceived authenticity is not solely in the control of the candidate. The findings also support previous research on partisan images and social groups (Bastedo and Lodge 1980; Campbell et al. 1960; Green Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), which suggests that citizens associate different images with parties and that these images should affect how authentic citizens perceive candidates’ group-based appeals to be.

Additional research could build on the framework developed here to provide a richer understanding of how political authenticity is related to other concepts (such as honesty and trustworthiness) and what influences perceptions of it. Given that the present study relied on relatively sparse measures of beliefs about the political system and forms of media use, as well as cross-sectional analyses of their associations with authenticity perceptions, future research could explore the relationships among these concepts—and their causal direction(s)—in more depth. For example, future research could attempt to disentangle how the use of particular television outlets is related to perceptions of authenticity. Moreover, new research could examine how candidate characteristics, besides partisanship, and candidate messages, besides group appeals, shape voters’ perceptions of authenticity. Panel surveys and experiments would be particularly useful in testing for causality here. For example, researchers could use the former method to test whether voters’ perceptions of candidate authenticity change over time in response to campaign events (e.g., the controversy surrounding Romney’s “47 percent” comments, which occurred after the present study was conducted) and the latter method to test whether exposure to portrayals of candidates in news coverage and/or campaign communication (ranging from television ads to social media messages) affect these perceptions.

Just as importantly, future studies could begin to test whether—and, if so, how and when—perceptions of authenticity influence more general candidate evaluations as well as voting behavior and other forms of political participation. Similarly, researchers could test whether perceived message authenticity shapes how voters respond to campaign communication. Previous discussions of political authenticity typically assume that it matters to voters, and such a premise seems plausible; thus far, however, it remains untested. Ultimately, authenticity is politically important to the extent that it influences key outcomes. The present study provides a starting point for empirically capturing the political consequences, if any, of perceived authenticity. Again, panel surveys and experiments would be especially useful in building on the approach presented here to examine the impact of authenticity perceptions on voter behavior.

Finally, there are potential normative implications of public perceptions regarding authenticity. A pessimistic perspective might suggest that voters' judgments of candidate authenticity reflect campaign's efforts to "manufacture" such authenticity as well as journalists' proclivities to spin character-based narratives about campaigns (see, e.g., Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Parry-Giles 2001). Then again, a more optimistic perspective (see also Louden and McCauliff 2004; Popkin 1991) might hold that campaigns provide voters with extensive opportunities to evaluate authenticity and that these evaluations provide them with information shortcuts for forming reasonable voting decisions. Either way, this study's results suggest that impressions of authenticity vary in complex but understandable ways depending on not merely the candidate in question but also the broader political landscape, the media context for the campaign, and citizens' own partisan filters.

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