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**A Charismatic Leader Would Automatically Have My Vote:
Appearance as a Key Factor in Youth's Trust of Politicians**

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June 2012

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**A Charismatic Leader Would Automatically Have My Vote:
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Abstract

Previous studies show that youth rely on personal interactions to assess the trustworthiness of others, including politicians with whom opportunities for interaction are unlikely. Absent such opportunities, some worry that youth will refrain from making trust judgments about politicians altogether and disengage from civic participation. In this study, we conducted dilemma interviews with adolescents and emerging adults (ages 15 – 25) to investigate how they make trust judgments about distant political figures. We found that 1) a lack of interaction did not prevent these youth from making trust judgments, and 2) counter to earlier findings, they relied on appearance-based criteria as proxies for interaction. We discuss the need to educate youth to be critical consumers of information and media.

Introduction & Background

A closely scrutinized aspect of the 2008 U.S. presidential elections was the impact of young voters ages 18-29. Youth demonstrated unusually high levels of involvement and a heavier than usual leaning toward the Democratic Party. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “66% of those under age 30 voted for Barack Obama, making the disparity between young voters and other age groups larger than in any presidential election since exit polling began in 1972” (2008, p.1). The 2008 elections revealed a generational shift in the electorate, a “new class of interested citizens” (Gomeshi, 2008). In addition to their tender age, young voters were characterized by greater racial and ethnic diversity, increased female participation, and waning reported religious affiliations (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008).

Despite indications over the last decade that youth voter turnout may be on the rise, this most recent upswing must still be considered in the context of a long-term *downward trend* in youth voter turnout in the United States. According to U.S. Census Bureau data (2009), since the early 1970s, youth voter turnout rates have not equaled or surpassed 50% - the highest youth turnout rate ever recorded. In fact, youth political participation is notoriously unpredictable, which makes it difficult to assess whether recent increases in turnout reflect a steady rise in engagement or just a temporary ‘blip’ within the more troubling trend of political apathy amongst young people. For example, while approximately 48% of all eligible youth (aged 18-24) voted in the 2008 presidential elections, only about 21% of that demographic voted in the 2010 midterm elections (<http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/>).

Given the instability of youth participation in politics, and the high stakes tied to their engagement or disengagement as citizens in a democratic society, it is important to understand

how young people make decisions about political candidates whom they are expected to evaluate. A variety of factors might influence how youth approach making decisions about political candidates. Levine (2005) found that the majority of college students in his sample would choose a qualified candidate – one who has a successful track record and displays intelligence - rather than a popular candidate – one who is sociable, physically fit, and charismatic.

While Levine’s study suggests youth may value performance-based evidence over appearance-based evidence, other studies reveal that appearance may be importantly connected to whether youth perceive a candidate as qualified. For example appearance- based evidence such as gender (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007), race (Finn & Glaser, 2010), and facial appearance (Riggio & Riggio, 2010) can influence youths’ perceptions of whether a candidate is qualified to do the job. Appearance includes external characteristics such as how an individual carries himself / herself physically and the way he/she dresses (Giddens, 1991), as well as the projection of civility and good manners (Good, 1988). Additionally, objects or places associated with an individual are also considered appearance-based evidence (Sztompka, 1999).

Early research on the impact of appearance on voters found that photographs of politicians could effectively communicate a candidate’s projected sense of “general fitness” for public office, as well specific characteristics associated with effective leadership (Rosenberg et al, 1986). Researchers found that “a single photograph can have a clear impact on voters’ judgments regarding a candidate’s congressional demeanor, competence, leadership ability, attractiveness, likableness, and integrity,” and consequently “these nonverbally mediated judgments influence how people vote” (p. 123).

Additionally, appearance can influence our trust judgments because the more a trust target seems to have things in common with us the more likely we are to assess him/her as trustworthy (Earle & Chetkovich, 1995). We are more prone to trust people who appear similar to us because their actions seem more predictable than those with whom we have less in common (Hardin, 1993). Emotional reactions to candidates, such as the feelings of hope inspired by Barack Obama's charisma-infused 2008 campaign, suggest that affective factors also influence young people's decision-making about trustworthiness (Bligh & Kohles, 2009).

Previous findings from our own research on trust indicate that appearance is a rarely preferred evidence type. Instead, while many of the youth in our sample relied primarily on performance criteria, a notable number favored personal interactions to assess the trustworthiness of others, including distant political figures with whom opportunities for interaction are unlikely (Rundle et al., forthcoming). In other words, the youth favored making trust judgments based on having direct interactions with a person, because they could come to know and trust them through such interactions. Absent such opportunities, some worry that youth will refrain altogether from making trust judgments about civic leaders and accordingly disengage from civic life. We examine such claims in this study. By analyzing participants' responses to a hypothetical vignette, we investigate how, if at all, youth engage in processes of trustworthiness assessment when it comes to distant political figures.

Methods

In this study, we seek to understand how youth ages 15 to 25 conceive of trust and make trust judgments. We chose to focus on this segment of the population because while a substantial amount of studies on trust focus on children, college students, and adults; adolescents

and emerging adults, defined as youth ages 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000, 2004), are under-represented in the area of trust research.

Existing studies demonstrate that trust may be influenced by a number of factors including age, level of education, socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, and community type and demographics (Putnam, 2007). Since it is impossible to account for all possible variables in a small study such as ours, we selected participants based on age, socioeconomic status, and community type. Participants in this study are from low to middle income areas of a mid size city, two small cities, and a small town in the Northeastern United States.

Our sample is in large part a convenience sample. We began recruitment working with a personal contact, a high school administrator in a small town where the students are predominately from low to middle income communities. From this initial step we obtained almost 30% of our sample. We then reached out to other contacts who recommended us to high schools and community organizations in our local area with a low to middle income demographic, resulting in another 20%. For the remaining 50% of the sample, we reached out to community colleges, school-to-work programs, and adult education centers in the same and similar SES areas and recruited participants, striving to balance the sample with regards to gender, age, and race.

Three research instruments were used in the study: a pre-survey interview, a person-centered interview, and three of five possible dilemma interviews. In total, we conducted 122 interviews with 64 youth subjects. Among these, 58 subjects completed both person-centered and dilemma interviews, while 6 participated in only one interview. All youth subjects were between the ages of 15-25; 41 were high school students and 23 were post high school (16 were in college; 7 were employed or enrolled in school-to-work programs); 29 were male and 35 were

female; 31 were white and 33 were non-white; 19 were from a mid-size city, 22 were from two small cities, and 23 were from a small town.

This paper is based on analysis of a dilemma presented to subjects about a new political party (see Appendix A). This dilemma, which consisted of a hypothetical vignette followed by related person-centered questions, is designed to investigate the evidence types youth use when making trust judgments about political candidates. 34 participants (21 high school students and 13 post high school; 17 males and 17 females; 16 who identify as white and 18 who identify as non-white; 10 from a mid-size city, 8 from two small cities, and 16 from a small town) received this dilemma.

Participants were presented with the following vignette:

In the wake of recent political scandals and unhappiness with the course of events in the Middle East a new political party is formed. To date, the primary focus of the party has been to expose the poor decisions and wrongdoings of the current party in power. Just based on this information does this party appeal to you? Would you choose to support this party (by voting for it)? What are your main reasons for your decision?

The design of the dilemma interview is informed by the use of hypothetical vignettes in both psychological (Parker et al., 2001) and sociological (Bloor, 1991; Hughes, 1998) research. For the purposes of this study, vignettes provided an avenue for accessing the values and beliefs that inform participants' trust judgments, and invited them to draw from their own experiences, knowledge, and understanding of group norms (Jenkins et al., 2010). Whereas traditional procedures ask participants' to react to scenarios framed in the third person, our vignette purposefully positioned participants as the main actors in the scenario. We asked participants to think about what they would actually do if faced with the particular situation. This ensured that participants would not see themselves as passive observers and encouraged them to articulate

and examine their reasoning. At the same time, the hypothetical nature of the situation made it a less threatening activity.

Our vignette was designed to prompt participants to think about the types of evidence they would require in order to make trust assessments about a political party and its candidates. After responding to the initial questions posed by the vignette, participants were asked a series of questions that further probed for the reasoning behind their judgments. In particular, participants were asked to weigh the relative importance of evidence-types in their decision-making. In addition to probing for participants' use of various evidence types when making decisions about political candidates, the vignette also explored the extent to which young people perceive themselves as trusting or cautious when it comes to politics.

These dilemma interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were coded both etically and emically - that is, in terms of our own analytical scheme (etic) and in terms of the categories invoked by the subjects themselves (emic). In the first round of coding, we grouped participants' responses by theme based on the topics framed by the interview questions. In the second round of coding, we conducted a line by line analysis for possible emergent themes. Through each successive round of coding, we wrote short memos about patterns and questions that arose.

Findings

Here we present findings that demonstrate how youth in our study depend on appearance-based evidence when making trust judgments about political candidates. Additionally, we show that even though the majority of the interview subjects described themselves as cautious when it

comes to politics, many of the very same youth admitted they would acquiesce to the allure of a charismatic leader.

Ascribed traits and self-presentation

When discussing the hypothetical vignette, references to appearance-based criteria emerged both unsolicited as well as in direct response to interview questions addressing this evidence type. Participants referenced a range of appearance-based criteria that would influence their trust judgments about a new political candidate. They described the importance of diversity in ascribed traits, such as age, gender, race, and ethnicity insofar as they might encompass a range of values and beliefs. Some external characteristics mentioned included dress, hygiene, manners, and way of speaking as indicators of professionalism, efficacy, dignity, and genuineness. One participant described how a candidate's character is an important factor, and believed it could be assessed through "how they talk to people...how they give their speeches and such" (Derrick, age 17). Another participant expressed the need for a candidate to project a sense of "dignity...you've still got to present yourself a certain way" (Nestor, age 20). Appearance is associated with a politician's ability to get the job done: "I'd want them to be kind of well-kept... if they appear really dressed down, like tie-dye shirts and totally hippied out, no one's going to respect them, because the hippies didn't really get that much done, you know," (Nicolas, age 20). In sum, participants' expressed that external appearance matters "because how you bring yourself to the table is how people are going to see you" (Alyssa, age 16).

Local knowledge

In addition to the criteria described above, appearance based-assessments can also take into consideration the objects and places associated with an individual. For some of the youth, a

politician who comes from the same neighborhood would be most appealing. One participant described:

It kind of does make a difference...you can't really try to make decisions for a community that you don't live in unless you come to that community and you see how bad we are doing or you see how good we are doing and try to make it better for us (Alyssa, age 16).

Several participants volunteered that they would be more likely to vote for and campaign for someone from their hometown. For these youth, coming from the same place is an indicator of shared values and provides an important sense of familiarity:

I'd be more apt to vote for someone that I knew, and where they came from, and what they did, and how they were raised, and stuff like that...because you can put yourself in their shoes more than you could, say, George Bush...you know how he's grown up, where he lived - you can familiarize yourself more with them than you could someone you have no clue about (Rob, age 21).

However, for some youth, coming from the same hometown was not seen as an automatic advantage. Instead, a sense of shared values and beliefs emerges from a more general association with place. A politician must "know what the struggle looks like" (Deshawn, age 16). For example, one participant stated it did not matter which city the politician came from, as long as he/she understands the needs of the "urban community." When asked whether it makes a difference if a political candidate came from the same large city as he did, versus Chicago, Baltimore, or Philadelphia, for example, the respondent replied:

It could be anywhere...I want to see what they've done in the urban community. I want to see what they've done for the kids that are unfortunate or the kids that are in the system. What are their plans for the people who are struggling...for the people who are struggling who want to be helped (Ray, age 18)?

At the macro-level, youth talked about politicians' association with place in terms of attending to social and political issues within the United States. These participants emphasized how important it is for a political leader to prioritize domestic issues over international ones,

implying that the administration at the time of the interviews did not focus enough on local issues at home in the U.S.:

You know, they're so worried -- Iraq, Iraq, Iraq. They haven't handled the internal problems; like we've got gang violence and everything else going on right here, you know. And that's a whole other thing is like poverty. We're spending billions of dollars on the war when half of the people don't even got housing (Deshawn, age 16).

Another participant echoed these sentiments: "Just take care of us ... I agree with helping out other countries, but we're obviously having our own problems too, and we shouldn't be worrying that much about other countries. We can help them out, but we shouldn't be focusing most of our energy on them" (Naima, age 18). While many expressed concern over the war in Iraq, the emphasis was on bringing the troops home: "I would want to know what was going to happen if they (the hypothetical political candidate) are elected with the Middle East. Like are we going to take the troops out? Are we going to send more there? If we do take them out, what are we going to do to help them?" (Tanya, age 15). Youth identified other domestic issues such as poverty, debt, social security, gang violence, housing, outsourcing, and Hurricane Katrina; they claimed that a politician who prioritized these issues would be more likely to gain their trust.

Charisma over caution

Participants described the persuasiveness of charisma in garnering their support and swaying their vote. Though the majority of youth described themselves as cautious when it comes to politics, many of the very same youth acquiesced to the allure of a charismatic leader when asked about such a scenario. According to one such participant, a charismatic leader would "automatically have my vote." The youth associated charisma with passion, articulation, and effective conveyance of a party's platform. They believed that a leader's charisma would

grab their attention, be indicative of a politician’s vitality and relevance to a younger generation, and serve as proof that an individual is genuine and proud of his or her value system.

We also found that, when making trust judgments, charisma over-rides a sense of caution. On the one hand, the majority of participants (62%) considered themselves cautious when it comes to politics for a variety of reasons, ranging from an awareness of their own lack of information to the complexities of political processes that make it difficult for politicians to fulfill campaign promises. They expressed a sense of withholding – not making a trust judgment – and valued performance-based evidence for assessing whether trust is warranted. One participant described, “I’m more cautious- you can never tell what’s going to happen, you know, until they get here and start doing the work.” Another explained, “You have to be cautious; because if you put the wrong person in office, we can go from a democracy to a dictator” (Ray, age 18). However, even though the majority of youth described themselves as cautious when it comes to politics, many of the very same youth admitted they would be easily swayed by a charismatic candidate.

Participants’ perceptions of themselves as cautious or trusting when it comes to politics N=34

Cautious	Trusting	Both	No Answer
21 (62%)	4 (12%)	4 (12%)	5 (15%)

Of those 21 participants who perceived themselves as cautious about politics, 17 (80%) indicated they would be persuaded by a charismatic leader. According to one young person who described herself as cautious due to her lack of knowledge about politics, charisma matters

because "if they can move me within ten minutes, then what are they going to do...if I give them the chance to change stuff in like a year... it's probably going to turn out really great" (Julia, age 16). Similarly, another participant who is cautious about politicians because her "future is in their hands," said a leader with charisma "would automatically have my vote; because they made that connection with me" (Tanya, age 15). As one self-described cautious individual expressed: "If I can sit through a speech ... then they've got me...that would swing my vote so much. Yeah. A good charismatic speaker means more to me than 10,000 good intentioned, boring people" (Emily, age 18).

Discussion

Overall, despite the lack of opportunity for individual interaction between the youth and distant political figures, our interviews showed how the interactional dimension of trust formation was accessed by way of appearance-based evidence and related perceptions of a shared sense of place, experience, and values.

Appearance as a proxy for interaction

Contrary to fears that a lack of opportunity to interact with distant political figures would lead young people to withhold making trust assessments and therefore disengage from civic life, our analyses yielded two findings: 1) a lack of opportunity to interact with politicians did *not* prevent youth in our study from making trust judgments about them; and 2) these young people relied heavily on appearance-based criteria, which had not emerged as an important evidence type in the analyses of the pre-survey and person-centered interviews. Importantly, when opportunities for direct interaction were unavailable, *the youth interpreted appearance-based evidence as a substitute for interaction*. Elements of politicians' appearance, therefore, were

translated by the youth as proxies for interaction. In this way, the interactional dimension of trust formation was still key to young peoples' processes of trust formation.

The youth in our study searched for evidence to indicate whether or not a politician shares their own values and priorities. They relied on appearance-based evidence - ascribed attributes, external characteristics, and importantly, the projection of charisma – to make their trust judgments. This evidence-type did not suffice in isolation. Further analyses revealed the ways in which the youth interpreted appearance-based criteria as a substitute for interaction – a much preferred evidence-type - even when opportunities for direct interaction were unavailable.

The participants in this study prefer politicians who can demonstrate a shared sense of place because they view it as a form of local knowledge. Such local knowledge can be acquired from growing up in the same neighborhood or more generally, from sharing the struggle of living in an urban environment. It also manifests at the policy level when a politician prioritizes domestic issues over foreign affairs. For these youth, such local knowledge serves as an indicator that a politician possesses values and beliefs similar to theirs. In this way, the youth were able to extrapolate a sense of community-level interaction with a politician when opportunities for personal interaction were unavailable.

Despite perceptions of themselves as cautious when it comes to politics, participants' accounts reveal their susceptibility to the appeal of a charismatic leader. This finding raises important questions about the consistency between their self-perceptions and their decision-making processes, and between their perceived trust stances and their actual trust judgments.

Research on Charismatic Leadership Theory illuminates how charisma may also serve as a proxy for interaction for participants. These studies investigate situations “where the leader is known to followers indirectly through reputation, the mass media, or both” (Cherulnik et al,

2001, p. 2149). They explore factors that contribute to followers' perception of a leader and their readiness to accept, and therefore trust, a distant political figure (Bligh and Kohles, 2009). Charismatic Leadership Theory employs a three-pronged approach for analyzing effective leadership: in addition to accounting for a leader's personal appeal, it considers follower outlook and needs, as well as current social context, as essential ingredients for group mobilization (Bligh and Kohles, 2009; Cherulnik et al, 2001). Importantly, this approach shifts conventional definitions of charisma as a psychological concept focused on the properties of a leader (which would be categorized under appearance-based evidence), to a sociological concept where "charismatic leadership is more accurately understood as a **relationship** [our emphasis] between leaders and followers" (Bligh and Kohles, 2009, p. 485; Bowden, 2010). This conceptualization of charisma explains how young people can experience a sense of interaction - even when direct contact is unavailable – that continues to inform their trust assessments.

Conclusion

In hypothetical situations, youth rely on appearance-based evidence to make trust judgments about distant political figures. When direct interaction is not an option, appearance signals that a political candidate may share similar values, is trustworthy, and is therefore qualified to do the job.

Given the discrepancy in results between our person-centered interviews and our dilemma interviews, our study highlights the importance of a variety of methodological approaches for studying this topic. The dilemma interview method provided an opportunity to examine participants' reasoning processes in a more structured way and the possible factors at play. Ultimately this method uncovered the complex ways in which youth may be accessing the interactional dimension of trust formation, even when opportunities for direct interaction were

unavailable. Had we only conducted the person-centered interviews, we would have overlooked the salience of appearance in youths' trust assessments of politicians.

Though a concern about youth disengagement from politics continues to be relevant given inconsistent patterns of participation, our study highlights a more immediate need: ensuring that, in the realm of politics, youth have the tools to make informed critical judgments. Our findings suggest that a lack of opportunity to interact with politicians did not prevent youth from engaging in trustworthiness assessments. Instead, we reveal the ways in which they compensated for a lack of interaction by finding proxies for interaction via appearance-based criteria. We must attend to the sources of information on which youth draw and the central role the media play in influencing how politicians appear - often intimating a relationship between political figures and their young constituents.

Our finding that charisma over-rides young peoples' sense of caution when it comes to political decision-making is troubling. However, a closer consideration of how charisma functions also reveals a potential solution. If we characterize charisma as a relationship between leaders and followers, we also must take into account follower outlooks as well as the surrounding social context. If we wish young people to become critical consumers and citizens, we must help them assume a stance of action rather than a stance of passivity. Perhaps we should direct efforts to the development of tools that enable them to disentangle complex images and rhetoric and to participate constructively in the political arena. So armed, they are in a better position to attribute authority to a qualified leader who also has the ability to engage and inspire.

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Appendix A

Youth Perspective Dilemma New Political Party

In the wake of recent political scandals and unhappiness with the course of events in the Middle East a new political party is formed. To date, the primary focus of the party has been to expose the poor decisions and wrongdoings of the current party in power. Just based on this information does this party appeal to you?

- Would you choose to support this party (by voting for it)?
- What are your main reasons for your decision?

Target's Trustworthiness

- What would the party (and its members) have to be like and/or what actions would it have to take to earn your vote before the election?
- Would you think about the party's reputation when deciding whether to support it? What would you base their reputation on (how would you measure it)?
 - Would the party's reputation depend on its members' reputation?
 - If yes, what kind of experience & reputations would members need to have?
 - Would members need to be established politicians? If yes, would their previous party affiliation matter? What if they are all former members of one particular party?
 - Is the purpose of the party (to expose the truth) enough, or do they need a track record first to gain your vote? If yes, what kind of track record?
- Would you pay attention to how the party presents itself?
 - Rock concert-like speeches, use of technology to spread message, eye-catching slogans/branding
- Would it matter if you shared any similarities with members of the party, like coming from the same hometown, sharing the same values & interests?
- Would anything about members' appearances help you decide whether to give your support?
 - Age, clothing, charisma, height, mannerisms, language, gender, education
- Based on the information that I gave you in the beginning, what motivations do you think the party (and its members) has to run in the election?
 - Commitment to truth, justice, word of God
 - Individual members: build/repair reputation, earn fame, money
- If motivations are important to you, what could the party (and its members) do to demonstrate that its motivations are genuine?

Risk/ Opportunity Assessment

- *Probability of outcome:*
 - Would the party's chances of winning affect your decision to support it?
 - Does the probability of the party doing a good job once in office affect your vote?
- *Benefits & losses:*
 - What are some of the benefits that could result from voting for the party? What are some of the negative outcomes that could result?
 - Benefits: radical change, being part of something new
 - Losses: wrong candidate,

- What are the benefits of choosing not to vote for the party? What are the negative outcomes that could result from not voting for the party?
 - Benefits: maintain safe status quo
 - Losses: democracy may suffer
- *Commitment required:* Does the commitment required of you affect your decision of whether or not to vote for the party?
 - Would you support the party in their efforts to get elected through volunteer work? Donations? Or just give them your vote?

Independent/Intervening Variables

- *Relational/Situational: Emotional connection:* Sometimes politicians can be quite charismatic when they give speeches and people feel moved and excited by what they say. What if you felt this way about one or more of the party's members?
- *Relational/Situational: Past trust experiences with trusted:* Would it make a difference if you had had previous experiences with one or more of the party's members (as politicians, businessmen, classmates, etc)? What would these experiences have had to be like for you to support them now? What if you had heard about others' (positive or negative) experiences through friends/family or a news report?
- *Psychological/Biographical: Past experiences with trust:* Have you ever been in a situation where you had to decide which politician and/or party to support? How did you make your decision? Would you consider this past experience in making your decision in the current situation? Would you consider the past experiences of friends, family members, or people featured in the news?
- *Psychological/Biographical: Trustful dispositions:* In general, would you consider yourself a trusting or cautious person when it comes to politics? Do you think this would influence your decision?
- *Social/Cultural: Trusting norms:*
 - Do you think this is the kind of situation where you are expected (based on age, social convention, etc) to vote for the new party? Describe.
 - Is this the sort of situation where it is commonly expected that the party running would live up to their goals and aspirations if elected?

You mentioned that you would do XXX. Is this what you would **really** do if you were faced with this situation?

At the very beginning when I first asked you what you would do, you said that you WOULD/WOULD NOT support the new political party and XXXX would be the main reason for your decision. After all of the things I've asked you to consider, is there anything else that you would consider in addition to/instead of XXXX?