

Original Research Reports

“I Feel Your Pain”: The Effect of Displaying Empathy on Political Candidate Evaluation

Randall A. Renstrom*^a, Victor C. Ottati^b

[a] Department of Psychology, Central College, Pella, IA, USA. [b] Department of Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA.

Abstract

Two experiments demonstrate that highly empathetic messages conveyed by a political candidate produce more favorable attitudes and increase the likelihood individuals will vote for the political candidate. Study 1 revealed this Empathetic Communication Effect is stronger among female political candidates than male. Compared to male candidates, female candidates are evaluated more positively when they engage in empathetic language but are more harshly penalized when they fail to display empathy. An analogous pattern emerged for candidate party in Study 2. Namely, the Empathetic Communication Effect is stronger among Democratic political candidates than Republican political candidates. Results also explore the impact of empathetic rhetoric on perceptions of candidates' socio-emotionality and instrumentality.

Keywords: candidate evaluation, empathy, candidate traits, stereotypes, gender, party affiliation

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2020, Vol. 8(2), 767–787, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v8i2.1292>

Received: 2019-07-23. Accepted: 2020-10-02. Published (VoR): 2020-11-03.

Handling Editor: Alessandro Nai, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Central College, 812 University Street, Mailbox 089, Pella, IA, 50219, USA. E-mail: renstromr@central.edu



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

On December 16, 2012, President Barack Obama spoke at a vigil in Newtown, CT, to memorialize the 20 children and six staff members fatally shot at Sandy Hook Elementary School two days prior. Obama stepped into the role of “healer-in-chief,” tasked with honoring the victims and comforting their families and the nation. It was a role Obama previously assumed after shootings in Tuscon, AZ, and Aurora, CO, and one he would occupy over a dozen times during his presidency in response to gun violence, providing emotional understanding and empathy to a country in grief.

In response to worry or personal misfortune, politicians often must communicate in an empathetic or interpersonally warm manner, both in formal speeches like at the Newtown memorial and informal interactions with constituents. President George W. Bush showed compassion when meeting with families of fallen soldiers (Cooper et al., 2017). At a campaign event, candidate Bill Clinton famously responded to an activist concerned about the AIDS epidemic, “I feel your pain” (New York Times, 1992). A politician’s favorability can rise or fall depending on how successfully they navigate these emotional interactions. And while social psychological research has revealed the importance

of empathy in everyday interpersonal interactions (see [Davis, 1996](#)), less has been done investigating political candidates who display empathy to voters (for exceptions, see [Funk, 1996](#); [Hoyt et al., 2009](#)).

Furthermore, in most studies investigating empathy in politics, the candidates have not *displayed* empathy or kindness. Instead, participants typically read a written description of a candidate that *explicitly tells* them whether the candidate is warm, friendly, and empathetic or not (e.g., [Funk, 1996](#); [Hoyt et al., 2009](#)), rather than observe interpersonal interactions or read about behaviors that would *imply* a political candidate possesses traits like warmth or empathy. In contrast, the present research manipulates a candidate's display of empathy when verbally interacting with voters. This manipulation is more reflective of the real world where candidates must verbally express, communicate, or display empathy in their speeches and interactions with others, and voters must infer that the candidates possess empathy from those behaviors.

Empathy

Empathy is a key element in a host of psychological phenomena. It plays a role in decreasing bias and prejudice, reducing intergroup conflict, and increasing trust ([Pettigrew et al., 2011](#); [Rosler et al., 2017](#)). Empathy is also thought to be a motivating factor for prosocial and altruistic behaviors ([Batson et al., 2002](#); [Eisenberg & Miller, 1987](#)) and can be an important element of interpersonal relationships, including intimacy and relationship satisfaction ([Block-Lerner et al., 2007](#); [Sened et al., 2017](#)) and coping ([O'Brien et al., 2009](#)).

Although empathy has been investigated and researched by psychologists for decades, there is not widespread agreement on a single definition of the construct ([Batson, 2009](#)). Some researchers distinguish two components of empathy: a cognitive component that involves an individual's ability to identify, discern, or understand another person's state—the ability to adopt another's perspective—and an affective component that involves the ability to share the emotional experience of another person ([Engelen & Röttger-Rössler, 2012](#); [Lawrence et al., 2004](#)). There is agreement, however, that *empathetic communication* involves responsive messages to another person's emotional needs, especially in cases where one is trying to comfort or support a person in distress. Recognizing or feeling the other person's emotional state is only the first step. In addition to identifying and understanding the emotional state of the distressed person, one can reflect those emotions back to the distressed person and communicate resonant messages to make the distressed person feel better ([Aspy, 1975](#); [Burlinson, 1994](#); [O'Brien et al., 2009](#); see also [Rogers, 1975](#)). As such, empathy can encompass not just perspective-taking (cognition) and empathic concern or emotional contagion (affect) but also communicative responsiveness (behavior).

The present research focuses on these behavioral aspects of empathy, manipulating empathetic communications from political candidates. The following experiments manipulate candidate verbal responses that display either a high or low level of empathy, which is then predicted to impact how the candidate is evaluated.

Empathy and Political Candidate Evaluation

Research suggests voters evaluate the traits and characteristics of a political candidate along two superordinate dimensions: one concerning instrumental traits related to job performance (e.g., competence, intelligence) and another concerning more socio-emotional or interpersonal traits (e.g., empathy, warmth) ([Clifford, 2018](#); [Funk, 1999](#); [Goren, 2007](#)). [Kinder \(1986\)](#) distinguishes leadership/competence traits, which form the more “performance-based” dimension, from integrity/empathy traits, the “interpersonal character” dimension. Similarly, [Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, and Sullivan \(1990\)](#) make a distinction between “task-oriented” traits that have a professional component and “socio-emotional” traits that are personal or character-oriented. Rhetoric that is empathetic and emotionally

understanding likely influences evaluations along the socio-emotional dimension. That is, highly empathetic messages from a candidate should indicate that candidate possesses socio-emotional traits like warmth, compassion, and sensitivity.

But to what extent do interpersonal traits like empathy impact a voter's overall evaluation of a political candidate? Work in social psychology finds warmth and empathy to be crucial in everyday interpersonal relationships (Brambilla et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2007; Wojciszke, 2005). We like people who are interpersonally warm and emotionally understanding. Research in political science also finds interpersonally warm traits to be important when voters form impressions of political candidates, though the evidence is mixed. Some research suggests socio-emotional traits are not considered or weighted as heavily as instrumental traits like competence and effectiveness (Kinder, 1986; Kinder et al., 1980; McCurley & Mondak, 1995) while other work asserts that socio-emotional traits like empathy and warmth are just as important, if not *more* important (Clifford, 2018; Laustsen & Bor, 2017; Shogan, 2009).

If candidate evaluation is indeed influenced by the perceived warmth of the candidate, communicating and expressing empathy should be beneficial to those running for office. After all, politicians often must respond to upset voters or distressed constituents, and political experts recognize it is important for candidates to display warmth and compassion to voters on the campaign trail (Fenno, 1978; Gooch, 2018). Thus, being able to accurately surmise the emotional state of others and reflect emotional understanding back to them—in a genuine manner that does not appear cynical or manipulative—should be beneficial in a political context, improving a candidate's image and increasing the likelihood voters will vote for that candidate.

Empathetic Behaviors and Candidate Stereotypes

Candidate behavior is not viewed and evaluated by voters in isolation, however. Past research suggests behaviors performed by political candidates are often judged by how much they confirm or violate cultural stereotypes. For instance, the effects of engaging in negative campaigning are different for male candidates compared to female candidates (Fridkin et al., 2009; Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014). Likewise, voters hold stereotypic expectancies about the two major political parties, including assumptions regarding issue “ownership” (Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992; Petrocik et al., 2003; Pope & Woon, 2009) and assumptions regarding the personality traits of party members (Goren, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Winter, 2010). Such stereotypes involving candidate gender or candidate party may moderate the effect of empathetic communication on candidate evaluation.

Women running for political office often need to address stereotypic expectancies about what traits they do (or do not) possess and what issues they can (or cannot) handle as an elected official (Bauer, 2017; Bligh et al., 2012; Dittmar, 2015; Schneider & Bos, 2014). This may create a dilemma for female political candidates when it comes to displays of emotional empathy. On the one hand, the stereotypic traits associated with women (e.g., warmth, empathy) are not necessarily the key traits associated with political figures, which instead are more masculine or instrumental in nature (e.g., strength, decisiveness) (Best & Williams, 1990; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a, 1993b). As such, women may feel the need to downplay their stereotypical feminine traits (e.g., empathy) and emphasize more masculine traits to align themselves with the public's expectations of what a political leader is like (Bauer, 2017; Bligh et al., 2012). On the other hand, however, women may be especially vulnerable to attacks from political opponents who challenge them on stereotypically feminine traits (Cassese & Holman, 2018). A female candidate may be evaluated more harshly when trait-based attacks suggest she fails to embody feminine or empathetic traits commonly expected of women. Consequently, the impact of empathetic

communication on candidate evaluation may differ when comparing female to male candidates. This will be explored in Study 1.

Stereotypes about the candidate's party may also impact the effect of empathetic communication. Voters often hold stereotypes about the major political parties and their members (Goren, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992; Petrocik et al., 2003; Winter, 2010). Oftentimes, Democrats are presumed to have greater expertise in policy areas related to social welfare while Republicans are assumed to have more expertise in national security and business. Similarly, Democrats are stereotyped as possessing socio-emotional traits like empathy and compassion whereas Republicans are perceived as possessing more instrumental traits like strength and toughness. These stereotypic assumptions mirror, to a certain degree, gender stereotypes of men and women. Consequently, showing empathy toward a voter should align with the Democratic Party stereotype but not the typical Republican. Thus, just as a candidate's gender may moderate the effect of candidate empathy on voters' evaluations, a candidate's party membership may also moderate the effect of candidate empathy on voters' evaluations of that candidate. Study 2 investigates this possibility.

Study 1: Effect of Empathetic Communication on Evaluations of Male and Female Political Candidates

The *Empathetic Communication Hypothesis* predicts a candidate will be judged more positively when the candidate displays empathy toward someone (in this case, a voter) in need or distress. However, this effect will be likely be more strongly pronounced among female candidates than male candidates. We label this prediction the *Candidate Gender Role Hypothesis*. Empathetic displays by a female (as opposed to male) candidate should elicit greater positive candidate evaluations (see Rudman & Glick, 2001, for evidence on gender role (non)conformity eliciting (un)favorable reactions from others). This is because empathy is more strongly associated with female gender norms than male gender norms (Best & Williams, 1990; Deaux & Lewis, 1984). Conversely, low empathy, which is normatively more masculine in nature (Best & Williams, 1990; Deaux & Lewis, 1984), should elicit a more negative reaction from a female (versus male) candidate because such behavior is incongruent with female gender norms.

The Candidate Gender Role Hypothesis predicts that empathetic displays will be perceived as less attractive coming from a male candidate because masculine gender norms dictate men should be less sensitive and emotionally supportive (Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Jansz, 2000). According to the *Candidate-Recipient Gender Role Hypothesis*, this may be especially true when a male candidate communicates with another man. That is, men might utilize messages low in emotional sensitivity and empathy, in part, to maintain a masculine gender-identity, especially when interacting with *other men* (Burlleson et al., 2005; Jakupcak et al., 2003; Jansz, 2000). Accordingly, individuals may perceive a highly empathetic communication between two men as a more extreme violation of gender norms and therefore evaluate the empathetic male candidate more harshly.

Finally, it is predicted that empathetic rhetoric will positively influence not only the overall evaluation of and likelihood of voting for a candidate but also trait and issue ratings of that candidate. Candidates who display empathy should be seen as possessing more socio-emotional traits like warmth and sensitivity. Moreover, because certain policy areas like healthcare and welfare are perceived to involve more compassion and warmth (Huddy & Terkildsen,

1993a), such messages should also bolster candidate's perceived competency to handle these socio-emotional issues while serving in office.

The inverse is predicted for the impact of empathy on perceptions of a candidate's instrumentality. That is, empathetic displays should produce more favorable socio-emotional ratings but more *unfavorable* instrumentality ratings (e.g., strength, ability to handle military issues). Previous research demonstrates this can occur in some cases. For example, individuals displaying high status and power are perceived as having *more* instrumental traits but *fewer* interpersonally warm socio-emotional traits, whereas individuals with low status and power are perceived as *lower* on instrumentality but *higher* on socio-emotionality (Gerber, 1996). Empathy should operate similarly.

Method

Participants were presented with verbal statements made by a male or female candidate to a male or female voter at a town-hall meeting. The candidate's statements conveyed either high or low empathy in response to the voter's problem. Empathetic Response (non-empathetic v. empathetic), Candidate Gender, and Voter Gender served as the manipulated independent variables. Effects on attitude toward the candidate, likelihood of voting for the candidate, trait ratings, and issue performance ratings were examined.

Participants

A power analysis via G*Power (Faul et al., 2007; Linear Multiple Regression: fixed model, R^2 increase) indicated a minimum of 101 participants in order to have 80% power for detecting a small to medium-sized effect ($f^2 = 0.08$) with a traditional .05 criterion. For Study 1, 280 students from the introductory psychology participant pool at a large Midwestern university were recruited in exchange for course credit. Three participants were removed for failing to follow instructions, leaving 277 participants total. The sample was 74% female and mostly college-aged ($M = 18.58$). In terms of racial composition, the sample was 69% white, 11% Hispanic, 10% Asian, and 4% African American, with the remaining reporting some other racial or ethnic category.

Procedure and Design

Participants were brought into the lab in groups and randomly assigned to conditions. After consenting, participants read a transcript of a conversation that supposedly occurred between a state senator running for reelection in a neighboring state and a voter at a town-hall gathering where constituents can "meet-and-greet" candidates for office. In the conversation, the voter brings up a personal hardship (i.e., trouble affording college tuition) to which the candidate responds with low or high empathy. The town-hall voter's gender, the candidate's gender, and the content of the candidate's response were manipulated, creating a 2 (empathetic response: low vs. high) X 2 (candidate gender: male vs. female) X 2 (town-hall voter gender: male vs. female) between-subjects design.

After reading the transcript, participants exchanged it for a survey packet where they reported their attitudes toward the candidate, likelihood of voting for the candidate, impressions of the candidate's traits, and perceptions of how well the candidate could handle various issues. Upon completion, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Materials

Transcript — Participants received a one-page transcript of a conversation that purportedly took place between a state senator and a voter at town-hall meeting. To manipulate the candidate's gender within the transcript, the

senator's name was varied across conditions ("Paul" versus "Paula" Johnson). The same was done to manipulate the town-hall voter's gender ("Christopher" versus "Christine" Smith). To avoid effects of political party, the transcript did not mention the candidate's party affiliation and purposefully avoided giving the candidate specific issue stances and policy positions. Thus, participants could not infer whether the candidate was a Democrat or Republican.

In the transcript, the voter at the town-hall expressed sadness and worry because he or she was having difficulty paying for college and might have to drop out due to the financial costs of attendance. The voter's portions of the conversation were identical in all conditions. However, the level of empathy in the candidate's response to this voter's problem was manipulated, modeled after stimulus materials from research on "person-centered" communication (Burlleson, 1994; Holmstrom et al., 2005; Samter et al., 1987). Reflecting the key aspects of empathy, "person-centeredness" refers to the degree to which one is comforting, sensitive, and emotionally understanding when interacting with another person. A highly person-centered communication explicitly recognizes and legitimizes the feelings of another distressed person, reflects those feelings back to the person and elaborates on them, and then puts them into a broader context. A low person-centered communication ignores, denies, or challenges the emotions of the person in need, failing to recognize that person's perspective and perhaps even telling the person how he or she *should* be feeling (Burlleson, 1994).

In the low empathy condition the candidate utilized low person-centered messages, remarking on the predictable rise of tuition for everyone and advising the town-hall voter to instead focus on feeling happy about the other great things in his or her life, thus failing to acknowledge the voter's upset feelings and instead telling the voter how to feel. In the high empathy condition the candidate used high person-centered messages: explicitly acknowledging the voter's feelings and reflecting them back, showing the candidate understood the voter's emotional state, and then suggesting a context by which the distressing situation might be viewed. In no condition did the candidate ever solve the voter's problem of financial hardship. Copies of research materials are available from the researchers upon request.

Manipulation check and pilot testing — In preliminary testing, the transcripts were rated by two independent coders trained to identify different empathetic, person-centered messages. Results from their ratings indicate the "high empathy" response by the candidate is indeed high in empathy while the "low empathy" response is low ($\kappa = .98$). Further pilot-testing was conducted with a sample of 19 participants who rated the transcripts on several 5-point scales to assess their believability and how empathetic and sensitive the candidate's response is. These individuals rated the high empathy communication as more sensitive ($F = 10.52, p < .01$), caring ($F = 4.02, p = .04$), and supportive ($F = 5.09, p = .02$) compared to the low empathy communication. Crucially, the high and low versions of the transcripts did not differ in terms of believability and overall realism. No differences were found when participants rated how realistic the conversations were ($F = .39, p = .68$), how authentic ($F = .74, p = .49$), believable ($F = .64, p = .54$), and how easy it was to imagine such a conversation actually taking place between a politician and voter ($F = .10, p = .90$). Thus, the high empathy condition was perceived as relatively authentic, believable, and genuine.

Participants' ratings of the candidate — After reading the transcript, participants completed a survey packet containing the dependent measures. Attitudes toward the candidate were assessed using four items. First, participants indicated how they felt about the candidate on a "feeling thermometer," selecting a number from 0 to 100 with higher numbers representing more positive feelings about the candidate. Participants also rated the candidate

on three 7-point semantic differential scales (-3 = *extremely unfavorable* to 3 = *extremely favorable*; -3 = *extremely unlikeable* to 3 = *extremely likeable*; -3 = *negative* to 3 = *positive*). Participants then indicated their likelihood of voting for the candidate, also on a 7-point scale (-3 *extremely unlikely* to 3 *extremely likely*).

Next participants reported how well specific traits described the candidate on 5-point scales (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Extremely*). Modeled after Huddy and Terkildsen (1993a), half of these items measured “socio-emotional” traits (e.g., compassionate, warm, gentle, empathetic) and half assessed “instrumental” traits (e.g., assertive, tough, resolute, aggressive). Participants then indicated how well they thought the candidate could handle certain issues (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Extremely*). Again modeled after Huddy and Terkildsen (1993a), roughly half of the items assessed performance ratings on “instrumental” issues (e.g., military spending, foreign crisis, budget deficits) and the remaining items assessed performance on “socio-emotional” issues (e.g., healthcare, assisting the poor).

Lastly, participants reported their political ideology (1 = *strong liberal*, 7 = *strong conservative*), their party affiliation (1 = *strong Democrat*, 7 = *strong Republican*), and basic demographic variables. As potential exploratory variables, participants also completed measures of political expertise and gender schematicity (Markus et al., 1982).

Results

Feeling thermometer and semantic differential ratings were normalized and averaged to form a composite attitude toward the candidate score ($\alpha = .93$). Likelihood of voting for the candidate was also normalized. The ten instrumental trait ratings were averaged and then normalized to arrive at a single measure of perceived trait instrumentality ($\alpha = .82$). The nine socio-emotional items were averaged into a socio-emotional trait index which was then normalized ($\alpha = .87$). Similar procedures were used to form dependent variable scores for perceived performance (issue competency) on instrumental issues ($\alpha = .76$) and socio-emotional issues ($\alpha = .88$). For all indices, higher numbers correspond to more favorable ratings.

Using hierarchical regression, each dependent variable was predicted using level of empathy in the candidate’s response to the voter (-.5 = low empathy, +.5 = high empathy), candidate gender (-.5 = male, +.5 = female), and gender of the town-hall voter (-.5 = male, +.5 = female). Following Cohen and Cohen (1983), Step 1 in the regression tested all main effects, Step 2 tested all possible two-way interactions, and Step 3 tested the three-way interaction among all the predictors. Two control variables, the participant’s own political ideology and party affiliation, were normalized as z-scores and entered into the regression models at Step 1.

Predicting Attitude Toward the Candidate and Voting Likelihood

Regression results are summarized in Table 1. When predicting attitude toward the candidate, Step 1 only yielded the predicted main effect of empathetic response, $B = 0.94$, $SE = .10$, $t(255) = 9.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$, $.27_p$.ⁱ Confirming the Empathetic Communication Hypothesis, attitudes toward the candidate were more favorable when the candidate was high in empathy ($M = 0.47$) than low ($M = -0.48$).

Table 1

Candidate Ratings as a Function of Empathetic Response, Candidate Gender, and Town-hall Voter Gender, Study 1

Variable	Voting				Traits				Issues			
	Attitude		Likelihood		Socio-emotional		Instrumental		Socio-emotional		Instrumental	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	-0.01	.05	-0.01	.05	0.01	.04	0.01	.05	0.01	.05	0.00	.06
Participant Ideology	0.05	.08	-0.06	.09	0.06	.07	0.09	.08	0.08	.09	0.09	.10
Participant Party ID	-0.06	.08	0.09	.09	-0.14 [†]	.07	-0.03	.08	0.10	.09	-0.09	.10
Empathetic Response (ER)	0.94 ^{***}	.10	0.88 ^{***}	.11	1.40 ^{***}	.09	-1.07 ^{***}	.11	0.89 ^{***}	.11	-0.35 ^{**}	.12
Candidate Gender (CG)	-0.07	.10	-0.06	.11	0.08	.09	-0.08	.11	0.03	.11	-0.04	.12
Voter Gender (VG)	-0.03	.10	-0.12	.11	-0.09	.09	0.15	.11	-0.19 [†]	.11	0.03	.12
ER x CG	0.39 [*]	.20	0.38 [†]	.22	-0.01	.18	-0.20	.21	0.13	.22	0.12	.25
ER x VG	-0.17	.19	-0.37	.22	0.18	.18	-0.07	.21	-0.37	.22	-0.06	.25
CG x VG	0.11	.19	0.04	.22	0.25	.18	0.48 [*]	.21	0.38 [†]	.22	0.28	.25
ER x CG x VG	-0.35	.39	-0.19	.44	0.05	.36	0.59	.43	0.60	.44	0.65	.50
R ²	.29		.23		.50		.32		.25		.05	

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Reported main effects are from Step 1, two-way interactions from Step 2, and three-way interaction from Step 3 of the regression analyses.

[†] $p < .10$. ^{*} $p < .05$. ^{**} $p < .01$. ^{***} $p < .001$.

As predicted by the Candidate Gender Role Hypothesis, a significant interaction between empathetic response and the candidate’s gender emerged at Step 2, $B = 0.39$, $SE = .19$, $t(252) = 2.02$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .02$, $.01_p$. As seen in Figure 1, the effect of empathetic communication on attitude ratings was stronger for the female candidate than the male candidate. In the female candidate condition, the high empathy candidate ($M = 0.48$) was viewed much more favorably than the low empathy candidate ($M = -0.57$), $B = 1.13$, $SE = .13$, $t(252) = 8.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$, $.22_p$. This effect was weaker among male candidates ($M_{highER} = 0.36$; $M_{lowER} = -0.32$), $B = 0.75$, $SE = .14$, $t(252) = 5.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$, $.10_p$. No other two-way interactions were significant at Step 2. The three-way interaction was also nonsignificant, so the Candidate-Recipient Gender Role Hypothesis was not supported.

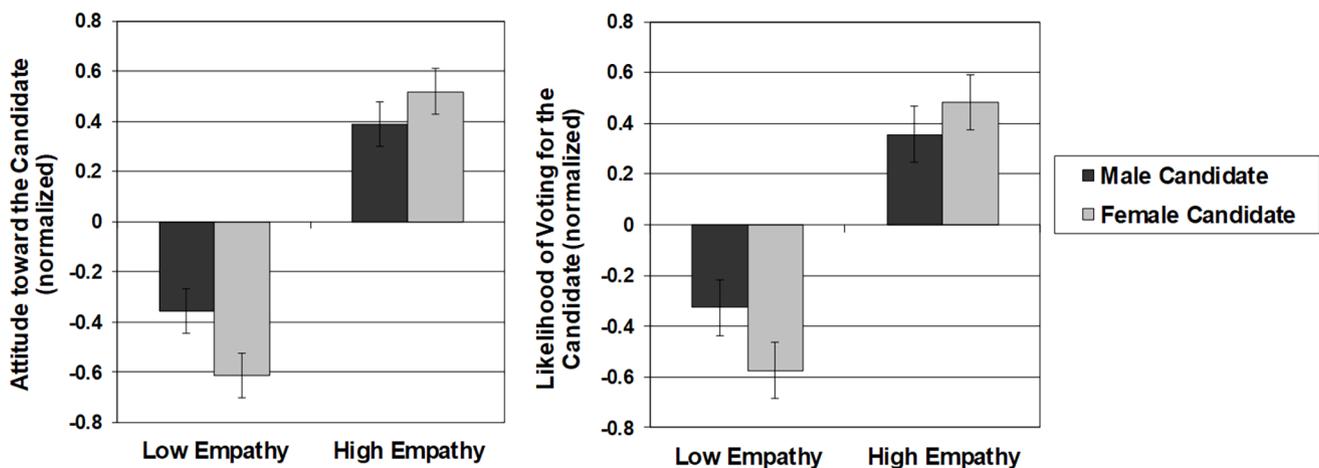


Figure 1. Two-way interactions between candidate gender and displays of empathy by the candidate on attitudes toward the candidate and likelihood of voting for the candidate (Study 1).

When predicting participants' likelihood of voting for the candidate, results mirrored those obtained for attitude ratings. A main effect of empathetic communication emerged at Step 1, $B = 0.88$, $SE = .11$, $t(262) = 7.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$, .19_p. As hypothesized, participants reported a greater inclination to vote a candidate using highly empathetic messages ($M = 0.43$) as opposed to low ($M = -0.45$).

The two-way interaction between empathetic communication and candidate gender on voting likelihood was marginally significant, $B = 0.38$, $SE = .22$, $t(259) = 1.70$, $p = .09$, $\eta^2 = .01$, .01_p. Again, the impact of empathetic communication was more robust for female candidates than male candidates (see Figure 1). Among female candidates, participants reported a greater likelihood of voting for the highly empathetic candidate ($M = 0.48$) compared to the low empathy candidate ($M = -0.57$), $B = 1.06$, $SE = .15$, $t(259) = 6.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$, .15_p. This effect was weaker for male candidates ($M_{highER} = 0.36$; $M_{lowER} = -0.32$), $B = 0.68$, $SE = .16$, $t(259) = 4.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, .07_p. No other two-way interactions reached statistical significance, nor did the three-way interaction.

Predicting Trait Ratings: Socio-Emotionality and Instrumentality

Ratings of the candidate's traits were analyzed next, starting with the socio-emotional trait index. Once again, level of empathy of the candidate's response to the town-hall voter produced a significant main effect, $B = 1.40$, $SE = .09$, $t(254) = 15.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .48$, .48_p. As predicted, participants rated the candidate as having more socio-emotional traits when the candidate used messages high in empathy ($M = 0.72$) compared to low ($M = -0.68$). Empathetic communication also had a significant effect on trait ratings along the instrumental dimension, $B = -1.07$, $SE = .11$, $t(249) = -10.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$, .29_p. However, this effect operated in the opposite direction. Highly empathetic candidates were perceived to possess fewer instrumental traits ($M = -0.52$) while low empathetic candidates were rated as greater on instrumentality ($M = 0.55$).

Although not relevant to our hypotheses, a two-way interaction between candidate gender and voter gender emerged when predicting instrumental trait ratings, $B = 0.48$, $SE = .21$, $t(246) = 2.28$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .02$, .01_p. Male candidates were rated roughly the same when speaking at the town-hall to male ($M = 0.09$) and female voters ($M = -0.01$). In contrast, female candidates were perceived as having fewer instrumental traits when speaking with a male ($M = -0.23$) as opposed to a female voter ($M = 0.15$). No other significant effects emerged.

Predicting Performance Ratings: Socio-Emotional and Instrumental Issues

The last two columns of Table 1 summarize effects on the candidate's ability to handle socio-emotional issues (e.g., healthcare, social welfare) and instrumental issues (e.g., military, business). Just as empathetic communication exerted inverse effects on socio-emotional versus instrumental *traits*, it exerted inverse effects on socio-emotional versus instrumental *issue performance ratings*. Empathetic messages exerted a positive effect on socio-emotional issue performance, $B = 0.88$, $SE = .11$, $t(256) = 8.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$, .20_p, with candidates high in empathy ($M = 0.46$) perceived to be better equipped to handle socio-emotional issues than candidates low in empathy ($M = -0.43$). Conversely, empathetic messages exerted a *negative* effect on performance ratings pertaining to instrumental issues, $B = -.351$, $SE = .12$, $t(255) = -2.82$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, .03_p. Candidates communicating with higher empathy were judged as *less* able to handle instrumental issues ($M = -0.17$) while candidates communicating with lower empathy were rated *more* competent on instrumental issues ($M = 0.18$).

Supplemental Results

Additional supplementary analyses were run as robustness checks, specifically, to explore whether participant ideology or participant gender potentially moderated the effects of candidate empathy. To examine the first possibility, participant political ideology as well as interactions of participant ideology with the other independent variables were included in an expanded regression model. This expanded model yielded no significant interactions involving participant ideology and candidate empathetic display ($p > .21$ in all cases), and no interactions involving participant ideology and any other independent variable ($p > .14$ in all cases).

To examine the second possibility involving participant gender, another regression model was run that included participant gender and interactions of participant gender with all independent variables. This too failed to consistently moderate the effects seen in Study 1. The gender of the participant exerted a modest main effect on most of the dependent variables except candidates' perceived ability to handle instrumental issues, with female participants generally providing lower candidate ratings than male participants (see Table S1 in the [Supplementary Materials](#) for all effects). Importantly, the two-way interaction between participant gender and candidate empathy failed to emerge when predicting all outcome variables. Indeed, with the exception of a lone three-way interaction between candidate empathy, candidate gender, and participant gender when predicting instrumental trait ratings ($p < .01$), all interactions involving participant gender and candidate empathy were nonsignificant ($p > .10$ for the remaining seventeen interactions tested).

Discussion

The results of Study 1 strongly support the Empathetic Communication Hypothesis. Highly empathetic candidates were preferred to candidates displaying low levels of empathy. This effect emerged when predicting attitudes toward the candidate as well as likelihood of voting for the candidate. These findings align with studies showing individuals who communicate empathetic or emotionally sensitive messages to others are viewed more favorably (Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Burlison & Samter, 1985; Samter et al., 1987; Sened et al., 2017). A main effect of empathetic communication was also found for ratings of the candidate's traits and issue competencies, however these effects depended upon the dimension of evaluation. High empathy led to increased perceptions that the candidate possessed socio-emotional traits like warmth and compassion and could handle socio-emotional issues like welfare. Interestingly, high empathy *lowered* ratings on instrumental traits like toughness and assertiveness and it *decreased* perceptions that the candidate could handle instrumental issues like military affairs.

In support of the Candidate Gender Role Hypothesis, a two-way interaction between empathetic response and candidate gender was obtained when predicting attitudes toward the candidate. As predicted, the Empathetic Communication Effect was magnified for female political candidates. Because social norms dictate that women should be emotionally responsive and sensitive, empathetic women were rewarded for conforming to gender norms whereas non-empathetic women were penalized for violating gender norms. This Empathetic Communication Effect was diminished among males, presumably because empathetic men violate gender norms that promote toughness and strength, and non-empathetic males conform to the norm. A similar (marginally significant) two-way interaction emerged when predicting voting likelihood. Against predictions, the gender of the town-hall voter did not seem to matter in these situations. The Candidate-Recipient Gender Role Hypothesis was not supported.

Study 2: Effect of Empathetic Communication on Evaluations of Democratic and Republican Candidates

The results of Study 1 suggest empathetic responses from candidates are especially valued when they conform to gender stereotypes. Hypotheses examined in Study 2 are rooted in research that indicates Republican and Democratic Party stereotypes elicit expectations that, to a large degree, mirror these gender stereotypes (Goren, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992; Petrocik et al., 2003; Winter, 2010). Study 2 proposes that analogous findings will emerge when considering the role of partisan stereotypes. That is, empathetic displays from political candidates will be especially valued when they conform to expectations that are activated by a politician's party membership, but they will be less strongly valued when they violate expectations of this nature.

In line with party stereotypes (Goren, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992; Petrocik et al., 2003; Winter, 2010), voters may expect Democrats to possess more interpersonally warm socio-emotional traits like empathy, compassion, and sensitivity and they may expect Republicans to possess more instrumental traits like strength and toughness. Thus, expressions of empathy align with the stereotype of Democrats, whereas non-empathetic responses violate stereotype-based expectations of Democrats. Consequently, it is hypothesized that the Empathetic Communication Effect should be magnified for Democratic candidates. Correspondingly, the Empathetic Communication Effect should be smaller for Republicans because such empathetic displays may violate party stereotypes for Republicans. Thus, Study 2 substitutes "candidate party" for "candidate gender" and derives analogous predictions. Specifically, according to the *Candidate Party Expectancy Hypothesis*, candidate party (Republican, Democrat) should moderate the effect of empathetic display (low empathy, high empathy) when predicting voters' reactions to the candidate.

Method

Participants

A power analysis via G*Power (Faul et al., 2007; Linear Multiple Regression: fixed model, R^2 increase) indicated a minimum of 101 participants in order to have 80% power for detecting a small to medium-sized effect ($f^2 = 0.08$) with a traditional .05 criterion. For Study 2, a new sample of 172 undergraduates was recruited from the introductory psychology participant pool at a large Midwestern university. This sample was 77% female, mostly college-aged ($M = 18.59$), and somewhat more diverse (66% White, 12% Hispanic, 12% Asian, and 4% African American, with the remaining reporting some other race).

Procedure and Design

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the conversation transcripts between the state senator and town-hall voter used in Study 1. The level of empathy in the candidate's response to the voter's problem was again manipulated in the transcripts using materials from the person-centeredness literature. Instead of manipulating candidate gender, here the candidate's *party* was manipulated to be either Democratic or Republican. The candidate's gender was "female" in all conditions to simplify the experiment and focus more intently on the effects of candidate party. And because Study 1 found no effect of the town-hall voter's gender, it was also held constant at "male" in the transcripts. Thus, the design of Study 2 was a 2 (empathy: low vs. high) X 2 (candidate party: Republican vs. Democrat) between-subjects factorial. After reading the transcript, participants completed a survey

packet where they reported their impressions and evaluations of the candidate. Once the packet was completed, participants were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

Materials

Transcript — The same conversation transcripts from Study 1 were used in Study 2. The town-hall voter in the transcript recounted a personal problem (concern about affording college tuition) to which the candidate responded with either low or high empathy, the first independent variable. The candidate's name ("Paula Johnson" in all conditions) was preceded throughout the transcript by either "Republican" or "Democrat," the other independent variable, so readers received continual reminders of her party affiliation.

Participants' ratings of the candidate — Measures of attitude toward the candidate, voting likelihood, perceived candidate traits, perceived performance ratings, participant party identification, and participant ideology were identical to those used in Study 1. Two exploratory variables were also measured: participants' political expertise and political interest. Finally, demographic items identical to those contained in Study 1 were administered.

Results

For the dependent measures, composite variables were calculated in the same way as in Study 1. An overall measure of attitude toward the candidate was created by normalizing and then averaging scores on the feeling thermometer and three semantic differential items ($\alpha = .91$). Voting likelihood was again normalized and served as the sole measure of behavior intention. The average of the ten instrumental trait ratings and the average of the nine socio-emotional trait ratings were both normalized to obtain separate measures of the candidate's perceived instrumentality ($\alpha = .80$) and socio-emotionality ($\alpha = .90$), respectively. Analogous procedures were used to create composite variables for perceived ability to handle instrumental issues ($\alpha = .80$) and socio-emotional issues ($\alpha = .90$).

Hierarchical regression with dummy coding was used to predict the dependent variables based on the level of empathy in the candidate's response ($-.5 =$ low empathy, $+5 =$ high empathy) and the candidate's party ($-.5 =$ Republican, $+5 =$ Democrat) as well as the interaction between the two. Step 1 of the regressions included all main effects and Step 2 tested the potential two-way interaction between candidate party and empathetic response. In addition to participants' own political ideology and party affiliation being normalized as z-scores and entered into the regression as control variables at Step 1, an additional control was included at this step: the interaction between participants' party identification and the party affiliation of the candidate in the transcript. This interaction was included to control for the fact that Democratic participants would be more accepting of a Democratic candidate in the stimulus materials and less receptive to a Republican candidate (and vice versa for Republican participants). The inclusion of this interaction as a control allows the effects of empathetic communication to be seen above-and-beyond any effects of participant party.

Predicting Attitude Toward the Candidate and Voting Likelihood

Regression results are summarized in Table 2. Analyses revealed a significant main effect of empathetic communication on attitudes toward the candidate, $B = 0.78$, $SE = .13$, $t(157) = 5.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$, $.18_p$. Candidates displaying high levels of empathy ($M = 0.35$) were judged more positively compared to candidates using messages low in empathy ($M = -0.42$). At Step 2, a significant interaction between empathetic response and candidate party emerged, $B = 0.77$, $SE = .25$, $t(156) = 3.02$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$, $.06_p$.

Table 2

Candidate Ratings as a Function of Empathetic Response and Candidate Party, Study 2

Variable	Attitude		Voting Likelihood		Traits				Issues			
	B	SE	B	SE	Socio-emotional		Instrumental		Socio-emotional		Instrumental	
					B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	-0.04	.06	-0.02	.07	-0.04	.06	0.02	.06	-0.01	.07	0.02	.07
Participant Ideology	0.14	.10	0.14	.12	-0.20	.11	0.28**	.10	0.09	.12	0.00	.12
Participant Party ID	-0.03	.10	-0.04	.12	0.08	.11	-0.26*	.10	0.03	.12	-0.05	.12
Participant Party ID x Candidate Party	-0.10	.13	-0.26†	.15	-0.11	.13	-0.19	.13	-0.07	.15	-0.41**	.15
Empathetic Response (ER)	0.78***	.13	0.65***	.15	1.20***	.13	-1.14***	.13	0.68***	.15	-0.59***	.15
Candidate Party (CP)	0.07	.13	0.28†	.15	0.18	.13	0.02	.13	0.28†	.15	0.18	.15
ER x CP	0.77**	.25	0.74*	.29	0.46†	.26	-0.20	.26	0.38	.30	0.25	.30
R ²	.23		.17		.37		.40		.14		.15	

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Reported main effects are from Step 1 and two-way interactions from Step 2 of the regression analyses.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

As predicted, the effect of empathetic communication on attitudes toward the candidate was more pronounced for the Democratic candidate than the Republican (see Figure 2). For Democratic candidates, the high empathy candidate ($M = 0.59$) was rated much more positively than the low empathy candidate ($M = -0.61$), $B = 1.20$, $SE = .19$, $t(156) = 6.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$, $.21_p$. This effect was much weaker among Republican candidates ($M_{highER} = 0.17$; $M_{lowER} = -0.27$), $B = 0.43$, $SE = .17$, $t(156) = 2.52$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, $.04_p$.

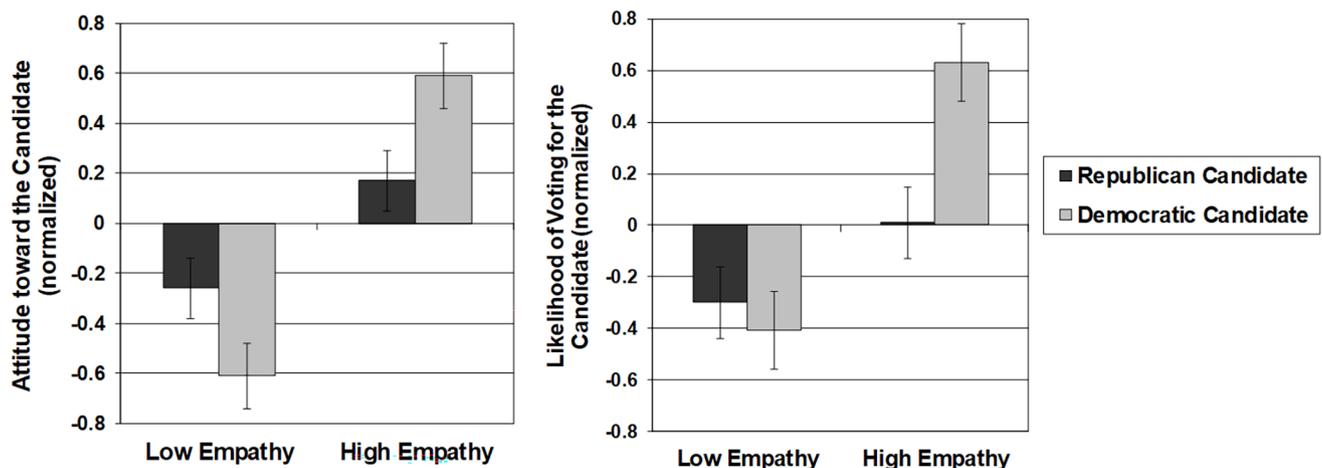


Figure 2. Two-way interactions between candidate party affiliation and displays of empathy by the candidate on attitudes toward the candidate and likelihood of voting for the candidate (Study 2).

For voting likelihood, a main effect of empathy emerged such that there was greater willingness to vote for the highly empathetic candidate ($M = 0.31$) than the low empathy candidate ($M = -0.35$), $B = 0.65$, $SE = .15$, $t(164) = 4.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, $.10_p$. There was also a marginal effect of the candidate's party, $B = 0.28$, $SE = .15$, $t(164) = 1.93$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .02$, $.02_p$. Democratic candidates ($M = 0.12$) were slightly more preferred than Republicans ($M = -0.16$). Finally, the hypothesized two-way interaction between empathy and candidate party was uncovered,

$B = 0.74$, $SE = .29$, $t(163) = 2.52$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, $.04_p$. Mirroring the results observed for attitudes toward the candidate, the effect of empathetic messages was stronger for Democratic candidates than Republican candidates. Participants reported significantly greater inclination to vote for a Democrat high in empathy ($M = 0.63$) than one low in empathy ($M = -0.41$), $B = 1.05$, $SE = .21$, $t(163) = 4.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, $.13_p$. Among Republican candidates, this effect was weaker and nonsignificant, ($M_{highER} = 0.01$; $M_{lowER} = -0.30$), $B = 0.31$, $SE = .20$, $t(163) = 1.56$, $p = .12$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $.01_p$.

Predicting Trait Ratings: Socio-Emotionality and Instrumentality

Empathy once again exerted a significant main effect on perceived trait ratings of the candidate along the socio-emotional dimension, $B = 1.20$, $SE = .13$, $t(161) = 9.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$, $.35_p$. Candidates displaying high empathy were presumed to have high levels of socio-emotional traits ($M = 0.56$) while low empathy candidates were assumed to possess fewer socio-emotional traits ($M = -0.64$). The only other noteworthy effect was a marginal interaction between empathetic response and candidate party, $B = 0.46$, $SE = .26$, $t(160) = 1.79$, $p = .08$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $.02_p$. Whereas both the low empathy Democrat and low empathy Republican were assumed to possess few socio-emotional traits ($M = -0.68$ and $M = -0.61$, respectively), the high empathy Democrat received higher trait ratings ($M = 0.77$) than a Republican using the same highly empathy messages ($M = 0.38$).

For ratings of the candidate's perceived instrumentality, a main effect of empathetic communication was the sole significant effect found, $B = -1.14$, $SE = .13$, $t(156) = -8.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$, $.34_p$. Empathetic messages were inversely related to ratings on instrumental traits, the same pattern observed in Study 1. Candidates engaging in high empathy were presumed to have fewer instrumental traits ($M = -0.55$) while low empathy candidates were thought to possess more instrumental traits ($M = 0.59$).

Predicting Performance Ratings: Socio-Emotional and Instrumental Issues

For ratings of the candidate's ability to handle socio-emotional issues, there was a main effect of empathetic messages, $B = 0.68$, $SE = .15$, $t(163) = 4.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$, $.11_p$, and a marginal effect of candidate party, $B = 0.28$, $SE = .15$, $t(163) = 1.94$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, $.02_p$. Candidates were perceived as better equipped to handle socio-emotional issues if the candidates were high in empathy ($M = 0.33$) rather than low ($M = -0.35$), and performance ratings were marginally higher for the Democrat ($M = 0.13$) over the Republican ($M = -0.15$). The interaction between empathetic messages and candidate party was not significant but trending in the predicted direction, $B = 0.38$, $SE = .30$, $t(162) = 1.27$, $p = .20$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $.01_p$. The high empathy Democrat was viewed favorably when it came to socio-emotional issues ($M = 0.57$), more so than the high empathy Republican ($M = 0.11$), and more than either the low empathy Democrat or low empathy Republican ($M = -0.31$ and $M = -.40$, respectively).

Lastly, a main effect of empathetic communication was the only significant effect found for performance ratings on instrumental issues, $B = -0.59$, $SE = .15$, $t(162) = -3.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$, $.09_p$. Again, displays of empathy by the candidate were negatively related to instrumental issue competency. Candidates using highly empathetic messages were assumed to be less adept at handling instrumental issues ($M = -0.27$), but candidates utilizing messages low in empathy were presumed to be more competent on instrumental issues ($M = 0.32$).

Supplemental Results

As was done in Study 1, additional analyses were conducted as a robustness check, again analyzing whether the observed effects could be potentially moderated by participant ideology and participant gender respectively.

Once again, supplementary analyses for Study 2 revealed that participant ideology did not moderate the effect of empathetic display, candidate party, or their interaction ($p > .13$ in all cases), aligning with the supplementary analyses from Study 1 that failed to find moderation by participant ideology. Thus, there is no evidence to suggest empathetic displays were viewed less positively (or more insincere) by participants who were ideologically opposed to the candidate's party.

Another regression analysis was performed to investigate participant gender. Unlike Study 1, a main effect of participant gender failed to emerge in Study 2. Male and female participants did not differ in their candidate ratings (see Table S2 in the [Supplementary Materials](#) for all regression coefficients). A two-way interaction between participant gender and candidate empathy did emerge for some, though not all, dependent variables. As shown in the Supplementary Table, the empathetic communication effect was more pronounced among female participants than male participants when predicting the attitude measure, voting likelihood, and socio-emotional trait rating. Thus, female voters may view empathetic displays more favorably than do male voters. Most importantly, however, participant gender did *not* moderate the predicted interaction between empathetic display and candidate party ($p > .12$ in all cases). Of course, given the unbalanced number of male and female participants in this study, and the low number of male participants in general, caution should be used in interpreting these effects.

Discussion

Study 2 sought to replicate the Empathetic Communication Effect obtained in Study 1 and investigate the moderating role of candidate party. Once again, the Empathetic Communication Hypothesis was supported. For both attitudes and voting likelihood, candidates were more preferred when they engaged in highly empathetic rhetoric over rhetoric low in empathy. And just as candidate gender moderated this effect in Study 1, candidate party moderated this effect in Study 2. As predicted by the Candidate Party Expectancy Hypothesis, the effect of empathy was stronger for Democratic candidates than Republican candidates.

Results involving trait ratings and perceptions of issue performance also largely mirrored Study 1. Participants perceived the candidate as higher on warm socio-emotional traits in the high empathy conditions, and participants saw candidates as lacking those socio-emotional traits when they engaged in low empathy communication. Similarly, participants judged the high empathy candidate to be more adept at handling socio-emotional issues compared to the low empathy candidate. For candidates using messages low in empathy, they were perceived as possessing more instrumental traits and greater competency to handle instrumental issues.

General Discussion

By experimentally manipulating a candidate's rhetoric, the present studies offer a novel approach to examining the impact of empathy on candidate evaluation, allowing us to investigate the connections between how a candidate communicates, what traits the candidate is inferred to possess, and the perceptions of that candidate. Across two studies, we found that empathetic responses from a candidate significantly influence candidate evaluation, suggesting empathetic communication influences impressions within a political context much like it influences interpersonal impressions in non-political contexts (Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Burluson & Samter, 1985; Samter et al., 1987; Sened et al., 2017). Political candidates displaying high (versus low) empathy are evaluated more positively and more likely to attract votes.

Study 1 and 2 showed the effects of empathetic communication are not the same for all candidates, however. Stereotypes around gender and party play a moderating role. Female candidates accrue larger benefits when using highly empathetic messages but also suffer steeper losses when responding to a voter with low empathy, presumably because the latter violates gender role expectations that stereotype women as warmer and more emotionally sensitive. It is more acceptable for men to convey low empathy messages. In essence, men are in a better position to “get away with” colder, low empathy rhetoric.

Empathetic communication also impacted ratings of the candidate’s socio-emotionality and instrumentality, again with implications for gender. Highly empathetic rhetoric positively affects socio-emotionality (e.g., perceived warmth, ability to handle healthcare policy) but is detrimental in terms of instrumentality (e.g., toughness, ability to handle military affairs). This raises unique challenges for female candidates. Female candidates are presumed to have greater expertise regarding socio-emotional issues than male candidates (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a, 1993b) but may have to “prove” they are competent, strong, or assertive leaders (Bauer, 2017; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Schneider & Bos, 2014). To convey strength and the ability to handle instrumental issues, a female politician might adopt a communication style lower in warmth and empathy. Unfortunately, this strategy may reduce her appeal when voters assess her socio-emotional characteristics (though for contrary evidence, see Leeper, 1991). The trade-off between instrumentality and socio-emotionality also raises questions for a male political candidate who wants to support a constituent in distress, for this might undermine the perception that he is tough, resolute, and able to handle instrumental issues.

The candidate’s party also moderated the effect of empathy on candidate ratings. Democrats receive more positive evaluations compared to Republicans when using the same highly empathetic messages, presumably because such sensitive, emotionally-understanding rhetoric is stereotypically more expected from Democrats (Cassese & Holman, 2018; Winter 2010). But, Democrats paid a bigger price for violating that stereotypic expectancy and failing to be highly empathetic. When using colder, low empathy messages, Democrats were evaluated more harshly than Republicans.

Future Directions and Conclusion

The present research demonstrates that highly empathetic messages from a political candidate positively affect impressions of that candidate. However, future studies should explore additional moderators of these effects, especially in light of the limitations of our sample. While supplementary analyses did not find evidence that participant ideology moderates perceptions of (non)empathetic candidates, there are still questions regarding the degree to which participant gender plays a moderating role. Past research suggests male and female individuals respond similarly to emotionally supportive messages in non-political contexts (Jones & Burleson, 2003; MacGeorge et al., 2004), but further investigation is needed in political contexts. Although the results of Study 1 are largely consistent with these findings, Study 2 suggested male and female voters may sometimes respond differently to a candidate’s empathetic displays. Because the samples of both studies were overwhelmingly female, we have limited evidence to draw firm conclusions regarding the moderating role of voter gender. Additional research is needed to more systematically explore potential differences when comparing male and female voters’ reactions to candidate empathy.

Further study is also needed to see if these effects extend to other issues. Study 2 showed Democratic candidates are viewed more unfavorably when they fail to speak empathetically about the costs of college tuition, the topic of discussion in the stimulus materials. It may be considered counter-stereotypical for a Democrat to be low in

empathy and perhaps *especially* counter-stereotypical for a Democrat to be non-empathetic about higher education. Future work can explore whether the effects seen in the present studies are stronger or weaker for other issues (e.g., failed business, unemployment).

Additional aspects of the candidate may also act as moderators. For instance, our results are presumably strongest for relatively unknown candidates. Genuine displays of empathy may convey that a lesser-known candidate is caring and understands the problems of everyday voters, which increases that candidate's favorability ratings and voters' intention of voting for that candidate. But empathetic displays may not meaningfully sway evaluations of politicians who are well-known or for whom empathy (or lack of empathy) is already expected by the public.

Finally, the level of office-holder—local, state, or national—may also be important. Previous research suggests stereotypically “masculine” traits benefit candidates running for national office more than local office (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b). Instrumental traits may be viewed as necessary for higher-level offices that require a firm response to national security concerns (president), whereas socio-emotional traits like empathy may be more desirable for local offices, especially those with more face-to-face contact with constituents (mayor). Consequently, the benefits of empathetic messaging may be greater for local politicians. We look forward to future research that investigates conditions that magnify and attenuate the effect of empathetic communication within politics.

Notes

i) Effect sizes are reported throughout. The first η^2 value reflects the eta-squared statistic (semi-partial correlation squared) and the η^2 value with a “p” subscript reflects the partial eta-squared statistic (partial correlation squared).

Funding

This research was made possible, in part, with the support from an Advanced Doctoral Fellowship grant generously provided through Loyola University Chicago.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

The authors have no support to report.

Supplementary Materials

Additional supplementary analyses of the data from both Study 1 and Study 2 were conducted as robustness checks to explore whether participant ideology or participant gender could potentially moderate the effects of candidate empathy on candidate evaluation. Results of these regressions, which include these additional variables and full interaction terms, can be found in the supplemental tables published here (for access see Index of [Supplementary Materials](#) below).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Renstrom, R. A., & Ottati, V. C. (2020). *Supplementary materials to “I feel your pain”: The effect of displaying empathy on political candidate evaluation* [Additional analyses]. *PsychOpen*. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.4282>

References

- Aspy, D. N. (1975). Empathy: Let's get the hell on with it. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *5*, 10-14.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001100007500500203>
- Batson, C. D. (2009). These things called empathy: Eight related but distinct phenomena. In J. Decety & W. Ickes (Eds.), *The social neuroscience of empathy* (pp. 3–17). Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.
- Batson, C. D., Ahmad, N., Lishner, D. A., & Tsang, J. (2002). Empathy and altruism. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 485-498). New York City, NY, USA: Oxford University Press.
- Bauer, N. M. (2017). The effects of counterstereotypic gender strategies on candidate evaluations. *Political Psychology*, *38*, 279-295. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12351>
- Best, D. L., & Williams, J. E. (1990). *Measuring sex stereotypes: A thirty-nation study*. Beverly Hills, CA, USA: SAGE.
- Bligh, M. C., Schlehofer, M. M., Casad, B. J., & Gaffney, A. M. (2012). Competent enough, but would you vote for her? Gender stereotypes and media influences on perceptions of women politicians. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *42*, 560-597.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2011.00781.x>
- Block-Lerner, J., Adair, C., Plumb, J. C., Rhatigan, D. L., & Orsillo, S. M. (2007). The case for mindfulness-based approaches in the cultivation of empathy: Does nonjudgmental, present-moment awareness increase capacity for perspective taking and empathic concern? *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *33*, 501-516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2007.00034.x>
- Brambilla, M., Rusconi, P., Sacchi, S., & Cherubini, P. (2011). Looking for honesty: The primary role of morality (vs. sociability and competence) in information gathering. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *41*, 135-143.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.744>
- Burleson, B. R. (1994). Comforting messages: Features, functions, and outcomes. In J. A. Daly & J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), *Strategic interpersonal communication* (pp. 135-161). Hillsdale, NJ, USA: Erlbaum Press.
- Burleson, B. R., Holmstrom, A. J., & Gilstrap, C. M. (2005). "Guys can't say that to guys": Four experiments assessing the normative motivation account for deficiencies in the emotional support provided by men. *Communication Monographs*, *72*, 468-501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750500322636>
- Burleson, B. R., & Samter, W. (1985). Consistencies in theoretical and naive evaluations of comforting messages. *Communication Monographs*, *52*, 103-123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758509376099>
- Cassese, E. C., & Holman, M. R. (2018). Party and gender stereotypes in campaign attacks. *Political Behavior*, *40*, 785-807.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-017-9423-7>
- Clifford, S. (2018). Reassessing the structure of presidential character. *Electoral Studies*, *54*, 240-247.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.04.006>
- Cohen, J., & Cohen, P. (1983). *Applied multiple regression: Correlation analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Hillsdale, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cooper, H., Blinder, A., & Gibbons-Neff, T. (2017, October 18). Fallen troops' families tell of meeting presidents: Sympathy and sometimes discomfort. *New York Times*. Retrieved from
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/us/politics/fallen-troops-families-meeting-presidents.html>
- Davis, M. H. (1996). *Empathy: A social psychological approach*. New York City, NY, USA: Routledge.

- Deaux, K., & Lewis, L. L. (1984). The structure of gender stereotypes: The interrelations among components and gender label. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *46*, 991-1004. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.46.5.991>
- Dittmar, K. (2015). *Navigating gendered terrain: Stereotypes and strategy in political campaigns*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: Temple University Press.
- Eisenberg, N., & Miller, P. A. (1987). The relation of empathy to prosocial and related behaviors. *Psychological Bulletin*, *101*, 91-119. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.101.1.91>
- Engelen, E. M., & Röttger-Rössler, B. (2012). Current disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates on empathy. *Emotion Review*, *4*, 3-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073911422287>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, *39*, 175-191. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146>
- Fenno, R. F. (1978). *Home style: House members in their districts*. New York City, NY, USA: Harper Collins.
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., & Glick, P. (2007). Universal dimensions of social cognition: Warmth and competence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *11*, 77-83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2006.11.005>
- Fridkin, K. L., Kenney, P. J., & Woodall, G. S. (2009). Bad for men, better for women: The impact of stereotypes during negative campaigns. *Political Behavior*, *31*, 53-77. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9065-x>
- Funk, C. L. (1996). The impact of scandal on candidate evaluations: An experimental test of the role of candidate traits. *Political Behavior*, *18*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01498658>
- Funk, C. L. (1999). Bringing the candidate into models of candidate evaluation. *The Journal of Politics*, *61*, 700-720. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647824>
- Gerber, G. L. (1996). Status in same-gender and mixed-gender police dyads: Effects on personality attribution. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *59*, 350-363. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787076>
- Gooch, A. (2018). Ripping yarns: Experiments on storytelling by partisan elites. *Political Communication*, *35*, 220-238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1336502>
- Goren, P. (2007). Character weakness, partisan bias, and presidential evaluation: Modifications and extensions. *Political Behavior*, *29*, 305-325. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-006-9019-0>
- Hayes, D. (2005). Candidate qualities through a partisan lens: A theory of trait ownership. *American Journal of Political Science*, *49*, 908-923. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00163.x>
- Holmstrom, A. J., Bureson, B. R., & Jones, S. M. (2005). Some consequences for helpers who deliver "cold comfort": Why it's worse for women than men to be inept when providing emotional support. *Sex Roles*, *53*, 153-172. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-005-5676-4>
- Hoyt, C. L., Simon, S., & Reid, L. (2009). Choosing the best (wo)man for the job: The effects of mortality salience, sex, and gender stereotypes on leader evaluations. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *20*, 233-246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leafqua.2009.01.016>
- Huddy, L., & Terkildsen, N. (1993a). Gender stereotypes and the perception of male and female candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, *37*, 119-147. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111526>
- Huddy, L., & Terkildsen, N. (1993b). The consequences of gender stereotypes for women candidates at different levels and types of office. *Political Research Quarterly*, *46*, 503-525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591299304600304>

- Jakupcak, M., Salters, K., Gratz, K. L., & Roemer, L. (2003). Masculinity and emotionality: An investigation of men's primary and secondary emotional responding. *Sex Roles, 49*, 111-120. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024452728902>
- Jansz, J. (2000). Masculine identity and restrictive emotionality. In A. H. Fischer (Ed.), *Gender and emotion: Social psychological perspectives* (pp. 166-186). New York City, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, S. M., & Burleson, B. R. (2003). Effects of helper and recipient sex on the experience and outcomes of comforting messages: An experimental investigation. *Sex Roles, 48*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022393827581>
- Kinder, D. R. (1986). Presidential character revisited. In R. R. Lau & D. O. Sears (Eds.), *Political cognition: The 19th annual Carnegie symposium on cognition* (pp. 223-235). Hillsdale, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kinder, D. R., Peters, M. D., Abelson, R. P., & Fiske, S. T. (1980). Presidential prototypes. *Political Behavior, 2*, 315-337. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00990172>
- Krupnikov, Y., & Bauer, N. M. (2014). The relationship between campaign negativity, gender and campaign context. *Political Behavior, 36*, 167-188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-013-9221-9>
- Laustsen, L., & Bor, A. (2017). The relative weight of character traits in political candidate evaluations: Warmth is more important than competence, leadership and integrity. *Electoral Studies, 49*, 96-107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2017.08.001>
- Lawrence, E. J., Shaw, P., Baker, D., Baron-Cohen, S., & David, A. S. (2004). Measuring empathy: Reliability and validity of the Empathy Quotient. *Psychological Medicine, 34*, 911-924. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291703001624>
- Leeper, M. S. (1991). The impact of prejudice on female candidates: An experimental look at voter inference. *American Politics Quarterly, 19*, 248-261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X9101900206>
- MacGeorge, E. L., Graves, A. R., Feng, B., Gillihan, S. J., & Burleson, B. R. (2004). The myth of gender cultures: Similarities outweigh differences in men's and women's provision of and responses to supportive communication. *Sex Roles, 50*, 143-175. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SERS.0000015549.88984.8d>
- Markus, H. M., Crane, M., Bernstein, S., & Siladi, M. (1982). Self-schemas and gender. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42*, 38-50. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.42.1.38>
- McCurlley, C., & Mondak, J. J. (1995). Inspected by #1184063113: The influence of incumbents' competence and integrity in U.S. House elections. *American Journal of Political Science, 39*, 864-885. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111660>
- New York Times. (1992, March 28). The 1992 Campaign: Verbatim; Heckler stirs Clinton anger: Excerpts from the exchange. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/28/us/1992-campaign-verbatim-heckler-stirs-clinton-anger-excerpts-exchange.html>
- Norpoth, H., & Buchanan, B. (1992). Wanted: The education president: Issue trespassing by political candidates. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 56*, 87-99. <https://doi.org/10.1086/269297>
- O'Brien, T. B., DeLongis, A., Pomaki, G., Puterman, E., & Zwicker, A. (2009). Couples coping with stress: The role of empathic responding. *European Psychologist, 14*, 18-28. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040.14.1.18>
- Petrocik, J., Benoit, W. L., & Hansen, G. J. (2003). Issue ownership and presidential campaigning, 1952-2000. *Political Science Quarterly, 118*, 599-626. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2003.tb00407.x>
- Pettigrew, T. F., Tropp, L. R., Wagner, U., & Christ, O. (2011). Recent advances in intergroup contact theory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*, 271-280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.03.001>
- Pope, J. C., & Woon, J. (2009). Measuring changes in American party reputations, 1939-2004. *Political Research Quarterly, 62*, 653-661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912908322406>

- Rahn, W. M., Aldrich, J. H., Borgida, E., & Sullivan, J. L. (1990). A social cognitive model of candidate appraisal. In J. A. Ferejohn & J. H. Kuklinski (Eds.), *Information and democratic processes* (pp. 136-159). Champaign, IL, USA: University of Illinois Press.
- Rogers, C. R. (1975). Empathic: An unappreciated way of being. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 5, 2-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100007500500202>
- Rosler, N., Cohen-Chen, S., & Halperin, E. (2017). The distinctive effects of empathy and hope in intractable conflicts. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61, 114-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715569772>
- Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (2001). Prescriptive gender stereotypes and backlash toward agentic women. *The Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 743-762. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00239>
- Samter, W., Burleson, B. R., & Murphy, L. (1987). Comforting conversations: Effects of strategy type on evaluations of messages and message producers. *The Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 52, 263-284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417948709372694>
- Schneider, M. C., & Bos, A. L. (2014). Measuring stereotypes of female politicians. *Political Psychology*, 35, 245-266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12040>
- Sened, H., Lavidor, M., Lazarus, G., Bar-Kalifa, E., Rafaeli, E., & Ickes, W. (2017). Empathic accuracy and relationship satisfaction: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 31, 742-752. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000320>
- Shogan, C. J. (2009). The political utility of empathy in presidential leadership. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 39, 859-877. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2009.03711.x>
- Winter, N. J. G. (2010). Masculine Republicans and feminine Democrats: Gender and Americans' explicit and implicit images of the political parties. *Political Behavior*, 32, 587-618. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9131-z>
- Wojciszke, B. (2005). Morality and competence in person- and self-perception. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 16, 155-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463280500229619>